

**Getting Curious about Niagara's Food System:
A preliminary exploration of potential opportunities and directions
Executive Summary: May 2013**

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In March and April 2013, Healthy Living Niagara supported a project furthering exploratory efforts into the possibility of a food policy council or other food systems work in Niagara. A consultant was hired to review background information and conduct a number of stakeholder interviews. The purpose of the project was to get curious about the Niagara food system – what is going on and who is doing it, the context and different perspectives, the connections, the key players, the challenges, the opportunities and so forth.

This project was exploratory in nature and should not be considered to be comprehensive or representative of all sectors involved in food systems work in Niagara. It is also important to note that the process represents one individual's interpretation and synthesis of one-to-one qualitative interviews. It does however provide an important starting point to inform further discussion and possible action. The project also identified gaps that could not be addressed within the scope of this project.

The project was completed in three phases.

- 1) **Background data collection and synthesis** – involved completing a preliminary environmental scan of key programs, initiatives, policies, organizations, groups, events, reports and food system champions in Niagara, Ontario, and Canada as well as in the United States and internationally.
- 2) **Stakeholder interviews** – involved arranging and conducting interviews with ten Niagara stakeholders and four provincial/public health stakeholders. The interviewees were identified from background work completed in phase one and in consultation with Region of Niagara Public Health and Healthy Living Niagara staff.
- 3) **Synthesis and reporting** – involved synthesizing the qualitative data collected in the interviews and identifying key themes and directions. The results were presented to representatives of Niagara Region Public Health, Healthy Living Niagara, and Niagara Region Integrated Community Planning on May 7, 2013.

Food Systems Work

Food systems are a complex topic as they not only represent the cycle of growing, distributing, eating and recycling of food but also all the factors that affect this cycle whether it be social systems, culture or economic systems. It is about food being central, food sovereignty and about how food connects us all.

For the purpose of this project the term “food systems work” is used to reflect coordinated efforts of all sectors in working towards achieving local sustainable food systems and community food security. This could include things like the development of a food policy council, communities of practice or food charter. The concept of broad food system work aims to provide a more integrated response to the food problems affecting a community.

Food Sovereignty

Approach where food is viewed as a primary foundation for healthy lives, communities, economies & eco-systems.

Source: Resetting the Table: A Peoples Food Policy for Canada – Executive Summary

Background Data Collection

The scope of this project permitted the identification of some of the key programs, initiatives, policies, organizations, groups, events, reports and food system champions in Niagara, Ontario, and Canada as well as in the United States and internationally. It is important to know what is happening elsewhere because 1) it affects what is possible for Niagara and 2) there is much that can be learned from the efforts of those much further along in food systems work.



Figure 1.1

Recommendations on how to proceed with a more comprehensive data collection strategy were developed within the scope of the project (as detailed in Figure 1.1). This strategy not only represents the type of data to be collected but also outlines an organizational strategy. It is recommended that data collection documents be updated frequently and evolve as food systems work evolves and roles are established. The data collection strategy can be part of a broader community food assessment plan. Appendix A lists some of the key resources identified and reviewed.

Interviews – Niagara

Interviews were completed with ten community stakeholders representing several different sectors and interests. Seven interviews were conducted in-person and three interviews were conducted by phone. The interviews were qualitative resulting in rich discussion and valuable findings. The following table outlines the key findings of the interviews and their potential implications or possible opportunities. It is important to note that this list is not inclusive of all important and valuable findings and contributions.

Findings

- ⇒ Lots of context to appreciate and understand, including different perspectives, several different lenses, understanding what each player “gets out of it,” “food systems” means something different to everybody, and the perceived disconnect between ideals and reality.

Implications / Opportunities

- ⇒ There is a need for key players and lead organization(s) to understand and appreciate the different perspectives.
- ⇒ The “lens” can be an important driving force or a necessary mind-set.
- ⇒ There is a need to progress with a common understanding.

Findings

Implications / Opportunities

| | |
|---|--|
| ⇒ Lots of great food systems work happening in Niagara. ⇒ Desire to celebrate successes. | ⇒ Need to recognize and share what is happening. ⇒ Need to find better ways to celebrate successes. |
| ⇒ There is a need and a readiness for moving food systems work forward in Niagara. | ⇒ Leadership is needed to move food systems work forward in Niagara. |
| ⇒ A process for furthering coordinated food systems work needs to incorporate the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• more talking but talking that is action-oriented and meaningful• to be collaborative and community-driven• to be grounded in reality | ⇒ Leadership or involvement in food systems work needs to incorporate these elements. |
| ⇒ While no local organization was named as an ideal candidate to lead this work, some interviewees indicated that Healthy Living Niagara is well-respected and well-regarded in their ability to bring people together. | ⇒ One or more of Healthy Living Niagara's partners may be well-suited and accepted to play an important role in food systems work. ⇒ Clarity of the link of health to food systems may be needed. |
| ⇒ Niagara is unique and there is a need to do what is best for Niagara. | ⇒ Leadership or involvement in food systems work needs to consider this. |

Interviews – Provincial

Interviews were also completed with representatives from different regions of Ontario. This was a convenience sample selected based on existing connections and knowledge of current efforts. It provided an opportunity to gain expertise and insight from individuals involved extensively in food systems work. All four interviews were conducted by phone. The following table outlines the key findings of the interviews and their potential implications. As with the Niagara stakeholder interviews, it is important to note that this list is not inclusive of all important and valuable findings and contributions.

Findings

Implications

| | |
|---|--|
| ⇒ Patience and time is needed for 1) the process and 2) to build rapport and relationships with all the stakeholders and sectors. ⇒ There does not appear to be one right way of doing food systems work. ⇒ An extensive and well-developed data collection (or community food assessment) process is needed. | ⇒ The value and the success are in the process, therefore, efforts need to be directed towards the process as opposed to a specific direction or output. |
|---|--|

| Findings | Implications |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Being collaborative and engaging all sectors was identified as essential to the process. ⇒ There is a need for common understandings and collective definitions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Leadership or involvement in food systems work needs to incorporate these elements. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ An investment of significant resources is needed including funds, staff time, skilled people, leadership and long-term commitment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Needs to be clarity about whose role it is and what resources are available. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Public Health played an important role in moving food systems work forward in many regions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Needs to be clarity around the role of local organizations. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Regional and Municipal buy-in and support are crucial to success. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Options and readiness for achieving buy-in and support in Niagara need to be explored. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ A change in mindset is often needed to move food systems work forward. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Explore how a change in mindset can be achieved. |



Figure 2.1

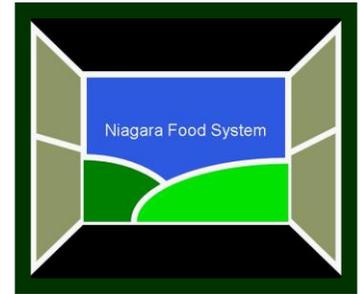
Figure 2.1 demonstrates the overall finding reflecting a need and readiness to move food systems work forward in Niagara. The value and success of moving food systems work forward will be in the process. A process that engages stakeholders in a collaborative, inclusive and meaningful manner. A process with established leadership and committed resources. A process that has acquired the necessary supports of the different stakeholders and ideally government with common understandings and definitions. The process also involves the completion of groundwork whether that be information gathering, understanding the context and different perspectives, or working on preliminary initiatives.

Recommendations

The following recommendations suggest ways to work towards a process that helps further “open the window” to the Niagara food system and the potential for coordinated efforts of all sectors in working towards achieving local sustainable food systems and community food security. This project represented an initial step in “seeing” the Niagara food system and what we can do to help open the window wider.

It's about opening the window on the Niagara food system

- As we learn more about the Niagara food system,
 - as more groundwork is laid,
 - as more questions are asked,
 - as more connections are made,
 - as roles begin to get established,
- the window starts opening wider and we start achieving what we set out to do**



Recommendations:

1. There is a need to identify possible roles for local groups in food systems work and have clarity about these roles. Considerations need to be made for capacity, readiness, desire, and the resources available to dedicate to this type of work. Carving out various roles also requires the ability and openness to embrace and expand a mindset necessary to move this type of work forward. This means a commitment to understanding the context of the Niagara food system, the different perspectives, and looking through lenses other than health and food access.
2. Further discussions are required to better understand the current and planned directions of Niagara Region Integrated Community Planning. These discussions are required to help build that relationship in terms of broad food systems work and to identify potential opportunities for collaboration and partnership. Building and fostering a relationship with other areas of Niagara Region such as Community Services, the Environmental Health division of Public Health, and potentially Public Works around food systems work may also be of benefit.
3. Future food systems work needs to integrate many different sectors. This integration can be accomplished by seeking out opportunities for partnerships, by being information gatherers, by initiating work on resources or projects, by influencing Regional Council to endorse and fiscally support food systems work, by articulating the link to health and why health is a key sector in food systems work, and by continuing to be curious and having a presence at various sector and community events and meetings.
4. A participatory and collaborative community food assessment needs to be completed to identify the specific needs, issues and priorities for Niagara. Additional background information should be collected to identify examples, strategies, tools and promising practices for completing a community food assessment. A forum or visioning day is also recommended as a means to engage and motivate local groups and possible champions as well as be an integral part of a community food assessment. Collaboration and community-driven approaches were a central finding of this project, therefore, it is recommended that a working group be established to direct this work and implement the recommendations.

- Recommendations should be implemented in a manner that is respectful to the findings of this project, including collaboration, meaningful engagement, committed funding and support, being multi-sectoral, commitment to feedback, follow-up and action, and doing what is right for Niagara.

The following diagram (figure 3.1) summarizes the recommended actions, highlighting the need to facilitate a **process** that moves food systems work forward and letting the outputs and directions evolve from the process.

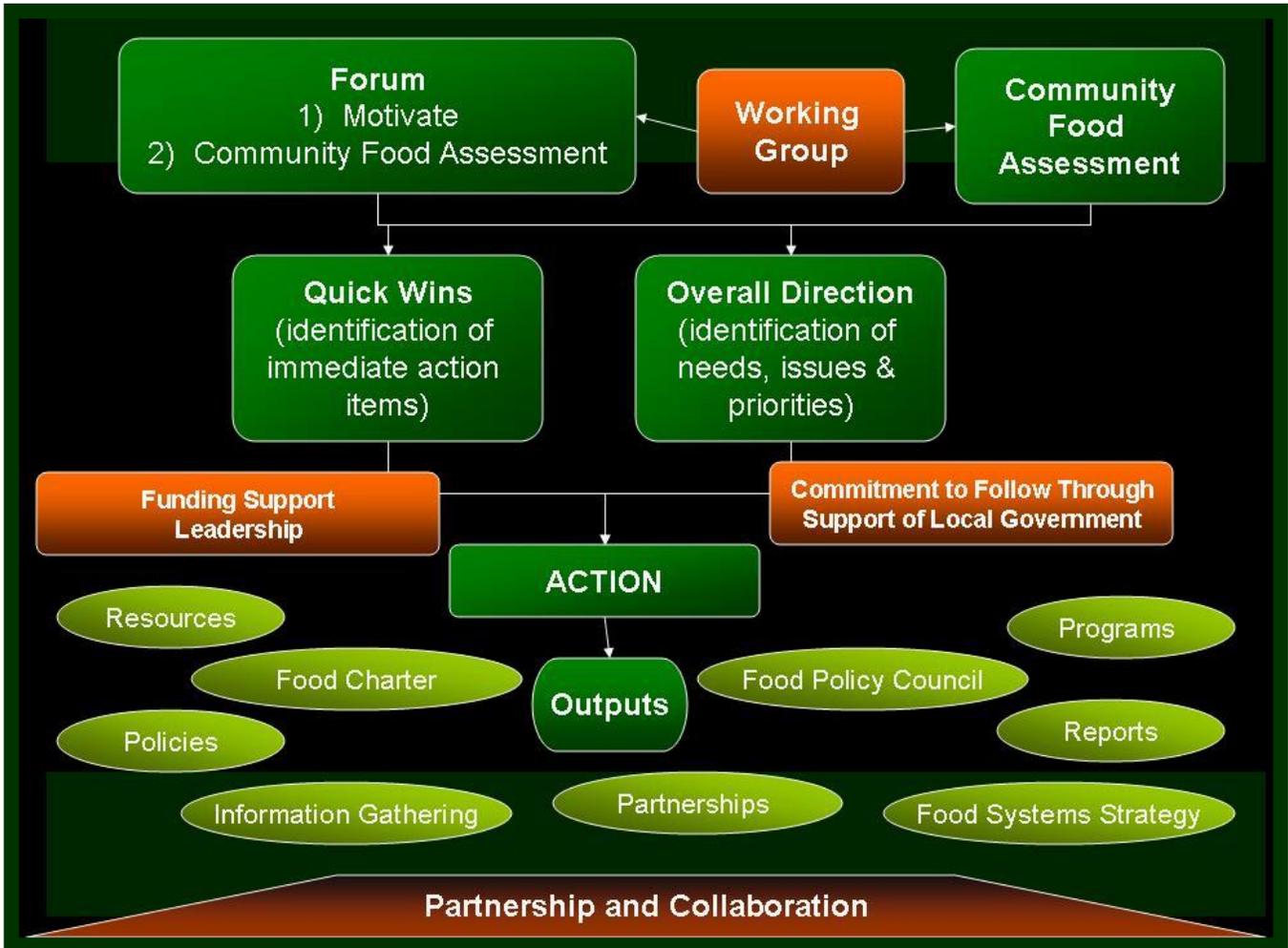


Figure 3.1

Appendix A

The following is a list of key resources and initiatives that were identified and reviewed in Phase One (background data collection and synthesis). This list represents what was presented but does not represent the entirety of what was identified and collected.

- A Review of Food Policy Councils and Recommendations for Niagara (Niagara Region Public Health)
- Understanding Food Systems in Niagara (Niagara Region Public Health)
- Existing Food Policy Councils – Sector Involvement (Niagara Region Public Health)
- Food for All (Niagara Region Public Health)
- Hungry for Health (Niagara Region Public Health)
- Local Food Action Plan (Niagara Region, 2008)
- Discover Niagara's Bounty
- Regional Chair's Agricultural Task Force and Agricultural Sub-Committee with related reports (Agricultural Action Plan, 2006 and Regional Municipality of Niagara Economic Impact Study, 2003 and updated in 2010)
- Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Action Plan 2021
- Greenbelt Act
- Greenbelt Foundation
- Planning for Food Systems in Ontario: A Call to Action (2011)
- Planning Regional Food Systems: A Guide for Municipal Planning and Development in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2009)
- Niagara Prosperity Initiative
- Niagara Poverty Reduction Network
- Creating a Healthier Niagara: Community Recommendations for Action (Healthy Living Niagara)
- Ontario Local Food Bill
- Food Connects Us All (Metcalf Foundation, 2008)
- Sustain Ontario
- Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada
- Framework for a Canadian Food Strategy (Centre for Food in Canada)