

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

June 5, 2006

To: Board of Health
From: Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health
Subject: Access to Environmental Information

Purpose:

To report on a review of access to environmental information in Toronto, and propose a mechanism for additional consultation and future implementation of strategies to increase municipal and public access to such information.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial implications stemming directly from this report. Any financial implications of actions resulting from this report will be considered through the operating budget process of relevant divisions.

Recommendations:

It is recommended the Board of Health request that:

- (1) the Medical Officer of Health, in collaboration with the Executive Environment Team:
 - (a) identify what environmental information currently held by the City could be shared within the corporation and what could be made available to the public, and develop and implement plans to make this information more available and accessible; and
 - (b) report to the Board of Health early in 2007 on progress in making environmental information currently held by the City more accessible within the corporation and to the public;

- (2) the Medical Officer of Health, in collaboration with the Executive Environment Team:
 - (a) consult with stakeholders in the business community, labour groups, environmental and health organizations and community groups to identify information needs, barriers and opportunities for enhanced access to environmental information;
 - (b) report to the Board of Health early in 2007 on the results of the stakeholder consultation and with recommendations for future action;
- (3) the appropriate City Officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background:

In 2000, City Council endorsed the Environmental Plan, entitled “Clean, Green and Healthy: A Plan for an Environmentally Sustainable Toronto”. The Plan recommended that the City develop a Community Right-to-Know by-law that empowers community members to know the location, sources and health effects of toxic chemicals in their community.

A right-to-know strategy was also included in the 2002 “Action Plan for Cancer Prevention in the City of Toronto” developed by the Toronto Cancer Prevention Coalition, which was adopted by City Council that year.

City Council has identified transparency, accountability and public accessibility as core values in the public service and in the governance of this city. This commitment is captured in the City’s Strategic Plan, approved by Council in 2001. The Ontario Information and Privacy Commissioner, in her 2003 annual report “Privacy and Access: A Blueprint for Change”, called on the Province and City to renew the government culture of openness, including access to environmental data.

Toronto’s Board of Health considered public access to information on toxic substances in Toronto at its January 17, 2005 meeting and recommended that the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) report on practical and effective community right-to-know (CRTK) strategies, including consideration of the feasibility of a community right-to-know by-law, in consultation with appropriate City Divisions and community stakeholders, including the Cancer Prevention Coalition, business, labour and environmental groups.

Comments:

The City of Toronto believes in government that is open and accessible to enable full participation in the life of our City. When residents, business owners and other stakeholders can access and understand reports, meeting agendas, budgets and other information, they are better able to contribute their skills and views to the programs and policies that affect their daily lives.

Providing information about the state of our environment is part of the City's commitment to open governance and enhancing health and quality of life. In an urban environment such as Toronto, health may be affected by environmental factors. Information about the local use and release of toxic substances, the condition of drinking water or the state of the air, for example, can assist residents, governments and the business community to participate in improvements that can benefit health. The more understandable and accessible this information is, the more effective this participation can be.

Evidence suggests that the systematic collection and dissemination of environmental information, such as chemical use data, have been useful to businesses, government and the general public. The primary benefits of reporting on environmental conditions include stimulating pollution prevention, supporting emergency preparedness and enabling effective community engagement in environmental decision-making.

While some laws and voluntary programs exist under which companies and governments currently provide data to various government levels, there is important information relevant to the residents of Toronto that is neither collected nor made easily accessible. These limitations reduce the public's ability to understand and reduce health risks, and diminish opportunities for governments and industry to pursue environmental innovations.

Given the potential of environmental information to benefit public health and further inform corporate and government policy, the City of Toronto should consider ways to further enhance the collection of and access to environmental data.

Key to the path forward is consideration of how to balance the benefits of increased access to information with potential negative impacts from inappropriate disclosure, such as those that might affect confidentiality, public security or industry competitiveness. Assessing options to enhance access to information should therefore consider what particular types of information and levels of access may be most appropriate and useful for businesses, government and the public.

The attached report entitled "Access to Environmental Information: Preventing Pollution, Avoiding Risks" (Attachment 1) provides a preliminary assessment of the current state of environmental data collection and public access to that information in Toronto. It suggests actions that could be pursued, including examining what information currently held by the City could be better shared between City divisions or made available to the public. It recommends further consultation with the business community and other key stakeholders to identify opportunities for enhanced access to information, as well as a detailed examination of the environmental reporting requirements for government and industry sectors in Toronto and the associated administrative (including financial aspects and technical expertise), environmental and health implications. As part of this comprehensive review, the City should investigate the possible benefits that municipal legislation could add to existing approaches.

The path towards making meaningful environmental data available to the City and the community is complex but worthwhile. It requires dedicated inquiry into the City's own operations and ways in which it can meet corporate commitments to transparency and

environmental leadership. It must also be done in consultation with the business community, labour unions and community organizations to consider their roles in enhancing access and pursuing pollution prevention opportunities to benefit health and the environment.

Conclusion:

Increasing municipal and public access to environmental information can lead to improvements in pollution prevention, emergency planning and preparedness and understanding of health and environmental risks. These goals are consistent with City Council's vision of open governance, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability, reflected in the City's Strategic Plan and Environmental Plan.

TPH conducted an initial review of environmental reporting programs, and as a result, recommends that data collection and access to information be enhanced to provide a more complete picture of environmental conditions and hazardous substances in Toronto. City divisions should assess the environmental information they hold for opportunities to increase interdivisional sharing as well as public access, and the City should consult further with the business sector and community stakeholders on ways to improve data collection and enhance access to information. It is recommended that the Medical Officer of Health collaborate with the City's Executive Environment Team to pursue both internal and external consultations and report back to the Board of Health in early 2007 on progress to date and options for further municipal action.

Contact:

Carol Mee
Supervisor, Environmental Information and Education
Toronto Public Health
Tel: 416-338-8098
Fax: 416-392-7418
Email: cmee@toronto.ca

Monica Campbell
Manager, Environmental Protection Office
Toronto Public Health
Tel: 416-338-8091
Fax: 416-392-7418
Email: mcampbe2@toronto.ca

Dr. Fran Scott
Director, Planning and Policy
and Associate Medical Officer of Health
Toronto Public Health
Tel: 416-392-7463
Fax: 416-392-0713
Email: fscott@toronto.ca

Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer of Health

List of Attachments:

Attachment 1: Access to Environmental Information: Preventing Pollution, Avoiding Risks