

Toronto Food Strategy: 2013 Update

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To:	Board of Health
From:	Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	All
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SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Toronto Food Strategy and an overview of current initiatives to support better access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food for all residents. A small interprofessional team of staff leads and coordinates Food Strategy initiatives. Over the last year, TPH has focused on building and strengthening connections with community and institutional partners, City staff, the private sector and other orders of government. TPH has also continued to integrate the Food Strategy into public health activities. In the last year, TPH has been successful in securing external funding from the Healthy Communities Fund (Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care), McConnell Foundation, Metcalf Foundation, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the International Development Research Centre to implement several key initiatives. This funding has enabled TPH to collaborate with numerous partners to lead, facilitate and support food initiatives such as the Mobile Good Food Market that will launch a retrofitted Wheel-Trans vehicle, donated by the TTC, this fall, to make low cost, high quality produce available in underserved neighbourhoods. There has also been increased emphasis on identifying opportunities to support corner stores to sell healthier foods, initiating research on innovative social financing models, extending the reach of the Community Food Works program, furthering research and action on World Crops and partnering with the community food sector on more efficient procurement strategies. TPH will continue to collaborate with diverse partners to pursue effective strategies to support a healthier, more sustainable food system, while also continuing to seek 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. On June 1, 2010, the Board received an update 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>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The vision of the Toronto Food Strategy is to champion and support a healthier, more sustainable food system for all. TPH collaborates with numerous partners, including a number of City divisions, and the community and private sector, to research, facilitate, coordinate and implement food projects and enabling policies that help make Toronto a healthy, vibrant place for everyone to live. The Toronto Food Policy Council is also the Community Reference Group for the Strategy.

COMMENTS

Over the last year, TPH has continued to collaborate with numerous partners on initiatives that reflect the vision of a healthier, more sustainable food system. Given that so many government departments and agencies at all levels play a role in food, implementation of food solutions requires building connections and developing ongoing and effective partnerships. Staff build networks that focus on implementing solutions initially on a small scale and evaluating them, with the overall intent of food system change. In the last year, TPH has implemented several initiatives with the support of funding through the Healthy Communities Fund (Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care), TPH Diabetes Strategy, McConnell Foundation, Metcalf Foundation, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the International Development Research Centre.

Overview of Collaborations with TPH, City Staff and the Community

TPH is spearheading many new food initiatives. For example, the Board of Health endorsed a TPH pilot initiative and advocacy for provincial menu labelling legislation to promote transparency and supportive food environments. TPH also recently drafted the Nourishing Young Minds report, which provided a review of the Student Nutrition Program in Toronto and other ongoing initiatives related to healthy food access, obesity reduction and diabetes prevention through the Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Directorate.

A core component of the Food Strategy is the integration of activities within TPH and across City divisions. In the past year, staff have expanded partnerships within TPH and many City divisions resulting in a number of innovative projects and partnerships:

- Research on community food procurement and distribution to inform and be informed by the related research underway in the Student Nutrition Program;

- Collaborate with key community and academic partners on a health impact assessment of Black Creek Urban Farm;
- Support research for City Planning and Social Development Finance and Administration's Tower Renewal team's implementation of the Residential Apartment Commercial (RAC) zone that will permit non-residential uses (including food retail) in identified tower communities across the City.
- Collaborate with Parks Forestry and Recreation (PFR), Planning and other divisions on disseminating the clear language version of the soil safety advice and development of a guide to regulations for selling food grown in urban gardens.
- Work with PF&R staff to develop enabling policies on community fresh food markets, gardens, and bake ovens.
- Work with staff in Shelter Housing Support and Administration to map food environments near City shelters and to assess opportunities for improving food in city and community operated shelters.
- Work with Toronto Community Housing (TCH) to bring the Mobile Good Food Market to some TCH sites, to identify opportunities to bring healthier food for sale in existing TCH tuck shops/stores, and to facilitate community markets and gardens on TCH sites.

Summary of Current Food Strategy Initiatives

Below is a summary of selected initiatives that TPH has led, facilitated or supported in the last year.

Community Food Works: Food Skills and Food Safety Training for Employability

Community Food Works aims to bring multiple benefits to low income residents by integrating nutrition education and employment skills training into the Food Handler Certification process. Participants develop job skills at the same time as building social networks and learning about food safety and healthy eating. The project began in 2011 through a partnership between Toronto Public Health, Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS), Economic Development and Culture, and Social Development, Finance and Administration. To date the project has trained over 300 participants in 17 program locations with 97% of the participants successfully obtaining their food handler certificates. All participants report they have changed the way they cook as a result of the program plus a number of participants acquired jobs or started businesses after acquiring food handler certification.

In early 2013, with additional 100% provincial funding TPH was able to continue to support Community Food Works and provide an overall food safety perspective to food strategy initiatives. Since June 2013, an additional 100 low income residents were trained in 10 community locations.

In addition to benefiting residents, the project is an example of positive interdivisional collaboration among City staff. By integrating efforts, the program has been able to multiply benefits to participants in a very cost-effective way. Moving forward, TESS will be implementing programs in three new sites in Scarborough. TPH will continue to

evaluate employment and health outcomes, develop partnerships with other community and institutional partners as well as explore opportunities for the project's long-term sustainability.

Mobile Good Food Market

With funding from the Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE), United Way Toronto and Toronto Public Health, FoodShare Toronto retrofitted one of its Good Food Program social enterprise delivery trucks to implement the Mobile Good Food Market (MGFM). Since July 2012, the MGFM has been making weekly visits to up to eight sites in lower income neighbourhoods across Toronto selling affordable, diverse fresh vegetables and fruit in areas underserved by traditional food retail. With FoodShare leading the operations, TPH is co-leading the project by coordinating evaluative research, liaising with licensing and other city staff and supporting community outreach, fundraising and communications efforts. The United Way was a founding partner and continues to provide strategic support, some funding and community connections.

A key part of the project has been the engagement of a group of residents as community food leaders at each site. The OCE grant plus some Provincial funding made it possible to offer small honoraria (in the form of food from the MGFM), training and capacity building for the community food leaders so that they could help promote and organize the weekly market. With support from the University of Toronto, FoodShare and TPH, staff surveyed residents at market sites. Customers cited convenience, price and quality as the most favourable features of the market. Many people, particularly seniors and those with existing health conditions, noted the importance of being able to access healthy, fresh food on a regular basis close to home. The weekly market also serves as a focal point for community interaction and an opportunity to address social isolation. Commenting on the value of the Mobile Good Food Market, one resident explained: "I get out of the house. I comb my hair, I change my clothes, I put some makeup on. I feel good that I'm going somewhere to buy something and I feel good that I dressed up. It's good for my health too."

The project partners are committed to continuing and expanding the project. Thanks to support from the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), the Mobile Good Food Market will launch a retrofitted Wheel-Trans vehicle that will be able to operate 12 months a year. The partners continue to seek external funding to support operations as well as explore opportunities to expand the scale and reach of the project. The MGFM is currently unable to serve all the communities that have requested service.

Healthy Corner Stores

TPH has coordinated a range of research projects to identify opportunities to support small to medium-scale food retail establishments to profitably sell healthy, affordable and culturally diverse foods in underserved neighbourhoods. For every supermarket in Toronto there are approximately eight small food stores, and very few sell fresh produce or significant quantities of other healthy staples. Many cities in the U.S. have launched initiatives to support convenience stores to offer healthier foods for sale.

In addition to consulting industry experts and reviewing best practices from other jurisdictions, staff coordinated in-store surveys in three neighbourhoods (plus Toronto Community Housing buildings with food retail) and interviewed a sample of food retail owners. In each area, the survey was a collaboration with local agencies, including East Scarborough Storefront, North York Harvest, Working Women Community Centre and the Oriole Food Space. Two-person teams of surveyors (a student researcher and a local resident) assessed the price, quality and diversity of food in 90 stores across the different neighbourhoods.

The research confirmed that few convenience stores sell fresh produce although some examples of existing healthier corner stores were found. There is great diversity within the small food retail sector but similarities in the challenges that store owners face in offering healthier items. Convenience store owners noted the difficulty in finding distributors who could offer good prices, accessing capital to purchase display units and refrigeration, lack of knowledge about buying and promoting healthier foods, and concerns that even if healthier items were stocked, residents wouldn't buy them. Workshops were held in June 2013 to share the survey research with Public Health staff and City and community stakeholders.

TPH continues to build connections with private sector and community partners to explore pilot opportunities and are at an early stage of researching possible financial tools, supports and incentives to offer small business operators. The next step is to develop a pilot implementation and evaluation plan and to research options for financial and other incentives specific to Toronto and the Canadian context. This research, supported in part by funding from Public Health Agency of Canada, will be conducted in collaboration with MaRS Centre for Social Innovation and other community and institutional partners. Depending on available resources, TPH hopes to collaborate with a range of partners to support "early adopter" small food retail locations to undergo a "healthy corner store" conversion. Rigorous process and impact evaluation research would be a key part of the project. It could also be timely to integrate a pilot with the new Residential Apartment Commercial Zone implementation in 2014. The new zoning category will permit a broad range of non-residential uses in and around residential apartment towers, including the many buildings common in Toronto's "food deserts".

Food Retail Mapping

Over the last year, TPH has worked with partners to deepen the analysis of the quality of food retail available to residents in different neighbourhoods. Earlier analysis showed that the problem in Toronto is not the lack of food stores overall but the quality of food retail and the availability of healthier items in the establishments. To get a better understanding of food retail quality, staff adapted an existing index that characterizes the "healthfulness" of food retail environments and applied it to Toronto. A lower score signifies a high proportion of less healthy food retail relative to healthier food outlets. Healthier food outlets were defined broadly, e.g. supermarkets, most butcher shops and fish shops, some bakeries and any smaller food stores that sell a significant quantity and diversity of produce. Scores were calculated for a 1km walking distance from the centre of every city block. The analysis showed that the "healthfulness" of food retail environments is

relatively low across Toronto with the median index score for the whole city being 23 out of 100. Household income was then overlaid onto the map and several lower income areas had particularly low scores. However, no significant correlation was found between income and the food environment index. This means that, although many lower income areas have few stores that sell healthier food, low income does not automatically predict limited geographic access to healthy food.

Over the next year, the research will attempt to address gaps in the current analysis. This includes identifying the role that food pricing plays in supporting or inhibiting healthy food access in different areas. Staff are also working with external partners such as the Centre for Research on Inner City Health to access health outcome data and will assess whether there are correlations with food environment measures.

Locally Grown World Crops

TPH continues to work with the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre to assess the regional value chain for ethnocultural vegetables, sometimes referred to as “world crops” (e.g. bottle gourd, okra, bitter melon, tomatillo). The goal is to determine how local production of these crops can support local farmers and how locally grown world crops can be integrated into distribution networks to meet the demand within Toronto’s diverse population.

The partnership received funding from the McConnell Foundation Sustainable Food Systems Initiative to assess a strategy to scale up world crop production by developing market linkages among farmers, distributors, retailers and urban communities. The research identified a number of needs, opportunities, and barriers to address the current gap in marketing and distribution infrastructure. For example, the absence of sufficient farmer-to-retail pathways and supports is currently a major impediment to Ontario farmers transitioning into world crop production and, in turn, accessing new markets.

It is hoped that locally grown world crops can be integrated into Toronto Public Health’s community food distribution and food retail analysis work and other appropriate community food initiatives. The next steps will be to develop a business plan to roll out expanded world crop production in the GTA. It is anticipated that the McConnell Foundation will continue to fund this work.

Soil Safety Guidance

TPH revised and disseminated a “Guide for Soil Testing in Urban Gardens”. The guide is a clear language brochure based on the 2011 research by TPH to help City staff and communities overcome soil toxics as a barrier to growing food in Toronto. The approach has been successfully used across the city to help communities grow food safely. TPH staff have conducted six community workshops and training sessions to share the information as well as disseminating the guide through a variety of networks, including food, gardening and agricultural list-serves across Toronto and internationally. Park, Forestry and Recreation staff are now using the guide to assess potential sites for community and allotment gardens. Numerous community organizations have also adopted the soil assessment approach, including Everdale, FoodShare and Greenest City.

Evergreen, a national charity that makes cities more livable, recommends that all its community partners across Canada use the Guide when assessing their proposed garden sites. Currently, Scotland and Melbourne, Australia are using this soil assessment approach as the foundation for the development of similar approaches for their jurisdictions.

Community Food Procurement Research

TPH has coordinated research that, alongside Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre’s “Community Food Flow Project” analysis, has identified many opportunities to enhance the availability of healthy foods in community programs. The sector includes drop-ins, social housing, community health centres, food banks, community meal programs, multiservice community organizations, shelters, school nutrition programs and others. Most programs are unable to effectively support their clients’ food needs, due in part to ongoing funding and resourcing constraints, but also because there is rarely a coordinated procurement strategy within the sector. Through better coordination, and by adding dedicated infrastructure to support distribution and logistics, these programs could have the ability to offer healthier diverse foods, and in some cases at reduced cost, while also supporting local food procurement. Food purchasing tends to occur on an individual program basis and go through conventional food service distributors, large-scale grocery stores and, in some instances, through local small food retail. This approach often leads to programs paying unnecessarily high costs and choosing less healthy foods. Collaborative purchasing solutions could therefore result in increased buying power and better nutrition and health outcomes.

The next steps will be to work with researchers and community partners to develop and expand supply options (especially in partnership with local producers), conduct detailed sector needs assessments, and develop a feasibility assessment for a community food distribution pilot.

NEXT STEPS

Over the next year, TPH will further its collaborations with a broad range of partners on activities that reflect 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. TPH 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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