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Urban food strategy unveiled

By ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY
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Board of Health wants people to have better access to quality food

David McKeown is out to change the way you think about food. What you eat, where it comes from, where you buy it and how you consume it.

Toronto's Board of Health is unveiling a wide-ranging food strategy whose broad and lofty goals include creating "food-friendly neighbourhoods," connecting city-dwelling consumers to rural producers and eliminating hunger.

The strategy, which goes before the Board of Health today, is the most ambitious attempt yet by any Canadian city to reform a local food system that simply isn't doing its job when it comes to feeding residents: A higher proportion of families in the Toronto area can't afford to feed themselves properly than in almost any other city in Canada; at the same time, child obesity rates continue to skyrocket; the region's vaunted Greenbelt is witnessing an agricultural exodus as farmers seek out greener, more profitable pastures.

Dr. McKeown, Toronto's medical officer of health, emphasizes it's early days: This strategy is a policy paper only - with a mandate from the Board of Health, the food strategy's backers hope months of consultation will let them bring specific recommendations to city council in June.

One of its models: a patch of ground by a running track outside Sir Sandford Fleming high school in Lawrence Heights.

These 2,700 square metres were transformed last spring from a scrubby vacant lot into a garden plot designed to grow way more than tomatoes and squash.

The garden, created and tended to largely by students, is becoming a community-building hub in one of the city's most neglected neighbourhoods. It gave almost 1,360 kilograms of produce to the North York Harvest last year. Grade 9 geography classes have done work there, alongside Grade 12 biochemistry. An art class is setting up shop, as is a new food and nutrition class. PACT, the community program behind the garden, hopes to expand it to several other schools this year in partnership with the Toronto District School Board.

There's a role for the city in fostering initiatives like this, Dr. McKeown says.

"The food system that we have now, broadly, was developed in the postwar period and was really designed to keep prices low and maximize the amount of food that goes out there. But that food, despite the fact that food prices are relatively low historically, is still not affordable for people who are of low income."

Almost 20 years after the city created one of North America's first food councils, Toronto still has glaring food deserts - areas where there's simply nowhere to buy decent food nearby. That's one obvious area where the city can play an active role, Dr. McKeown says, by using zoning bylaws to encourage grocery stores to set up shop in neighbourhoods that are lacking.

But he sees a much larger role for a municipal government that already spends \$11-million a year on food.

"People usually don't think of municipal governments being big players in food systems. But in fact there's a number of levers that city governments have," he said.

"Food programs, community gardens, communal food education. Those kinds of things can help the city to achieve its objectives in terms of addressing the needs of inner-city communities."

But University of Toronto geography professor Pierre Desrochers argues this overarching food strategy is a "pie in the sky" way of trying to address real needs. If the city wants to tackle poverty, he says, it should look at economic development. Childhood obesity? Bring back home economics and mandatory gym class. But Prof. Desrochers is adamant that a renewed city focus on local food will accomplish neither.

"There are such things as economies of scale in food production," he said. "They want to replace professionalized, large-scale food systems with grassroots-oriented [programs] that won't be able to do it as efficiently. ... You'll end up paying more for your food. How is that helping poor people?"

Taking the lead

Belo Horizonte

The Brazilian city of about two million is arguably the most advanced in the world when it comes to an integrated municipal food strategy, said Ryerson University professor Cecilia Rocha.

It boasts a department devoted to food security and policy, enshrining food security as a right of citizenship. The city's food programs reach more than 800,000 people daily, subsidizing fruit and vegetable sales, providing public-school meal programs and co-ordinating healthy, low-cost meals in restaurants.

London

The British metropolis unveiled its food strategy in 2006, tackling poverty, obesity and the carbon footprint created getting meals onto residents' plates. The plan's eight stages went from primary production (the city would focus on UK agriculture, its strategy vowed) to disposal (by 2016, composting would rule and food-related waste would be reduced). Using city planning to improve access to food was also a priority. The city has attempted to create economic links between urban buyers and farmers elsewhere in the UK and has beefed up its school meals programs.

Vancouver


A 2006 Vancouver Coastal Health three-year action plan was created to address gaps in food security. Goals included adding services to areas outside the notoriously needy, but relatively densely serviced, Downtown Eastside; to enhance residents' ability to grow and cook their own food; enhancing the food economy by supporting local farmers and "increasing the potential for food-related social enterprise."

Toronto

A food strategy going before the city's Board of Health today sets out six goals for revamping the city's food system - to grow food-friendly neighbourhoods, make food part of the city's "green economy;" eliminate hunger in Toronto; better inform residents (through labelling, for example); to connect city-dwellers with rural producers and "embed food system thinking in city government." The board plans to bring concrete recommendations before city council in June.

Anna Mehler Paperny

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