May 6, 2011

Toronto Board of Health
277 Victoria Street, Suite 203
Toronto, Ontario, M5B 1W2

Dear Board of Health,

It was a pleasure to host members of the Toronto Food Policy Council and others from Toronto Public Health recently at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre. This was the first meeting of what I anticipate becoming regular events as we begin to work together. I thought it would be useful to follow up with some additional background on Vineland’s research activities in ethno-cultural vegetables, and to re-affirm our commitment to the relationship between our organizations. We look forward to working with you to further strengthen our rural-urban connection and to realize some of the exciting synergies emerging from this collaborative partnership.

We are currently entering the second year of a research project to test different varieties of selected ethno-cultural vegetables and assess their suitability for production in Ontario, with a goal of providing vegetable producers with critical knowledge on what to grow, how to grow it, and where to sell their produce. We have several projects aligned around this core ‘production’ project, which focuses on creating supply of fresh ethno-cultural produce for sale via various outlets. This work is undertaken recognizing the need to take a multi-faceted approach to create change that will ultimately support a sustainable and robust production sector, and engages the full value chain – producers, retailers and distributors. We have several partners within this larger initiative, including the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers’ Association, Greenbelt Farmers, The Stop, Food Share Toronto, Distributors and Retailers. Collectively, we bring unique skills in production and consumer insights, and value-chain connections that will contribute to the project’s success.

Visible minorities will make up 63% of Toronto’s population by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2010). As demographics change, so does demand for ethno-cultural vegetables, creating a huge market opportunity for Ontario’s horticulture industry. Supplying ethnic markets provides Ontario producers with a profitable opportunity, while providing New Canadians with locally grown produce. Our research clearly shows that a wide range of “world foods” can be grown in the Greater Toronto Area. The challenge lies in creating food access strategies that enable distribution along multiple networks and pathways that ensure penetration into neighbourhoods with high concentrations of New Canadians which are typically under-served by grocery outlets.

Definition of these markets and means of accessing different sectors are critical to reducing investment risk (by providing ‘market pull’) for producers while making fresh, local and healthy produce available to a wider consumer audience. Lasting success will only be achieved by creating new partnerships that
cross traditional boundaries to establish new food service models that promote Ontarians’ access to culturally-appropriate fresh and healthy foods, while delivering economic benefits to Ontario’s vegetable producers through the creation of new markets that will support crop diversification.

The project that we recently jointly developed and submitted to the McConnell Foundation embodies many of these aspirations. The project would create a formal partnership between the Toronto Food Strategy and The Vineland Research and Innovation Centre to build connections within the city and between the health and agricultural sectors, towards a health focused, sustainable food system. This project links Vineland’s work on ‘World Crops’ with municipal policymaking activities to improve access and affordability of food in food deserts, and builds upon existing expertise and strategic initiatives in each organization rather than duplicating capacity.

I look forward to working with you on this and other initiatives as our relationship grows.

With best regards,

Michael Brownbridge, Ph.D