

Waterloo Region's Food System: A SNAPSHOT

A Healthy Food System is one in which all residents have access to, and can afford to buy, safe, nutritious, and culturally-acceptable food produced in an environmentally sustainable way and that sustains our rural communities.

This Snapshot is a summary of progress towards a healthy food system as identified by the Waterloo Region System Roundtable since the publication of *Towards a Healthy Food System for Waterloo Region* in 2005. It is organized by the **six priorities** for improving the health of Waterloo Region's food system. It is a sampling of research, projects and organizations that are actively pursuing the priorities.

This Snapshot is not an exhaustive chronicle of all food research and food initiatives undertaken in Waterloo Region since 2005.

Priority #1: Local Food Infrastructure

Rebuilding the processing and distribution infrastructure required to make more local foods available to local residents. Also includes convincing public institutions to buy more local foods.



Since 2005...

- Several new and expanded businesses in Waterloo Region have expanded the options for buying local food, including many new on-farm stores and *Community Shared Agriculture Projects (CSAs)*, and unique innovations like the *Elmira Produce Auction* and *Bailey's Local Foods*.
- There are lessons to learn from the failure of some of these initiatives, like the 100 Mile Market.
- The *Ontario government* has funded several projects, including one at the *University of Waterloo*, to help public institutions source more Ontario foods. It also introduced the *Local Food Act* in fall 2012, aimed at setting targets for public institutions to purchase more Ontario food.
- Some *exploratory research* by the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care identified barriers and opportunities for using more local food in hospitals and long-term care facilities.
- Two recent research studies—one by the *University of Waterloo* and one by *Opportunities Waterloo Region*—call for stronger connections and the creation of a shared strategy among economic developers and businesspeople to promote the local food sector in Waterloo Region.

Current Assessment

- Urban consumers who want to consume local food have many more options available than they did in 2005, thanks to expanded offerings from farm stores, food buying clubs, wholesalers, and restaurants.
- New and updated research is needed to identify specific economic development opportunities, such as a feasibility study on a local food processing and distribution hub, and to quantify the current potential contribution of food and agriculture to the local economy.
- Better co-ordination is needed to identify specific opportunities and take co-ordinated action to address barriers and make entrepreneurs aware of the opportunities in the local food sector.

Priority #2: Food Sovereignty

Working towards giving people greater knowledge about, engagement in, and control over the food in our communities. Also includes food democracy, food skills and food education.



Priority #3: Food Policy

Advocating for “joined-up” food policies at local, provincial, and federal levels of government and monitoring their implementation.



Since 2005...

- By hosting Food Summits and an interactive website, the *Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable* has furthered food democracy by providing opportunities for people and organizations involved in efforts to improve the health of our food system to network with, and learn from, each other.
- *Public Health research* has quantified the level of food skills among Waterloo Region’s population, and programs like Public Health’s *Peer Program* and the *Working Centre* continue to improve gardening and food preparation skills for many people.
- Several local organizations continue to provide food education to people, including *Foodlink Waterloo Region*, *Little City Farm*, *rare*, and the *Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable*.
- Recent research in Waterloo Region drew a strong correlation between the quality of people’s diets and their sense of engagement and control over the food they can access.



Current Assessment

- Food sovereignty has seen encouraging progress since 2005, as many more people and institutions begin to incorporate food systems thinking into the way they do things.

Since 2005...

- The Region of Waterloo adopted a new section on Access to Local and Other Healthy Foods in its *Official Plan*, and area municipalities are now following suit with policies on community gardens, temporary farm markets, and retail food stores.
- A *comprehensive report* on municipal policies that support healthy eating, physical activity, and mental health gives many ideas for strengthening municipal food policies.
- The Ontario government *no longer permits* the sale of foods high in unhealthy fats, sugar, or sodium in publicly-funded schools. The Waterloo Catholic District School Board nutrition standards exceed provincial directives and apply to all food and beverages that are not only sold but offered in schools (e.g. school celebrations).
- A new *report by Ontario nutritionists* calls on employers to improve workplace food environments by offering more local, healthy food options.
- New organizations have appeared on the provincial and national scenes to advocate for joined-up food policies. These include *Sustain Ontario*, *Food Secure Canada*, and *Centre for Food in Canada*.

Current Assessment

- Significant progress has been made in food policy in Waterloo region since 2005. Municipalities recently incorporated access to healthy food into their municipal official plans and will now move towards implementation.
- Many organizations are giving increased attention to convincing Ontario and Canadian governments to adopt comprehensive food policies, and though policies have yet to materialize, their realization seems possible in the medium term.

Priority #4: Urban Agriculture

Encouraging and supporting the expansion of food grown or raised in urban areas.



Priority #5: Farm Viability

Pursuing policies and other initiatives which return a larger portion of the food dollar to farmers, especially for producing healthy foods for local sale. Also includes paying farmers more and encouraging more sustainable farming.



Since 2005...

- Community garden plots in Waterloo Region have increased by 77%, from 679 plots in 2005 to 1,200 in 2012. Community gardens are now found in schools and workplaces.
- Great strides have been made to build an inclusive community garden movement; gardens have been established to welcome newcomers to Canada, youth, and people with mobility challenges.
- Several research studies on community gardens and urban agriculture in Waterloo Region have been published since 2005. The studies cover the benefits of community gardens, potential for accessible and inclusive gardens in Waterloo Region, and more.
- Policies permitting and supporting community gardens have been established in municipal official plans; these municipalities have varying positions on the raising of hens.

Current Assessment

- Growth in community gardens in Waterloo region is encouraging, and recently-adopted municipal policies should encourage more growth in the future.
- Barriers still exist for community gardens, including access to water and compost, and lack of long term tenure for some community garden sites. Public opinion remains mixed regarding urban hen raising and urban beekeeping.



Since 2005...

- The *2011 Agricultural Census* showed that Waterloo Region farms have much higher average incomes than ten years earlier, and continue to be among the highest in the province, despite having smaller average farm sizes. More research is needed to explain this phenomenon and to analyse specific trends such as how many farms are earning a higher percentage of their income from local markets.
- Waterloo Region's farmers continue to age, though they are six years younger than the Ontario average. New programs like *FarmStart* and *CRAFT* encourage younger people to consider farming with training programs for new farmers.
- Recent changes to the *countryside policies in the Region's Official Plan (ROP)* could provide more long-term protection for farmland from urban development and give farmers more options for earning income on their farms. The entire plan, however, is under appeal.
- The *Perth-Waterloo-Wellington chapter of Canadian Organic Growers* has produced numerous studies analyzing the organic farming sector, workshops, and resources aimed at supporting farmers interested in using more sustainable farming methods.

Current Assessment

- While farmers in Waterloo Region continue to be more prosperous on average than in most of the rest of Ontario, many continue to depend on off-farm income, and barriers to entry continue to be an issue for new farmers.
- Serious consideration needs to be given to expanding programs like the *Rural Water Quality Management Program* to pay farmers for delivering other environmental services.

Priority #6: Access To Healthy Food

Advocating for policies and other initiatives which ensure everyone has access to enough nutritious food. Also includes adequate income, emergency food, walkability, and cultural appropriateness.



Since 2005...

- New research is beginning to call for a different focus on the concept of Access to Healthy Food. Based on evidence that the accessibility of non-nutritious foods may have more effect on diet quality than the lack of accessibility to healthy foods, more voices are calling for measures to limit access to non-nutritious foods.
- The lowest income people in our community still struggle to afford enough nutritious food to feed themselves. While incomes have improved since 2005 for those who rely on minimum wage jobs and for those with children, thanks to the advocacy of several local and provincial organizations, the *cost of a nutritious food basket* for these people still leaves little to pay for other basic expenses. Single adults on Ontario Works cannot even afford a nutritious food basket after paying rent.
- *Food bank usage* has increased substantially since 2008. Nonetheless, the Region's food banks and emergency food programs have coordinated with one another to meet this challenge, and initiatives like *Waterloo Region Shares* have helped strengthen the emergency food network.
- A successful pilot of *neighbourhood markets* demonstrated the potential of small temporary farmers' markets to increase walkable access to food, fruit and vegetable consumption, and farmer incomes. New policies in municipal Official Plans now permit these ventures in most land use designations and set goals for ensuring healthy food is available within walking distance of all residents.
- *Recent research* summarized the opportunities and challenges for growing more ethnic vegetables locally. The *Vineland Research and Innovation Centre* is researching the viability of growing ethnic vegetables on a conventional scale in Ontario, and *FarmStart* is helping new farmers enter this emerging market. Meanwhile new community gardens in Waterloo Region are targeting New Canadians to give them the opportunity to grow foods that are most familiar to them.

Current Assessment

- Too many people still rely on emergency food assistance to feed themselves and their families because their incomes are too low to afford enough nutritious food. This affects the quality of their diets and therefore their health.
- Municipalities in Waterloo Region are starting to adopt policies encouraging walkable access to healthy food, but more work is needed to implement the ideas.



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