

VANCOUVER FOOD CHARTER: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

January 2007

As prepared by the Vancouver Food Policy Council

Municipal Food Charters

Canadian governments are responding to the growing need for food systems planning and integrated food policy development. One example is municipal food charters. Food Charters express key values and priorities for developing just and sustainable food systems. Typically, they combine vision statements, principles, and broad action goals pointing towards a coordinated municipal food strategy.

Food charters are most commonly created by food policy councils or other agencies that represent different sectors of the food system. The process of creating a food charter engages individuals and organizations from all aspects of the food system in finding creative solutions to local food challenges. Steps taken to create a just and sustainable food system can create broad cultural, social, economic, environmental, health, and educational benefits for all of society.

Municipal governments in Canada that currently have food charters include: Toronto, Sudbury, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Kamloops, and Merritt. The Saskatoon Health Region recently adopted a Food Charter. Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver, the Capital Regional District (Greater Victoria, BC,) the Province of Manitoba, and the Province of Saskatchewan are currently developing and exploring the adoption of food charters. As well, a proposal was recently presented to the House of Commons to adopt a Canadian Food Charter.

Food policy in Canadian cities

Food policy is a growing area of municipal planning and policymaking that addresses food production, distribution, access, consumption and waste management, and guides how these systems influence our lives and our neighbourhoods. This trend reflects a growing recognition that we are all affected by food decisions, particularly in cities, where the majority of Canadians live. It also represents local governments' acknowledgement of their role in the development of just and sustainable food systems for their citizens.

Municipal food policies typically focus on land use planning, urban agriculture, emergency food distribution, food retail access, community health, waste management, and community economic development. Integrating food decisions into these areas of municipal jurisdiction strengthens a whole system approach in the delivery of services. This can help improve the health of the community, and increase economic and environmental efficiencies. By applying food system best practices to municipal operations, governments can improve energy efficiency, decrease pollution, conserve water, and reduce and redirect garbage. Addressing food-related issues and working together on sustainable urban development initiatives enhances the stability of civil society and creates economic growth and increased employment opportunities.

Food policy in the City of Vancouver

On July 8, 2003, Vancouver City Council approved a motion supporting the development of a just and sustainable food system for the City of Vancouver. A just and sustainable food system is defined as one in which food production, processing, distribution, consumption and recycling of organic waste are integrated to augment environmental, economic, social and nutritional health. To provide leadership in achieving this goal, a Food Policy Task Force was initiated on July 8, 2003. In December 2003, Vancouver City Council approved a Food Action Plan developed by the Food Policy Task Force, and on March 11, 2004, City Council approved the expenditures associated with the Action Plan. Finally, on July 14, 2004, the Food Policy Task Force, as its final act, elected members of Vancouver's first municipally-affiliated Food Policy Council.

The primary goal of the Vancouver Food Policy Council (VFPC) is to examine the operation of our local food system, stimulate and lead a dialogue on food, promote projects in the community, and provide policy ideas and recommendations that enhance a sustainable food system. The VFPC met for the first time in September 2004 and developed a detailed work plan that integrates and builds upon the projects and goals identified in the Food Action Plan. The Vancouver Food Charter, an initiative of the VFPC, is a policy step in that direction.

The Vancouver Food Charter identifies five principles of a just and sustainable food supply:

1. Community Economic Development
2. Ecological Health
3. Social Justice
4. Collaboration and Participation
5. Celebration

1. Community Economic Development

Unprecedented changes in the global food system have led to analyses of the risks of the contemporary food supply and the benefits of strengthening the local food system for community economic development:

- The contemporary food system relies extensively on fossil fuels at every stage of production, processing, distribution/transportation, consumption and waste management. Spiraling food costs and interruptions in food supplies are potential and potent risks.
- Income limitations significantly reduce access to nutritionally adequate and quality food on a regular basis.
- Investing in ways to meet more of our basic food needs from sources closer to home builds a more sustainable and secure food system and strengthens overall economic diversity. The local multiplier from investing in the local food system has a larger and more sustained effect on all sectors of the local and regional economy. Cusgarne Organics in England found that for every unit invested in the local food economy there was a local economic multiplier of 2.59X, versus a return of only 1.4X to the local economy from a unit spent at the supermarket.

2. Ecological Health

We have enjoyed a cheap and reliable food supply that has grown over many decades. This food system, however, is based on an industrial model that is unsustainable.

- Environmental degradation has reduced the ability of the ecosystem to support sustainable food production and ecological biodiversity. Use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides damage the soil and leave environmental residues that threaten species diversity and human health. Antibiotics increase the potential for the development and transmission of resistant pathogens.
- Rapid urbanization is resulting in loss of productive agricultural land and the breakdown of links between urban and rural areas.
- Long distance transport of food consumes fuel and releases pollution into the air. Freight transport is a key source of greenhouse gas emissions, which are a cause of global warming.
- Locally-based food and agriculture policies that support sustainable agriculture and food production enhance efforts to protect land, air and water, conserve open lands, and preserve natural resources.

3. Social Justice

Hunger, food insecurity, and chronic health problems related to both access and lifestyle influences carry an increasing social cost of poverty and an expanding financial burden on our medical system.

- The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) found an estimated 3.7 million or 15% of Canadians are “food-insecure.” (Health Report, May 2005). Provincial trends show annual food bank use increased 16% and children needing emergency food increased 41.7% between 2003 and 2004. The Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society provides food to 25,000 people in need each week. 40% are families and 39% are children. Homelessness doubled in Vancouver and in the region between 2002 and 2005 (City of Vancouver Homeless Action Plan).
- Chronic diseases, such as malnutrition, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, are related to food availability, food access, and food choices. These diseases absorb an increasing amount of our health dollars.
- Childhood obesity has tripled in Canada over the last 25 years, with one in four Canadian children now considered overweight or obese. Diabetes, associated with obesity, is also rising dramatically among children. A disproportionate number of these children come from lower income families (Statistics Canada), where food dollars may be stretched further on cheap foods that derive a majority of their calories from added fats and sugar but do not provide adequate nutrition. Children do not learn when they aren’t getting nutritionally adequate, quality food on a regular basis. Each year, the Vancouver School Board provides daily hot lunch programs to over 9,000 children, or about 15% of the city’s student population. Outside of participation in school meal programs, it is a challenge for many vulnerable children and youth to access nutritious food.

- Addressing unequal access to nutritious food through land use planning, retail food access, urban agriculture, emergency food distribution, and community economic development strengthens municipal food security.
- Positive nutrition messages, along with providing nutritious foods and beverages in cafeterias and vending machines, can support wellness, health and nutrition in the workplace, schools, and other societal venues. (Goldberg, 2006)

4. Collaboration and Partnership

Many levels of government in Canada and beyond are addressing the need for sustainable food systems, and their initiatives provide a policy context for ensuring a sustainable food system for the City of Vancouver. There are opportunities for collaboration and partnership with other levels of government, with business and with groups from civic society to support sustainable agriculture, protect local farmland, create regional food economies, and develop food security programs and health and nutrition promotion strategies that help enhance the health of all Vancouverites.

- *Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD)*: The GVRD's regional growth strategy, *Livable Region Strategic Plan*, (1996) is a framework for regional land use and transportation decisions aimed at maintaining regional livability and protecting the environment in the face of anticipated growth. *Economic Strategy for Agriculture in the Lower Mainland* (2002) encourages the actions, plans and policies necessary to maintain and enhance the viability of agriculture in the Lower Mainland. The GVRD Agriculture Advisory Board (1992) advises the GVRD Board on agricultural issues in the region.
- *Province of British Columbia*: In 1974 the Province established the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and mandated the Provincial Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) to protect our scarce supply of agricultural land. However, there is increasing pressure to exclude parcels of land from the ALR for development purposes. While this is predominantly an issue within regional and provincial jurisdiction, the City of Vancouver recognizes the urgent need to conserve farm land resources as a key piece of a sustainable food system. City Council voted unanimously in 2004 to urge the ALC to reject a proposal to remove nearby farm land from the Agricultural Land Reserve.
- *The Government of Canada*: Canada ratified the UNCESCR (see following section) in 1976. It also enacted Canada's Action Plan for Food Security in 1998, based on the World Food Security Plan endorsed by 187 countries at a World Food Summit in 1996.
- *United Nations (UN)*: The need for just and sustainable food systems is a global need. A range of international initiatives exist that address food justice, food security, and food sustainability in the future. Most notable are the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (UNCSECR), which affirms "the right to food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger", the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which affirms in Article 24 children's rights to the provision of adequate nutritious foods), and in Article 27 (support for parents in providing nutritious food for their children), and the UN Voluntary Guidelines on the progressive realization of the right to food (UNFAO, 2004).

- *Civil society:* BC's community food security movement, including business leaders, is active in all aspects of the food system to address food related issues and improve community food security. Food security organizations include business, neighbourhood, municipal, regional and provincial groups whose actions contribute to food system and food policy development.

5. Celebration

We celebrate Vancouver for its distinctive food-ways, for its unrivalled international cuisine, and for embracing livability and sustainability as key development principles.

- We celebrate the multi-layered social role of food and culture and the diverse food-ways of different ethnic/cultural communities. Food is perhaps the most significant expression of cultural distinctiveness and the most frequent way that different communities enjoy one another's cultures.
- We also celebrate Vancouver's status as a world class city in its variety and excellence of restaurants. It is truly a culinary destination and many of our finest restaurants feature local produce on their menus.
- We celebrate the interdependent bond between rural and urban people and our bond with all living creatures in our absolute dependence on nature for the food, air and water we depend on for life.
- Vancouver is frequently cited as one of the most livable cities in the world. In April 2002, City Council endorsed sustainability as a fundamental approach for all the City's operations and a guiding principle for future development.
- The City of Vancouver already provides and/or supports a wide range of food-related programs and services including: urban agriculture for new neighbourhood developments, the development of farmers markets, community gardens, urban beekeeping, and food trees, and the promotion of composting and recycling of kitchen and yard waste.

More Information:

Email: foodpolicy@vancouver.ca

Web: www.vancouver.ca/foodpolicy