

Halton Region Health Department
Food Systems Consultation
Report on the Findings
May 1, 2008

Report by:
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BACKGROUND

“Today, when we produce more food than ever before, more than one in 10 people on Earth are hungry. The hunger of 800 million happens at the same time as another historical first: that they are outnumbered by the one billion people on this planet who are overweight... If we’re to reclaim our food system, we’ll need to do something far more systematic than buying ‘fair trade’. We’ll need to reclaim how our food comes to us - by having a democratic conversation...”

(Raj Patel. Author of: *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World's Food System.*)

The Halton Region Health Department has launched a process to determine the feasibility of establishing a regionally supported Food Council in Halton. If established, the Council would be comprised of a range of stakeholders, representing diverse aspects of the food system, who would work collaboratively to identify local food and food system issues and develop integrated solutions.

This initiative stems from local concerns with food access and food distribution. In its work with the community, the Health Department has become aware of some challenging food system questions such as:

- How could the community enhance its support of local farmers?
- Is hunger being addressed effectively?
- Does the community do a good job of facilitating access to healthy & nutritious food?

As the first step in this feasibility study, Lynn Garrison, a Public Health Nutritionist, researched four Food Policy Councils in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Kamloops to learn about their mandates, membership, organizational structures, activities and best practices. One of the key points emphasized by all four was that a Food Policy Council must be community based and community driven. In fact, in each of these locations, community members organized themselves first and then approached a government agency for support.

The second step in the feasibility study was to pull together eleven Key Informants¹ (“*Community Elders*”) for an initial consultation to explore the idea of developing an organized approach to food issues in Halton Region. The consultation was three hours long and took place on May 1, 2008. This report documents the findings from that consultation.

¹ A complete list of invitees can be found in Appendix A.

THE FOOD ISSUES CONSULTATION PROCESS

Purpose:

- To identify key food issues for our local community
- To meet others working with these issues
- To explore the idea of a collaborative approach

1:30 Welcome, Review of Agenda & Introductions

1:45 Setting the Stage

- *How did we get here and why are your thoughts so important?*
- *Questions*

2:00 Identifying Local Food Issues

- *From your perspective, what are some key food issues in our community that could be addressed at the local level?*

2:45 BREAK

3:00 Exploring Collaboration

- *Could we work collaboratively to address our local food issues and would we want to do that?*
- *What might that look like?*

3:45 Determining How We Should Proceed

- *Focus Conversation*

4:15 Wrap –Up & Next Steps

IDENTIFYING LOCAL FOOD ISSUES

Participants were welcomed and asked to introduce themselves by telling the group why they were interested in attending this consultation on food issues. People voiced their concerns about: access to food for different populations; the lack of coordination between programs; the need for more resources to support existing initiatives; the challenges of transporting food to the school programs; and the financial challenges for farmers who wish to sell their produce locally.

People were then divided into three groups and asked to come to agreement in their small groups on the most pressing food issues in Halton Region. The following issues were identified:

- **Hunger**
31,000 people in Halton region are hungry and a large percentage of this group is children.
- **Accessibility**
It's important to match needs with supply and transportation. For example: Fresh Food Boxes are available but there are a limited number and they are difficult to transport any distance without cars.
- **Coordination/duplication**
Greater coordination and less duplication are needed among organizations in the region.
- **Agricultural Sustainability and Food Security**
The loss of agricultural land, a lack of citizen and governmental support for farmers, the closing of local food processing plants, trade barriers, and a lack of community gardens all contribute to food insecurity.
- **Profits from Unhealthy Foods**
Large corporations, such as the soft drinks business, use excessive amounts of corn for corn syrup. It's hidden in so many foods that it is hard to remove it from our diets. Because processed food is where the revenue is made, corn and soy crops are in demand and the fields are not rotated thus depleting the soil of all nutrients.

- **Consumer Habits**
Consumers require greater awareness and education on healthy eating habits.
- **Media**
It can be very difficult to sort facts from fiction
- **Carbon Footprint**
Our food is transported thousands of miles. Is a “100 Mile Diet” even possible in this land of different growing seasons?
- **Food As a Cultural Experience**
Food is part of our cultural heritage and we need to be sensitive to New Canadians and whether we have the availability of a range of different foods. In Quebec, food is a sensual experience and we need to remember this concept.

In the ensuing discussion, participants stated that it is “*shocking for Halton*” that some people don’t have access to healthy, nutritious food. To compound this problem, local farmers find that the labour costs are expensive in Halton making it more economical to ship locally grown food to Toronto for distribution. People noted the paradox – on the one hand, there are citizens in Halton Region who are hungry; on the other hand, locally grown food is sent to Toronto.

Although consumers have not been paying for the real cost of food, this is about to change. As food costs rise, both healthy and unhealthy food choices will be affected so it is important that people prioritize the spending of their food dollars. Programs such as the Fresh Food Box assist citizens with obtaining fresh produce at lower costs but it was noted that the program faces challenges because it is not large enough for big growers but too large for small growers!

The region lacks a sustainable infrastructure for the proper storage, refrigeration and distribution of donated food for emergency responses and programs in schools and communities. Such an infrastructure would contribute to better efficiencies and long term outcomes.

People also noted that a more organized approach to community gardens could support breakfast programs. Halton has the land and it has the programs – it’s a question of “*making it happen*”.

EXPLORING COLLABORATION

There was unanimous agreement that collaboration makes complete sense and is the only way to move forward. This comment was typical of the group's sentiments:

"We can do it and we have to do it!"

When asked what collaboration might achieve, the responses were more mixed. It was clear that the participants had very different perspectives on what could be accomplished. The need for a common vision and goals was emphasized. As one person cautioned:

"We can't work on too many things at once"

Or, as someone else noted,

"Don't compartmentalize food issues. We need strong agriculture, strong political advocacy, and strong health promotion."

According to the participants, collaborative initiatives could encompass:

- **Public Education** – Provide referrals for newcomers, community kitchens and food demonstrations;
- **Advocacy** - Become informed about common needs and speak with one voice to influence policies;
- **Networking** – Build on existing connections;
- **Innovation** – Create the *"made in Halton solution"*;
- **Resource development** – Support infrastructural needs and operating costs;
- **A comprehensive focus** - Recognize that food security has two sides – food access and support for locally grown food;
- **Changes in food handling**- Reduce excess waste and packaging.

A FOOD COUNCIL FOR HALTON

Lynn Garrison presented her research on four Food Policy Councils that exist across Canada in: Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Kamloops. The presentation triggered a number of questions:

- If food is a poverty issue in Halton, which council most closely reflects our needs?
- Where would we find our sources of funding? If funding is available now for a coordinator (from the Health Department) can we hire, get things going and then seek elsewhere for an independent paid coordinator (once we're established)?
- There are already many groups meeting to discuss this issue. Are we creating a make work project? What is the underlying great benefit for the Halton community?
- If the Health Department provides staffing support, what would be our relationship with Halton Region – can we operate at arms length?

Cautions

Some people felt very cautious about the origins of this Food Council. Would the fact that it was initiated by the Halton Region Health Department jeopardize the Council's ability to play an advocacy role when required? Would there be a conflict of interest? There was also a concern about limited funding – if resources were spent on a Food Council, would there be sufficient regional funding to also support projects and infrastructural needs? People noted that the system for distributing food is largely dependent upon volunteers and minimal resources. Everyone is already on many committees and it's essential that a Food Council doesn't cause more duplication of efforts

Excitement

Other participants welcomed the Health Department's initiative:

"Bringing together this group is wonderful even though top down because all individual agencies now have come together and are being given the opportunity to have one voice."

"(I) can see the benefit of a council to prevent duplication of programs/services. The Toronto Food Policy Council is quite successful."

"(This is) very timely in Halton. We're paving over our farmland. It's great that staff is suggesting a council and that the community hasn't brought it forward."

HOW TO PROCEED

The group re-confirmed that there was a strong interest in forming a Food Council but insufficient time in this session to determine how best to proceed. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing the concerns that had been raised before proceeding too much further. There was also a need to clarify if the Health Department was offering leadership or support for a Food Council.

As the discussion continued, a couple of different suggestions were offered:

Suggestion #1 - Delay forming a Council immediately and instead create a looser network or forum comprised of the breadth of groups and organizations involved in food issues across the region. Once each quarter, the Halton Region Health Department Region could host a meeting, for all stakeholder organizations, with a loosely structured agenda and time for information sharing. After three or four meetings, the group might gradually coalesce around common issues of importance. Communication would be the key in order to see what emerges.

Suggestion #2 - Move forward quickly on this opportunity with the Region's support.

"We'd be foolish to let this opportunity go... We'd have greater impact with a Food Policy Council."

"This could leverage everything we do!"

In deciding how best to proceed, it was noted that there are already some local models that could inform the creation of a Food Council. *Choices 4 Health* is a Heart Health coalition which has a volunteer chair supported by staff at the Health Department.

On another note, someone suggested that it be called the **Halton Food Council** with the word "policy" removed.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the consultation session, everyone agreed that there was energy to collaborate on local food issues in Halton and there was consensus to proceed with these exploratory discussions about a Food Council.

"We have so much passion about this issue; we need to move it forward."

Some people were already at a state of readiness, while others needed more time. As expressed by one participant, the bottom line is to keep these conversations going and to recognize that this kind of change process takes time. Others noted that it's also important to ensure that people's concerns are met and their time is respected.

Participants' final thoughts captured the energy that was in the room at the time of closing:

"I'm passionate about this whole situation."

"We need one central voice for Halton"

"I'm in"

"I feel blessed to be invited. Very exciting to be part of something new and exciting"

APPENDIX A

Food Policy Council External Consultation with Key Informants

Farm to School
Lorenz Eppinger

Halton Fresh Food Box
Brenda Moher, Coordinator

**Food for Life/Food Bank
Collaborative**
Blair Richardson

**Make Poverty History – Burlington,
Halton**
David and Judy Goodings
Marnie Mellish

Choices 4 Health
Lynn Roblin

Kerr Street Ministries
Ron Shantz *

Halton Healthy Eating Network
Gabrielle Allison*

**Halton Agricultural Advisory
Committee**
Stephen Baker*

Food for Thought
Gayle Cruickshank

Halton Multicultural Council
Maria Brzeska

Our Kids Hubs
Suzanne Mulligan
Sheila Slattery-Ford

***Note: These participants were unable to attend the meeting on May 1, 2008**

