Planning Local Food Systems
- secure, sustainable, green
Lessons from the City of Vancouver

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Abstract

The City of Vancouver (CoV) is aspiring to set the global stage for sustainable city design in its attempt to be ‘The Greenest City in the World by 2020.’ The Greenest City Action Plan, created by resident experts and members of the public, has identified 10 bold strategies to ensure Vancouver reaches its goal. One of the goals is to enhance Vancouver’s food system to localize production, consumption, and increase access to agricultural spaces within city limits. Specifically, the target is to increase city and neighbourhood food assets by a minimum of 50% of 2010 levels by 2020. The ideas and concepts applied in the development of this urban food system provide lessons for others cities aspiring to bring agricultural urbanism into their municipality. Vancouver’s food system strategy provides a framework for cities to increase the local production and consumption of food; stimulate the green economy; and increase access to healthy food options for residents.
While Farmers’ markets encourage local food consumption and provide local farmers a market venue, Vancouver’s efforts illustrate how municipalities can facilitate greater momentum in all aspects of the food system.

In 2008, Gregor Robertson was elected as the Mayor of Vancouver on the political platform of making the city a global leader in sustainability and the emerging green economy. Under the leadership of Robertson, the City of Vancouver (CoV) began outlining objectives to become the Greenest City in the World by 2020. To meet this admittedly bold objective Robertson brought together a group named the Greenest City Action Team (GCAT) which consisted of environmental community leaders from a breadth of experiences to address the city’s most pressing environmental issues.

The GCAT produced the Quick Start Actions document which focused on: jobs in the future; greener communities; human health; and how to speed up implementation processes to complete the 10 long term goals outlined in the Vancouver A Bright Green Future document completed shortly after (City of Vancouver, 2009).

Bright Green Future’s 10 long term goals were adopted by Council in February 2010 leading to the formation of ten interdepartmental working groups to strategize an action plan for each goal. An External Advisory Committee (EAC) was also convened for each working group which included the collaboration of: residents; business leaders; academics; advocacy organizations; and government officials. In total 100 different organizations were represented within these external advisory groups.

**Background**

The City of Vancouver is not the only municipality in Canada catching up with the local food movement. Cities across Canada have experienced a rise in the demand for local production and consumption of food stuffs. The buy local movement is now a “burgeoning trend worldwide” with new campaigns being launched internationally to profit from new consumer demand for fresh, socially responsible, locally-grown food (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2008, p. 1). This trend has touched every aspect of the food chain and provoked municipal governments to invest in large civic developments to accommodate demand for fresh local foods (i.e. Halifax’s Waterfront Farmers’ Market, Saskatoon Farmers’ Market, Winnipeg’s Forks Market) (Elton, 2010, p. 151; Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2008).

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**(Source: City of Vancouver, 2009, p. 1)**
Facts of the Case

The Local Food in the Greenest City Draft Action Plan outlined the specific objectives, targets, and evaluation mechanism to build a robust food system in the city of Vancouver. The ultimate 2020 target of the Local Food Action Plan was to increase city and neighbourhood food assets by a minimum of 50% over 2010 levels. In order to assess the level of success, the following indicators were defined to measure the success of the initiatives:

1. Local food infrastructure
   The Action Plan identified the need to increase select neighbourhood and city-wide food assets such as facilities, services, and spaces to support the food system. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, the participants specified infrastructure that will be needed to reach the 2020 target to enhance the quality of life within the municipality (City of Vancouver 2011 p. 3). The City has different roles in the development of this infrastructure, as it will partner with community groups, funding agencies and other organizations to bring these investments into fruition.

2. Human capital and community capacity
   Participants also saw the need to build the capacity of community members through an increased presence of active Neighbourhood Food Networks (NFNs) at the neighbourhood scale. The strategies designate each local area, depending on its need, to have a NFN to assist local food and community greening initiatives (i.e. coalitions of community members, community organizations, agencies and businesses). These groups will organize the environmental knowledge and technical skills required to create robust food systems at a neighbourhood level.

3. Proximity of residents to healthy food
   To enhance the health of residents and increase the consumption of healthy food it was determined that access should be encouraged to be within a five minute walk (400m) to a basket of healthy produce. The point of this objective helps to alleviate food deserts in low income communities by having vegetable markets in neighbourhoods currently without access to healthy foods.

   At present, this measure is difficult to assess due to the lack of available and precise information about which convenience stores do not sell fresh produce and those that do. An analysis of: large-scale supermarkets; small/medium grocery stores; green grocers; pocket markets; and farmers’ market will need to be undertaken to obtain this data. Presently, the City has a limited idea on the areas of the city where food is most easily accessed (map 1.1) with the southern half of the city having to travel much further than five minutes to attain healthy produce. The total population of residents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1.1</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>2020 Goal</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Kitchens</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers Markets</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>450%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocket Markets</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>500%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Food Composting facilities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>500%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden Plots – minimum increase</td>
<td>3,260</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Orchards</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>233%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Farms</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>400%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Hub^1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,340</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,158</strong></td>
<td><strong>54.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outside of the buffered areas will be used as a metric, but additional research is needed around the existing outlets to provide a more precise measurement of access to healthy produce (City of Vancouver, 2011, p. 4-5). Currently, bylaws and zoning do not allow for mobile carts to sell fresh produce in food desert, City of Vancouver bylaws and zoning will need to be examined to bring them more inline with the City’s objectives of increasing access to a basket of fresh produce.

In addition to the above indicators, the Local Food Action Plan identified five comprehensive strategies to help achieve the long term goals. Accompanying the five strategies were corresponding methods of evaluation and criteria to meet the 2020 timeline (Ibid 2011, p. 7-10).

Short term action strategies
(1) Support the creation of food infrastructure and food-related “green jobs” related to production, processing, storage, distribution, access and waste management.
(2) Ensure Vancouver’s food system is resilient at the neighbourhood level, and each Local Area has equitable access to the resources needed to ensure a just and sustainable food system.
(3) Support the compilation, brokering and dissemination of information on just and sustainable local food systems.
(4) Ensure the City plays a strong advocacy role in promoting food issues at a regional, provincial and national level.
(5) Develop a coordinated municipal food policy and Action Plan.

The strategies push for a closed loop food system within the region as participants agreed the definition of local food should be “neighbourhood level” and “as close to home as possible” which has been agreed to be within British Columbia (Ibid, 2011, p. 2).

Outcomes
The Greenest City local food initiative has produced a variety of outcomes even before the plan has officially been approved by Council, as the preliminary engagement processes have confirmed the Mayor’s leadership is galvanizing what resident’s sees as important for the City’s future. The Greenest City Action Plan was accompanied by, Talk Green To Us, a broad public and online engagement about how the city can to reach its goal. Through this engagement strategy, there has also been a tremendous increase in the discussion around sustainability since the Greenest City initiative first began; this has provoked citizens to debate about how the economy can be more aligned with sustainability principles. The targets and objectives have created movement and momentum in the right direction which has lead to the start of some positives changes. It
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helps that “Vancouverites have a high level of competency around sustainability” explains James O’Neill, “I think we’re proud to showcase how the city is filled with ingenuity and innovation in all facets” (O’Neill, 2011).

In addition to creating a plethora of public discourse the initiative also created a large internal discourse amongst professionals and staff working for the municipality. Many departments have begun discussions about how their profession can enhance the city’s new goals. In some instances, some departments are broadening their thinking and pushing themselves on how they can provide more support for agricultural urbanism. For instance, Engineering, which has historically been about making infrastructure (i.e. roads) larger and more efficient for vehicles, has broadened to include supporting gardening and food production on boulevards and curb bulges. Paralleling and complementing the Local Food Action Plan and Greenest City process has been the development of the Metro Vancouver Regional Food Strategy which has been endorsed by the 24 municipalities in Metro Vancouver. The Regional Food Strategy is an offshoot food strategy outlining how the local food system can take shape in the next ten years in terms of food production, distribution, and disposal; as well as the social, health and environment implications like food access, loss of prime farmland, and degradation of fish habitats. The systems approach to local food has made governments, at all levels, aware of the roles they must take to make farming financially feasible without interfering in market processes. The Metro Food Strategy is a very powerful tool to guide and implement policies across the region; but a downside is that the policies may not have the regulatory specificity needed to guide policy in each municipality. As each municipality must choose to address the issues outlined in Metro Food Strategy, but they may not have the staffing or interest to implement the strategies. The document allows each municipality to apply strategies to fit their specific needs based on their geography. For instance, the City of Vancouver does not have land for large agricultural spaces like its suburban areas of the city despite having the Greenest City initiative in place. The Metro Food Strategy augments the Greenest City initiative by encouraging regional municipalities with excess space to produce food to make the region more economically and environmentally vibrant. The Greenest City initiative has enabled the City of Vancouver to provide leadership to neighbouring municipalities in implementing a systems approach to local food; in addition to illustrating how agricultural urbanism can be successfully conducted in an urban setting.

Lessons Learned
The Greenest City local food initiative is replicable models for other cities as its engagement processes captured the enthusiasm of resident experts and citizens to create a local food system. The key for the City of Vancouver was to start small by providing flexible regulations to make farmers’ markets and urban farming more widespread. City officials and planners also looked for relationships in which local food could be enhanced through government policy initiatives which other cities can also apply within their jurisdictions. The City began to see the need for a local food system strategy because of advocacy from residents who formed organizations like the Vancouver Food Policy Council which made local food a municipal issue. “Change comes from the citizens – get citizens to pressure for a more food systems approach to planning – talk with planners, policy people, and politicians – build a really good case, and keep pressure” (O’Neill, 2011). This approach is also being used in cities like Edmonton, Halifax, Toronto and Winnipeg which have food policy councils.
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advocating for local food systems similar to Vancouver’s (Toronto Green Community, 2010). These councils consist of chefs, farmers, activists, and professionals who advocate City Council to endorse food initiatives like community gardens, or gardening bylaws as it comes before them. The Vancouver Food Policy Council has been very active since 2002 and successfully lobbied City Council for numerous spaces, and environmental capacity building programs around food security. “The role that planning has in creating a city that embraces a local food system can be enhanced by the use of facts and data, leadership, and capacity building opportunities” explains James O’Neill, “we cannot do it any other way.” Municipal planners also have the ability to use new development as leverage for the creation of spaces for food planning; this ensures big developments have spaces for community gardens and local food vendors. However, the city must have an expressed mandate from its citizens to allow planners to advocate developers for these changes. In the case of Vancouver, the City has just caught up to citizens who were growing on vacant areas of the city. These not so vacant areas now have regulations around them to support their growth and encourage others to undertake similar projects throughout the city and Metro Vancouver.

Conclusions
The development of Vancouver’s Greenest City local food initiative provides many lessons to other municipalities on how to implement a local food system. In addition to showcasing the design principles of agricultural urbanism, Vancouver’s experience illustrates how innovative planning comes from active citizens who are organized and persistent in articulating their objectives to municipal decision makers. The role of planners in these processes can be to provide facts and data to citizens, and designate spaces for capacity building to take place around food security. Cities like Edmonton, Halifax, and Winnipeg can learn from the successes of Food Policy Councils in Toronto and Vancouver to advocate for their own local food systems. Small steps can also be taken by municipal planners to integrate agriculture into the landscape of municipal buildings and public spaces, as visibility and access to agricultural spaces impacts the number of people who participate in these activities (Milburn & Vail, 2010). As advocacy from Food Councils becomes more organized, planners can see the changes citizens want from their municipal institutions. The Greenest City local food initiative and the Metro Vancouver Regional Food Strategy will be precedents for planners in other cities looking for approaches to design a local food system. Yet city planners will need to adapt the tools and knowledge from these processes to fit different social, political and geographic contexts. The time is right for these changes to take place as the local food movement, despite the economic downturn, has seen increases in the demand for gardens and farmers’ markets in Canadian municipalities (Elton, 2010). These trends illustrate it is time for planners and politicians to adapt their policies to reflect the behaviour of local residents and allow just, sustainable and secure food systems to flourish.

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Future Directions
There have been a number of strategies proposed by residents and policymakers to enhance the financial viability of farming within B.C., but the future of this objective is still uncertain. The Local Food Initiative and the Metro Vancouver Regional Food Strategy have created two separate levels of policy to ensure local food security in the City and the Region. Both processes outline strategies to make local food production more attractive to residents in Metro Vancouver through the creation of green jobs. Strategies to enhance this process include:

1) Create local food processing plants through public/private partnerships
2) Purchase local foods for public institutions (i.e. schools, hospitals)
3) Increase the direct marketing of local foods (i.e. markets, food hub, CSAs) (Metro Vancouver, 2011, pp. 28-29).

Once the ‘invisible hand’ has illustrated the financial viability of agriculture within the local economy it is believed the number of local producers will increase. In the end the shift to consume locally produced food will have to come from the people of British Columbia. Unlike in Europe, NAFTA regulations want to ‘get government out of agriculture’ as the agreement has been used as a platform to advocate against institutions that hinder free trade (i.e. Canadian Wheat Board) (Olsen, 2008, p. 421). As Dennis Olsen, Senior Policy Analyst for the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, explains, “NAFTA has greatly benefited agribusiness at the expense of farmers, consumers, and sustainable food systems. Even though certain agricultural exports have grown, most farmers in all three countries have not realized any benefit from this growth. Nor have consumers benefitted, because today they are eating more unhealthy, processed foods and paying higher prices” (Ibid, 2008, p. 423).

At present it is still unknown how much public funding will be put towards agricultural infrastructure which will be determined after the Greenest City initiative has been approved by City Council. For planners, the next step in this process is to attract government funds by showing the high levels of resident satisfaction with this infrastructure and emphasize the role food has in the local economy. Yet if oil and food prices continue to rise government may need to allocate funding to agricultural infrastructure as local food may soon be more affordable than what is presently being imported. Vancouver, unlike other cities, is not waiting for oil prices to peak before localizing its food system, but the future challenge will be to bring younger generations into farming. Only time will tell if agriculture will be a more profitable and desirable career in the future. In the meantime education and capacity building are changing the way residents think about food which, in turn, may influence locals to put money where their mouths are.

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Contributors
James O’Neill is a graduate of the Masters of Arts (Planning) from the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia, and is currently working as a Social Planner for the City of Vancouver.

Aaron Short recently completed his Masters of City Planning course work at the University of Manitoba and is scheduled to defend his thesis in December 2011.

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