



The benefits of a municipal focus on food are manyfold—social, environmental, economic. Many cities, Vancouver included, are supporting food policy. **BY SHANNON BRADLEY AND WENDY MENDES**

Creating a just and sustainable food system in the City of Vancouver

ON JULY 8, 2003, following more than a decade of community organizing efforts, Vancouver City Council approved a motion supporting the development of a “just and sustainable food system” for the City of Vancouver. Since the motion, the City’s commitment to food policy has included an eight month consultation process; approval of a Food Action Plan; hiring two dedicated food policy staff; facilitation of a number of food-related initiatives including community gardens, fruit trees, and edible landscaping; project collaborations with a range of partners; and the election of the Vancouver Food Policy Council.

But what prompted all the above activity, what exactly is food policy, and why are increasing numbers of cities recognizing it as a legitimate issue for local governments to address?

What is food policy?

Food policy is an area of municipal planning and policymaking that engages individuals and organizations from all aspects of the food system to consider how the production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and waste management of food impacts our lives and our neigh-

borhoods. Food policy initiatives typically focus on urban agriculture, community gardens, farmers markets, emergency food distribution, food retail access, local food economies, and management of organic waste.

Over recent decades, unprecedented changes in the global food system have led to a growing interest in the ways that improvements to local food systems can support our health, communities, economy, and environment. Concerns stem from a number of issues including declining health and nutrition, increased food bank use in Canada, loss of agricultural lands, and growing distances between producer and consumer. The result is a growing recognition that we are all affected by decisions related to the food system, particularly in cities where the majority of Canadians live.

While a number of decisions related to the food system may be outside of the jurisdiction of local governments, a surprising number of food-related issues fall within local government mandates, including land use decisions, grocery store access, and organic waste. In many cases, food policy is a matter of local governments providing

better facilitation and coordination for activities that are already supported.

Like sustainability, food policy is cross-cutting in nature. As such, food policy initiatives typically result in multiple benefits—social, environmental, and economic—and creative solutions to urban challenges. Food decisions can help determine whether:

- Opportunities to grow food in the city are supported and encouraged;
- A city's most vulnerable populations have access to nutritious and affordable food;
- Food shops and restaurants that cater to multi-cultural tastes;
- Neighbourhoods have grocery stores or farmers markets close by;
- A city's streetscapes feature compact, walkable neighbourhoods that include vibrant outdoor cafés and local food retailers;
- Food-related community-building opportunities are supported and facilitated;
- The local food economy is supported;
- Food packaging and food waste destined for the landfill is diverted to make compost.

Food Policy in Canadian Cities

Vancouver is neither the first nor only Canadian city to integrate food-related issues into its policymaking and planning activities. A growing number of Canadian cities including Kamloops, Merritt, Regina, Toronto, and Montréal also have municipally-endorsed food policies, food-related initiatives and/or food policy councils in place. Vancouver continues to learn a great deal from

continued on page 16

FOOD POLICY IN OTHER CANADIAN CITIES

Kamloops, BC and Merritt, BC: On September 26, 2000, the City of Merritt became the first municipality in B.C. to adopt a food policy statement. The four principals of the statement are:

- Safe and nutritious food is available within the region for all residents
- Access to the safe and nutritious food is not limited by economic status, location, or other factors beyond a resident's control;
- There is a local and regional agriculture and food production system which supplies wholesome food to the region's residents on a sustainable basis;
- All residents have the information and skills to achieve nutritional well-being.

Kamloops has since adopted similar policy principles into its municipal Social Plan.

Montréal, PQ: The City of Montréal has a very extensive and well-supported community gardening program. Metro Montréal includes 15 municipalities that support approximately 100 community gardens. The program is administered by the Department of Culture, Sports, Leisure and Social Development in cooperation with other municipal departments and voluntary gardening organizations. The city provides the land, the equipment, and the materials necessary for the program to function efficiently. It also repairs the equipment, provides water, collects garden refuse, and offers the expertise of horticultural animators as resource personnel.

Regina, SK: The City of Regina Social Development Department, in partnership with Social Services, the Regina & District Food Bank, and REACH, manage and operate the Regina Food Security Project. The project uses the food security model that promotes access to quality and stable food supply.

Toronto, ON: The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) has been instrumental in putting food policy development on the municipal agenda in Toronto. TFPC has produced a ground-breaking series of 15 discussion papers on various elements of a food systems approach to public health policy. Paper topics include "reducing urban hunger," "health and the environment," "commercial food production" and "food security and urban planning."

continued from page 15

the experiences of those cities whose leadership in food policy helped pave the way for Vancouver's evolving food policy successes.

Recent years have seen more coordinated approaches to food policy development in local governments including formalized food charters, pilot projects and food policy councils.

Food Policy Initiatives in Vancouver following the Council Motion in July 2003

Since the approval of the Food Action Plan in December 2003, progress has been made on a number of fronts, including social, environmental and economic sustainability; community development; and environmental health. Much of the progress can be attributed to the concerted efforts of the Vancouver Food Policy Council. All twenty seats of the Food Policy Council are currently filled by a cross-section of highly qualified members of Vancouver's food and agricultural community, including nutritionists, food wholesalers and distributors, food retailers and grocers, non-profit organizations, and academics.

The primary goal of a Food Policy Council is to examine the operation of a local food system and provide ideas and policy recommendations for how it can be improved. The Vancouver Food Policy Council has a mandate make policy recommendations to the City that will promote a sustainable food system. The priorities identified by the Food Policy Council include:

- A Food Charter for the City of Vancouver;
- Strategies to increase access to groceries for residents of Vancouver;
- A coordinated effort to reduce food waste and

redirect food destined for land-fill;

- Review of the potential of an institutional purchasing policy for public facilities.

It is important to note that these initiatives are in early development stages.

In addition to the work of the Food Policy Council, the Food Policy staff team has a number of issues and projects underway. Two examples are outlined below.

1. Researching the Local Food System

Funded by Western Economic Diversification, and completed by a consortium of researchers called Forum of Research Connections (FORC), a food assessment of the City of Vancouver with a focus on the Downtown Eastside is nearing completion. The mandate of the assessment was to identify specific neighbourhoods and populations that are more vulnerable to food insecurity; analyze the food retail sector for factors including access, nutritional quality and affordability; and recommend social enterprise activities that might strengthen access to nutritious food, provide skills training, and present community development opportunities. The final research report will be available by Fall 2005. The findings will inform the continued work of the Vancouver Food Policy Council, Food Policy Staff Team, and a range of community organizations.

2. Increasing opportunities for Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture has been identified as a priority area for Vancouver's food policy work. Urban agriculture initiatives include community gar-

dens, edible landscaping, roof top gardens, and public orchards. Increased support and opportunities to grow food in urban environments yields a range of benefits. Community gardens provide an opportunity for healthy, outdoor recreation in a social setting. Educational sites can also be established in gardens for school children and those interested in the biology of food and habitats. Gardeners of all ages get the opportunity to share plants, stories, and knowledge. Residents can host harvest parties, seed swaps, and community events in these gardens, which would build knowledge and friendship between gardeners and non-gardeners alike. Community gardening is a community development tool as well as a way of improving food security.

Currently the City of Vancouver has 17 community gardens on Park and City property. In order to respond to the growing number of citizens who would like to grow their own food in the city, the Food Policy Staff Team is collaborating with the Park Board in their review of Park Board Community Garden policy. It is anticipated that this work will help to inform the creation of a plan and policy framework for community gardens that are on non-park property. The Food Policy Team is also working with the Park Board to support planting fruit trees on park property. Education programs for the maintenance and pruning of public orchards are under consideration. Further, public education on the importance of urban pollinators, such as honeybees, are also a possibility.

The growth of food in urban areas provides multiple avenues to link citizens with the



processes of nature. Urban agriculture has also been identified as a priority in the South East False Creek neighbourhood, and is reflected in the Official Development Plan.

The Future of Food Policy in Canadian Cities

As Vancouver and other Canadian cities continue to develop food policy initiatives, our collective success will depend on a commitment to collaborative approaches to food system issues, particularly where local government and community groups are concerned. Although challenges remain, there are promising indications of a growing enthusiasm for working together on food-related goals. After all, as Wayne Roberts, Coordinator of the Toronto Food Policy Council describes it: “The way to a city’s heart is through its stomach.” ■

Shannon Bradley and Wendy Mendes are Food Systems Planners for the City of Vancouver. For more information on food policy in Vancouver, including the Vancouver Food Policy Council, please visit:
www.vancouver.ca/foodpolicy