

Summary of the Toronto Food Strategy Consultation and Engagement

“What We Heard”

June 2010



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In February 2010, the Toronto Board of Health endorsed “Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto”. The report identified a range of health, social and environmental problems related to food and called for the City of Toronto to use its food-related powers to champion a healthier and more sustainable food system.

Food Connections served as the basis for a broad and inclusive consultation and engagement process on food issues beginning in spring 2010. This report provides a summary of the consultation process and the major themes that we heard.

Beyond Traditional Consultation

The goal of our discussions was more than getting feedback on the Food Connections consultation report. We also wanted to create opportunities to engage and energize residents in all kinds of food system issues, learn about community-based initiatives, document their successes and identify barriers and opportunities related to the City’s food-related powers. In other words, rather than just informing residents of the ideas proposed in the Food Connections report, we sought to gather and share information, discuss issues, engage residents in solutions and build new partnerships.

We invited residents to hold discussions in their communities (as opposed to coming to City Hall or a centralized town hall format) by encouraging them to design their discussions around the food initiatives and concerns in their neighbourhoods. We provided specific support to communities that are often underrepresented in consultations, such as Aboriginal communities, newcomers, seniors, women’s groups, people living with AIDS and persons with disabilities.

“This discussion was an eye opener for everybody. ... Regardless of the variations in the opinions offered by various participants there was still a sense of integrity and unity. It was an excellent and valuable learning experience...was a unified expression by everyone.”

-Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, TNO

To help groups share their stories and achievements more broadly, with the assistance of United Way, the Centre for Digital Storytelling helped groups create videos about food initiatives in their communities. The “Toronto Food Stories” videos can be viewed online at the Food Connections website (toronto.ca/foodconnections). Our website also offers a discussion forum where anyone can submit ideas, questions or comments.

Staff heard from more than 60 groups and approximately 1090 residents across the city. (see map in appendix). An overwhelming majority were women. Everyone is engaged in food whether or not they have taken the time to reflect on food issues. So people from all walks of life shared stories and discussed the food issues in their community.

“...more than 200 people gathered in Grenoble P.S. to talk about food issues and the Toronto Food Strategy. Many came with written answers to the 4 questions and the discussion was overwhelming. The majority of the participants were women.”

– Flemington Park Parent Association

The Toronto Food Policy Council assisted by organizing discussions on key themes, including urban agriculture, small green business, poverty and the environment, as well as specific sessions for youth, academics and chefs/food artisans.

Staff developed a four page summary document and consultation guide with sample discussion questions to help guide the community discussions although groups were encouraged to focus on relevant issues in their neighbourhoods. For example, the Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO) focused specifically on the food issues faced by people with disabilities.

Many consultations, including the ones sponsored by the Toronto Food Policy Council, began with a formal presentation of key themes followed by general discussion and questions. Other groups used the opportunity to be creative. For example, an ESL instructor used the discussion to not only find out students’ perspectives but to help them learn new English vocabulary. Jane Finch Action Against Poverty started their discussion with skits and a rap. The Lawrence Heights Friday Night Café organized “food justice bingo” and the Kingston Galloway/Orton Park Community Speaks used a food oriented ice-breaker.

A tremendous amount of information was collected from the participants who were clearly energized and engaged throughout the process, sharing their thoughts, dreams and hopes for a better food system.

“Given how new food systems ideas were to the group facilitators, it would have been preferable to provide these community leaders with translated materials to use with newcomers or other ESL participants. Helping to make concepts specifically accessible to newcomers and ESL participants would be an invaluable next step.”

– Suggestion from Facilitator Training Session, North York Community House

We also spoke to several food industry associations. They stressed the work they do on behalf of their members to advocate for initiatives that advance both the health of consumers and the prosperity of their industry. They stressed that they work on a broad range of food issues such as nutrition education, product reformulation, food waste and packaging. They indicated that they would like to participate in the continued development of the Food Strategy.

What We Heard – Major Themes

Participants identified many issues but the affordability of healthy food and access to food stores emerged as overarching themes across the city. Other themes included: the specific needs of newcomers adjusting to a new food system, a range of food safety and quality issues, concern about lack of basic food skills among young people, children's poor eating habits, the potential for growing food in the city, the poor quality of food available through food banks and creating small food business opportunities. We heard strongly from residents that everyone, regardless of household income, should be able to readily and easily access healthy food. Many residents expressed frustration about the lack of clear information and resources to implement food initiatives in their own communities. Most see a role for governments in facilitating community food solutions. Some participants expressed concern about the state of local agriculture, the challenges of earning an adequate income from farming, and the loss of prime farmland through urban development.

Affordability of Fresh and Healthy Food

For a majority of communities involved in the consultation, the affordability of fresh and healthy food is a key issue. Many residents, particularly those on fixed incomes, told us that their income is insufficient to maintain a healthy diet, even when they shop in the most economical and creative ways. They explained that after paying fixed expenses such as rent and transportation, they had little money left over and were obliged to stretch their food budget by purchasing less expensive and often less healthy food. At one meeting, the organizers surveyed residents about the food that they wished they could buy. Almost all of the 37 respondents indicated fruit and vegetables, and meat to a lesser extent. Many residents in low income neighbourhoods believe that food prices are higher in their communities. They referred to the February 2009 Heart and Stroke Foundation study that found supermarket prices in Jane and Finch were higher than in Thornhill and Scarborough.

“I think many Canadians can afford the basic food, but to buy healthy food is a different story.”

-Participant, Centre for Information and Community Services (CICS), Scarborough

Some communities expressed concern about the impact of the elimination of the Special Diet Allowance. Others talked about the additional costs of purchasing food that is culturally appropriate or that meets their religious requirements. And many told us that they wished they could afford to purchase organic food because it is better quality.

Residents spoke about the need for higher minimum wages, social assistance rates and other supports so that all residents, including the working poor and people on social assistance are able to live a dignified life (e.g. housing supplements, childcare subsidy, Ontario Child benefits, nutrition allowance, income supplements for medical conditions, etc.)

“I would like to be a good example of nutritious eating for my children, but being a good example is sometimes more expensive than I can afford.”

-Participant, Stonegate Community, South Etobicoke

Distance to Food Stores

Many residents, especially those outside the downtown core, told us that they had to travel outside of their neighbourhood to shop. Many took transit and talked about the challenges of shopping with children, transferring buses, and returning home with many shopping bags. Others explained that they would like to be able to shop at several stores to get the best prices and quality or to purchase food that is culturally appropriate or that met their religious requirements, but couldn't afford the transit costs of going to multiple locations.

“I go to get groceries by bus because I cannot drive. Each time I can only carry so much grocery. When I add up the cost of taking the buses, I think I have spent more money on bus trips than on food.”

-Participant, Agincourt Community Services Association

Residents in communities that had Good Food Markets but didn't have local supermarkets, spoke about the convenience of a local fresh food market, but wished that their other groceries were available closer to home.

We heard about the challenges that seniors face when food stores are not a walkable distance. The inability to acquire essentials, such as food, can contribute to seniors being unable to continue to live in their homes independently. At one community meeting of about 80 seniors, one quarter relied on their children to get to and from food stores. Others had formed shopping clubs where for a small fee, one person with a car drives a small group to and from the supermarket.

We heard stories about neighbourhood supermarkets or food stores that had closed. Some eventually reopened under new names and others converted to pharmacies or other uses. One Councillor told us about a small supermarket that closed and how nearby residents, mostly seniors without cars, must now go twice the distance to shop. He recently received notice that a second supermarket in his ward will close.

Generally, residents talked about the need for walkable, affordable food stores and ways to make shopping for food easier so that seniors can continue to live in their homes. Others talked about the need for programs for isolated seniors such as congregate dining and trucks that sell fresh fruit and vegetables.

Newcomers – Adjusting to a New Food System

Newcomers reported that they faced immense challenges in their first years as they adapted their food skills to living in Toronto. In their countries of origin, many were accustomed to walkable neighbourhood food stores or markets, shopping each day for fresh produce, knowing the vendors or shopkeepers and having family gardens. They talked about the difficult adjustment to planning and shopping for a week of meals at a time and the anonymity of the shopping experience in Canada.

“In my country, I shopped every day. Markets and shops were everywhere and sometimes vendors came to my house.”

-Resident, Greenest City ESL/Literacy class, Parkdale

For many newcomer families, in Canada, the cooking responsibility is no longer shared with extended family members and many talked about the difficulty of assuming the entire responsibility of preparing food.

At the same time, in addition to their household responsibilities, both parents are often working and there are few opportunities to devote the customary time to preparing meals. For many, this is compounded by a lower standard of living.

Many commented that there was more unhealthy food advertising and processed foods in Canada than in their country of origin. They expressed concern about what their children are eating outside of the home and some found it difficult to influence their children's choices. Even at home, many children prefer to have 'Canadian' food such as pizza. A number of participants told us that their children were asking for the packaged and processed sweets, soft drinks and snacks that other children eat at school.

Some newcomer parents got advice from friends or participated in a Peer Nutrition Program but many talked about the need for a more systematic approach as part of newcomer settlement services to help them adapt their food skills to the Canadian context, including: cooking healthy food on a budget; shopping once a week; responding to children's requests for "Canadian" food and unhealthy food; food safety; preparing healthy and acceptable school lunches; adapting recipes; reading labels and understanding expiry dates.

The Food Skills and Diets of Children and Youth

We heard a lot of concern about children's food choices. Parents told us that they try to serve healthy food at home, but worried about the food their children are eating at school and outside the home. Many linked children's poor food choices to advertising on television. Some parents and youth told us that eating together as a family is less common due to the time pressures of multiple jobs.

"They should put a tomato plant in the front hall so that kids can see it grow as they come into school each morning. Most kids don't have a clue".

-Student, Westview Collegiate Institute

Many parents expressed concern that youth don't have the cooking skills that they will need as parents to feed their families.

They told us that children should be learning food skills at school to reinforce what they are hearing from their parents. Many were aware of the healthy breakfast, snack and lunch programs that are offered in some schools and suggested that all schools should serve should offer these programs and have healthier food in school cafeterias.

"As soon as we saw that movie Super Size Me, we started to look for healthier alternatives, but there are no healthier alternatives in the mall."

-Youth participant, Afri-Can Food Basket, Lawrence Heights

Youth told us that while their families don't eat together often, they have fond memories of family meals. They said that the food at those meals was an important part of their cultural identity. At the same time, they told us that there is a certain status in eating fast food and that it helped them feel included and valued by their friends, particularly at lunch time at school. Some youth told us that they want to learn to cook healthy foods and learn gardening skills. Several told us stories about the excitement of participating in food gardens at their school, watching cooking shows and learning to cook.

We also heard about innovative culinary programs at some secondary schools. With help from their teachers, students help run the cafeteria, prepare and sell food to fellow students. Some schools cater for community events and others run bakeries that specialize in wedding cakes.

“Get kids involved in the process....plan school trips to Ontario farms so that farmers can teach children about where food comes from and how it is made.”

-Participant, Women's Habitat of Etobicoke

Most of the youth reports called for the expansion of creative and fun food programming to support youth in developing food knowledge and skills. For example, a number of youth expressed interest in learning to garden and requested training, mentorship and learning opportunities in food animation (e.g. organizing, planting and maintaining a garden) to become more involved in neighbourhood food security. Youth also told us that seniors in the community would also be a great resource to transfer food skills to the younger generation.

“I think it would be really cool to have a program that runs like every week to help kids learn how to eat healthier but not lose the foods that they like to eat.”

-Youth participant, Seed to Table in partnership with East Scarborough Storefront

Food Safety and Quality Issues

Many participants are anxious about the quality of their food and about how to make the best choices. They spoke about the relationship between price and quality: less expensive food is generally poorer quality and the most affordable fruits and vegetables are often too ripe and don't last very long. Many spoke about the need for more information but find labels and media reports confusing. Some spoke about their concern about the use of pesticides to grow food, additives in processed foods and hormones in meat and poultry.

“One resident commented that one day you can turn on your TV and you hear that a certain food is beneficial to your health and the next day the experts will tell you that it is not.”

-Lotherton Pathway Action for Neighbourhood Change

Food Banks

A significant number of people expressed concern about the quality of food provided at food banks and the need for more fresh produce and foods that are culturally appropriate and/ or meet their religious requirements. Many food banks told us that they would like to provide a range of services and a wider selection of food but are limited by their funding and what is donated.

A number of community organizations told us they were inspired by The STOP and other multi-service agencies that combine charitable food distribution with other services. They told us that problems of food access and security are often related to other issues and that the multi-service model helps residents avoid the stigma associated with food banks while acquiring skills and access to healthy food.

In several communities we heard concern about the practice of asking for identification at food banks and that it prevents people without status from using food banks.

Excitement about Community Food Solutions

In addition to concerns there was also excitement and interest in creating community food solutions, including growing and cooking food for consumption and sale in their neighbourhoods, purchasing food from local farmers and Good Food markets, starting small food business initiatives and enhancing access to quality, affordable food stores.

In many communities, residents shared stories about the ways that food activities have helped them meet their neighbours and become active in their communities.

“All of them are agreed that through this gardening project they got to know each other... are feeling great that they have a garden in their community. There are some other places near this garden which are vacant...maybe the City can take step in so we can do more gardening in these places”

- South Asian Womens Rights Organization (SAWRO)

We heard about the history of food activities in Toronto’s neighbourhoods. For example: in Kingston Galloway/Orton Park, the Festival Market (Good Food market) led to a garden, catering training, and to a local food strategy; in Lawrence Heights, having a Community Food Security Coordinator in the community centre led to multiple community gardens, a Good Food market and a bake oven; and in Mount Dennis, the community kitchen led to gardens and a network of community kitchens.

“A Mohawk author links gardening to promote mental health; a lot can be gained from gardening than just the food that’s being grown, such as, knowledge of the land, physical exercise and emotional well being (connecting to the land), transfer of knowledge”.

- Participant, Aboriginal Peer Nutrition Program

Many groups talked about the importance of having community space to grow their favourite fresh fruits and vegetables, get a little exercise, meet their neighbours and share the harvest with family and neighbours.

Food Small Business and Food Employment

Some participants spoke about using their food skills to earn additional income or start food businesses. We learned about several examples of innovative partnerships to create community-based food catering companies and to sell backyard produce. Others want to use school and park facilities and open space to start programs that teach food and employment skills.

“They should have markets in front of subways, like in Montreal.”
-Participant, People with Aids (PWA)

A number of participants, especially youth and newcomers, told us that they want to access food-related employment, but the food handler certification course is too expensive.

Some young people told us that there are a lack of structures and opportunities to support them to get employment in the food sector and cited the now ended YMCA Youth Eco-Internship Program as an effective model for connecting young people with real-world employment opportunities.

“The City can facilitate the start-up experience of young, social entrepreneurs – cut through all of the permits, regulations and other hurdles.”
- Participant, Toronto Food Policy Council, small food business consultation

The State of Local Agriculture

Farm organizations told us that the agricultural sector needs to be profitable to attract new farmers and maintain existing farms. They spoke about the need for agricultural policies that are more oriented to the specific needs of the GTA and Southern Ontario; provide incentives for ecological preservation; help farmers and processors connect with niche markets such as culturally diverse fruit and vegetables; support a diverse farm sector (large, medium and small producers and processors); and renew the fruit, vegetable and meat processing sector. Farm organizations also told us that the City of Toronto can support farmers by participating in the anticipated Regional Food Strategy and by expanding the local procurement program.

“I remember as a child that farmers were able to sell their produce going up and down the streets in their trucks and stopping at every block.”
- Online comment, www.toronto.ca/foodconnections

Some residents spoke about the state of local agriculture and the expansion of cities into farmland. Others expressed concern about the low wages and working conditions of farm labourers and the reliance on migrant workers, many of whom have temporary work permits.

Growing Food in the City

Many residents spoke about the potential for growing food in the city and that programs should be developed to support backyard and vacant land planting, container gardening on balconies, fruit and nut trees and using edible plants instead of only ornamental plants

in parks. They told us that the city should permit the sale of locally grown food as widely as possible, increase the resources available for community and allotment gardens and explore opportunities for the City and community to produce high quality compost.

Some people talked about the need to encourage commercial urban agriculture in the city through changes to planning and zoning to create access to land and rooftop space. To make it viable they pointed to the need for coordination, learning opportunities and incentives for urban farmers. Others talked about the missed potential for using the city's food waste creatively to produce high quality compost, and some talked about the benefits of legalizing backyard chickens and encouraging beekeeping.

“We need to create several St Lawrence Markets around the city, like Montreal which has three markets, not one.”

– Participant, community meeting organized by the North York Local Health Committee

The Role of the City

Residents told us that it should be easy to create food activities in their communities. Instead, they find that resources are limited and policies are restrictive, unclear or don't exist. They talked about the need for simple but reliable explanations of how to access services and resources and understand how to meet reasonable requirements. Some asked for this information to be in multiple forms – print and video, and the many languages spoken in the city.

To accelerate City support for food activities, some suggested a staff position such as a food facilitator or ombudsman to help residents sort through the City bureaucracy.

“Put the community first...programs that are run by community members, that make a difference in the community, that provide skills to youth... anything to make a better life for the community.”

- Participant, Gordonridge Place, South Scarborough

Many spoke about the important role that City Planning can play in encouraging development that is food friendly. There was considerable support for the idea that food stores should be located at major transit intersections so that transit users could shop on the way home. Some felt that there should be less regulation, more public education and more community based decision making.

Conclusion

Overall, participants in the consultation and engagement process were excited about Toronto developing a Food Strategy and pleased with the directions in the Food Connections report. However, many people felt that a municipal Food Strategy requires ongoing communication and collaboration between communities, grassroots organizations, food activists, City staff and other levels of government. This is essential to break down silos and transform our food landscape into a more vibrant, equitable and sustainable one. Participants were clear that they want the City to enable and support community action on a range of social, environmental and health problems related to food in Toronto.

The comments reflected in the “What We Heard” report helped inform the recommendations in the Cultivating Food Connections report and provide a foundation on which to build further community engagement and input into priority setting as we enter the next phase of the Toronto Food Strategy.

“How many places are there in Finch to buy junk food and how many places are there to buy cheap healthy food? Junk food altho it tastes good gives us none of the ‘good stuff’ in fact most of the time it takes away our ‘good stuff’. People say it is our fault cos we have the choice to eat right or not but when you have little access to good food and loads of access to bad food chances are you’re gonna end up addicted to the bad stuff...this is a form of food insecurity.”

-From rap – No Man’s Land, Jane Finch Action Against Poverty

Toronto Food Strategy Community Consultation and Engagement Participants

1. Adanac All Seasons Community Food Market and Community Garden
2. Afri-Can FoodBasket
3. Agincourt Community Services Association
4. Amlakawi Beteseb Institute of Natural Sciences & Afri-Caribbean Arts
5. Black Health Network – Cancer Care Ontario
6. Black Creek Food Security Work Group
7. Branson Westminster Food Action Team
8. Cabbagetown Community Salon and Dinner Group
9. Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors
10. Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association
11. Centre for Information and Community Services
12. Councillor Mihevc Community Forum
13. Councillor Fillion Community Forum
14. Etobicoke Local Health Committee
15. Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO)
16. Eglinton East-Kennedy Park ANC
17. Flemington Park Parent Association
18. Food and Consumer Products of Canada
19. Food Action Community Engagement Group (TCHC tenant group)
20. FoodShare staff
21. Gordonridge Place & One Love Garden, Southwest Scarborough
22. Greenest City – ESL Class
23. GTA Agricultural Action Committee
24. Jane Finch Action Against Poverty
25. Lawrence Heights Community Food Forum – Friday Night Cafe
26. Lotherton Community ANC
27. Malvern Action For Neighbourhood Change (ANC) Steering Committee
28. Metcalf Foundation – Food Policy Paper authors
29. Mount Dennis ANC
30. North York Harvest Food Bank staff
31. North York Harvest Food Bank Annual General Meeting with representatives from participating food banks
32. North York Local Health Committee
33. North York Community House Women’s and Family Program
34. Orton Park / Kingston Galloway residents – Community Speaks
35. PACT Urban Peace Program – West Humber students
36. Parkdale Golden Age Foundation
37. People Living with AIDS Foundation
38. Riverdale community residents – Ralph Thornton Centre
39. Ryerson University. Food for Thought student meeting
40. Scarborough Local Health Committee
41. Scarborough Village ANC
42. Seed to Table / East Scarborough Storefront
43. Somali Women and Children's Support Network
44. Somali Youth Association of Toronto
45. South Asian Women's Rights Organization (SAWRO)
46. South West Scarborough Food Strategy Project
47. Stonegate Community, South Etobicoke
48. Tamil Senior Group – Malvern Community Centre
49. Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office
50. Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre
51. Toronto Local Health Committee
52. Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC)
53. Toronto Youth Food Policy Council
54. TFPC sponsored meeting on poverty
55. TFPC sponsored meeting with chefs/food artisans
56. TFPC sponsored meeting on the environment
57. TFPC sponsored meeting on small green business
58. TFPC sponsored meeting with academics
59. Toronto Urban Gardeners (TUG)
60. Trinity St Paul’s Church / Harbord Residents Association
61. Toronto Farmers Market managers
62. Women's Habitat of Etobicoke

Locations of Community Consultations



25 Food Connections to the City of Toronto

