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Canadian planners put food on menu
100 Mile Diet may become survival strategy

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When planners -- the people who determine zoning and design neighbourhoods -- start talking about food and sustainability, you know the times they are a changin'.

The Canadian Institute of Planners followed the lead of its American counterpart at its annual meeting held in Winnipeg this month by putting planning for food and agriculture on the agenda. Speakers told participants it's been about 50 years since what and how people will eat has been considered part of the public planner's role.

Maybe it's because of the spectre of declining energy reserves and global warming is finally seeping into the public's consciousness. Maybe it's due to the linkages being drawn between the food system and rising levels of obesity, or the safety scares related to our reliance on foods produced and processed by big companies in far-off places.

"You are what you eat and right now, that's not looking too good," noted Jim Hiley, a land evaluation specialist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, as he outlined reasons for the growing interest in sustainable food systems.

Or maybe it's because prices have been driven up over the past year to the point where people no longer take food for granted.

Whatever the reasons, food has now joined the list of other necessities of life, such as clean air, potable water and shelter, that planners are starting to examine more closely in the context of building and maintaining sustainable communities.

Why wasn't it there before?

Jerry Kaufman, a professor emeritus with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the Winnipeg meeting that until recently, there was a sense that the food system would look after itself.

But this failure to plan for food and agriculture has resulted in the degradation and loss of the primary resource needed to produce it -- land. Canada, for example, is the second-largest land mass in the world, but the only major producing countries that have fewer arable acres are the likes of the United Kingdom and France -- countries that are a fraction of Canada's size.

Only 7.3 per cent of Canada's massive land base can be used for agricultural purposes compared to 13.9 per cent of China, 41 per cent of the United States, and 63 per cent of Argentina. Half of Canada's prime farmland has already disappeared to urban development and subdivisions have been gobbling it up at an escalating pace.

The 40,000-member American Planning Association planners went so far as to develop a policy guide that promotes food systems that strengthen the local economy, improve the health of the region's citizens, are ecologically sustainable, are socially equitable and just, sustain traditional food cultures and promote comprehensive food planning at the community and regional levels.

It is a policy ethic that considers food in a much broader context than as a saleable commodity. It treats land as a resource rather than a possession.

Canadian planners haven't collectively gone there yet. But some cities have started to consider the implications of the changing paradigm.

Vancouver's city planning commission organized a series of seminars in 2005-2006 designed to help citizen planning groups examine scenarios such as Peak Oil price shocks and global warming. The exercise in crystal ball gazing underlined some stark realities.

While increasing urbanization combined with large-scale agriculture has been the model for modern efficiency, those development strategies don't fare well in a resource-depleted world.

"Everything we take for granted right now is up for grabs," says Richard Balfour, a Vancouver-based architect who chaired the strategic sustainable planning process for the Vancouver City Planning Commission.

The debate continues over when or if the world will actually run out of oil, but there is growing awareness that increasing demand on the limited supplies could make petroleum prohibitively expensive for all but critical necessities. No clear technological fix has emerged.

In the book, *Strategic Sustainable Planning -- A Civil Defense Manual for Cultural Survival*, that resulted from the Vancouver workshops, Balfour and co-author Eileen McAdam Keenan say communities must choose between a radical adaptation now or endure a meltdown of the economy and infrastructure that amassed during the industrial age.

"During the century of cheap oil, planning policy in North America has resulted in the creation of cities, towns and neighbourhoods where no alternative to the automobile to carry out the necessities of daily life exists," they write. "We are now the possessors of an enormous automobile infrastructure clogged with frustrated motorists trying to commute increasing distances every day, and despite the clear warnings, we're still building more."

He predicts Peak Oil could push civilization back to the future -- to a time when communities were small, largely food self-sufficient and fuelled predominantly by renewable energy.

In other words, the 100 Mile Diet might become less about fads and more about survival.

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