

# Policies from the Field

*Promising Food Policies from Other Places*



## ONTARIO: THE CASE FOR A PROVINCIAL FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

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### ABSTRACT

Ontario faces a range of food system challenges, such as unequal access to affordable, healthy, and locally produced food, soaring health care costs due to unhealthy food environments, and economic problems that make it difficult for farmers to make a living growing food. Food policy councils offer an opportunity to address problems by building solutions collaboratively. By bringing together stakeholders to harness the power of good food ideas, food policy councils can create policies, programs, and regulations that foster healthy communities and a strong and vibrant food and farming sector.

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If media reports are any indication of the public's interest, food matters are running a close second to the sports page. The latest facts and figures on obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related health problems, the call for more locally produced food, the desire to protect farmland and enhance regional agricultural capacity, growing awareness about the economic and environmental implications of food and farming, and the heightened risk of food shortages and even famine due to increasing weather variability, use of biofuels, and economic shocks, make food an ever increasing part of the daily human story. Food, with its seemingly limitless reach into every aspect of our lives, is fueling the passions of advocates and non-governmental organizations, undergirding community and regional economies, and seizing the attention of voters and policymakers in a way we have not seen in recent memory.

With so many food system stakeholders, and so much at stake, it is reasonable to ask the question "What is government's role?" In North America, there are currently no cities, states, or provinces that have a "Department of Food." Lacking a unified focus – or a common table around which to work together – food-related functions are often scattered among several separate and generally disconnected governmental functions such as agriculture, health, and education, just to name a few.

And it's not only in the administrative sphere that food unity is lacking. At the highest levels of public policy, decision makers do not have incentive or direction to create a common vision for a food system that serves the public interest. Given this void, private interests of all stripes – for-profit and non-profit, small and large – generally rule the day and leave policymakers' heads spinning with their frequent and sometimes competing requests. Food policy, broadly defined as a set of collective decisions made by governments at all levels that affect how food gets from the farm to the table, becomes a fragmented affair at best.

As the challenges facing the food system grow more complicated, the depth of its problems grows more severe. According to Food Secure Canada:

*Close to two and a half million Canadians are food insecure. Farmers and fishers are going out of business, our natural environment is being pushed to the limit, a quarter of Canadians are considered obese, and we are the only G8 country without a nationally funded school meal program.<sup>i</sup>*

Ontario's relevant food figures generally mirror those of Canada as a whole. Over 412,000 Ontarians are food insecure<sup>ii</sup> and 59% are overweight or obese.<sup>iii</sup> Health related complications resulting from obesity cost the Ontario health system between \$2.2 and \$2.5 billion annually.<sup>iv</sup> Obesity, for instance, directly impacts rates of type 2 diabetes, which costs Ontario \$4.9 billion a year. As stated by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care:

*Today, health care consumes 42 cents of every dollar spent on provincial programs. Without a change in course, health spending would eat up 70 per cent of the provincial budget within 12 years, crowding out our ability to pay for many other important priorities.<sup>v</sup>*

Given the risk that the latter problem poses to future generations of Canadians, research conducted by the Ontario Medical Association found that 65 percent of Ontarians think investments should be made to combat childhood obesity.<sup>vi</sup> In light of the growing public concern with health and diet, to say nothing of food insecurity and the avalanche of interest in a more localized food system, there is a growing sense of urgency that a more engaged and comprehensive response by both informed citizens and the provincial government is required.

Fortunately, there are exciting opportunities to that can be nurtured and built upon to create a healthier, more equitable, financially viable, and ecological food system. For example, Ontario has over half of the best quality agricultural soil in Canada, which supports over 57,000 farms with cash receipts of \$10.3 billion.<sup>vii</sup> With such a sizeable share of both the country's agricultural resource base and its economy, Ontario must protect, enhance, and even expand the capacity of agriculture to meet the nation's food needs through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **What Food Policy Councils Are**

One proven method to engage citizens, stakeholders, and government in shaping food policy, and thus take a more intentional approach to promoting a food system that is sustainable, just, and robust, is through a food policy council. A food policy council is a forum where individuals representing various sectors within a region – from production to consumption – can gather and analyze food system information, make recommendations on program and policy issues, educate the public about food system issues, and foster coordination between various sectors of the food system. Food policy councils typically include farmers, distributors, processors, educators, health care professionals, social service representatives, government staff and elected officials, academics, and others with specialized knowledge of the food system.

By drawing on the knowledge and experience of people from all segments of the province's food system, a food policy council becomes a wealth of information for policy makers. Just as importantly, it creates a multitude of opportunities for connection, learning and growth for all the actors in a food system. Producers, for example, learn more about the opportunity for government procurement, which facilitates the flow of more locally produced food to public institutions. Educators are able to connect with growers, non-profit agencies, and public servants to build healthier food environments in schools. In effect, a food policy council is an efficient means by which to harness the best attributes of democracy while bringing the most diverse and informed expertise to the decision making table.

Food policy councils have been operating in North America since 1982 when the first one was founded in Knoxville, Tennessee. One of the longer operating and by all accounts most effective food policy councils is the Toronto Food Policy Council, which has been operating under the auspices of the City’s health department since the early 1990s. The first state or provincial council formed in Connecticut in 1998 when it was established by an act of the state legislature. Over the past ten years there has been a steady acceleration in the development of food policy councils at the local, regional, and state/provincial/tribal levels. The Community Food Security Coalition conducted food policy council censuses in 2010 and again in 2012. Here are the comparisons:

	<u>2010</u>	<u>2012</u>
Local (city, county, city/county combined)	84	134
Regional	7	25
State/Provincial	20	29
Tribal	0	5
U.S.	100	180
Canadian	11	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>193</b>

A more recent Canadian study – the Municipal/Regional Food Systems and Strategies project – conducted a census of Canadian food policy groups in the spring of 2012 and found a much greater number of food policy councils operating in Canada than was previously known:

	<u>2012</u>
Local (city, county, city/county combined)	29
Regional	29
Provincial	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>

At this time, the only known provincial food policy council is in Nova Scotia. It was formed in 2010 following a province-wide food summit held in late 2009. According to its own statement, the Nova Scotia Food Policy Council “is a citizens’ group working with communities, organizations and governments to develop and implement policies and programs that ensure an equitable, healthy, and sustainable local food system, responsive to the economic, environmental, social and cultural needs of Nova Scotians.”<sup>viii</sup>

### **How Food Policy Councils are Organized**

Food policy councils can be organized in several ways. The most common are ones that are either organized and formally authorized by a government, or ones that are organized independently, either as stand-alone non-profit organizations, or operating under the aegis of an existing non-profit. The 2012 U.S. Food Policy Council census found that about one-third of all councils are formally established within the context of local or state government with the rest falling into various forms of independence.

The 2012 Canadian Food Policy Council census uncovered a much smaller number of food policy councils (9 of 59) created with structural linkages and accountability to a government body, although most food policy councils had some level of informal ties to government. In all cases, the quality of governmental ties, such as participation from elected officials and public servants in food policy council work, the ability to engage with government processes, and access to funding, was strongly correlated with the ability of food policy councils to improve their local/regional food system.

In the United States, state councils formed by government have been established by either executive order of the governor or an act of the legislature. The State of Michigan’s council was created by executive order; Connecticut’s by legislation; New Mexico’s is independent and operates as a program of Farm-to-Table, an established non-profit organization; Iowa’s was created as a stand-alone non-profit corporation by a well organized group of state food advocates. Regardless of the organizational model employed, all councils maintain strong lines of communications between themselves and government agencies, usually both administrative agencies as well as elected officials. At the core of food policy council work is the need to form and nurture working partnerships between the public and private sectors. The quality of the work of food policy councils is often a reflection of the quality of the collaboration between its members.

Council members are appointed by either executive or legislative branches, or selected – and sometimes elected – by those who organized the council, including a specified membership if one exists. Generally, council membership and terms are prescribed by by-laws, statutes, or in some cases, by less formal governing guidelines. The composition of council membership reflects the diversity of the food system, e.g. farmers, food bankers, retailers, local food enthusiasts, non-profit food advocates, and of course, government. In the case of government, it is typical to have participation from agriculture, health,

education, natural resources, economic development, and other agencies whose functions intersect with the food system.

### **What Food Policy Councils Do**

While they are generally guided by the purposes of research and assessment, recommending policy and program actions, and educating themselves, the public, and policymakers, they tend to work on practical opportunities to improve the performance of the food system. Their mission and vision are before them, but they tend to take small, chewable bites of the food system.

According to a 2012 survey of food policy councils conducted by Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, food policy councils in the United States are most likely to take on the following issues: access to food – providing affordable, nutritious food to school children and low-income populations; agriculture – promoting land preservation and urban agriculture; and procurement – seeking policies that direct public institutions to buy locally grown food.

In Connecticut, for instance, research by the food policy council found that the state was losing farmland at a precipitous rate. It inaugurated a statewide education campaign with a one-day forum on the problem and its solutions. As a result of maintaining a focus on the issue over an extended period of time and building a strong coalition of pro-farmland and farming proponents, the council was able to secure a long-term, multi-million dollar commitment on the part of the state to preserving farmland.

In a similar vein, the Connecticut Food Policy Council undertook other educational projects that identified the need for improved agricultural infrastructure. It also worked closely with one of its state agency members, the Department of Transportation, to improve public transit to supermarkets for transit-dependent populations such as senior citizens. With Transportation, the council created a state farm road map that highlighted the locations of hundreds of places where a consumer could find locally produced food. The farmland protection and enhancement effort, the identification of infrastructure improvement opportunities, and the public road map have had a positive impact on the state's agricultural sector to the tune of tens of millions of dollars over the past 10 years.

The New Mexico Food Policy Council, founded in 2004, has developed strong working partnerships with state agencies and key leaders with the state legislature that expanded funding for farm-to-school initiatives and halted the sale of sugary soft drinks in schools. More recently it has secured wide-spread support for new public procurement regulations that would increase the percentage of current public expenditures on food in order to have a more significant economic impact on the state's agricultural sector.

Michigan and Illinois' food policy councils have been notable for the work they have done to link existing food purchases by households and institutions to their respective state's economic and environmental health. In the case of Michigan, the council has established and is working on the following goals: increase locally-grown food purchased by public institutions to 20 percent by 2020; ensure that 80 percent of Michigan's residents have easy access to affordable, healthy, and fresh food; incorporate food and agriculture into the state's public education curriculum from K through 12.

Illinois's food policy council is working for the establishment of food hubs – businesses or organizations that actively coordinate the aggregation and distribution of locally and sustainably grown food products. Based on the council's research, such hubs could meet \$10 billion (USD) in unmet need for regionally produced food in Illinois and generate an additional \$14 to \$29 billion in state economic activity using a multiplier of 1.4 – 2.6.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Closing Remarks**

In closing, it might be instructive to look at the work now being done in Edmonton, Alberta where a year-long planning and citizen engagement process has been underway to prepare a local food strategy. Like many jurisdictions – from local to national – Edmonton has demonstrated foresight by not taking its food supply for granted. They have identified nine key goals for their region that include the protection of a significant share of their remaining farmland and the creation of a city food policy council that will have significant responsibility for overseeing the strategy's implementation. All goals are designed to promote healthy eating, reduce health care costs, enhance long-term food security and protect natural resources. Citizen interest has been so high that an estimated 700 people attended one public hearing alone concerning the food strategy. While discussion and public debate are still underway, all indications are that most if not all of the recommended goals of the strategy will be accepted by the city council this fall.

Looking ahead at an uncertain global food future, cities, provinces, and countries that don't actively plan and manage their food systems will be at the mercy of global forces over which they are unlikely to have much control. Prudent leaders will see the value in giving their food system the attention it deserves, and thoughtful policymakers will recognize how engaged citizens and stakeholders, working under the auspices of a food policy council, can play an important role in ensuring a safe, affordable, healthy, and sustainable food supply for all.

## Additional Resources

More information about what food policy councils are doing can be found by looking at the directory at [www.foodpolicycouncil.net](http://www.foodpolicycouncil.net). By going to [www.markwinne.com](http://www.markwinne.com) and clicking on “Resources” the same food policy council directory can be found as well as two new “how-to” resources: *Doing Food Policy Councils Right: A Guide to Development and Action* and a toolkit of local food policies in the U.S. prepared by the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic called *Good Food, Good Law*.

## REFERENCES:

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