



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Toronto Food Strategy: 2012 Update

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To:	Board of Health
From:	Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Toronto Food Strategy and an overview of current initiatives. In the last year, Toronto Public Health has been collaborating with community partners as well as City staff from a number of divisions to lead, facilitate and support the implementation of priority food initiatives. The Food Strategy's work has focused on building partnerships among City staff, facilitating the development of more enabling regulatory environments for food initiatives and leveraging external funding to support innovative food system projects. Working with a variety of partners, the Food Strategy is engaged in initiatives such as a Mobile Good Food Market pilot project to make affordable, healthy produce more accessible in underserved neighbourhoods; supporting improved access to locally grown ethnocultural vegetables; promoting an integrated approach to food safety, food literacy and employment as a determinant of health through learner-centred food handler training in community settings, and enabling better access to kitchens, bake ovens and public space for urban agriculture, markets and community food programming.

Staff will continue to pursue activities based on the vision laid out in the "Cultivating Food Connections" report, but also inspired and informed by ongoing engagement with residents, community organizations and City staff on food systems issues. Staff will continue to work with partners to access external project-specific funding. The Medical Officer of Health will report back to the BOH annually on the progress of the Food Strategy.

Financial Impact

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of June 16, 2008, the Board of Health approved a recommendation from the Medical Officer of Health to spearhead a Toronto Food Strategy. At its meeting of February 16, 2010, the Board of Health approved a report from the Medical Officer of Health as a basis for broad community stakeholder consultation and engagement on the Food Strategy. On June 1, 2010, the Board received an update, including the results of consultation and engagement and endorsed the actions proposed in the “Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto” report.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2008/hl/decisions/2008-06-16-hl15-dd.pdf>

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/hl/decisions/2010-02-16-hl28-dd.htm>

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/hl/decisions/2010-06-01-hl31-dd.htm>

In August 2010, the City Manager distributed a letter to all City of Toronto Divisions, Agencies, Boards and Commissions requesting that they all identify and implement initiatives that support a healthy and sustainable food system, including, but not limited to, the activities identified in the Cultivating Food Connections report. The report outlined six priority areas for action:

- Support food friendly neighbourhoods;
- Make food a centerpiece of Toronto’s new green economy;
- Eliminate hunger in Toronto;
- Connect city and countryside through food;
- Empower residents with food skills and information, and
- Urge federal and provincial governments to establish health-focused food policies.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The goal of the Toronto Food Strategy is to work collaboratively with a broad range of partners to champion and support a healthier, more sustainable food system for all. The need for improvements to the food system is clear. The Toronto area, along with the rest of the industrialized world, faces numerous problems related to food, including hunger, obesity, chronic disease, disappearing farmland and environmental pollution. At the global level, rising oil prices and droughts have caused food prices to reach record levels, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. Toronto's Nutritious Food Basket Survey found a 4.6% increase in food prices last year, coupled with the high cost of housing and other fixed expenses, The Daily Bread Food Bank reports more than 900,000 visits to its food banks in Toronto, a 14% increase since the pre-recession period in 2008 (Daily Bread Food Bank, 2011).

Food issues continue to be strongly connected to the City’s social, economic, health and environmental objectives. Local governments are, and have been throughout history, connected to food in many ways. In Toronto, the City serves food in shelters, seniors’ homes, recreation centres and childcare centres, carries out food safety inspections, promotes healthy eating, offers breastfeeding support, funds school nutrition programs, provides business licenses for food sales, supports community gardens and provides allotment garden spaces, supports incubators to foster food entrepreneurs, applies zoning rules, and coordinates and promotes food festivals and events. The work of the Food

Strategy is very much focused on the notion that the City could reap many more benefits if it started to identify, name and intentionally leverage its power and resources in favour of a healthy and sustainable food system.

COMMENTS

In the past year, Food Strategy staff have been leading, facilitating and supporting the implementation of numerous food initiatives that reflect the goals of a healthier, more sustainable food system. Much of the work consists of brokering relationships across City Divisions and between local government and community organizations, with the goal of creating more enabling policy environments for food solutions. Not only is it important in an era of limited public sector resources to leverage the power of unique partnerships and working across silos, the complexity of food issues demands this approach. Given that so many government departments and agencies at all levels play a role in food (agriculture, environmental standards, employment, dietary advice, food safety, waste disposal, and so on), the implementation of food solutions requires unique and innovative partnerships. In this way, the Food Strategy project brings multiple benefits. It plays a vital role in catalyzing positive food initiatives but also highlights opportunities for City staff to work across silos and with community, all of which can inform approaches to addressing complex issues beyond food.

Collaboration with Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) and Other Partners

The TFPC is the community advisory group for the Food Strategy. The Food Strategy and TFPC work very closely, with many members partnering on key Food Strategy initiatives. The close integration of the TFPC and Food Strategy means there is significantly greater capacity to bring a food systems perspective to TPH and across City divisions. The Food Strategy appears on the agenda of all TFPC meetings to facilitate in-depth reports and knowledge-sharing between the staff team and TFPC members.

The Food Strategy team has also collaborated with partners to secure three external funding opportunities in the last year from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, the Ontario Centres for Excellence, and the McConnell Foundation. Several activities described below were supported through funding from the province's Healthy Communities Fund and coordinated locally with the Into Health Partnership. This funding enabled the implementation of the Into Health Partnership's work plan that focused on policies to support access to healthy food. The Food Strategy coordinated a number of projects with the Into Health funding focused on removing regulatory and other barriers to the proliferation of safe, healthy, affordable and diverse food options, especially in low-income areas.

Examples of 2011-2012 Into Health funded activities include research that identified regulatory barriers and opportunities, including mobile produce vending; initiatives to build and strengthen partnerships; and creating innovative and clear language communication tools.

Below is a summary of selected initiatives that the Food Strategy has led, facilitated and/or supported in the last year.

Mobile Good Food Market Pilot

A significant number of Torontonians face economic and geographic barriers to accessing healthy and culturally appropriate food on a regular basis. While low income is the biggest barrier, neighbourhood characteristics can amplify the disadvantage many residents face. Too many Torontonians live in neighbourhoods that have few quality and affordable food retail options within easy walking distance, along with relatively poor access to public transit. Even individuals in areas that are well served by healthy food retail can face challenges, especially seniors, newcomers, those with disabilities and single parents with young children.

One of the solutions is to promote innovative food access options, such as mobile food vending. Toronto Public Health, Foodshare, United Way Toronto, and the Food Policy Research Initiative (CAMH/ University of Toronto) are working together to launch a Mobile Good Food Market pilot project in the summer of 2012. The pilot is made possible through a one year grant from the Ontario Centres of Excellence with additional support from United Way's Toronto Enterprise Fund. Leveraging FoodShare's existing warehouse operations, including its 18-year relationship with a buyer Super Select at the Ontario Food Terminal, the Mobile Good Food Market will be able to sell fresh fruits and vegetables at wholesale prices. The initial mobile market sites will be at or near apartment tower communities, including many Toronto Community Housing (TCH) buildings. Partners selected the initial sites based on examination of existing food retail and in depth consultation with residents and local community organizations.

During the planning stage, the Food Strategy team and its partners have consulted City Divisions, including Municipal Licensing and Standards, to ensure all regulatory requirements are met. There have also been discussions with City Councillors, community organizations and residents. In April 2012, the partners held a community event for more than 100 food leaders and residents to gain feedback on the pilot and to hear residents' vision for alternative healthy food vending in general.

The pilot social enterprise initiative is one of many models to enhance access to affordable fresh produce. The pilot will be evaluated by the collaborating partners together with the funder who has hired consultants with expertise in social return on investment evaluation.

If successful, additional funding will be required to continue operations. It is hoped that the project will not only provide another way for residents in lower income neighbourhoods to access affordable fresh produce, but will also highlight the need for a more enabling regulatory environment for mobile healthy food vending.

Locally Grown World Crops

The Food Strategy is collaborating with the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre to assess the regional value chain for ethnocultural vegetables, sometimes referred to as

"world crops". The intent is to determine the feasibility of growing these crops in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region to support local farmers and to take advantage of the health and economic benefits of growing ethnocultural vegetables locally. World crops being explored include bottle gourd, callaloo, yard-long beans and okra. While these crops are increasingly available in retail stores, they tend to be imported even though many can easily be grown in Ontario. Displacing some of these imports with locally grown versions would deliver fresher, healthier, culturally-appropriate food to Toronto's increasingly diverse communities, while opening up new markets for local farmers and reducing the environmental costs of long distance food distribution.

The Food Strategy is working with Vineland Research to connect locally grown world crops with retailers, local farmers, and TPH and community programs in ethnically diverse, lower income Toronto neighbourhoods. A grant from the McConnell Foundation has enabled the partners to summarize existing research on world crop cultivation, consumer habits, and marketing, in part through community consultations. It is anticipated that the funder will support further retail assessments, key informant interviews and business plan development for a more comprehensive project on world crops. The Food Strategy will also continue to support research on consumer preferences to help inform broader commercialization of world crop production.

The Food Strategy is also working with the World Crops Project to support community-based world crop learning gardens. Now in its second year, the project is providing seedlings and some technical support to a number of community gardens across the city. This builds on existing expertise of newcomer gardeners in growing a variety of ethnocultural crops. The Food Strategy is partnering with the STOP Community Food Centre, the Greenbelt Foundation, Foodshare and other community agencies to raise awareness of the potential for locally grown world crop production. Partners are exploring the potential for a citywide learning network for the world crop learning gardens to increase local capacity in urban gardening and community mobilization through food. Training for the World Crop Learning Gardeners for the 2012 season will include world crop seed sharing and propagation techniques, pest management, small plot intensive gardening, recipes and more.

Soil Safety Guidelines

TPH has created an Urban Gardening Soil Assessment Protocol to determine and minimize risks associated with potential soil contamination in community and allotment gardens across the city. To make the information more widely accessible, the Food Strategy and Toronto Food Policy Council have developed a clear language toolkit and "how-to guide" for urban gardeners. In 2012, an initial training and capacity building workshop was held with over 100 community gardeners and food leaders where the resource was very well received. The project has also trained over 30 members of a Toronto Community Housing gardening group on how to assess soil safety.

Community Food Skills and Employability Pilot

The City of Toronto Bylaw No. 678-2006 requires every owner/operator of an eating or drinking establishment to have at least one certified food handler working in a

supervisory capacity at all times. Many residents have expressed great interest in obtaining certification. Evidence suggests that residents who are looking for work, or who hope to launch a food enterprise, have a much better chance of success if they obtain Food Handler Certification. However, the majority of participants in the recent pilot programs, plus feedback from low income communities across the city, identified the fees as a barrier (\$79.10 for course and examination, \$33.90 for examination only).

The Community Food Skills pilot project was delivered in two phases: the initial phase from January through March 2011 was implemented through 12 sites in Toronto and reached 240 participants with a 97% pass rate for achieving food handler certification. Supported by provincial funding, Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) and Dietitians (RDs) worked together to deliver food handler and food skills training, usually in a community kitchen setting. The intent was to test the efficacy of an integrated approach to delivering food safety and food literacy using adult learning principles. Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) partnered on the second phase of the pilot by integrating employment skills training and supporting participants interested in pursuing careers in the food sector at five additional sites. Toronto Economic Development and Culture provided links to potential employers.

Evaluation of the first phase indicated that participants appreciated the hands on approach to the Food Handler training as it allowed them to retain information better while learning how to make a nutritious meal and choose healthier food options. Participants stated that they would use this knowledge in the future.

The second phase of the pilot placed a stronger emphasis on employment. There was a 95% pass rate for food handler certification and 20% of participants were employed within 3 months while an additional 14% were pursuing further training. The majority of participants reported knowing more about kitchen and food safety rules after the program. Most reported increased knowledge about ways of preparing safe and healthy meals as well as healthier eating habits and acquiring new cooking skills. Pairing the Food Handler Certificate and Food Skills training in the same session provided participants with a more grounded understanding of food safety as well as important nutrition information and cooking skills.

Key ingredients for the project's success were its flexible, learner-centred approach that made it easier for participants to learn and retain information. This required adapting the curriculum to meet specific community needs. Furthermore, the project relied heavily on a strong partnership with other City divisions, community organizations and agencies serving the target population groups.

The evaluation identified the need for better participant screening and stronger linkages with employers in order to enable better employment outcomes. This requires a better understanding of the needs of employers in the food services industry. TPH, TESS and Economic Development and Culture staff will continue to work together to refine and resource this integrated model. This includes seeking sustainable resources and finding partners in the food industry who are interested in employing program graduates to

enable the program to continue and to be more effective by food safety, food literacy and employment measures.

Bake Ovens Policy

Requests to Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PF&R) to install bake ovens in parks have increased in recent years. Community bake ovens not only provide space for residents to engage in traditional baking practices but can also act as a focal point for community gatherings and build stronger communities.

Over the last year, Food Strategy staff worked with Parks, Forestry and Recreation on the development of a citywide policy on community bake ovens on City land. In November 2011, City Council adopted the "Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy". The Food Strategy will continue to work with PF&R staff to develop clear language communications on the policy and procedures for the community.

Access to Community Kitchens

The Food Strategy and Toronto Food Policy Council collaborated with PF&R to conduct a survey of kitchens in community centres across the city. While there is high demand for community kitchen space from residents, some groups experience barriers to accessing kitchens or don't even know that they exist. Barriers include complex booking procedures, lack of availability and high permit fees. There is particular demand for kitchens that have passed an inspection by Public Health Inspectors. Cooking in inspected kitchens is a requirement for community groups who wish to sell or distribute prepared food at community events and markets.

While a significant number of the kitchens have already been inspected and approved for use as a community kitchen, some remain uninspected. Some of those kitchens appear to have the necessary requirements to be approved for use as a community kitchen, once inspected. The Food Strategy is working with PF&R and Public Health Inspectors to identify and facilitate inspection of those facilities that have not been inspected as well as to clarify booking procedures for kitchens to enable consistency and transparency. Once completed, this information will be posted online. It is hoped that this work will enable better access to community kitchen space for community programming.

Mapping Access to Healthy Food Retail

With the help of Into Health funding, the Food Strategy is continuing to collaborate with other TPH Directorates and the City's Social Research and Analysis Unit (SDFA) to analyze economic and geographic access to healthy food through GIS mapping. The objectives are to build a better understanding of barriers and opportunities related to healthy food access, to uncover specific City of Toronto levers that can enable solutions, and to use this information to inform ongoing discussions and strategies for action with staff from appropriate City Divisions.

To date, the project has identified (through GIS mapping) areas of the city where there is an overlap of low-income households, high distance to supermarkets and poor access to public transit. As with many other indicators of disadvantage, these areas exist almost

exclusively in the inner suburb neighbourhoods. These maps have helped inform several subsequent initiatives. For example, the information was used as part of the site selection process for the Mobile Good Food Market; to support a range of community food planning projects and to explore ways to connect world crops with underserved and diverse communities.

Future analyses will focus on the degree to which smaller food stores are able to compensate for the absence of supermarkets; whether areas underserved by affordable healthy food retail also show indicators of poor health outcomes; and whether there have been neighbourhood differences in the opening and closing of supermarkets over the last decade. Food Strategy staff are also working with the City's Wellbeing Toronto interactive knowledge tool (toronto.ca/wellbeing) to create a healthy food access indicator for the website.

Community Food Distribution Research

Through Into Health Partnership funds, TPH commissioned some preliminary research to explore opportunities for bulk purchasing of affordable, healthy and, wherever possible, local food for community agencies and TPH programs. With differences in the size, location and program needs, a coordinated approach to food distribution for communities across Toronto can be very complex. Nevertheless, this preliminary research has identified some opportunities for local food procurement and bulk-buying, as well as areas for further exploration.

The overarching challenge in community food purchasing is the tension between keeping costs low and supporting a healthy, sustainable local food system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that community agencies want to prioritize local, healthy and organic produce that supports local producers, but when price is the primary driver of food purchasing decisions, these goals often cannot be achieved. For many of these organizations, which are often underfunded and under-resourced, it is cheaper and more convenient to go to the nearest grocery store to purchase produce for their food programs. It is very difficult for alternative distribution mechanisms to compete. However, the research suggests that there could be opportunities to help shift community food purchasing toward quality, local produce and leverage existing food expenditures. These could include buying from the Ontario Food Terminal; direct purchasing from farmers and bulk buying and distribution through new and existing community food hubs.

Food and the Official Plan Review

Toronto's statutory review of its Official Plan is currently underway. The review provides a unique opportunity to further establish the position of food as a key issue in managing and guiding growth in the city. The Food Strategy and TFPC are working with City Planning on opportunities to further encourage the goals of a healthy, sustainable food system in the Official Plan. Specific areas of consideration include supporting access to healthy food, urban food production, food sector employment opportunities and strengthening connections between producers and consumers. TPH will report to the Board of Health later in 2012 on opportunities to further integrate health objectives into the Official Plan.

Participation in Regional, National and International Food System Projects

Recognizing that Toronto needs to collaborate with partners beyond our borders to create a more sustainable food system, the Food Strategy is participating in a series of informal and formal networks of government and civil society partners from across the country. The network allows for information sharing on opportunities for local governments to champion food system initiatives. At the national level, the Food Strategy has had discussions with the Conference Board of Canada which is developing a Canadian Food Strategy, to be released October 2013. Most recently, staff provided input to the Conference Board on defining performance metrics that will be used to gauge progress on a strategy implementation. The Food Strategy is also involved in sharing best practices with international partners, including those from several U.S. cities and from South Africa and Kenya.

Next Steps

Toronto Public Health will continue to pursue activities based on the vision laid out in the "Cultivating Food Connections" report, but also inspired and informed by ongoing engagement with residents, community organizations and City staff on food systems issues. Toronto Public Health will continue to work with partners to access external project-specific funding. The Medical Officer of Health will report back to the BOH annually on the progress of the Food Strategy.

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