

St. James Town Community Food Table

Date: June 16, 2021

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

Wards: Ward 13, Toronto Centre

SUMMARY

At its meeting on November 25 and 26, 2020, City Council directed the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration to convene and facilitate a community-led food table in St. James Town. The purpose of the St. James Town Community Food Table was to develop a collaborative framework to address food security in the neighbourhood and report back on the outcomes. The community food table has brought together local community-based agencies, including the OASIS Food Hub, Toronto Community Housing, relevant City divisions and other stakeholders to co-develop this framework.

The St. James Town Community Food Table began meeting in January 2021. This report details the outcomes of the table to date which include: the development of an Interim Collaborative Framework that describes a collective vision for food programming in St. James Town, the identification of three key actions and corresponding next steps to address food security in the neighbourhood, and a list of local spaces that could be made available for food-related programming and initiatives as well as the processes to secure these spaces. The St. James Town Community Food Table will continue with three Co-Chairs from the community for the next 6 months to move the table forward and finalize the Interim Collaborative Framework. Toronto Community Housing will also release a Request for Expression of Interest for their space at 200 Wellesley Street East in the fourth quarter of 2021 to further support food-related initiatives in the neighbourhood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration recommends that:

1. The Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The St. James Town Community Food Table has been analysed from the beginning for potential impacts on Indigenous, Black and equity-denied groups of Toronto. The St. James Town Community Food Table may help better coordinate food programs and service delivery in the community. Improved coordination of service delivery may benefit women, immigrants, and refugees, undocumented individuals, seniors and youth, and Indigenous, Black, and racialized residents in the St. James Town neighbourhood.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on October 2 and 3, 2019, City Council adopted Members Motion MM10.13 to request the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, in conjunction and in consultation with OASIS Food Hub, the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, the Chief Executive Officer, Toronto Community Housing Corporation, the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, the General Manager, Solid Waste Management Services and other divisions as required to review the actions and approvals necessary to facilitate the creation of an underground aquaponics farm at 325 Bleecker Street and a location for the OASIS Food Hub to manage the produce and distribution of food and water in St. James Town and to report back to the March 10, 2020 meeting of the Economic and Community Development Committee.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.MM10.13>

At its meeting on November 12, 2020, the Economic and Community Development Committee considered Item EC17.6 and adopted a motion to direct the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, in consultation with the President and Chief Executive Officer, Toronto Community Housing Corporation, and other City divisions as required, to work with community-based agencies and other stakeholders, including the OASIS Food Hub, in St. James Town to establish a community food table to lead the development of a collaborative framework to address food security in the St. James Town neighbourhood and report to the Economic and Community Development Committee on the outcomes of the community food table in April 2021. At its meeting on November 25 and 26, 2020, City Council considered Item EC17.6 and adopted the item as amended.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.EC17.6>

COMMENTS

St. James Town Neighbourhood Overview

The St. James Town neighbourhood is bounded by Bloor Street East to the north, Parliament Street to the east, Wellesley Street East to the south and Sherbourne Street to the west. Though the area is densely populated, it is served by two large chain grocery stores and three smaller stores. While the stores offer important food access points, these retailers alone cannot ensure affordable access to healthy and fresh food for all residents of the neighbourhood, particularly those with lower incomes.

Residents in this neighbourhood tend to be individuals living with low incomes, new immigrants and families with young children from very diverse backgrounds.

Demographic and neighbourhood data shows that the area has a high percentage of people over 65 years and a high number of children 0-9 years. The area also has the highest number of persons living below the Low Income Measure-After Tax and the level of unemployment is second highest in the downtown core. Nearly a quarter of those who are employed have only part-time employment.

Food is one of the many basic expenses which households living with low-income struggle to meet. For several years, Toronto Public Health has been involved with a "Nutritious Food Basket" research initiative that measures the minimum cost for a person or family to purchase healthy food. In 2019, the report indicated that approximately 64% of residents who rely on social assistance experience food insecurity, which can lead to an increased risk of chronic disease, depression, anxiety and mortality.¹ Food insecure households are often forced to use their food budget to pay for other expenses. As a result, these households tend to resort to nutrient-poor foods and emergency food services.²

St. James Town's high population density and prevalence of low income and food insecure households present notable challenges in securing affordable, accessible and culturally-appropriate foods for its diverse community. All of these factors suggest a targeted approach is needed to combat food insecurity in a community that already faces heightened vulnerability to external shocks and emergencies.

St. James Town Community Food Table

In response to a Councillor Motion at the Economic and Community Development Committee on November 12, 2020, City staff from the Social Development, Finance and Administration Division were directed to convene and facilitate a community-led food table in St. James Town. The purpose of the St. James Town Community Food Table was to develop a collaborative framework to address food security in the neighbourhood. The community food table has brought together local community-based agencies including the OASIS Food Hub, Toronto Community Housing, relevant City divisions and other stakeholders to co-develop this framework. The outcomes of the community food table are included in this report.

¹ <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/nutrition-food-basket/>

² <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-138987.pdf>

The community food table started from the work of the St. James Town Community Co-operative in developing their OASIS Food Hub model. The food table includes almost 40 members from 24 local agencies. These agencies provide services ranging from emergency meals to food banks to capacity building and educational programming. A full list of these agencies and a brief description of their initiatives are available in Appendix A. Based on this membership and the food table's knowledge of local food programs, a map of food assets has been developed and can be found in Appendix B. These food assets include grocery stores, food banks, community kitchens, physical space, community gardens, meals and food boxes, and food education. In addition to the Tower and Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit, staff from the Community Development Unit and Poverty Reduction Strategy Office from Social Development, Finance and Administration participated. Staff from Parks, Forestry and Recreation and Toronto Community Housing also participated at the table. This community table has met 11 times on a roughly bi-weekly basis since January 2021.

In order to understand the various projects underway in St. James Town and explore opportunities at the food table, there were several presentations given at the table including:

- Toronto Community Housing on spaces within their buildings that could be available for community agency use.
- Parks, Forestry and Recreation providing an overview of the park developments in the area.
- The Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit at Social Development Finance and Administration on the Black Food Sovereignty Action Plan.
- The St. James Town Community Cooperative on the OASIS Food Hub model, one of the drivers for the community food table. The project summary can be found in Appendix C.
- The St. James Town Service Providers Network on the various food programs delivered by their member agencies in the neighbourhood.
- The Neighbourhood Food Hub at Gerard and Coxwell who provided an overview of their partnership model and development process.

In addition to these presentations, staff provided information on eight different funding opportunities to encourage partnerships and collaboration on resources. At least three organizations have applied for one of these funding streams.

St. James Town Community Food Table Interim Collaborative Framework

The community agencies at the food table developed an Interim Collaborative Framework that describes a collective vision for food programming in St. James Town. The agencies are also leading a resident engagement process which includes a survey and direct conversations with residents about the Interim Collaborative Framework. The Interim Collaborative Framework can be found in Appendix D. The agencies advocated to translate the resident survey questions and Interim Collaborative Framework into six of the most common local languages. Toronto Community Housing supported this request and provided translated documents to the community agencies at the food table to use in their resident engagement process. The Interim Collaborative Framework has been adopted by the St. James Town Community Food Table and the community agencies will undertake a process to finalize the framework.

The Interim Collaborative Framework contains a vision, seven principles and six goals. The vision is: “A collaborative, resident-led, and sustainable food system that secures healthy, culturally appropriate, quality food that is equitable and just for the community of St. James Town. We envision this neighbourhood system as a part of City and regional food systems.”

The seven principles are:

- A. Food is a Human Right
- B. Accountability to Community
- C. Supports Self-Sufficiency
- D. Food Matters for Health Equity
- E. Inclusive for all Community Members
- F. Food Systems Approach
- G. Sustainability, Resilience and Adaptation

The six goals are:

1. Empower Resident Management and Leadership
2. Increase Climate Change Adaptation, Mitigation, and Resilience
3. Empower Local Employment Opportunities and Social Enterprise Development in this Food System
4. Improve Health Equity for Residents of St. James Town
5. Cultivate a Sustainable Food System Appropriate to the Uniquely Diverse Community
6. Increase Cooperation and Pathways for Collaboration between Grassroots Organizations, Agencies, and Government Departments Towards Healthy Food Security

The details of the Interim Collaborative Framework, a glossary of terms, and preliminary resident feedback on the framework can be found in Appendix D.

St. James Town Community Food Table Identified Actions

Community agencies at the St. James Town Community Food Table collectively identified three key actions to support their work moving forward. These actions include:

- 1) Developing emergency response teams in buildings that can provide residents with food and water during a sudden event such as a power outage or fire.
- 2) Ensuring residents are engaged in the development and implementation of food programming in the neighbourhood.
- 3) Mobilizing spaces for food programming in St. James Town.

The community agencies undertook a back casting exercise to determine the steps required to bring these key actions to fruition and these have been outlined at a high-level below.

1) Build emergency response teams in buildings

- Understand how residents are currently organizing or taking leadership in their buildings. For instance, understanding who the resident champions are, which residents have good relationships in their buildings, identifying buildings with and without residents associations, and taking stock of what is currently working in these buildings.

- Employ residents into the response teams by encouraging resident leadership in the design and implementation of the response including training and funding or incentives to compensate them for their time.
- Secure buy-in from property owners in the neighbourhood to develop partnerships for this response.
- Create a stockpile of emergency food and water in these buildings. This requires the identification of locations to store supplies and funding to purchase.
- Develop an emergency food distribution process and identify vulnerable residents that need to be prioritized for outreach.

2) Ensure resident engagement in the development and implementation of programs

- Resident engagement working group of the St. James Town Community Food Table to move this forward with support from the table.
- Engage residents through the emergency response planning work and on the Interim Collaborative Framework.
- Incorporate resident feedback into the Interim Collaborative Framework to finalize the document in the next six months.
- Process to move from resident engagement to resident leadership in designing initiatives and programs.

3) Mobilize spaces in St. James Town to support food security

- Understand the food needs whether cultural or allergies or other. Design and administer a survey or other ways to connect with residents.
- Prioritize the use of space based on needs and develop partnership agreements to support collaboration as well as create a process to determine which organizations at the table are best positioned to meet needs.
- Create a plan to leverage spaces in an emergency and connect with residents engaged in the emergency food response to design a decentralized model.
- Outfit spaces for community kitchen and other needs. This will require an inventory of existing spaces with identified gaps in meeting current needs including accessibility and then securing the funding required to implement these upgrades.
- Develop a short term emergency plan while the spaces are being outfitted to meet needs.
- Collaboratively develop operating models for these spaces and include wraparound services tied to outreach and food provision.
- Determine measures of success that are defined by residents and community agencies collectively.
- Create plans to mobilize new spaces to meet gaps in space needs and develop an inventory of other spaces and partnerships the table would like to explore.

Space in St. James Town for Food Programming

Community agencies at the table have identified a lack of space in the neighbourhood available for food programming. The community agencies have requested that more property owners in the neighbourhood join the table to make space available. Staff have invited local owners to the community food table and identified opportunities for community space at the properties below in Table 1 and Table 2 which have been presented at the table. Further details on costs associated with securing and operating

the space will be made available through the processes outlined in the tables below.

Table 1: Current identified opportunities for community space in Toronto Community Housing properties within St. James Town.

Location	Ownership	Type of Space	Process
200 Wellesley Street East	Toronto Community Housing	<p>1. Exclusive space for offices and food storage (non-perishable)</p> <p>2. Non-exclusive (shared with tenants) multi-purpose space for pop-ups and events</p>	<p>Request for Expression of Interest to be released the fourth quarter of 2021</p> <p>1. Exclusive space – No cost or discounted rents proportional to in-kind food provisions and services to Toronto Community Housing tenants</p> <p>2. Non-exclusive – No cost</p> <p>Toronto Community Housing to cover cleaning, maintenance, and utilities for shared spaces</p>
Ontario Street market area (plaza area north of Wellesley Street East, west on Ontario Street)	Toronto Community Housing	Outdoor with potential enclosed structure	<p>Considering initiating a future Request for Expression of Interest for this space and exploring alignment with the Community Space Tenancy Policy.</p> <p>Space available in 2026-2027</p>

Table 2: Current identified opportunities for community space in other properties within St. James Town.

Location	Ownership	Type of Space	Process
525 Bloor Street East	Church of St. Peter and St. Simon-the-apostle	4,200 square feet of space that could be used for food bank type programming	<p>Proposal and Letter of Understanding</p> <p>Space available as of June 15, 2021</p>

561 Sherbourne Street	Medallion	Indoor basement space	Proposal and Letter of Understanding Space available now
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Should further space opportunities arise, City staff will continue to present these to the St. James Town Community Food Table.

Next Steps

The St. James Town Community Food Table will continue to meet. The table will now be convened and facilitated by the community on a monthly basis. As part of the City's Community Coordination Plan, the Community Cluster Lead will continue to represent Social Development, Finance and Administration at the table. Three Co-Chairs have been chosen from the community for the next 6 months to move the table forward and finalize the Interim Collaborative Framework.

As part of the fall 2021 Black Food Sovereignty Plan report, the needs of the St. James Town neighbourhood will be considered and assessed among other high priority neighbourhoods through consultation with the Black Food Sovereignty Advisory Body. Initiatives with predominately diverse Black leadership will be prioritized.

Toronto Community Housing will release a Request for Expression of Interest for their space at 200 Wellesley Street East in the fourth quarter of 2021. The Request for Expression of Interest will provide detailed information on the exact specification of the space, possible uses and requirements for submissions. The space at 200 Wellesley is a large indoor basement space with the potential to provide exclusive office and food storage space for multiple agencies and organizations. The space will also include a large multipurpose area that can be used and booked by tenants and agencies for pop-up events. This space was chosen because it is underutilized and has the most immediate potential for renewal and conversion into usable space for tenants and agencies. Toronto Community Housing is committed and currently working to renew and prepare this space in anticipation of a fourth quarter of 2021 launch with selection and placement of agencies beginning in 2022. The process to evaluate applications will be made through an advisory committee comprised of Toronto Community Housing staff and tenants, City staff, and third-party food agencies.

There is also the potential and option for the creation of a community kitchen in the space at 200 Wellesley that can be used by agencies and tenants. As part of the Request for Expression of Interest process, Toronto Community Housing will outline an option for a community kitchen and the requirements for proposals including the need for additional external capital funding and an operating model. Capital funding would need to be secured to support the community kitchen option. As the community kitchen would be a key community asset, proposals from agencies will be considered through joint partnerships or collaborations between multiple agencies.

Looking further into the future, Toronto Community Housing is also committed to the possibility of offering additional space at its buildings at 275, 325 and 375 Bleecker Street through a similar Request for Expression of Interest process, depending on the outcome of the Request for Expression of Interest process for 200 Wellesley Street East

and continued need for space for food programs. As a result of on-going construction of the underground parking garage and public realm at the Bleecker buildings, the earliest the Request for Expression of Interest could launch would be Spring 2022 (depending on construction schedules). In order to address and respond to immediate emergency needs for food programming space, Toronto Community Housing is also considering case-by-case requests for space under its existing policy where possible.

The Toronto Community Housing owned open space, which includes the Ontario Street market area, will be commencing detailed design in 2021. Parks Forestry and Recreation, Social Development Finance and Administration and Toronto Community Housing is considering initiating a future Request for Expression of Interest for this space and exploring alignment with the Community Space Tenancy Policy.

In addition to these spaces, Parks, Forestry and Recreation is currently undertaking a redesign process for St. James Town West Park and are seeking partnerships with a volunteer working group to maintain a community garden space. City staff will continue to provide updates to the St. James Town Community Food Table if spaces become available.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A - List of St. James Town Community Food Table Members and Other Organizations Providing Food Services or Programming

Appendix B - Food Security Asset Map for St. James Town

Appendix C - Summary: OASIS Food Hub by the St. James Town Community Co-operative Inc.

Appendix D - Interim Collaborative Framework for Healthy Food Security in St. James Town