



*Healthier people and communities in the Capital Health District,
Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada, contributing to a healthier world.*

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August 31st, 2011

Dear Councillor Lund:

Thank you for your letter of June 7th in which you requested my feedback regarding the findings of the Community Garden Heavy Metal Study, which was conducted in collaboration with the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) and the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. I was pleased to have the opportunity to review it.

Indeed, the findings of the study correlate well with the experience of Public Health. We are frequently asked to comment on or investigate concerns within Capital Health and across the province regarding heavy metal exposure. In those investigations, conducted with the assistance of our colleagues in the Department of Natural Resources and in Nova Scotia Environment, we have often seen the high soil concentrations of arsenic and lead in the province due to the composition of the bedrock in Nova Scotia and historical land use patterns, as your study describes. Human exposure resulting in harm from these concentrations, however, continues to be rare (and the Conclusions section of your study (page 36) very nicely articulates the reasons for this) and so we continue to encourage Haligonians and all Nova Scotians to use the outdoors safely and in the ways that enhance their connection to nature and the environment. With that in mind then, your study concurs with what our own recommendations would be and is in keeping with public health recommended emerging best practices nationally (1).

While the survey was conducted using current or proposed community garden sites, its release will undoubtedly raise questions for individual home owners that you may wish to cover in your public communication or future work in this area. Many of these were reflected in correspondence HRM has received from the study authors, which you forwarded me as well. For your public communication I would ask you to consider what your answers might be to the following questions:

- The recommendations around constructing raised beds could benefit from more specificity: what precisely are the appropriate or recommended materials for building such a bed? Where might you obtain it? What is the rough cost? A “how to” guide would be a beneficial supplement to the public communications around this recommendation. No doubt such details could be embedded in the content of the Ecology Action Centre’s Urban Garden Project, as I see that some of the information is already there.
- The recommendation to have soil tested may be problematic for some not-for-profit organizations low-income families, as soil testing can be expensive, and remediation even more so. Is there a subsidy program of some sort available to community garden sites (or homeowners) who may not be able to afford testing or remediation but who would like to grow their own fruits and vegetables?

- Is there a potential impact of test results on property values, in which case already low-income home owners may find themselves at greater potential for risk from devaluation of their property?

Finally and most importantly, when I consider the impact of food availability and food quality on health, I feel obligated to stress how very pleased I am to see, in this report, such a fine contribution to enhancing food security within Capital District. I am confident that this study will encourage the citizens of Halifax and Capital District to create even more opportunities for quality food to be grown locally to meet the needs of our communities.

Congratulations on a job well done, and thank you once again for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely yours,



Dr. Gaynor Watson-Creed
Medical Officer of Health, CDHA

- cc: Dr. Robert Strang, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness (NSDHW)
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Caryll Tawse, Manager, PHU

Reference: 1) National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health (NCCEH), personal communication. See also presentation from NCCEH at: www.ncceh.ca/sites/default/files/UBC_SOEH_2010_Urban_Ag.pdf