



**Food Connections:
Toward a Healthy
and Sustainable
Food System
for Toronto**

A Consultation Report

February 2010

 **TORONTO** Public Health

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Foreword

Food can play a powerful role in promoting health, as well as building strong and diverse communities, protecting the environment and strengthening the economy. That's why food is such an effective vehicle to connect people to one another, to their neighbourhoods and their city.

I believe it is time to build on these connections and challenge ourselves to create a healthy and sustainable food system for all. I initiated the Toronto Food Strategy project to inspire discussion and action that will move us toward this goal.

“Food Connections” proposes a new vision for Toronto’s food, one that unites health and city building. The report, which lays out six directions for food system renewal, provides the basis for a broad community engagement process.

Toronto Public Health’s 2007 report, “The State of Toronto’s Food”, showed that the food we eat comes from a complex system of connected activities – production, processing, distribution, marketing, consumption and disposal – from “grow it to throw it”. It warned of intensifying pressures from a range of food-related problems – hunger, obesity, chronic disease, disappearing farmland, environmental pollution – and highlighted the need for coordinated and strategic approaches.

In 2008, the Toronto Board of Health endorsed the Food Strategy project, and a Steering Group was convened to guide the work. I’m grateful to the diverse group of community food experts and senior City staff who serve on the Steering Group. Its mandate is to help articulate a bold food vision for the city and begin to identify effective short and long term actions to implement it. I’m also thankful for the ongoing support and advice of the Toronto Food Policy Council.

Toronto already has many examples of food system leadership through the efforts of community organizations, City divisions and agencies, the private sector, and academic institutions.



Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer of Health, City of Toronto

With the support of the Steering Group, the Food Strategy project has begun the process of reaching out to, and connecting, a wide range of people and organizations in the community and across City government.

I welcome your thoughts about ways to improve the food system. There are many ways to feed into the discussion. Visit our website (toronto.ca/foodconnections) for more information and details about upcoming events. You may also contact Peter Dorfman, Toronto Food Strategy Manager (Tel: 416-338-7935, Email: pdorfma@toronto.ca), with your questions and ideas. Your feedback will be reflected in a final food strategy report with recommendations which will be submitted to Toronto City Council later in 2010.

I look forward to working with you to build a healthy and sustainable food system for Toronto.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dr. David McKeown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Dr.", "David", and "McKeown" being capitalized and prominent.

Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer of Health, City of Toronto

Introduction

Torontonians are ready for a fresh take on food. Many are looking for new ways to make a difference by unlocking food's potential to contribute to personal health, vibrant neighbourhoods and a great city. People increasingly understand that food connects health, the environment, the economy and community. There's growing interest in cooking, gardening, food festivals, farmers' markets, specialty food stores, food entrepreneurship, volunteering with neighbourhood food projects, learning about nutrition, and supporting local farms and healthy and sustainable food.

Food is also becoming central to how residents and the outside world see Toronto. It's recognized as the city's number one service and industrial employer. As one of the most diverse cities in the world, Toronto has food to match. Almost any food craving can be met in our Little Indias, Chinatowns, Greektowns, Little Italies and Korea Towns in the downtown, and lesser-known restaurants featuring foods from a hundred cultures, scattered across suburban plazas. And newly "fused" cuisines, mixtures of food traditions that exist side by side in Toronto, are spontaneously emerging. Community agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are spearheading made-in-Toronto projects that are winning international acclaim.

All this excitement has opened many people's eyes to the urgent need to accelerate progress toward a healthier and more sustainable food system. Toronto, along with the rest of the industrialized world, faces a cascade of health, social and environmental problems connected to food.

At least one Toronto household in ten – the rate is much higher among households of recent immigrants and lone parents – can't afford to eat a healthy diet.¹ This hardship persists in the face of undeniable research that links hunger and poverty to lifelong chronic disease and lower life expectancy.²

Side by side with hunger, approximately one in three Toronto children (age 2-11) is either overweight or obese.³ Newcomers to the city are often more vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, underemployment and social isolation than long-established residents. These factors contribute to a decline in the health of immigrants over time. Newcomers are not the only ones at risk of severe health problems. According to a 2010 report from Statistics Canada, children as a group are "taller, heavier, fatter and weaker than in 1981", which may lead to accelerated "non-communicable disease development, increased health care costs, and loss of future productivity".⁴ These indicators of worsening health point to the need for lifestyle changes at the personal level, backed by public policy to support healthy diets and physical activity.



Food can address health, social, economic and environmental issues simultaneously.



Many of Toronto's food problems exist in spite of enormous advantages. For example, the city is surrounded by the Greenbelt, the largest area of protected near-urban greenspace in the world. The city's creative chefs, many of whom feature local, sustainable and heritage foods, are another asset. The diverse restaurant sector is fast becoming as much a signature of Toronto's creative edge as movies, live theatre, music, comedy, publishing, biomedical research and higher education.

Despite these advantages, the number of farms in the Greenbelt dropped by 7 percent between 2001 and 2006, a bad omen for local farm survival.⁵ The average Ontario food producer earns a little more than \$8,000 annually from farming operations,⁶ while production costs continue to increase for many. It is increasingly recognized that the food system's high energy inputs account for as much as a third of greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change.⁷ A rapidly aging population means that the nutritional needs of seniors and the role food can play in promoting independent living will become a priority. Children are exposed to a greater intensity and frequency of unhealthy food marketing than ever before. Many young people, and adults for that matter, lack basic food skills and information – the ability to cook healthy meals from scratch, read food labels correctly, or know where food comes from. Added to all of this, there are few signs of preparation for a relatively near-term future when fossil fuels for food production, transportation

and storage will become scarcer and more expensive, and continued reliance on today's long-distance, centralized food system will become more difficult. These challenges won't be overcome by increased public spending alone, especially at a time when governments face budget deficits and less revenue.

This is where a food system perspective or "food system thinking" comes into play. The term "food system" is commonly defined as the complex set of activities and relationships related to every aspect of the food cycle, including production, processing, distribution, retail, preparation, consumption and disposal. Food system thinking is a way of seeing the bigger picture, of developing solutions to food problems by seeing and leveraging their connections to other issues. Governments are increasingly looking for cost-effective policies and programs that can address multiple issues at the same time. Food system thinking epitomizes the approach. In large part, this food strategy initiative is about finding and implementing new ways of achieving multiple objectives through food. By its nature, food can address health, social, economic and environmental issues simultaneously. For this to happen, Toronto needs to think in strategic terms about how to leverage and coordinate food advantages and assets to help solve the city's problems.

This report proposes some directions that could form the foundation of a "whole-of-society, whole-of-government"⁸ food strategy. Taking the next

steps in food leadership can help Toronto reach its social, economic and environmental goals. Even though achieving our vision is a long-term goal, the city doesn't have to wait for systemic changes before taking action. Toronto can start now, and these efforts can be a catalyst for systemic change. In the short term, we can build on what's already happening. For example, food activities such as community kitchens, nutrition education and social enterprise support could be integrated into existing neighbourhood-based initiatives. In the medium term, new initiatives and programs could be launched to change the way the city addresses food problems and seizes opportunities. Toronto might facilitate the creation of food hubs in neighbourhoods to better coordinate food activities and increase access. Each of these approaches can make real changes in people's lives while building momentum for longer-term, larger scale actions to redesign systems so that they don't give rise to problems in the first place. This might mean establishing comprehensive federal and provincial policies that identify optimal health as the goal of the food system and enhance the capacity of cities to take action.⁹

In this vision of a health-focused food system, health becomes the overarching and driving principle. This means much more than making safe and nutritious food more available. It also refers to a range of influences on the health of individuals, families, neighbourhoods and cities. A health-focused food

system, in other words, protects and nourishes the environment, fights climate change, promotes social justice, creates local and diverse economic development, builds community and much more. This "big picture" approach to health isn't new. It reflects the holistic view promoted by the World Health Organization and endorsed by Toronto Public Health, sometimes described as the "social determinants of health".

The six directions suggested in this report will enable Toronto to build on its advantages. Our proposals include: growing food-friendly neighbourhoods, making food a centrepiece of the new green economy, eliminating hunger, empowering residents with food skills and information, using food to connect city and countryside, and embedding food system thinking in City government.

A Health Focused Food System

- Fosters food-friendly neighbourhoods
- Promotes social justice
- Supports nutrition and disease prevention
- Builds strong communities
- Creates local, diverse and green economic development
- Protects and sustains the environment
- Empowers people with food skills and information
- Nourishes links between city and countryside



So many of the ingredients to promote health, environmental, economic and social benefits through food are already in place.



Toronto is Poised to Lead the Way

Cities are well positioned to play a leading role in fostering a healthy, sustainable food system. Toronto is better equipped to lead than most. The potential of cities to be food leaders may not be obvious, given that many formal food powers related to agriculture, healthcare, imports and infrastructure are in the hands of federal and provincial governments. But the role of cities is rapidly changing in the 21st century for a number of reasons. With more than half the world's population and more than 80 percent of Canadians living in urban areas, cities are a nexus of change, where health, social, economic and environmental challenges are felt most acutely, and where opportunities for innovation and positive change are most abundant.

Many policies and programs that Canadians take for granted began with experiments at the local level. On the international level, the role of cities as breeding grounds for innovation is becoming ever more important in the era of climate change. Many national governments have been slow to react, so cities all over the world are uniting in action and Toronto is among them, earning a reputation as a global environmental leader. Similarly, major cities are becoming leaders in food system renewal. New York, London, San Francisco, Chicago, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil, among others, are spearheading efforts that highlight the untapped potential of food to address a wide range of urban priorities.

Toronto's Advantages

When it comes to the list of what's required for cities to lead the way in food – knowledgeable and engaged residents, abundant natural assets, economic strength, “collaborative infrastructure”¹⁰ and dynamic leadership – the Toronto region has a lot going for it. So many of the ingredients to produce health, environmental, economic and social benefits through food are already in place, available to be leveraged by a strategy and connected through a common vision.

When it comes to people, Torontonians have repeatedly shown their willingness and generosity in support of projects that help the environment and society. The city has a respected, popular and effective group of community organizations with a long history of achievements in food access projects, urban agriculture, capacity building and strengthening communities through food. Indeed, a host of community agencies, NGOs, university institutes and publications are earning Toronto a reputation as a world leader in food thinking and action. A broad network of community food programs also provides emergency food to thousands of people every day.

When it comes to economic clout, Toronto shoppers spend about \$7 billion per year on food.¹¹ Many are using their purchasing power to support products

that express their values, especially through local, fair trade, organic and sustainable choices. To a remarkable degree, the success of new food “niche markets” has been driven by demands from consumers, rather than governments, major corporations or food producers – signalling a dramatic increase in the role of eaters and citizens in shaping the emerging food system. While these markets are still relatively small, they are being embraced increasingly by major food retailers, suggesting a potentially powerful role for consumers in creating larger structural changes to the food system.

As for natural assets, the GTA is home to some of the best agricultural land in the country. On a clear day, over one third of Canada’s class one farmland can be seen from the top of the CN Tower.¹² At a time of increasing water scarcity in other parts of the world, Toronto has access to vast amounts of freshwater. There’s some comfort in knowing that governments have protected the Greenbelt, over 1.8 million acres. However, much work remains to reconcile the interests of farmers, conservationists, local residents, and developers.

On the economic front, Toronto is the second largest food distribution hub on the continent. The provincially-funded Ontario Food Terminal, located in the city’s west end, is Canada’s largest wholesale market for vegetables and fruits. As one of the few North American regions to still have a public food

distribution centre, Toronto has a dynamic sector of independent and diverse neighbourhood retailers who can buy and sell fresh produce at competitive prices. Surprising to those who think that food’s importance is restricted to the rural economy, it is a foundational economic sector in Toronto, providing one in eight jobs in the city and generating \$85.2 billion in annual revenues across the province.¹³ Niche markets for local, sustainable, organic, artisanal and ethnically diverse food are all growing rapidly, as are efforts to stimulate regional food infrastructure.

The food cluster in the Golden Horseshoe has great potential for growth. Internationally recognized nutrition research in Southern Ontario universities, agri-food research in Guelph, a bustling agricultural technology centre in the Niagara fruit and wine region, along with a wealth of nearby financial, biomedical research, information technology and logistics expertise, all point to a region poised for a breakthrough in food system renewal. There are already many examples of businesses that have achieved success through food innovations that respond to an evolving consumer market. The strategic challenge is to build the links – create a synergy of these advantages so that their combined efforts are greater than the sum of their individual efforts. A pressing strategic opportunity is to link the evolving food cluster with the developing green economy. Toronto is already building a world reputation as a centre for green investment.



Ontario Food Terminal: The provincially funded Terminal is the largest wholesale fruit and vegetable distribution centre in Canada and supports diverse and independent retailers across the region.

The Toronto Stock Exchange, for example, has more “cleantech” companies listed than any other exchange in the world.¹⁴ Food is an equally important building block for a green economy. Food growing, after all, is the original solar and renewable industry.

Toronto has also built “collaborative infrastructure” – opportunities for people from all walks of life to work together on solutions to common problems, instead of splitting into polarized groups. Scholars have argued that the cities which embrace collaborative infrastructure are the ones most likely to succeed in the 21st century. A leading example of Toronto’s success in this direction is the City Summit Alliance, organized by the late David Pecault. Leadership for food system improvements has grown out of this civic culture of engagement and collaboration. It encourages solutions, founded on “horizontal” partnerships, a precondition for successful and long-lasting teamwork around food.

Toronto enjoys a history of dynamic leadership in the broad area of food, going back to the crusading Medical Officer of Health Dr. Charles Hastings, a major force shaping the city during the early 1900s. Hastings championed nutrition promotion, prenatal care, food safety and water treatment as central to the public health agenda, resulting in Toronto winning a reputation as the healthiest big city in the world in the 1920s.¹⁵ Toronto Public Health continues to deliver and support a wide

range of programs that link health with personal and community development. Prenatal and early childhood supports, nutrition education, food skills training, student meal programs, Nutritious Food Basket monitoring, food safety promotion and enforcement, and dental services for people on low income, all testify to ongoing public health leadership.

During the 1990s, Toronto’s Board of Health created one of the world’s first food policy councils. The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) is a City-supported, community-led organization that has pioneered the field of urban food system thinking. It has put a whole range of new food issues on the radar of local, national and international policy makers, including community and rooftop gardens, local and sustainable food, rural-urban partnerships, nutrition labelling and GE-free milk. The TFPC was also a major participant in the Food and Hunger Action Committee, established by the newly amalgamated City of Toronto. It also helped write the Toronto Food Charter (2001), which has inspired dozens of charters across the continent. More recently it launched the world’s first Youth Food Policy Council, an idea that is already spreading internationally.

Similar forward-thinking approaches to food are evident in many parts of local government. For example, Toronto Community Housing uses gardens as a cornerstone of their tenant engagement and



Student Nutrition Programs: The City collaborates with the Toronto Partners for Student Nutrition to provide nutritious food for over 108,000 children and youth in schools and community sites.

green programs. Likewise, staff from the Shelter, Support and Housing division collaborated with Public Health to make healthier and more culturally appropriate emergency meals available. Economic Development and Culture regularly works with members of the Toronto Food Policy Council, including co-sponsoring a 2009 conference on local food infrastructure. The Parks and Environment Committee directed staff, led by the Interdivisional Workgroup on Urban Agriculture, to prepare an inventory of City-owned land that could be used for urban agriculture. Staff are also investigating the feasibility of allowing backyard chickens.

All these advantages exist at a time when enthusiasm for food's potential is at an all time high. But our strengths also highlight the need for concerted action. With more than enough produced or imported to feed everyone well, there are still hungry families in Toronto. Likewise, most farmers are having a hard time making a living from their farms, even though they live on fertile land next to a prime market. These challenges, in the midst of so many advantages, call out for a comprehensive vision and strategy to make the most of our potential and build a healthy Toronto.

Moving Toward a Health Focused Food System

Since the 1950s, a focus on mass production methods dramatically increased food availability in wealthier parts of the world. The modern, highly mechanized and commercial food system that supplies most of Toronto's supermarkets, restaurants and dinner tables, has many successes to its credit. Despite significant population growth over the last 60 years, farmers and fishers produce more than enough food for everyone on the planet. Year round, it's possible to find a diversity of reasonably priced tropical foods in grocery stores, along with locally grown vegetables. Modern technology has also reduced some of the back-breaking and dangerous work traditionally required in primary food production.

How We Got Here

Many of today's food production technologies and institutions are legacies of the period following World War II, when the modern food system took shape. The thinking of the day was quite idealistic. Most people shared high hopes for a post-war world of plenty and freedom. Many had painful memories of hunger and famine during the 1930s and food rationing during the war. The talk of those days was about building strong bodies, conquering hunger, and declaring war against poverty and disease. This explains why the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Charter of Human Rights were created so early in the United Nations' history.

“
*With more than enough to
feed everyone well, there
are still hungry families
in Toronto.*”



Gelek Badheysang

Greenest City:

Parkdale youth enjoy Greenest City's garden and cooking programs, one of many community-based programs funded by Live Green Toronto grants.

The modern food system surged ahead during the 1950s, when methods so effective at mobilizing resources during war were adapted to food. Tanks morphed into tractors, and chemical warfare turned into weed warfare. The logic of industrialization, centralization and compartmentalization, so successful in factories, was applied to agriculture and food processing. Huge increases in food availability followed. The idea that increased food production would automatically improve health and serve the public good was logical for that time. Cheap fossil fuels, transformed into diesel, pesticides and fertilizers, made specialized or monoculture (one crop) farms possible. High input technologies, from tractors to irrigation, became standard. The term “agri-business” was first coined in the 1950s, when dominant food players became national and international conglomerates. Economies of scale led to greater concentration of ownership everywhere in the world, but particularly in Canada’s processing, distribution and retail sectors. As of 2005, for example, just four grocery retailers controlled 78 percent of market share.¹⁶ Likewise, the number of farms in Canada declined by more than 47,000 between 1996 and 2006 (a 17 percent drop), even as total farm acreage rose, an indicator that food was coming from ever larger farms.¹⁷

Unintended Consequences

A system focused on mass production methods succeeded in making large quantities of food available at relatively low prices across North

America. Indeed, by the 1990s, the portion of household income spent on food had plummeted to about 10 percent, down from 20 percent in the 1950s.¹⁸ At the same time, a whole category of highly-processed “convenience” foods filled supermarket shelves. Today, more than enough food is grown or imported into Canada – 3,372 calories for every person, every day of the year.¹⁹

Notwithstanding such successes, the food system is increasingly identified as a contributor to many serious problems, sometimes referred to as “negative externalities” or “unintended consequences”.

Unforeseen back in the 1940s, the food system has become a major source of climate change emissions and pollution. Likewise, the overproduction of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor products that come out of processing plants fosters an unhealthy or “obesogenic” food environment, where the cheapest and most accessible choices are often the least healthy. These and other emerging problems are partly the result of a system that continues to prioritize mass production, rather than the health of people and the environment.

Carving Up Food

Prioritizing high volume production has become institutionalized, often without the checks and balances needed to support public health and protect the environment. For example, most farm incentives and supports encourage farmers to produce more commodities at a lower price, rather than rewarding

them for growing healthier food or providing environmental benefits. This problem is partially a result of the specialization that developed to support the modern food system. After the 1950s, a whole range of new specializations flourished, both within agriculture (producers of growth hormones or genetically modified seeds, for example) and across the food system (logistic experts, food scientists, information technology specialists, marketers, and others).

Based on the same logic of specialization, distinct food issues became separated or “siloe” within a labyrinth of government ministries, departments and authorities. Food, which by its nature connects health, social, economic, environmental and cultural goals, became disconnected. Seemingly separate food issues – nutrition, agriculture, safety, job creation, waste, for example – were carved up into different government departments, making it more difficult to treat them in interconnected ways. It also made it harder to prevent problems early on by getting at the root of the matter, or by focusing on what public health experts call the “cause of the causes”, as distinct from the symptoms of the problem.

For example, early environment ministries were designed to deal with “end of pipe” impacts on soil, water and air pollution, rather than helping farmers or processors reduce their environmental impact. Likewise, health ministries concentrate on treating

chronic disease and other “downstream problems” caused partly by poor nutrition and unhealthy food environments. For much of their histories, each government domain focused on its own mandate, rarely collaborating with others to seize common opportunities and solve food-related problems. Siloe structures bred siloe thinking. The signs of disconnect between food and health are everywhere now. Think of hospitals. They’re institutions dedicated to restoring health. But few hospitals see providing healthy food to patients as a key part of their mandate. Wendell Berry, an American philosopher of food and farming, famously addressed this paradox: “we have a health system that doesn’t care about food and a food system that doesn’t care about health”.

The “small picture” thinking encouraged by compartmentalization also stands in the way of adapting to new conditions of the 21st century. Few of the factors driving success of the food system in the post-war period exist any longer. The producers of that era relied on seemingly unlimited and cheap energy. Ours can’t. They didn’t anticipate that fossil fuels or irrigation water, fundamental to increased production, would ever become scarce or unaffordable. That generation didn’t know that there was a limit to the amount of waste or pollution that the soil, water and air could absorb. This generation does.

“
*We have a health system
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”



A food system that values resilience would empower people with food skills and information.



Likewise, few anticipated that an overriding focus on high volume production at low price could threaten regional food self-reliance. But by the 1990s, food companies followed in the footsteps of auto and textile companies, pursuing ever-increasing cost efficiencies by becoming global. Farmers and processors became suppliers to global food chains, rather than local communities. The basics of local food infrastructure - from farmers' markets to canning facilities and meat packing plants - started to disappear. In recent years, interest in rebuilding local food systems has grown rapidly.

Sometimes, both the local food movement and its detractors have become absorbed in debates expressing the same compartmentalized thinking that characterizes the dominant food system. "We need to cut down on food miles to save the environment", say some. "We need to keep food prices low, no matter where it comes from", say others. This report suggests that these discussions would be better served from a broad food system perspective. The issue is not so much which single food choice is "best", but how can we accelerate progress toward a comprehensive health-focused food system where goals of affordability, environmental protection, local farm viability, land use planning and others, can be reconciled. One of the functions of this food strategy project is to promote this kind of dialogue.

The Road Ahead

Resilience, equity and sustainability are primary goals underlying any truly health-focused food system. They are not just goals, they are also guideposts that suggest ways of approaching a wide range of food policies – anti-hunger initiatives, the role of food banks, urban agriculture, food waste and packaging, school meals, supermarket expansion, farmers' markets in parks, and more.

Resilience can apply to a system as a whole or to individuals, neighbourhoods and cities. A resilient food system is able to meet the needs of consumers in the face of short-term crises, such as blackouts, as well as longer term stresses, such as the rising cost of fossil fuels that underpin modern food production and distribution. Resilient people are able to cope with adversity in ways that are not only effective, but enhance their capacity to deal with future stresses. Resilience is, therefore, a kind of "self-righting mechanism" that allows people, communities or systems to bounce back. But it's not a static phenomenon. Resilience is interactive, the product of complex relationships of inner and outer protective factors over time.

No government can ensure or instil resilience, but public supports can be put in place to facilitate it at every level of society. At the individual level, a food system that values resilience would empower people with a broad range of food skills and information. It would foster strong neighbourhoods with a sense of

community where people feel they can rely on each other in difficult times. Resilient neighbourhoods might have food centres or hubs – places where residents could learn or teach food skills such as cooking and gardening. At the municipal level, local government would embrace food system perspectives, seeing opportunities to ensure food access and availability in the work of public health, parks, planning, economic development and others. Provincial and federal governments would make certain that not all of our eggs were in one basket, for example, that no region was overly dependent on long-distance imports from just a few suppliers.

A system that promotes equity ensures that food is accessible to everyone. Many areas of Toronto have vibrant and diverse food assets, including grocery stores, fruit and veg stores, specialty shops, restaurants and cafés. However, too many neighbourhoods are “food deserts” – places underserved by quality and affordable food stores. Many of Toronto’s inner suburban neighbourhoods were constructed in an era when most households owned a car. Many residents in these suburbs are now primarily dependent on public transit or walking to reach food stores. For some people, this adds a minor inconvenience. But for a large portion of the community, especially for people on low income, those with health problems that limit their mobility, seniors, as well as mothers with young children, the lack of nearby stores is a significant barrier to a healthy diet. Research from St. Michael’s Hospital shows that areas with few food stores tend

to have higher rates of diabetes.²⁰ These inequities create higher healthcare costs for all of us. There is also evidence that countries with a large gap between the rich and poor have worse health overall compared to countries where there is a more equitable sharing of wealth.

In a food system that prioritizes equity, people would have access to enough safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, as well as access to accurate information about these foods. All neighbourhoods in Toronto would have nearby, quality and affordable food stores, as well as spaces to grow, share and celebrate food – allotment gardens, community kitchens, restaurants and food festivals, for example. Local government would use planning, zoning and licensing and other levers to foster equity of food access. And provincial and federal governments would do their parts by ensuring that income supports reflect the real cost of healthy living.

Sustainability has been defined in numerous ways, but fundamentally it refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.²¹ A sustainable food system prioritizes the protection of the environment so that the soil, air and water will be able to continue producing food long into the future. Beyond the environment, a sustainable food system is also economically and socially viable over the long term, especially for local farmers.



Toronto: The Breastfeeding World Champion! Each year, Toronto Public Health and the Chinese-Vietnamese Breastfeeding Network participate in the Global Breastfeeding Challenge. In 2009, Toronto set the world record for the most babies breastfeeding in one place at the same time.



Good Food Markets: Many neighbourhoods lack access to fresh, healthy food. FoodShare works in partnership with community organizations to run 17 Good Food Markets across the city featuring seasonal produce purchased from local farmers and the Ontario Food Terminal.

Individuals would embrace elements of a sustainable food system by composting and choosing more locally grown and seasonal foods. At the neighbourhood level, food stores would be easily accessible on foot or by public transit, and would offer sustainably grown foods with minimal packaging. Local government would embrace “good neighbour” policies. This could mean building links between local food producers and urban eaters by expanding government purchasing of sustainable food, promoting farmers’ markets, and supporting the expansion of local, sustainable food infrastructure. Provincial and federal governments would develop policies to shift agricultural practices to more sustainable methods and make it easier for farmers to gain from the environmental benefits they produce.

Resilience, equity and sustainability, therefore, are not only prerequisites for a health-focused food system. They reinforce each other. One way of expressing mutually reinforcing influences is the notion of a “virtuous circle”. For example, the way food is produced can be a virtuous circle – protecting against climate change by storing carbon in the soil and further nourishing the land, as well as the economy. Or, food production can be a vicious cycle by exacerbating climate change through fossil fuel dependence, leading to further environmental destruction, depleted soil and more public funding diverted to fix those problems. Using food to create a virtuous circle of continuing benefits is an objective of a food strategy.

Old Food System ▶ New Food System	
Prioritizes mass production	▶ Prioritizes health
Food is not seen as the business of cities	▶ Food is seen as a strategic vehicle for meeting city goals
Market forces determine location of food stores	▶ Neighbourhoods are planned with food access in mind
Food pricing unconnected to nutritional benefit	▶ Food pricing favours healthy choices
Food issues carved up into separate government departments and jurisdictions	▶ Food solutions come from collaborative partnerships within and among governments and civil society

The food system of the future will be quite different from the system of today. The table opposite highlights some of the key differences between the conventional or “old” food system, as it relates to cities, and the new system envisioned by this report.

Thinking Outside the Breadbox

Achieving this vision means thinking about problems and opportunities within the context of broader systems, and developing solutions accordingly. Thanks to progressive initiatives that Toronto has made in many areas, food is already primed for the rethinking and convergence that have characterized the reorganization and renewal of the dynamic information technology sector.

For example, imagine how food activities could converge with the expansion of public transit. The ambitious Transit City plan has great potential if it incorporates food planning because food is a key ingredient that makes city streets lively and inviting through daily shopping, cafés and restaurants. By contrast, subways which go under a city, and throughways which go through a city, don't rely on active, life-filled streets. But Transit City's street rail vehicles will, so food is a great side dish for them. For example, grocery shopping could be made available at transit transfer points, thereby allowing riders easier access to food on the way home, adding another reason to take public transit, instead of driving.

In the same vein, Toronto is a pioneer with Tower Renewal, the project to modernize the energy efficiency of Toronto's 1960s high rises while building a sense of community among residents. Tower communities were built at a time when most families had access to a car. As Toronto moves to a more pedestrian-friendly and transit-oriented city, the convergence of ground floor food businesses, community gardens and markets on the redesigned landscapes will do much to renew tower communities.

If municipalities adopt the next phase of connected thinking, they will need mechanisms to break down silos and foster partnerships within government and with civil society. In other words, there needs to be a way to embed food system thinking in local government. The goal is not to make food a priority that competes against other issues for resources but to identify opportunities where food can address and enhance local government objectives. Because food is so connected to every societal goal – health, environmental, social, cultural and economic – the potential benefits that food projects yield can be a spark for yet more collaboration within government and more efficient use of public resources.

“
*Food projects can spark
more collaboration within
government and more
efficient use of
public resources.*
”

Local Government's Food Levers

Cities don't have the full toolkit to remake an entire food system. They need partnerships with residents, neighbours, businesses and other orders of government to make this new vision a reality. However, cities have more influence over how food systems work than many suppose, and could have even more influence if they started to identify, name and intentionally leverage what they can do in support of a healthy, sustainable food system.

Cities regulate food sales, provide business licenses, carry out food safety inspections, support community gardens and provide allotment garden spaces, promote healthy eating, offer breastfeeding support, run nutrition education programs, fund school food programs, serve food in childcare centres and seniors' homes, provide social housing, fund dental clinics for low income families, support the growth of food processors and retailers, apply zoning rules, and coordinate food festivals and events. The list goes on and on.

Food is also rooted in the work of many agencies, boards and commissions funded by, or connected to, City Council. For example, Exhibition Place hosts a food pavilion, a range of food outlets and the annual Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, the largest fair of its kind in the world. The City-owned St. Lawrence Market has been around since the early part of the city's history and has been named one of the top 25

markets worldwide.²² The Toronto Public Library, the largest public library system in North America, houses a wealth of information on every aspect of food, including no less than 2,500 cookbooks.

A lot of public spending goes to food, both directly and indirectly. Three City Divisions - Children's Services, Homes for the Aged, and Shelter, Support and Housing - spend a combined \$11 million a year to feed 7,000 people each day.²³ The City spends millions more on food in less obvious ways when taking into account garbage collection and composting (Toronto picks up the tab for much of the 20-40 percent of the food that's wasted in the system), social assistance payments, and the millions spent each year to maintain Toronto's roads (it is commonly accepted that 20 percent of all vehicle trips are for food).

The City has taken advantage of many levers for food system change already. In 2008, Toronto adopted a local food procurement policy to begin to leverage its purchasing power in favour of home-grown products. Toronto has earned a reputation as an environmental champion by adopting green technologies, requiring green roofs on new developments, restricting cosmetic pesticide use, and supporting urban agriculture projects. And this report builds on work done a decade ago by the Food and Hunger Action Committee and the



Nutrition Education Programs: Public Health Dietitians and Nurses engage residents in interactive activities to increase nutrition knowledge and food skills such as reading labels, nutritious recipes, shopping skills and cooking economically.

subsequent adoption by City Council of the Toronto Food Charter in 2001.

There is a new energy in government and agency circles focused on place-based initiatives and services. The closer that supports and services are to the place they're serving, the more accessible they are to residents needing the service, the more flexible they can be in adapting to local needs, and the easier it is to build trust and ongoing relationships in the community. The hundreds of projects happening in Toronto's thirteen priority neighbourhoods are examples of local government and communities, led by Neighbourhood Action Partnerships, working together to complement each others' efforts. The initiative has leveraged more than \$86 million in funding from non-government sources since its inception. The food strategy's proposed creation of food-friendly neighbourhoods as a key action area fits well with this approach

Fortunately, great cities are not limited by their authority to command and control. On the contrary, they use their capacity to animate and inspire residents. Cities have an ability and responsibility to work with people at a neighbourhood level. Successful cities work with residents to help the community grow in ways that fit their own needs and desires. This is especially relevant for food because while eating habits and food purchasing decisions may be supported by public policy they require the consent and participation of individuals.

That's why community animation – the task of tapping the creativity of residents and fostering collaboration among them on projects – is such an important lever for cities, all governments, and community agencies to use.

Animators are already playing pivotal roles in establishing food-friendly neighbourhoods across Toronto. The Toronto Community Food Animators, funded through the City's Community Partnership and Investment Program, have helped residents in underserved neighbourhoods organize fresh produce markets, community kitchens and community gardens. They are now working with Toronto Community Housing to develop a comprehensive strategy to grow and support community gardening as a neighbourhood engagement and capacity building project. Livegreen Toronto Community Animators, funded by the Toronto Environment Office, are using food projects to breathe life into neighbourhood activities that also advance the city's environmental agenda.

But even with the power of animation, there are limits to what City budgets can fund. Like all cities, Toronto needs other levels of government to help with adequate funding and supportive legislation. Many planning, zoning, licensing, public health, taxation and similar roles that influence food in cities are governed by provincial and/or federal authorities. Consequently, cities must also lead by leveraging their ability to partner with, and advocate to, other levels of government.



The Toronto Community Food Animators: Food Animator Anan Lololi of the Afri-Can FoodBasket, at the Varna garden in Lawrence Heights.

Six Directions to a Health Focused Food System

This report urges Toronto to take the next steps in its food leadership by developing and implementing a comprehensive city-wide strategy for a healthy and sustainable food system. Cities will become important food leaders of the future and there is no shortage of actions they can take right now to move in the right direction. This section offers a list of those kinds of ideas to accelerate Toronto's progress through engaging, connecting, coordinating, facilitating, advocating, innovating and supporting. Six directions to food system renewal are described below. Within each are examples of actions that would move us toward a healthy and sustainable food system, while also meeting many of the city's other objectives – job creation, strong neighbourhoods, protecting the environment, and more. At a time when the City is facing severe budget pressures, the ideas below also focus on ways to tap into, and maximize, our existing underused, paid-for food assets.

The ideas are not intended as a comprehensive list. Detailed recommendations will be developed after the consultation and engagement process and included in a report to City Council. Your feedback will get us to that stage. Information on how to get involved and share your ideas is provided on page 25.



Tinashe Kanengoni - Community Food Security Coordinator, Lawrence Heights:

“My role in our community centre is to engage and involve children, youth and the rest of the community in food-related activities and programs. We use food as a tool for learning, living and recreation. Cooking classes, growing an organic garden filled with vegetables and making these activities fun for participants fills my day. Food is our connection.”

1. Grow Food-friendly Neighbourhoods
2. Make Food a Centerpiece of Toronto's New Green Economy
3. Eliminate Hunger in Toronto
4. Empower Residents with Food Skills and Information
5. Connect City and Countryside Through Food
6. Embed Food System Thinking in City Government

1. Grow Food-friendly Neighbourhoods

Torontonians understand that food and neighbourhoods reinforce each other. Safe and friendly neighbourhoods offer healthy and vibrant food scenes, and lively food environments bring neighbours together.

Resilient neighbourhoods connect people and place in a variety of ways – walkable access to everyday services, greenspace, lively and safe main streets, common meeting places and celebrations. Food is pivotal to creating this connective tissue. With the help of governments, residents and local businesses can foster food-friendly neighbourhoods by anchoring main streets with a rich diversity of restaurants, cafés, markets, gardens, grocers and supermarkets.

Traditionally, lively neighbourhoods have formed around key public services such as libraries, schools, parks, hospitals, community health clinics and recreation centres. An important way to implement a food strategy at the neighbourhood level is to establish multi-service food centres or networks that can occupy the same pride of place as traditional services. Many of these centres already exist – the Scadding Court Community Centre, Lawrence Heights Community Centre, the Stop Community Food Centre and Green Barn, as well as evolving community hubs across the city. In ways that are complementary to their core functions, these centres provide community-based services, including drop-ins, perinatal programs, civic engagement, community kitchens, nutrition education and urban agriculture. To breathe life into food projects, each neighbourhood also needs access to community animators who help ensure that services are offered in ways that meet the community's needs.

Ideas for Action:

- Systematically integrate food initiatives into projects happening in the City's thirteen priority neighbourhoods.
- Work with community partners to increase and integrate an appropriate range of food activities in community and recreation centres, libraries and community hubs.
- Ensure that food access considerations are embedded into planning the Transit City project.
- Expand opportunities for those City and community staff who work in community development to use food as a tool to create safe and healthy neighbourhoods (for example, Toronto Community Food Animators, Live Green Animators, Toronto Community Housing Health Promotion Officers and City of Toronto Community Health Officers).
- Develop enabling policies for community gardens, bake ovens, farmers' markets and fresh food markets in parks and on other public lands.
- Work with City divisions, as well as City-funded agencies, boards and commissions, to conduct inventories of food-related assets and infrastructure (such as buildings, land and kitchens) in order to maximize use of existing facilities.



Mount Dennis Community Kitchen: Thanks to United Way's Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative, residents organize many community activities and events which bring them together to cook, garden and plan neighbourhood improvements.

2. Make Food a Centerpiece of Toronto's New Green Economy

Food is already key to Toronto's economic success. Food production, processing, distribution, marketing, retail and services employ about one person in eight. On top of that, the \$7 billion that Torontonians spend on food every year could generate and sustain a wide range of local jobs and careers.

In an era of heightened environmental awareness, opportunity is knocking to make an expanded food sector a centerpiece of the emerging green economy. According to the Martin Prosperity Institute, Ontario's food sector has the potential to rival the once dominant auto industry as a great economic, cultural and environmental success story in the next ten years. For this to happen, the fundamentals of regional food infrastructure need to be restored, and Toronto needs to build a reputation as a champion of healthy and sustainable food founded upon a green economy. This is well within the city's reach, since it's already a recognized leader in biomedical research, financing and public health.

Food has all the makings to connect ecological benefits to increased job creation. Why? Because the essence of a green economy is to use design and smart labour to displace energy, pollution and waste. For example, local processing plants rely on local farms, and in turn, are more likely to use recycled or locally produced packaging such as glass bottles. In turn, this could serve the city's goal of reducing the waste going to landfill sites. That kind of "virtuous circle" explains why green can be good for both job creation and the environment, and why food is well positioned to be a major player in the new economy.



Toronto Food Business Incubator: Susan Ho, founder of TeaAura Inc, developed her line of tea-infused shortbread cookies at the Toronto Food Business Incubator. With support from the City of Toronto, the TFBI provides access to business resources and industry-standard equipment to help start-up micro-enterprises become commercialized food businesses.

Ideas for Action:

- Expand the City's Food Business Incubator project to support a wide range of start-up, community-based, social enterprise and artisanal food entrepreneurs.
- Integrate food opportunities into all strategies aimed at expanding Toronto's green economy.
- Urge changes at the Ontario Food Terminal so that local and local-sustainable foods can be readily identified, making it easier for retailers to meet the needs of consumers and support local farmers.
- Expand food festivals and celebrations to all parts of the city, including a "Hiddenlicious" event that highlights little known businesses featuring culturally diverse, healthy and/or sustainable food.

3. Eliminate Hunger in Toronto

One in ten Toronto households can't regularly afford to put enough healthy food on the table. Many people in single parent families and racialized communities suffer disproportionately, and there's undeniable evidence that hunger and poverty lead to poor health outcomes. In spite of their best efforts, thirty years after food banks first came to Toronto, charitable food assistance alone has not been able to address the deep-seated and chronic problems that create hunger. Eliminating the systemic causes of hunger needs to be a priority health, social and ethical issue for the whole city, not just for those who go without.

In the absence of coordinated strategies at the provincial and federal levels to deal comprehensively with poverty, inequities in food access cause unnecessary suffering for individuals and preventable medical expenses for governments. Toronto must continue to make its voice heard on the urgent need for safe and affordable housing, adequate social assistance, community services, minimum wage, and a universal school nutrition program. In a city that hopes to be an economic and social leader of the 21st century, poverty and hunger need to be defined as too costly in health and social outcomes to accept any longer.

Ideas for Action:

- In collaboration with community partners, urge the provincial government to ensure that social assistance rates and minimum wage are based on the real cost of healthy living and eating.
- Call on the provincial government and others to fund the integration of healthy food and snack programs into new full day kindergarten, early childhood and after-school services.
- Leverage planning, zoning and licensing rules to increase access to quality affordable food for underserved populations and neighbourhoods, including through supermarkets, fresh food markets and mobile food vending.
- Continue to support and advocate expansion of student nutrition programs in Toronto.
- Support food bank and emergency shelter efforts to provide more nutritious and culturally appropriate food.



The Stop Community Food Centre: At The Stop, neighbours participate in a broad range of programs that provide healthy food, foster social connections, build food skills and promote civic engagement. Among the STOP's initiatives are community kitchens and gardens, cooking classes, drop-in meals, perinatal support, a food bank, outdoor bake ovens, food markets and community advocacy.

4. Empower Residents with Food Skills and Information

Food literate residents are essential to building a healthier, more sustainable, equitable and resilient food system in Toronto. The work begins with ensuring that the next generation grows up knowing where food comes from, how to grow, cook and shop for it, and be able to pass these essential skills and information on to their own children. Prioritizing food literacy in children's education is not only important because it will help them make healthier choices now and throughout their lives, but because we need leaders of the future to appreciate the health, social, environmental and economic implications of food, and embrace supportive public policies.

In the here and now, people also need the skills to make food choices, and for that they need governments' help to get accurate and relevant information to navigate the system. Information and support is especially important in a multicultural city such as Toronto, where many newcomers are adapting their food skills to new foods, new ways to shop, and a new language. Greater food system transparency is important for other groups too, such as people with severe allergies and medical conditions. As well, the growing number of Torontonians who want to grow and preserve their own food need help getting the right skills to succeed. To some extent, consumers are already inundated with facts and advice about food choices. What's important is not only the quantity, but the quality of information. Consumers are increasingly asking for information that's conveyed in simpler and more accessible ways, making it a benefit rather than a burden.



Growing Thumbs, Growing Kids

Garden at Winchester School:

In classrooms without walls, more than 30 Toronto elementary and secondary schools link food activities to math, science and other subjects.

Ideas for Action:

- Identify ways to promote transparency in the food system, including accurate and easy-to-understand labeling (for example, food calories, trans fats, sodium, sugar, allergens, and others).
- Work with parent groups, school boards and the Ministry of Education to ensure opportunities to weave food literacy broadly into the curriculum (nutrition education, cooking, gardens, and food and the environment, for example).
- Work with school boards and academic institutions to expand food oriented opportunities in a wide range of non-classroom learning environments (cooperative placements, internships, independent studies, service learning, for example).
- Promote food skills and information in a wide range of community contexts, such as seniors, newcomer settlement and homeless services.

5. Connect City and Countryside Through Food

In an era of rising energy prices and threats from climate change, it's essential for Toronto to support local farmers and help protect local farmland. Consumers that are more skilled and knowledgeable about food systems will also raise the demand for locally grown products. A lot of work needs to be done to rebuild the capacity of Ontario's "foodshed" to meet that demand. Toronto is fortunate to be so close to a protected Greenbelt with highly fertile soils for food growing, as well as greenspace for clean water and air purification. Likewise, there are economic and social opportunities for people living next door to the fifth largest food retail market in North America.

One job of a food strategy is to connect city and countryside, and thereby bring the understanding of mutual benefits closer to home. By working together as good food neighbours, Toronto and communities across Southern Ontario could help generate an economic boon for Ontario. Becoming better neighbours also means becoming more familiar with each other's needs, collaborating on, rather than competing for, key projects and seeing our future well-being intertwined.

Ideas for Action:

- Expand the City's current purchasing of local food to all City divisions, agencies, boards and commissions, and explore strategies for sustainable food purchases and funding.
- Work with the GTA Agricultural Action Committee, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, GTA governments and food producers to develop a regional food strategy that addresses the needs of farmers and the entire regional food supply chain.
- Work with school boards and community agencies to expand urban farms, farm-to-school programs, and purchases of local and local-sustainable food.
- Encourage farmers and agricultural policy makers to expand production of culturally diverse foods.
- Work with federal and provincial governments to provide programs that assist new Canadians and youth who wish to farm in near-urban areas.



Anfernee Chansamooth

Evergreen Brick Works Farmers' Market: Throughout the summer, the Saturday market features fruits, vegetables, wild fish, meat, cheese, milled flours, eggs and oils – all from local producers.

6. Embed Food System Thinking in City Government

Food's many benefits, as well as its far-flung problems, cannot be addressed comprehensively within one governmental silo or department. Food is, by its nature, a cross-divisional matter. It requires horizontal management or, in a municipal context, collaboration across City divisions. The upside for governments in an era of constrained public resources is that effective collaboration within government and with the community can often leverage assets that working within silos couldn't. Successful cities will be those that become adept at developing programs that address multiple needs at one time, perhaps taking advantage of underutilized assets such as unused City land that can be converted into community gardens (something the City is already moving on). It allows us to make improvements by leveraging existing resources. Because of these advantages, "whole-of-society, whole-of-government" approaches to food system thinking must become the norm in the 21st century.

To take the next steps in food system leadership, local governments need to embed food system thinking in their work, much like the City has already applied a financial lens and has begun to apply environmental and equity lenses city-wide. One of the goals of our engagement process is to determine the best ways for Toronto to do this. The engagement process will also foster the first step in embedding food system thinking – building a common understanding that food connects to everyone's business and to the mandate of every part of City government.



Food System Thinking:

The City has begun to embed environmental and equity perspectives in everything it does. The same should happen with food activities since they can also help meet the goals of almost every part of City government.

Ideas for Action:

- Establish mechanisms within local government to identify food opportunities, coordinate food initiatives, leverage resources, evaluate and support food initiatives and partnerships both within government and with the community.
- Encourage the Toronto Food Policy Council to work with residents to engage all city committees in relevant and appropriate food-related discussions and actions.
- Urge provincial and federal governments to establish comprehensive food policies that identify optimal health as the goal of the food system and which enhance the capacity of cities to take action.

Get Connected!

Your experience is important. Your views will make a difference.

- What's your vision for Toronto's food?
- What food issues are the most important for you, your family and friends?
- What food improvements would you like to see in your neighbourhood?
- What needs to happen to make your vision a reality?

There are lots of ways to connect.

- Visit our website for more information, resources and to share your ideas and stories.
- Get tips on exploring these questions with friends & neighbours.
- Call or write us directly to share your thoughts:

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Grow Food-friendly Neighbourhoods

Eliminate Hunger in Toronto

Connect City and Countryside Through Food

Make Food a Centerpiece of Toronto's New Green Economy

Empower Residents with Food Skills and Information

Embed Food System Thinking in City Government

toronto.ca/foodconnections

Appendix 1: Members of the Toronto Food Strategy Steering Group

Below is the list of Food Strategy Steering Group members who have guided the development of this project with valuable insights and advice all along the way. Members were invited to participate in the process as individuals, rather than as representatives of any organization or interest group. Member affiliations listed below are for identification only and don't necessarily represent an organization's endorsement of this report.

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