

Smart Cities Project Update

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

That the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- The Nutritious Foods Workstream has an ambitious goal to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods by 50% by 2025 in Guelph-Wellington;
- Since the last [Smart Cities Project Update Report](#) to the Board of Health (May 2022), \$146,500 has been distributed to fund small-scale food access initiatives, expand a fresh food prescription program, encourage conversations about food equity, and build relationships in Wellington County;
- A Food Security Action Plan describing six strategic priorities for the Nutritious Foods Workstream was released in January and will be mobilized through community partners and Action Tables.

Background

Our Food Future – A Smart Cities Initiative

In May of 2019, the City of Guelph, and County of Wellington (Guelph-Wellington) were awarded \$10 million in funding from Infrastructure Canada’s Smart Cities Challenge to create Canada’s first circular food economy. In January of 2020, Guelph-Wellington officially launched Our Food Future which aims to reimagine how our community produces, distributes, sells and consumes food. Rather than a linear take-make-dispose model, Our Food Future intends to create a circular food system that increases access to nutritious foods, recognizes the value of waste, and creates space for businesses to adapt their operations and implement circular practices.¹ Our Food Future’s governance structure includes three workgroups that focus on each pillar of the circular food economy: 1) Nutritious Foods Workstream, 2) Waste Workstream and 3) Business Workstream.

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDG Public Health) was one of many community partners that contributed to and supported Guelph-Wellington’s Smart Cities proposal. Currently, two public health staff specializing in public health nutrition and health promotion are members of the Nutritious Foods Workstream (NFW). WDG Public Health continues to lead workstream activities and oversee the NFW budget.

Nutritious Foods Workstream

The NFW is comprised of various health and social service agencies, municipal staff, academic researchers, and community groups. The workstream’s goal is to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods by 50% by 2025. The workstream recognizes that nutrition plays a major role in growth and development, mental health, and preventing lifestyle-related chronic diseases. It aspires to create a supportive environment where everyone can achieve **food security** – when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.² Using a results-based accountability framework, the NFW agreed to complete a food environment assessment to identify local gaps and opportunities, followed by a community-driven intervention strategy.

May 2022 Board of Health Report

In May of 2022, a [Smart Cities Project Update Report](#) was shared with the Board of Health. The report describes research completed by the Nutritious Foods Workstream to better understand local food security, funding allocated to community-led interventions and the initiation of a Food Security Action Plan for Guelph-Wellington.³

Discussion

Progress Since May 2022

Spark Grant Program

In May of 2022, the Nutritious Foods Workstream launched the Spark Grant Program to fund small-scale food access initiatives that needed financial support to get started or sustain momentum. This funding opportunity allowed participants to publicly socialize their project ideas on Our Food Future's Kitchen Table platform before being short-listed to submit a detailed proposal. Participants were encouraged to share ideas that would increase access to nutritious foods in settings where people live, learn, work or play. A total of \$51,500 was provided to [11 community projects](#) in Guelph-Wellington. Participants received grants between \$2000-\$10,000 in September and have started to launch their projects.

Fresh Food Prescription Program Expansion

In September of 2022, the Nutritious Foods Workstream committed \$30,000 to the Guelph Community Health Centre to expand their Fresh Food Prescription (FFRx) program to health system partners of the Guelph-Wellington Ontario Health Team. The FFRx program is a healthcare-based approach to mitigating the downstream effects of food insecurity. Doctors and healthcare practitioners prescribe fresh food to community members who need it for their health and participants redeem their prescriptions for free fruits and vegetables at The SEED markets or online grocer.⁴ Funding will be used to build capacity and expand the program to additional healthcare providers throughout Guelph-Wellington.

Food Equity and Community Resilience Series

In November of 2022, Toward Common Ground and Our Food Future's Food System Resiliency Table launched "Setting the Table: Gatherings of Food Equity and Community Resilience." Setting the Table is a series of gatherings and discussions co-

created by community members to learn about community resilience, food equity and how the two topics relate. The launch event was hosted at Waverley Drive Public School and featured a free community meal from FEWD (Food Equity with Dignity). The launch event included the first open public meeting of the Food System Resiliency Table and introduced a new microgrant funding opportunity called the Community Fund. The Nutritious Foods Workstream provided \$20,000 through the Community Fund to encourage community members to host events or learning opportunities that build connection and resilience. In January of 2023, a total of 20 participants in Guelph-Wellington received microgrants between \$300-\$1500 to cover the cost of food, supplies, childcare, transportation or gathering space. Future events for the Setting the Table series are being planned with the intention of providing \$15,000 to equity deserving groups or organizations to advance food equity work in the summer of 2023.

Wellington County Food Insecurity Community of Practice

Members of the Nutritious Foods Workstream attend monthly Community of Practice (CoP) meetings hosted by the Centre Wellington Community Foundation for community agencies involved in food insecurity work. Through this network the Nutritious Foods Workstream learned about multiple opportunities for strategic collaborations and provided \$30,000 for food access interventions in Wellington County (e.g., Minto, Wellington North, Centre Wellington, Erin, etc.). In addition, the CoP members identified the need for a communications campaign to increase public awareness about food insecurity and calls to action. NFW staff are leading the development of communications materials (e.g., social media posts, news releases, letters, etc.) for partners to adapt and share in the spring of 2023.

Guelph-Wellington Food Security Action Plan

In January of 2023, the Smart Cities Office released the [Guelph-Wellington Food Security Action Plan](#) created by the Nutritious Foods Workstream. The Action Plan includes background information describing Our Food Future's involvement in food access initiatives to date and identifies strategic priorities moving forward. This document is intended to move action forward, guide the use of remaining intervention funds, and be a tool to leverage for partnerships and funding opportunities. The development of the Action Plan was informed by past research and consultations with key partners. In June of 2022, key partners gathered in facilitated meetings to prioritize actions that will contribute to the goal of food security. During these meetings partners discussed opportunities with momentum and synergy that could be priorities over the

next three years. Through this process, six strategic priorities for future food access initiatives emerged (Figure 1):

1. Food Access and Healthcare: Increased distribution and use of healthy food prescriptions and vouchers by health and social service agencies.
2. Local Food Infrastructure: Increased food infrastructure for food storage, processing, distribution and community building.
3. Building a Circular Food Movement: Increased awareness about the importance, value and right to healthy food for everyone.
4. Integrated Funding Strategy: Coordinated funding strategy that results in reliable funding sources for local food system work to support service delivery and service innovation.
5. Community Food Growing Strategy: Increased public land used for food growing and retail opportunities for growers.
6. Regenerative Agriculture: Increased regenerative practices used in food production, with greater understanding of the value of these ecosystem services.

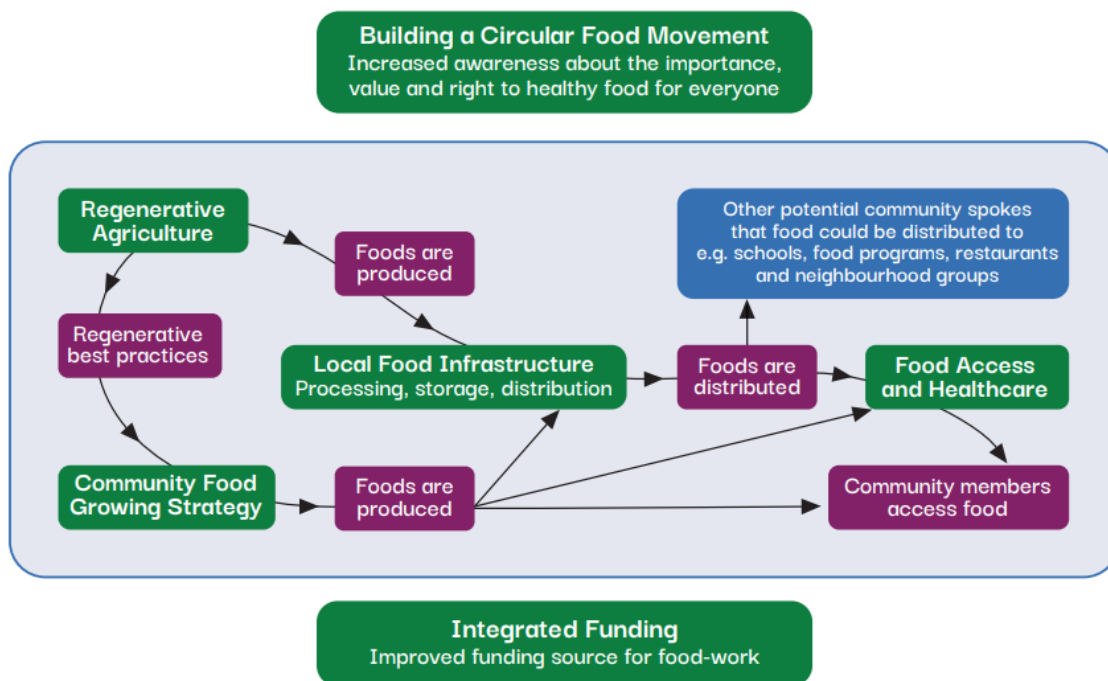


Figure 1: Connections between the six strategic priorities listed in Guelph-Wellington’s Food Security Action Plan.

The Nutritious Foods Workstream believes the six strategic priorities listed in the Action Plan can contribute to achieving food security and set the collective direction for long-term collaborations.

Next Steps

Mobilizing the Action Plan

To ensure successful implementation of the Action Plan, the following next steps are required to assess implementation capacity:

1. Seek continued collaboration between City of Guelph, County of Wellington and various community partners.
2. Establish a new, or revise the existing, Our Food Future governance model.
3. Create facilitated action tables that would identify leads and provide structure for each strategic priority.
4. Seek dedicated resources (e.g., funding, staff, space, etc.) to complete project activities.
5. Align the Strategic Priorities with the work and plans of the Food System Resiliency Table, City of Guelph, and County of Wellington.

Three of the six strategic priorities have dedicated staff and external funding to move project activities forward (i.e., Food Access and Healthcare, Community Food Growing Strategy and Regenerative Agriculture). The remaining three strategic priorities are being mobilized through NFW-led Action Tables and NFW funding (i.e., Integrated Funding, Local Food Infrastructure and Building a Circular Food Movement). The Nutritious Foods Workstream established leads for each strategic priority and continues to meet bi-monthly to provide updates, make connections and track progress.

Impact Reporting

The Smart Cities Office submits quarterly milestone reports to Infrastructure Canada (INFC) to share progress about Our Food Future. The Nutritious Foods Workstream has two key performance indicators (KPI) to track. Through the NFW food environment assessment 10 geographic areas with lower food access were identified. To meet KPI #1, by December 2023 there must be programming in at least 5/10 geographic priorities (i.e., 50% increase). People participating in Our Food Future funded food access initiatives have the option of completing a survey asking about their experience in the program. To meet KPI #2, by December 2023 more than 50% of survey respondents

must agree or strongly agree their access to affordable nutritious foods has improved (i.e., 50% increase). To date there are 43 NFW funded actions to improve food access, in at least 5/10 geographic priority areas and over 50% of surveyed program participants agree or strongly agree they have improved access to affordable nutritious foods.

In February of 2023, the Smart Cities Office presented an annual project update to City Council. Project collaborators delegated and urged Council to consider how to best resource the coordination of food access efforts between City and County councils and the community in 2024 and beyond. City councillors were enthusiastic about project outcomes and showed genuine interest. The Smart Cities Office will continue strategic planning in the spring and summer in hopes of sustaining Our Food Future's momentum. A final annual report describing the impact and culmination of the Smart Cities Initiative will be released by the Smart Cities Office in December of 2023.

Health Equity Implications

Food insecurity is defined as inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.⁵ When money is tight, putting food on the table is a constant struggle and source of stress.⁶ People cope in many ways such as skipping meals, postponing bill payments, borrowing money or cutting their food budget to prioritize other critical expenses like rent, utilities, childcare, etc. Post-secondary students often apply for loans and bursaries, seek different employment opportunities or use credit cards.⁶

People experiencing food insecurity also experience health inequities – they are more likely to report poor general health, adverse mental health outcomes and multiple chronic conditions.^{7,8,9} People particularly at risk for food insecurity include low-income households, households with limited assets (e.g., home ownership, savings, etc.), Indigenous and other racial or cultural groups, female-led lone parent households and households reliant on income supports.¹⁰

As described in the [Nutritious Foods Basket 2022 Board of Health Report](#), rising inflation and housing costs will likely cause food insecurity to get worse. The Nutritious Foods Workstream continues to prioritize equitable food access by funding food access initiatives and participating in community conversations about systems change.

Conclusion

The Nutritious Foods Workstream’s goal is to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods by 50% by 2025 in Guelph-Wellington. Since May of 2022, \$146,500 has been distributed to fund small-scale food access initiatives, expand a fresh food prescription program, encourage conversations about food equity, and build relationships in Wellington County. In January of 2023, the Smart Cities Office released the Guelph-Wellington Food Security Action Plan created by the Nutritious Foods Workstream. The Action Plan describes six strategic priorities that will be mobilized through community partners and NFW-led Action Tables. This document is intended to move action forward, guide the use of remaining intervention funds, and be a tool to leverage for partnerships and funding opportunities.

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Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2023 WDGPH Strategic Directions

- People & Culture:** WDGPH has an organizational culture of engagement, inclusion and agility.
- Partner Relations:** WDGPH collaborates with partners to address priority health issues in the community.
- Health System Change:** WDGPH is positioned to be an agent of change within the broader health sector.

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