

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

Purpose

This document outlines the work done to date by the St. James Town Community Co-op to develop the OASIS Food Hub in the St. James Town neighbourhood. Since a 2019 City Motion, we have been in close dialogue with City Staff with active support from Councillor Wong-Tam to secure a site and zoning changes for long-term operations and a Phase 0.5 Shipping Container.

OASIS is a model for a healthy, affordable, and sustainable food system developed by and for the residents of St. James Town. It is a replicable full cycle food hub that combines climate controlled urban agriculture, a certified community kitchen, bulk food procurement, organic waste diversion, sustainable energy, and farm-to-city exchanges into one **Organic Agro-ecological Sustainable Integrated System (OASIS)**. OASIS aims to address systemic, equity-based, and emergency food insecurity in vulnerable communities.

OASIS Food Hub Objectives

1. Improve Health and Food Security
2. Create Sustainable Jobs and Social Enterprise Opportunities
3. Run Accredited & Community Education
4. Reduce Impact on Environment

The Need

OASIS was designed by and for the crowded, low-income Toronto neighbourhood of St. James Town, with the ability to be adapted to other communities. Home to majority newcomers, St. James Town has remained overlooked and underserved leading to systemic food insecurity. While the neighbourhood has physical access to groceries, it is food insecure in that it lacks economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food. In a survey of 180 residents in 2021, 69.1% reported they always or sometimes rely on a foodbank. The pandemic has worsened the situation, with 77.6% saying they have less access to healthy, nutritious food since its onset. Lack of green and growing spaces also contribute to food insecurity.

As a global neighbourhood of at least 20,000 people, St. James Town is also impacted by global crises. As the IPCC (2019) notes, climate change “negatively affects all four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilisation, and stability.”¹ These impacts are already beginning to hit St. James Town economically, and through the increasing arrival of climate refugees. OASIS offers elegant solutions to a compound of

¹ Mbow, C., C. Rosenzweig, L.G. Barioni, T.G. Benton, M. Herrero, M. Krishnapillai, E. Liwenga, P. Pradhan, M.G. Rivera-Ferre, T. Sapkota, F.N. Tubiello, Y. Xu, 2019: Food Security. In: Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems [P.R. Shukla, J. Skea, E. Calvo Buendia, V. Masson-Delmotte, H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, P. Zhai, R. Slade, S. Connors, R. van Diemen, M. Ferrat, E. Haughey, S. Luz, S. Neogi, M. Pathak, J. Petzold, J. Portugal Pereira, P. Vyas, E. Huntley, K. Kissick, M. Belkacemi, J. Malley, (eds.)]. In press.

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local and global problems including the climate change emergency, food waste, inequality, and the climate refugee crisis.

OASIS Food Hub Model:

Designed in modular phases that can be re-ordered, combined, and tangentially developed to meet emergent needs and space opportunities.

- **Phase 0.5: Shipping container** – inspected community kitchen, resident capacity trainings, good food buying club storage and operations, community meal preparation
- **Phase 1: Grow the community food hub** - expand storage and add office space.
- **Phase 2: Food production** - aquaponics & mushrooms in unused below-grade spaces
- **Phase 3: Biodigestion and composting** - waste into renewable energy and fertilizer
- **Phase 4: Green Roof & Retail** – rooftop farm, rainwater, office, retail & program space

Figure 1: OASIS Food Hub Managed by the St. James Town Co-op



Figure 2: Social, Economic, Environmental Benefits and Policy Alignments of OASIS

BENEFITS	1. Food Production	2. Food Distribution	3. Food Processing	4. Food Consumption	5. Food Recycling	6. Co-op Structure
Social						
Nutrition	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community building	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social inclusion and dignity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Food and Nutrition Security	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Emergency Preparedness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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Economic						
Employment	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Canadian Experience/ access to employment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Green job training						✓
Healthy food cost reduction	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Entrepreneur Incubation	✓		✓	✓		✓
Community Accountability						✓
Environmental						
Climate Adaptation & Mitigation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
GHG reduction (methane, nitrous oxide, CO2)	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Water use efficiency	✓				✓	
Reduce chemicals growing	✓	✓				
Compost for restoring soil	✓				✓	
Clean Energy Production					✓	
Food Waste Reduction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Policy Alignment						
TransformTO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Toronto Food Strategy 2018	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Milan Food Pact 2015	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
GrowTO Urban Agriculture Plan for Toronto 2012	✓	✓				✓
Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan 2018	✓				✓	✓
Circular Economy Act 2016	✓	✓			✓	✓
Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth & Climate Change 2016	✓	✓			✓	✓
17 SDGs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Current Partners:

Local Farm and Food Co-op, Foodshare (Trustee), The Neighbourhood Group (Trustee), North Pine Foundation (Grantor), African Food Basket, Global Medic, Ecojust Food Network, Auntie Amal Community Centre, Muslim Welfare, Humaniti, Conscious Minds Co-op, LIFT, National Farmers Union Local 305 (GTA), U of T Sustainability Centre, Ryerson University, CREW.

Current Status of the OASIS Food Hub - June 2021:

With funding from NorthPine Foundation and private donors, the Co-op currently runs \$20,000 per month of emergency food operations out of the Wellesley Community

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Center. The permit expires on June 30th, and we **require 100 sq meters** to be able to continue. Meanwhile, the co-op is phasing into a sustainable model under the Good Food Buying Club. We continue to work with City Councillor Wong-Tam's office and City Staff to secure appropriate space, such as the Phase 0.5 Shipping Container. Our community garden and partnerships with local farmers and farmland continue to grow. Set to co-chair Community Food Table after this report. **To date, no space has been confirmed for any phase of OASIS or for emergency food facilities.**

Current Activities of the Co-op that operationalize the OASIS model:

1. Growing & Composting: community garden with individual and community plots with a small composting system and sun-dehydrator. 2-acres of farming land has been recently secured for co-op members in the GTA by a partner farm.

2. The Good Food Buying Club: a bulk buying program for access to local, healthy, organic, affordable, and ecologically-grown food from local farmers and suppliers. Members collectively share the cost of buying food in bulk including minimal operational costs, resulting in significant savings. "Ally-members" further subsidize residents' costs by opting into a higher mark-up.

3. COVID-19 Emergency Food: St James Town is one of the hardest and most disproportionately impacted neighbourhoods in the city because of the pandemic. Initially through RedCross funding followed by private donors and NorthPine Foundation, the Co-op and our over 100 volunteers rose to the challenge to coordinate healthy, culturally-appropriate grocery boxes and prepared meals for over 450 households and isolated residents.

4. Timebank: allows resident members to exchange skills with one another, gain experience, and build community. Timebanks engage members in offering services to other members and "earn" time credits, a form of community currency. Members can then "purchase" services using these time credits. Timebanks contribute to increased social capital and community health.

5. Black and Indigenous Food Sovereignty: The City of Toronto Board of Health (2021) acknowledges that Black families are 3.5 times more likely to be food insecure². St. James Town's population is 14% of African and Caribbean, significantly higher than the city average³. The co-op is developing programs and co-op-wide practices for Black

² City of Toronto, Social Development, Finance and Administration. (March 25, 2021). *Advancing Black Food Sovereignty – Update*. Retrieved from: <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2021/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-165110.pdf>

³ City of Toronto. (2018). North St James Town 2016 neighbourhood profile. Retrieved from: <https://www.toronto.ca/ext/sdfa/Neighbourhood%20Profiles/pdf/2016/pdf1/cpa74.pdf>

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and Indigenous food sovereignty and to increase the co-op's culturally-responsive and democratic capacities.

History of the OASIS Food Hub:

2006 - L.I.F.T., with Ryerson University and the Wellesley Institute, submit report to the U.N. on human rights in St. James Town. Food insecurity is identified as a significant issue.

2010-12 – Community Café, with funding from Tower Renewal, is launched by residents, incubated by LIFT. Activities: pay-what-you-can community dinners, nutritional education, certificate program with George Brown. This work was unsustainable without dedicated space.

2013-15 – Feasibility study identifies a community enterprise co-op as the most sustainable and appropriate model. The café incorporates as the not-for-profit resident-majority St. James Town Community Co-operative (2015). Members begin to plan on-site sustainable food production, naming our new vision the OASIS Food Hub.

2017 - Ward 13 City Councillor passes away and Toronto Centre MPP leaves office, leaving us no political representative at the municipal or provincial level with which to engage. Farm trips, dinners, community led workshops continued. Explorations of TCHC sites and meetings with technical consultants and Scadding Court ensue. Yonge St. Mission's neighbourhood office is closed so we lose storage and regular programming space. Operations move to member's home.

2018: City funds feasibility study for the OASIS Food Hub. See Feasibility Study section below.

2019: Feasibility study published and the bulk food buying club is launched as recommended by residents. Councillor Wong-Tam successfully puts forward City Motion (MM10.13) to bring Social Development, Finance, and Administration in consultation with OASIS, City planners, and staff in various departments to review the actions and approvals necessary to facilitate: A) The creation of an underground aquaponics farm at 325 Bleecker Street, a Toronto Community Housing Corporation Building; and B) The location for OASIS Food Hub for the production, distribution and management of food and water in St. James Town (City Council, 2019). From Nov. 2019 to Sept. 2020: co-op worked with city staff to identify opportunities and obstacles.

2020-21: COVID-19 hits, and the St. James Town Co-op pivots its focus to emergency food provision for neighbourhood, with Red Cross and private donor funding, and local

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partnerships.

The City Motion working group identifies zoning and by-law obstacles and recommends that a collaborative framework for food security is developed with all willing agencies and grassroots food organizations in the neighbourhood, which resulted in this report.

2018-19 Feasibility Study

The City of Toronto funded a \$50,000 feasibility study conducted by James Town Community Co-operative with support from our trustee, Scadding Court Community Center, and technical partner WaterFarmers. To further develop the model, understand community buy-in, technical and financial feasibility, and site possibilities of the Food Hub researchers engaged the: **Community:** 193 food surveys; 3 design gatherings with 35+ residents, and experts; 1 youth-specific design gathering; 30 informational drop-ins; 2 social dinners; a candidates' debate; weekly community tabling; 3 urban food field visits; and 7 resident working group meetings. **Stakeholders Meetings:** 4 with TCHC, 5 with city councillors, 3 with Tower Renewal and planning officers, 6 with the MP's and MPP's offices, school principals and teachers. 5 partnerships established. **A Technical study:** by WaterFarmers, consultants who've built urban farm sites for the City of Toronto and Hamilton. Budgets, space requirements, site analysis, and production and waste diversion possibilities.

Key Findings from the Study: OASIS is desirable, replicable, and technically feasible.

- 60% of respondents said they would join a food co-op to increase access to healthy food; 72% of respondents said they want food grown in St. James Town & local trusted farms
- Resident identified important qualities of a good food hub: high quality food, managed by residents, committed to regenerating the land, full cycle/food systems approach, employment, resilience to emergencies and climate change.
- The co-op model is sweet spot between for-profit and charitable ventures
- Measures are proven, off-the-shelf, easily deployed, and scalable.
- OASIS will significantly increase climate resilience & emergency preparedness
- OASIS can be replicated in other communities
- Based on space sizes and constraints in the neighbourhood, OASIS has the potential to:
 - **Produce per year:** 200,000 heads of leafy greens, 7.7 tonnes of fish biomass, 9,400 lbs of tomatoes, 1,900 lbs of lettuce, 15,900 lbs of specialty mushrooms
 - **Divert per year:** 485 tonnes of organic waste (10% of the neighbourhood's waste), 290 tonnes of compost for sale, 77 tonnes of premium worm compost

Key Challenges Identified in the Study:

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- Zoning/permitting challenges for urban agriculture and composting
- Biological and economic success is more straightforward for indoor farming: R&D partnerships and no-cost recovery start-up funding can address this
- Collaboration across different levels of government for funding, retrofitting, and zoning
- No confirmed space commitments by the end of the study.

For More Information or Questions about Budgets and More Detailed Plans:

<https://stjamestowncoop.org/> Email: info@stjamestowncoop.org