

A HEALTHY COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM PLAN



FOR WATERLOO REGION



Acknowledgements

This report completes a community-based process of data gathering, data synthesis, stakeholder consultations, report writing – and now – a document which charts the way to improving the health of our food system.

We would like to thank the 80 community members who attended the focus groups in 2006 and provided feedback on the strategies we proposed to improve the health of Waterloo Region's food system. Your time and energy and commitment are very much appreciated. Your involvement in this work has kept it grounded in reality and made it relevant.

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Lastly, we thank Ellen Desjardins and Marc Xuereb who wrote "*Towards a Healthy Food System for Waterloo Region - Interim Report*", organized and facilitated the focus groups to gain input on this interim report, and synthesized the suggestions that came out of them.

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1. Executive Summary

The inter-sectoral nature of the Regional Growth Management Strategy afforded Region of Waterloo Public Health (Public Health) the opportunity to explore food issues in a very broad way. This is appropriate because the food system – all of the processes that are a part of providing food to people – is complex and influenced by the social, economic, natural, and political environment. It is increasingly understood that comprehensive food system planning provides an integrated response to the wide-ranging food-related problems that affect the public's health.

Public Health conducted several research studies to document the current state of Waterloo Region's food system and produced an interim report presenting the results in November 2005. Public Health then engaged a wide range of stakeholders to comment on the interim report and provide input into objectives and strategies which would help to reach the goal of a healthy food system. This consultation process resulted in a list of actions that could be taken to improve the health of the food system. A stakeholder forum in June 2006 confirmed some actions as priorities and mobilized community members to begin or continue to carry them out.

Progress on the actions to date has been steady. Some of the highlights of the progress are summarized here but the full report contains more detail. Public Health is facilitating the development of a Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable to enable networking to implement the actions. Public Health formed a collaborative with two community partners and has secured funding from the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation to pursue several of the other actions. Public Health is working with the Planning, Housing, and Community Services Department to ensure that agricultural policies enhance the health of the community food system.

This report makes the following recommendations to ensure the continued pursuit of the key strategies to improve the health of the food system that were supported by stakeholders at the follow-up stakeholder meeting in June 2006:

- That Public Health staff continue to provide administrative and research support to the Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable
- That Public Health staff continue to identify mechanisms to increase opportunities for enhanced supply and distribution systems for local food as a means to increase food access (such as mobile farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and urban agriculture)
- That Public Health staff explore expanding the Region of Waterloo's Green Purchasing Program to include the purchase of local food.¹

2. Introduction

A Healthy Community Food System Plan is one of several reports prepared by Region of Waterloo Public Health as part of the implementation of the Regional Growth Management Strategy. This report completes a key informant consultation process, presents the community food system plan that consultation process developed, and informs further Public Health action related to food system themes and the Growth Management Strategy.

Public Health, Community Food Systems, and Land Use Planning

There are a number of public health issues related to food in our communities that, at first glance, seem unrelated. For example, one problem is the increased consumption of highly-processed, low-nutrient convenience foods and the parallel increase in the incidence of obesity. The rising incidence of obesity and related diseases like Type 2 Diabetes² has currently been receiving a large amount of media attention. Another problem is the amount of fossil fuel energy used and the resulting greenhouse gases emitted from transporting food over long distances. A third example is the social impact of the loss of community infrastructure in rural communities following major changes in the agriculture sector. In the past, public policy tended to view these problems in isolation without examining the broader context. The concept of broad community food system planning tries to overcome this problem by providing a more integrated response to the seemingly disparate food problems affecting public health.

The term “food system” refers to all of the processes which are part of providing food to people. It includes the growing, harvesting, transporting, processing, marketing, selling, consuming, and disposing of food. The food system is influenced by the social, natural, economic, and political environment. A healthy community food system is one in which all of the processes involved in the food system are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional health of a geographic community.³

A community food system planning approach goes beyond looking at individual eating behaviours and providing nutrition education. It examines the broader environment in which food is produced and made available to people and attempts to enhance it in order to improve health. A food system that improves access to fresh produce and other healthy food throughout our region, decreases our dependence on long-distance food transport, and helps to support a viable local agricultural economy, is key to the health of all residents and our community as a whole.

Background to this Report

In June 2003, Regional Council approved the Regional Growth Management Strategy, a document that identifies where, when, and how residential and employment growth will be accommodated over the next forty years. The goals of the strategy are to enhance our natural environment, build vibrant urban spaces, provide greater transportation choice, and protect our countryside. Eighty implementation projects were initiated at that time across all Regional departments. One of those implementation projects was the development of a Community Food System Plan. This provided Region of Waterloo Public Health an opportunity to work with the Planning, Housing, and Community Services Department and other food system stakeholders to explore food system issues in a very broad way.

In January 2005, Public Health established an advisory group involving producers, retailers, consultants, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs, the Waterloo Federation of Agriculture, and others to guide the development of this Community Food System Plan. With their guidance, Public Health conducted research to assess the Waterloo Region Food System.

A timeline and summary of the activities follows on page 4.

Timeline and Summary of Activities

Date	Action
January 2005	Advisory Group convened by Public Health to guide development of Community Food System Plan.
November 2005	<i>Towards a Healthy Community Food System for Waterloo Region</i> Interim Report released.
February 2006	Public Health convened 11 focus groups with over 80 participants from nine sectors in the food system to provide feedback on the interim reports' suggested strategies.
Spring 2006	Public Health used feedback from focus groups to design 26 actions to address interim reports' suggested strategies; six of these actions were then short listed by Public Health as suggested priorities.
June 2006	Focus group participants met as a group and endorsed five priority actions and added an additional priority action.
April 2007	A Healthy Community Food System Plan for Waterloo Region released with three recommendations for Public Health to continue in its role of facilitating change to improve the health of the food system.

In November 2005, Public Health released an interim report entitled *Towards a Healthy Community Food System for Waterloo Region*⁴ which described the current state of our food system. It proposed that **the goal of a healthy community food system be that all residents have access to, and can afford to buy safe, nutritious, and culturally-acceptable food that has been produced in an environmentally sustainable way and that sustains our rural communities.**

It proposed seven objectives and several strategies to pursue a healthy community food system.

When the report was released, staff was directed by Regional Council to engage key informants in a consultation. In February 2006, 11 focus group meetings were held with key players in the Waterloo Region Food System. Over 80 people attended.

Focus groups were held with each of these sectors:

- Technical Advisory Group
- Land use planners (2 groups)
- Restaurants
- Institutional purchasers
- Interested individuals (2 groups)
- Producers
- Old Order Mennonite producers
- Manufacturers and distributors
- Food retailers

The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain feedback on the objectives and strategies proposed in the interim report. Public Health staff used the feedback from the focus groups to design 26 actions to address all of the strategies given in the Interim Report. Based on a set of evaluation criteria, six of these actions were short listed as suggested priorities.

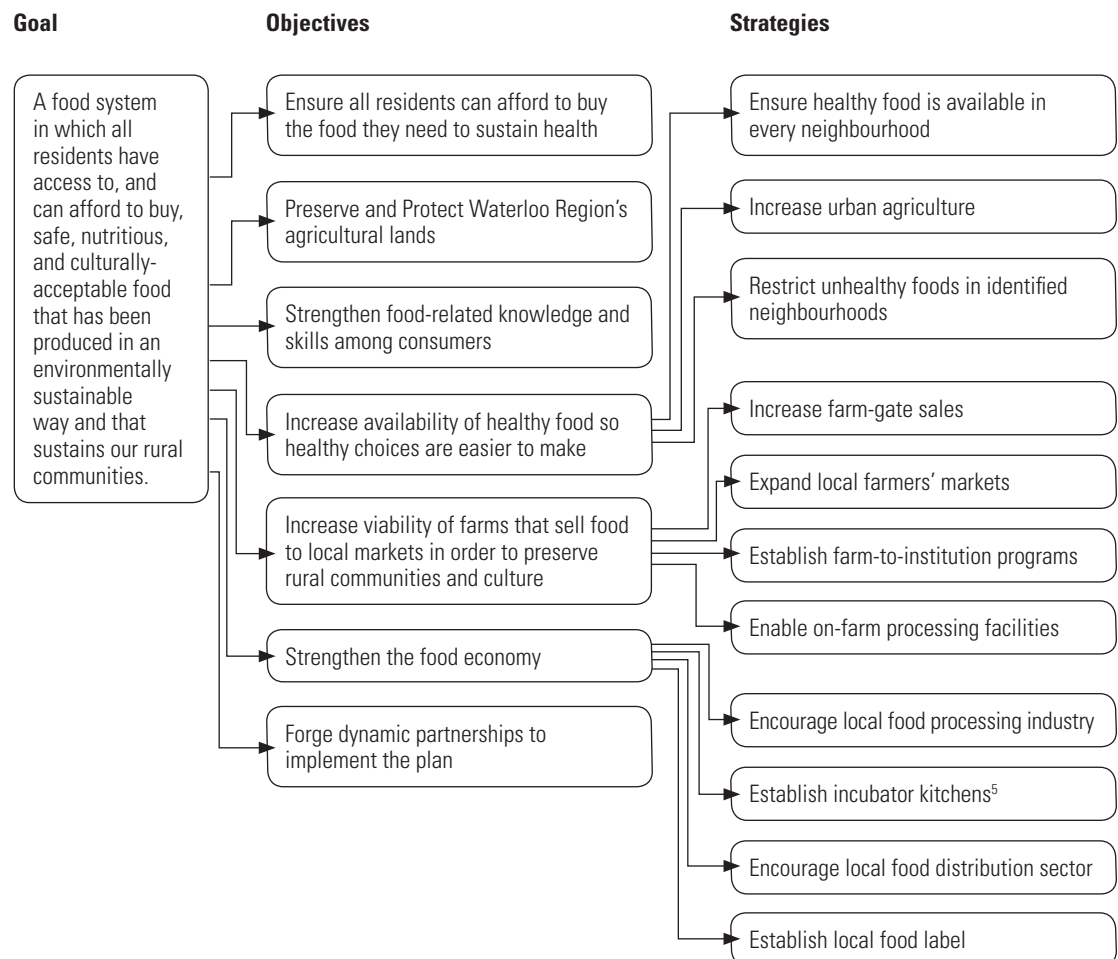
In June 2006, Public Health organized a follow-up forum for all of those who had been involved in the focus groups. The purpose of this forum was to present back to all of the focus group participants the feedback they had collectively given, and to suggest the six priority actions as a way to move the planning process forward. During this follow-up meeting, the group affirmed five of the six suggested priority actions and added one more.

This report – *A Healthy Community Food System Plan for Waterloo Region* – presents the results of the key informant consultation, which consisted of the focus groups and the follow-up stakeholder meeting. It describes the progress by various actors on several priority actions as well as others that came out of the consultation process and makes action recommendations for Public Health.

3. The Key Informant Consultation Process

The Interim Report of November 2005 proposed a goal for achieving a healthy food system and several objectives and strategies for reaching that goal. The following diagram shows these objectives and strategies. These objectives and strategies were presented to each focus group. The first three objectives – ensuring that all residents can afford to buy the food they need to sustain health, protecting our agricultural lands, and strengthening food-related knowledge and skills among consumers – were already being pursued by other agencies in Waterloo Region. The interim report provides details about these agencies and initiatives. Since these objectives were already being pursued, no specific strategies were proposed and the facilitators encouraged the focus group participants to concentrate on the last four objectives and the strategies to make them happen. It is important to note that although the focus of the consultation was on the last four objectives, the first three are equally as important in achieving a healthy community food system.

Each participant was asked to comment on which of the strategies addressing the last four objectives most closely aligned with how they were currently involved in the food system. Each group was asked to determine the three or four strategies that were most important to them and to discuss what would need to happen to make these strategies become reality. A summary of participant input in the focus groups is contained in the Appendix.



4. From Comments to Possible Actions

Public Health staff summarized the comments heard at the focus groups and developed a list of possible actions for each strategy. The actions are shown in Table 1. Each of the 26 possible actions was subjected to the following evaluation criteria:

- The financial resources required
- The potential capacity to achieve significant food system change
- Local community support or readiness for this activity
- Ease of implementation
- Number of known community partners involved or planning involvement

Based on these criteria, Public Health staff suggested six actions to be regarded as possible priorities for citizens and organizations interested in working toward the goal of a healthy community food system in Waterloo Region. These actions are presented in Section 5.

Table 1: Actions Developed Based on Focus Group Participant Feedback

Objectives	Strategies	Actions	
Ensure all residents can afford to buy the food they need to sustain health		1. Advocate for higher minimum wage, social assistance rates, affordable housing etc.	
Preserve and protect Waterloo Region's agricultural lands		2. Support Region's efforts to establish and maintain proposed countryside line	
		3. Review rationale for prohibition of farms smaller than 40 hectares	
Strengthen food-related knowledge and skills among consumers		4. Advocate for curriculum changes in schools to include food system issues	
		5. Establish focused social marketing campaign	
		6. Establish education/training campaign focusing on seasonal eating, preserving, and cooking	
		7. Develop a media strategy to promote local food and strategies listed in the interim report	
Increase availability of healthy food so healthy choices are easier to make	Ensure healthy food is available in every neighbourhood	8. Map food retail along the central transit corridor with a view to identifying opportunities for additional food retail	
		9. Conduct a feasibility study for mobile farmers' markets	
		10. Investigate street vendor licenses	
	Increase urban agriculture	11. Conduct inventory of all fruit and nut trees and bushes in the Region and identify which are available for public harvesting – have education program along with it	
		12. Advocate for funding for paid community garden coordinators: students could work with schools to establish gardens, work with teachers and then recruit others to garden throughout the summer	
		13. Advocate to have municipalities provide support to community gardens: e.g. land access, water, compost, woodchips, rototiller, etc.	
	Restrict unhealthy foods in identified neighbourhoods		14. Implement zoning changes to restrict unhealthy food stores within radius of identified areas (e.g. high schools)

continued on page 7

Table 1: Actions Developed Based on Focus Group Participant Feedback continued from page 6

Objectives	Strategies	Actions
Increase viability of farms that sell food to local markets in order to preserve rural communities and culture	Increase farm-gate sales	15. Advocate for sign by-laws to give farmers more flexibility to attract consumers to farm-gate sales, e.g. program to establish uniform Regional highway signs for farms on <i>Buy Local! Buy Fresh!</i> (BL!BF!) Map
		16. Work proactively with tourism boards to promote countryside as a destination with specific info on farms through BL!BF! Map
	Expand local farmers' markets	17. Require all farmers' market vendors to prominently label origin of all products for sale
	Establish farm-to-institution programs	18. Assemble package of information on farm-to-institution programs for Waterloo Region, using resources already produced by Local Flavour Plus, Foodlink, and Canadian Organic Growers
		19. Approach universities, the Region, hospitals, school boards, etc. to establish farm-to-institution programs
Enable on-farm processing facilities	20. Work with Region and Townships to influence wording of goals and policies in next Regional Official Plan	
Strengthen the food economy	Encourage local food processing industry	21. Investigate possibilities of subsidies or support programs for smaller food processors (including incubator kitchens) to address the barriers posed by food safety and other regulatory requirements
	Establish incubator kitchens	22. Conduct a feasibility study for incubator kitchens in Waterloo Region
		23. Identify commercial kitchens with excess capacity and share information with producers and retailers seeking to process local produce for local markets
	Encourage local food distribution sector	24. Advocate for a support program for new local food business
Establish local food label	25. Establish a local food label	
Forge dynamic partnerships to implement the plan		26. Establish a food systems roundtable for Waterloo Region that would involve representatives of different sectors of the food system in overseeing food system and recommending interventions

5. Follow-up Stakeholder Forum

In June 2006 a follow-up forum was organized for all those who had participated in the focus group meetings. The purpose of the forum was to present a summary of the feedback received and to have participants discuss and vote on the suggested list of six priority actions. Thirty-six participants returned for the forum.

Public Health staff presented a more detailed version of the previous chart to the group. The following prioritized list of actions resulted from the discussion and voting process. The number in brackets refers to the number given to the action in Table 1.

- a) Approach universities, the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, hospitals, school boards, and other institutions to establish farm-to-institution programs (19)
- b) Continue social marketing efforts to promote buying local food (5)
- c) Work with the planning department to address agricultural policy issues (added by the stakeholders)
- d) Conduct a feasibility study for mobile farmers' markets (9)
- e) Continue pursuing a local food label (25)
- f) Conduct a feasibility study for incubator kitchens in Waterloo Region (22)

At one point in the discussion a participant suggested that one of the six priority actions Public Health staff had suggested – the creation of a body to oversee the food system and recommend interventions – was of paramount importance if the current momentum for achieving a healthy community food system was to be maintained. At this point, Public Health committed staff to begin the process of establishing a Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable (26). This action was then removed from the list of suggested priority actions on which participants were asked to vote.

6. Current Progress on Actions

The following section describes progress that has been made to date on the identified objectives. A complete list of strategies and numbered actions related to each objective is found in Table 1. The action numbers refer to those in Table 1. It is recognized that many other initiatives to improve the local food system in Waterloo Region are taking place which contribute to these objectives as well.

Forge a dynamic partnership to implement the Community Food System Plan (Action 26)

In various Canadian and U.S. jurisdictions, multi-sectoral community-based networks are providing guidance to and championing the development of healthy local food systems. Some of the stakeholders who were involved in this key informant consultation process have met and are in the process of establishing such a network – the Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable. Its terms of reference are still being discussed, but generally there is commitment to a network that would:

- Leverage community resources to support a healthy community food system
- Establish benchmarks and targets for achievement of mission/goals
- Identify and prioritize food system needs and support the creation and implementation of initiatives
- Build new partnerships and enhance networking between existing food system stakeholders

In October 2006, The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation funded a project entitled Advancing the Healthy Community Food Systems Plan in the amount of \$200,000 over two years. The project represents a collaboration among Public Health, Foodlink Waterloo Region, and Canadian Organic Growers. The project will continue to strengthen the local food system through several actions. (See report to the Community Services Committee of Regional Council PH-07-099.)



Local food system stakeholders who attended the first meeting of the initial Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable. Left to right: Dan Flanagan, Martha Gay Scroggins, Ellen Desjardins, Marc Xuereb, Gary Hallam, Peter Katona.

Strengthen food-related knowledge and skills among consumers (Actions 5, 7)

Through its obesity prevention strategy, Public Health is playing a role in the social marketing of healthy food choices and working to ensure that healthy food choices are readily available. The strategy, launched in October 2006, is taking a broad and inter-sectoral approach to obesity prevention. Along with public education, this strategy will also include social marketing, community engagement, and policy development initiatives. As an example of policy development, Public Health is looking to provide assistance with the development and implementation of institutional (i.e. school) policies that stimulate access to healthy food and healthy eating practices.

Foodlink Waterloo Region also continues its work of educating the public about the many benefits of eating local food through its newsletter – *Local Harvest*.

Work with the planning department to address agricultural policy issues

The Region of Waterloo's Planning, Housing, and Community Services Department held two workshops to gather input into various areas of agricultural policy as part of the preparation of the new Regional Official Plan. The first workshop, held in August 2006, gathered input from local farmers and other stakeholders on the topic of farm viability. The second workshop, held in October, dealt with minimizing urban-rural land use conflicts to further support local farmers. The third workshop on the subject of urban agriculture will be held in 2007.

Increase the availability of healthy food (Actions 9, 10, 12)

The Waterloo Region Community Garden Council, Opportunities Waterloo Region and Public Health are collaborating to ensure the 600 community garden plots in Waterloo Region remain active and to build capacity for the addition of 200 plots over three years. Additional funding is being sought for this work.

With the Lyle S. Hallman funding, Public Health will pilot 5 community mobile farmers' markets over two years to increase the availability of fresh produce in urban areas. These markets will run weekly (on different days than the current farmers' markets) and sell locally grown fruit and vegetables and provide information on the health, social, economic, and environmental benefits of local food. The University of Waterloo connected with the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative and held a local farm market on campus as a pilot venture in 2006.

Strengthen the local food economy (Actions 22, 23, 25)

A working group (including Public Health and other interested stakeholders) is exploring the development of an incubator kitchen. It is currently doing an inventory of best practices in other areas and of underutilized facilities within Waterloo Region.

Foodlink Waterloo Region has received funding from the CanAdvance program and the Lyle S. Hallman foundation to pursue a regional food label. Foodlink also promotes farm-gate sales through the production and distribution of the *Buy Local! Buy Fresh!* Map and it promotes local food through sponsorship of the annual Taste Local Taste Fresh Event.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Achieving a healthy community food system – where everyone has access to and can afford to buy safe, nutritious, and culturally-acceptable food that has been produced in an environmentally-sustainable way and that sustains our rural communities – is a task that requires the collaborative effort of many different types of stakeholders. The key informant consultation process described in this report has initiated collaboration among many different sectors involved in the food system. The process also identified some recommendations for Public Health’s continued involvement:

- That Public Health staff continue to provide administrative and research support to inform and facilitate the operation of the Waterloo Region Food Systems Roundtable
- That Public Health staff continue to identify mechanisms to increase opportunities for enhanced supply and distribution systems for local food as a means to increase food access (such as mobile farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, and urban agriculture)
- That Public Health staff explore expanding the Region of Waterloo’s Green Purchasing Program to include the purchase of local food.⁶

8. Appendix

Focus Group Comments Related to Objectives and Strategies

This appendix briefly describes the context and some rationale for each objective and strategy (more detail is available in the interim report) and then summarizes the comments that were made in the focus groups about each. Even though participants were encouraged to focus on the last four objectives, comments were made about the first three as well and are recorded here.

Objective 1: Ensure all residents can afford to buy the food they need to sustain health

A healthy food system exists when everyone has income sufficient to buy food that supports health, at prices which support the continued viability of farming. Given the inadequacy of income support mechanisms in Canada, it is estimated that 5.9% of the population of Waterloo Region is food insecure.⁷

What we heard:

There was agreement among participants that this objective is not intended to put more pressure on local farmers to lower the price of their food products as a way to increase access to healthy food. It is already difficult to make a living at certain types of farming with current high-input costs and low-commodity prices. To address the root causes of this problem, public policy should seek to increase the amount of money a household has available for healthy food through income support programs, improve the supply of affordable housing, increase opportunities for community gardening and urban agriculture, and foster a strong and diversified economy. It was noted that even if all the other strategies listed in the report are implemented and there is no action regarding income available to buy food, we still will not have a healthy food system for all.

Objective 2: Preserve and protect Waterloo Region's agricultural land

A healthy food system requires that a sufficient land base exists to produce the foods required to support the health of local populations. Waterloo Region already has some of the strongest farmland protection policies in the province. The current Regional Official Policies Plan sets out urban/rural boundaries which area municipalities must respect within their own Official Plans. In addition to protecting the farmland from development, farmers need to be able to make a viable income from farming and the land needs to be farmed in a way that will enable it to continue to be used to produce food for future generations.

What we heard:

Focus group participants suggested that the policies which have been put in place to protect farmland at times conflict with producers' desires to make their livelihood viable. At the focus group meetings for land use planners, participating planners talked about the difficulties in zoning for on-farm businesses. In general, planners want to provide the opportunity for on-farm diversification while protecting agricultural land from potential non-farm uses that could undermine the agricultural community. More of this discussion is captured in the strategy dealing with on-farm processing.

Another topic discussed with these planners was the minimum size farm policy in the Regional Official Policies Plan (ROPP). Currently, the ROPP does not permit the creation of farms less than 40 hectares unless the proposal can be properly justified. There was an acknowledgement that this policy, while designed to discourage farm fragmentation and the creation of hobby farms, may work against the supply of smaller-scale farms that focus on Community Supported Agriculture schemes or producing higher value cash crops such as culinary herbs. Farming less than 40 hectares is particularly viable if someone is considering vegetable or fruit production.

From these discussions, the idea emerged of finding ways to make subtle changes to official plans and zoning by-laws which allow them to maintain their original intent to protect farmland and discourage farm fragmentation but also enable some of the healthy local food system objectives outlined in this report (e.g. strengthening the local food economy and increasing the viability of farms that sell food to local markets) to be pursued.

Objective 3: Strengthen food-related knowledge and skills among consumers

Education must play a key role in encouraging residents to eat a more nutritious diet. Public Health has always had a strong mandate for food and nutrition education and has carried out this mandate through the programming listed in the interim report. However, research is showing that diet related diseases such as diabetes are proving resistant to traditional educational approaches.⁸ Ensuring that healthy food is easily available in every neighbourhood is equally as important as providing nutritional education. (A study by the University of North Carolina showed that the more supermarkets a neighbourhood has, the more fruits and vegetables its residents eat.)⁹ Educating about the health disadvantages of highly-processed, low-nutrient convenience foods is not useful when those types of foods have more marketing resources used to promote them and are more widely available than healthy food options.

What we heard:

This objective received the highest number of comments in the focus groups. Participants pointed out that consumers want fast and prepared foods, give their children junk food to take to school, and consistently choose cheaper over healthier options. They suggested many ideas for trying to change consumer behaviour including:

- Incorporating education about healthy foods and the food system into elementary school curriculum – this one was stressed by many participants, usually on the premise that children are eager to learn and can influence family purchasing habits
- Re-introducing family studies programs into high schools to familiarize students with food preparation and preserving skills – many participants recognized the funding and infrastructure required to do this and advocated for their provision
- Building food system and nutrition education into culinary arts programs at colleges so that food service workers will bring the ideas and knowledge to their workplaces
- Media campaigns involving celebrities to make eating healthy and local food more attractive to more people
- Focused social marketing strategies to identify the most likely market segments to switch from occasional eating of healthy foods to consistent healthy eating habits
- Focused campaign on foods that are in season when, and how to preserve foods for eating in off-season
- Having institutional food providers educate their own clients about the healthier choices available on their menus (e.g. table tents, posters of farm families, stickers, etc.)

Many participants stressed the need to educate the public about the benefits of eating local food, and pointed out that until consumers demand it and are willing to pay for it, the market will not supply it. Participants felt that food consumers are responsible for our existing food environment because of their demands.

Objective 4: Increase availability of healthy food so that healthy choices are easier to make

One aspect of a healthy food system is that nutritious choices are easy to identify and more convenient to find, while less healthy choices are limited in their availability. The following strategies were discussed:

Strategy 4.1: Ensure healthy food is available in every neighbourhood

Retailers supplying healthy food options need to exist in each neighbourhood. Increasing the availability of healthy food in neighbourhoods can be done in different ways. One way is for municipal governments to develop zoning and/or financial incentives to attract retail operations which focus on healthy foods to locations in which retailers offering healthy food are scarce. Another way is for mobile farmers' markets to be established to bring fresh local produce to different neighbourhoods on different days of the week. Another possibility is for street vendors to venture beyond traditional hot dog fare and to offer more healthy choices.

What we heard:

There were strong expressions of support from many participants from different sectors for the idea of finding ways to make healthy food more available in urban neighbourhoods. Participants talked about wanting to be able to walk to fruit and vegetable stands. A Good Food Box program (a program in which people pool their resources to purchase produce in bulk and in turn receive a regular box of fresh fruit and vegetables delivered either to their home or to a central depot) was also mentioned as another way to ensure people have access to healthy food. There was some recognition that the municipal by-law regarding street vendor licensing might be a barrier to having fruit and vegetable stands in the streets.

Participants noted that finding farmers interested in staffing urban fruit and vegetable stands would be a challenge. It was suggested that it might be more feasible to have other entrepreneurs operate the stand and source produce from local farmers, perhaps through the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative. (The Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative is a place where wholesalers can go to purchase large quantities of local fresh produce in season. It was started by local farmers three years ago.)

Participants also talked about improving the health of food offered in cafeterias as being related to this strategy. They felt that healthy choices should be more readily available, especially for children in schools.

One participant noted that in a survey of people accessing emergency food sources, participants expressed interest in being able to walk to buy food in their neighbourhoods. Other participants warned that supply of fresh produce may be only part of the solution and urged that education about the benefits of eating healthy food accompany supply-side solutions (as discussed in the section on Objective 3).

Strategy 4.2: Increase urban agriculture

Urban agriculture, whether it is a backyard garden, rooftop garden, community garden, or green roof (not meant for food production but for runoff retention), contributes to the quality of life and the health of individuals, families, and the community as a whole. The numerous benefits pertain to many different areas of health such as community health (e.g. increased social interaction), economic health (e.g. increased local food production), and environmental health (e.g. improved air quality, less storm water runoff).¹⁰

What we heard:

Two focus groups spent significant periods of time discussing urban agriculture, mostly focused on community gardens. It was felt that gardening is difficult enough to motivate people to do (e.g. “hard to get off the couch,” people spend time in own gardens but don’t grow food, having to walk to community garden, lack of gardening skills) without the additional barriers of lack of access to water, land, compost, rototillers, and paid coordinators.

The groups suggested the following ways to support urban agriculture:

- \$/in-kind support from municipalities for water, land, compost (an example from Winnipeg was cited)
- Funding for coordinators
- Program to encourage school gardens (would need \$ for coordinators to work with teachers, neighbours over summer)
- Fruit/nut tree/bush inventory (an example in Portland, Oregon was cited)
- Marketing campaign to encourage “edible landscaping”
- Program to encourage institutional gardens (apartment buildings, seniors’ homes, hospitals, etc.)
- Document stories of successful gardens

Strategy 4.3: Restrict unhealthy foods in identified neighbourhoods

Some jurisdictions in North America are attempting to limit the proliferation of high-energy, low-nutrient convenience foods in the immediate vicinity of schools.¹¹ The rationale is that dietary habits formed in childhood and adolescence are often maintained for life, and that helping children and youth form good dietary habits will help prevent chronic disease.

What we heard:

In the focus groups there was a mixed response to this idea. Some people strongly supported the idea of banning highly-processed, low-nutrient convenience foods in specific places, especially around schools. Others felt it much more positive to find ways to make healthy foods more available and attractive.

**Objective 5: Increase the viability of farms that sell food to local markets
in order to preserve rural communities and culture**

The future health of Waterloo Region's food system and its rural communities is dependent on farmers' ability to earn a reasonable living from agriculture. Agriculture in Waterloo Region is more diversified and farms are smaller than the Ontario average.¹² Strengthening the viability of farms that sell food locally takes advantage of this unique mixed, small-farm profile evident in Waterloo Region.

Strategy 5.1: Increase farm-gate sales

Waterloo Region has a rich tradition of farm-gate sales of fresh produce. The *Buy Local! Buy Fresh!* Map, which locates food producers in Waterloo Region who sell their produce at their farm, has made this tradition more visible to residents, and has begun to have a positive impact on participating farms.

What we heard:

Though there was broad support for increasing farm-gate sales, there were not many ideas suggested of how to do it. Some concern was expressed that farm-gate sales mostly rely on drive-by traffic, so unless more effort is made to make the countryside a destination, there is not likely to be increases in farm-gate sales except on major thoroughfares like Regional roads.

Farm-gate sales are affected by zoning regulations. Township planners are grappling with issues of how to regulate the location of roadside stands. Some of the issues raised were:

- Municipal staff have concerns about traffic impediments and roadside signs
- Stands need to abide by requirements for how far they are set back from the road
- Should multiple farmers be allowed to sell at one farm-gate stand?

Strategy 5.2: Expand local farmers' markets

Farmers' markets can be a way of supporting local farmers and the local economy. Currently farmers' markets are made up of a mixture of farmer vendors who sell only items from their own farms, farmer vendors who supplement their own farm produce, and those who are not farmers and are selling the produce they have bought elsewhere (resellers). Vendors may be selling locally grown or imported produce. Despite the success of Waterloo Region's farmers' markets, the availability of imported produce during peak local season remains a challenge for local producers.

What we heard:

Participants in six focus groups had at least some comment on this strategy and participants in two focus groups spent a lot of energy discussing it. There was significant support for the idea of expanding farmers' markets by establishing mobile farm stands – possibly along higher-volume transit routes, at community centres, and/or on university or college campuses. One of the existing markets considered this idea, but found no interest among existing vendors. This raised the question of farmer interest in selling directly through markets. Market managers claim declining interest among farmers in staffing market stalls.

Participants felt that the dominant public perception was that farmers' markets are made up of local farmers selling food from their farms. Many participants felt it important to address this perception by, at very least, having vendors label what has been grown locally and what has not.

Overall, participants wanted to find ways of making local produce more available in cities through some type of market or produce stand.

Strategy 5.3: Establish farm-to-institution programs

Farm-to-institution programs, in which farms or groups of farms provide food for local hospitals, universities, nursing homes etc., allow these institutions to improve the quality of the food they provide. When farmers have partnered with schools to provide food for their cafeterias, the health of the children who eat there has been shown to improve.¹³ The demand these programs create for local produce helps to strengthen the viability of local farms. Institutions are captive audiences which can be persuaded to pay higher prices for local foods. Local food will, ironically, cost more. Subsidies, technological advancements, and increased competition from low-cost foreign producers are all factors in making imported produce less expensive than produce grown on a smaller scale locally.¹⁴ A consequence of these downward pressures on prices has been that the local infrastructure to process and distribute locally grown food has been slowly dismantled through the consolidation of the food system.

What we heard:

"We have a responsibility as public institutions to advocate for this and promote it to our employees, students, or patients."

This quote from one participant indicates the strength of the support for this strategy. This strategy was seen as an excellent first step toward overcoming barriers to other strategies. The barrier mentioned most frequently by participants was that local producers cannot supply or charge a fair price unless the consumer demands it or is willing to buy it. Since institutions may be willing to pay higher prices to purchase local foods, the contracts they make will be large and will provide producers with a fair price.

Institutions are able to modify the conditions of their food service contracts to require that a certain percentage be sourced locally. Participants were aware of this occurring at the University of Toronto through the organization Local Flavour Plus. This organization promotes local sustainable agriculture by certifying local farmers and processors who meet certain sustainability criteria and then linking them with local purchasers.

If the institutions to be involved were schools, the participants suggested combining the farm-to-school program with related curriculum (e.g. Family Studies) or with community gardens.

Strategy 5.4: Enable on-farm processing facilities

On-farm processing refers to transforming fruits and vegetables grown on the farm into another form through canning, freezing, or washing and peeling at the same location. It was proposed as a strategy since it would be one way to allow producers to benefit from the value added to their products through processing. Currently, land zoned for agriculture pays a lower rate of tax than land zoned for commercial or industrial uses. Farmers seeking to build a processing facility on their land face the prospect of engaging in a process to have a portion of their land re-zoned and paying a higher rate of tax on that land.

What we heard:

The discussion of on-farm processing overlapped with the discussion of encouraging the local food processing industry in general (see Strategy 6.1). Planners and producers agreed on the benefits of encouraging local processing.

Farmers did not express any preference for on-farm processing versus local processing generally. None of the participants defended the need to have processing facilities on-farm versus in areas currently zoned for processing activities.

Township Planners explained many issues related to the approval of zoning changes to permit on-farm processing. First, according to the Regional Official Policies Plan, on-farm business activities must be secondary to farm operations. One planner thought on-farm processing rarely remained secondary for long because it usually needs to expand for reasons of economy of scale. It then reaches a point where processing revenues move beyond revenues from farming operations.

Planners appreciated the importance of a processing facility's close proximity to the farm community. They would prefer to see industrial and commercial activity happen in rural settlement areas and have agricultural land preserved for farming. Planners felt the need to be cautious not to set precedents by granting exemptions that would then be difficult to deny to other landowners wishing to engage in non-agricultural on-farm activities.

Objective 6: Strengthen the local food economy

To help make it more economically viable for farms to sell to local markets, certain gaps in our local food economy need to be addressed. Retailers (including restaurants, institutions, and grocery stores) who might be interested in serving local food have very few sources that meet their criteria in terms of volume, quality, and amount of processing. The local infrastructure which used to support the processing and distributing of local food has gradually been eroded due to consolidation of the food system.

Strategy 6.1: Encourage the local food processing industry

There is a market for fresh, unprocessed fruits and vegetables. However, our climate requires that food products undergo a certain degree of processing to make them available for more of the year. Food that is processed locally allows the local economy to benefit from the larger market share these products capture. Municipal and private partners need to come together to identify ways to stimulate entrepreneurial development in this area.

What we heard:

There was widespread support for more local processing to increase the supply of local food to local markets. At least two producers indicated that they could produce more or use more of what they grow if they knew of opportunities to process product locally. Many participants expressed frustration that small processors must meet the same food safety and other regulatory requirements as large competitors, and felt this made small-scale processing not viable because of the high costs involved in certification. The following quote expresses this frustration:

"There would be more small-scale processing in this area, but the rules make it almost impossible."

The rules the participants referred to were food safety and certification regulations. Food safety regulations are the same no matter what the size of a processing facility and so it is much easier for large-scale processors to have the capital to comply. The costs involved in certification are very high and were seen to discourage small processing.

Another barrier was the difficulty in determining what is required to begin small-scale processing. All three levels of government have some role in food safety regulation and inspection and this makes it difficult for those who want to start processing facilities to know where to begin in addressing the regulations.

Many participants suggested programs which support small processors as a way to encourage local food entrepreneurs to establish processing facilities in this area. Others suggested more cooperation between producers to make better use of existing facilities. One farmers' market manager suggested there was a big opportunity for prepared and value-added foods at markets.

There was recognition among many participants, including farmers, that some element of scale would be required to make local processing viable. It may necessitate co-operation among many producers to process at the same facility.

Strategy 6.2: Establish incubator kitchens

Incubator kitchens are places to nurture small food businesses. They are shared-use commercial kitchens where local food entrepreneurs can prepare their food products in a fully licensed and certified kitchen. Incubator kitchens usually offer technical assistance in food processing and general business management skills. They also create the opportunity for people to work collectively to purchase bulk supplies as well as market and distribute their products. Incubator kitchens can be useful for preparing locally-sourced food for use in farm-to-institution programs.

What we heard:

This idea generated a lot of interest among participants. They liked the idea that incubator kitchens might make institutional purchasing of local produce more convenient, as produce could be washed/peeled/cut or otherwise prepared.

The participants identified a number of existing commercial kitchens that operate below capacity and that could possibly provide opportunities to new businesses wanting to make use of them. One facility mentioned that they do not rent out their kitchen because of damage concerns and said that keeping staff on to supervise renters was not viable.

Some of the same regulatory concerns expressed around local processing came up for incubator kitchens as well. Participants felt that the new federal requirement to provide nutritional facts on the label of any food product that has been packaged would need to be addressed. Larger businesses with larger volumes would be able to cover the cost of this labelling more easily than smaller businesses starting out in an incubator kitchen. There is a phase-in period for smaller operations to comply with this new legislation.

Strategy 6.3: Encourage local food distribution sector

In addition to building an infrastructure for processing local foods, a healthy community food system requires distributors who focus on local produce. Farmers need a distributor to which they can sell their farm produce and retailers need a distributor that will supply all of the local produce they need for their businesses. The Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative is a promising start in this direction, as it provides one location where distributors can purchase wholesale quantities of fresh produce. Similar initiatives could expand into other areas of the Region and/or expand into preserved or processed local foods in the off-season.

What we heard:

A wide variety of participants spoke of the need for food distribution companies to carry local produce. Participants suggested that major food distribution companies buy food from wherever they can get it for the cheapest possible price. They felt that consumers want fresh produce year-round and also demand the lowest possible price. They recognized that distribution companies need large volumes of produce to make distribution economically viable.

Several participants expressed the need for consumer demand to drive the supply of local produce on local shelves. Food distribution companies confirmed the difficulties in getting new products (e.g. local produce) onto their lists, and said they have to see evidence of adequate demand for it before they will take a new product on.

Participants who were distributors emphasized the need for quality produce. Consumers will not accept local produce that does not have the same quality to which they have become accustomed. Distributors and some institutional buyers confirmed that the price of local will need to be competitive, as some may be willing to pay a premium for local but not all. That said, distributors said that if local produce was available, of similar quality, and competitively priced, they would choose local produce. At least two food retailers said their clients are demanding local produce, and that they are having problems finding a local distributor who will supply it.

Some participants suggested subsidies or start-up loans to distributors willing to focus on local produce. Another suggestion was to focus local distribution efforts on institutions, since one contract might generate enough demand.

Strategy 6.4: Establish a local food label

A 2003 survey of Waterloo Region residents found that 71.3 percent said that they would buy more local food if it was labelled as such.¹⁵ Pursuing a local food label would make Waterloo Region grown or processed food more readily recognizable at various distribution points – including retail outlets and restaurants.

What we heard:

There was strong support for the idea of establishing a local food label for fresh produce and eventually for a wider range of local food products. Two focus groups spent a significant amount of time discussing how to make a label happen. Many felt this strategy was key to the success of several other strategies. One participant called the label the crucial “pull” factor in generating demand for local food that can stimulate increases in supply. It also has the potential to give retailers a quality assurance if the label guarantees a certain level of quality.

Some issues that surfaced related to the label are:

- Definition of what is local may be problematic – certain radius? Waterloo Region? Ontario?
- Foodland Ontario already exists, but only for produce – some participants didn’t want to compete against it, others did
- Foodlink plans to develop Buy Local! Buy Fresh! logo into a brand; Local Flavours Plus also seeking to promote its brand
- Should label also incorporate certain environmental standards or other issues like ethical animal treatment?
- Who will police use of the logo – government? contracts between owner of logo and user?

Objective 7: Forge a dynamic partnership to implement the community food system plan

The goal of achieving a healthy food system for Waterloo Region will require that many different organizations endorse the plan and co-operate in pursuing its aims. A body comprised of diverse stakeholders in Waterloo Region’s food system, such as Regional and area municipal planners, Foodlink Waterloo Region, Waterloo Federation of Agriculture, economic development departments, food system entrepreneurs, and others will be necessary to advance the strategies and policy options developed through this consultation process.

What we heard:

Many comments were made suggesting the need for more cooperation among players in the food system to build demand and supply for local food together. Some suggested that if there were more talking and networking amongst different sectors with interest in promoting local food, this would facilitate increasing the demand and the supply.

Producer cooperatives were commonly mentioned examples of partnerships. Several producers said they would need help to make a cooperative work and could learn from existing successful models elsewhere. The Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative was mentioned as an example of such a cooperative, one which is having economic spin offs within Waterloo Region.

Participants felt that gathering together as a group of interested stakeholders to network and encourage momentum was necessary if any progress was going to be made in advancing the Community Food System Plan.

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