

City- Wide Food and Urban Agriculture Strategy  
Stakeholder Groups Feedback Summary:  
*Round One*

*Draft 2- September 26, 2012*



## Introduction

In late April and early May of 2012 nine stakeholder groups including about 50 representatives from various organizations, participated in workshops to discuss possible directions for the City-Wide Food and Agriculture Strategy (“Strategy”). Each workshop brought together stakeholders with different interests including: 1) food retail and restaurants; 2) farmers and producers; 3) senior governments; 4) landowners and developers 5) organizations focused on culture 6) local processors and distributors; 7) community organizations; 8) education and social welfare; and 9) health. Participants shared their experiences and perspectives during a three hour facilitated discussion and in workbooks. Generally, participants were asked three key questions:

1. What are the challenges for creating resilient food systems in Edmonton?
2. What are the opportunities for creating resilient food systems in Edmonton?
3. What, if any, do you see as the role of the City of Edmonton?

In addition, people were asked to share information about their organizations and how, if at all, they currently engage in food and agriculture issues or initiatives. This allowed participants to connect and network as well as give the project team a sense of the many existing efforts and initiatives related to local food and agriculture.

This summary presents a synthesis of the discussions and written comments.

## Limitations

The stakeholder groups were held by invitation only, and although considerable efforts were made to reach out to a broad and representative group of identified stakeholders, it is expected that there were individuals and representatives who were not in attendance for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it cannot be stated that the stakeholders in attendance for the nine discussions represent an exhaustive and complete list of stakeholders with an interest in food and agriculture in Edmonton.

The nine discussions resulted in an overwhelming amount of data collected. For the purposes of this summary, the responses were organized into themes. As a result, there is not a representation of ideas organized by specific stakeholder groups, for example farmers and producers.

The qualitative data outcomes required analysis that is subject to interpretation. The summary presented here is intended to provide the as much relevance as possible for the development of the City Wide Food and Urban Agriculture Strategy.

## What are the Challenges for Resilient Food Systems?

Most of the participants were involved in or connected to local food and agriculture issues through their work and interests. Many were experiencing some key challenges with various aspects of the food and agriculture system. Some of these challenges were unique to one or two stakeholder groups (not enough storage space for producers for example). Other issues were echoed by many groups including access to land for food production, the high cost of local food and the need to raise awareness about local food with consumers.

- **Divergent perspectives on land use for agriculture in Edmonton:** There are differing opinions about land use when it comes to agriculture in the City. There was strong concern expressed for protecting land for agricultural uses; similarly strong concern expressed to make use of existing urban infrastructure in surrounding area for residential use.
- **Lack of access to land for new farmers:** Stakeholders stated that it is too expensive to buy land for farming, especially land with access to irrigation and it is hard to find secure tenure opportunities for leasing farms.
- **Farming can be difficult:** Farmers find it tough to make a living because it is difficult to find labour, farming is hard work, and there is limited access to funding, technology, infrastructure (freezers for example) , business training, knowledge/skill sharing and start-up support. They also stressed that short seasons and fluctuations in weather makes it difficult to have a consistent harvest. Some farmers noted the challenge of people not being willing to pay higher prices for local food. There is a real concern about who will be farming in the future; there are not enough young people to take over the farming profession and high land prices limit farm purchasing opportunities. Many farmers are forced to take off-farm jobs for part of the year.
- **Bylaw barriers for urban farming:** Current bylaws and regulations may run counter to some food and agriculture opportunities. This includes the inability to use land for farming, food safety requirements, insurance and raising backyard hens and bees.
- **Agriculture and Development:** There was concern over conflicts with agriculture in or near urban areas and the potential on-going obligation for continuing costs, long-term liability, lack of transparency and costs to consumers. As one stakeholder stated: “/

would need to see how these [goals] will be implemented to get a better sense of the impacts on us as developers. We all want to see these goals achieved, but at what cost to us, and ultimately to the end purchaser”.

- **Lack of local food availability for food service organization and businesses:** Food service organizations and restaurants/retailers stated that it is currently difficult to find both fresh and processed supply of local food to meet the demand. There are just not enough local producers growing for local markets, partially because many local farmers produce for export out of the region, believing they can compete better and get higher prices in more distant markets. The short growing season also means that fresh produce is available for only part of the year. It was stated that there is also a redundancy with the import/export market as there is as much food exported as imported.
- **High cost of local food:** The cost of local food was a concern that was voiced by many stakeholders. Local food tends to be more expensive than imported food which impacts accessibility, especially for lower-income residents. It is also a challenge for businesses wanting to sell or process local food because most customers are unwilling to pay the higher price.
- **Artificially low costs of imported foods:** Many stakeholders noted that while local food does cost more, Canadians spend less on food as a proportion of overall income compared to EU nations and what Canadians have spent historically. It was suggested that if one considers the “full” or “true” costs associated with imported food such as poor labour conditions and environmental impacts, local food is not necessarily a “higher-cost product” but, rather, reflects the real cost of food. The need for a reasonable income/return on investment for farmers was generally acknowledged.
- **Lack of training and education around basic food skills:** Education repeatedly came up as a challenge. Stakeholders felt that there is insufficient training for farming and related employment. There is also seen to be a lack of training for basic food skills: processing, cooking, nutrition, shopping and education about the value of local food.
- **Funding:** It is difficult to access to funding for educators and food organizations. There is a need for long term funding specific to programs, many programs and grants are year to year agreements. Finding food and agriculture research money is also a challenge.
- **Need for processing, storage and distribution infrastructure:** Stakeholders emphasized the need for more local processing infrastructure, affordable space for business start ups and for adequate food storage. It was also stressed that there needs to be a network to move food from the land to the consumer in

order to improve access to local products. There is also a lack of local infrastructure and a need for a central place for buying, selling, and distributing food.

- **Navigating health and safety standards:** Stakeholders involved with farming and/or value added products noted that it is difficult to know what health and safety standards apply to them and how to become certified. Many noted the cost and time prohibitive nature of adhering to health and safety standards, which was therefore thought to limit business potential.
- **Edmonton's climate:** In terms of expanding the food crops grown in Edmonton, many people noted the limitations of Edmonton's short growing season. Some offered thoughts for how to overcome this challenge through education on seasonal eating and utilizing energy efficient technologies to extend the growing season.

## What are the Opportunities for Resilient Food Systems?

The discussion around challenges for resilient food systems quickly gave-way to one around opportunities. Stakeholders came up with a wide-range of potential opportunities for food and agriculture in Edmonton. The need for sharing resources in a number of different capacities was emphasized by a number of groups. Select groups offered ideas with some caution. For example, integrating agriculture with development may work but it is important to consider the impact to developers and ultimately to the consumer.

- **Provide a variety of options for agricultural spaces/places to grow food.** Expanding what Edmonton is already doing around micro-farming or gardening such as growing food in backyards, balconies, rooftops, parks etc. was generally thought of as an opportunity. Including community gardens in neighbourhood development is already being tested in Edmonton and it was thought there may be further opportunity to better work with the City on park design. In the existing urban environment, ideas included small-scale community gardens on city-owned land, expansion of backyard gardening and rooftop gardens. Some saw land protection for future agriculture as an opportunity while others did not agree that medium scale agriculture should be a land use within a city and that land protection for agriculture is not desirable.
- **Establish a central food hub with neighbourhood satellite hubs:** Many different stakeholder groups brought up the concept of a food hub as an

opportunity worth exploring. This would be a destination space for local food and to share resources and knowledge. It could include a community kitchen, space for agricultural distribution, wholesale, retail, processing facilities, food storage and administrative space and a retail farmers' market (there were many comments relating to need for more farmers markets, although there were some concerns about competition).

- **Improve existing farmers markets:** Many stakeholders noted either their personal enjoyment of farmers markets and/or their importance to producers and the community at large. There was some discussion about how the existing markets while containing some very successful markets, are seen as disparate, uncoordinated with each other and often offering more crafts than agricultural goods.
- **Improve the local food economy:** There were many comments on how to improve the local food economy including: creating more direct-to-consumer sales; transforming producers into business owners; creating a competitive and self reliant industry; supporting local supplier and vendors; researching the value chain; providing extension to growers and farmers; engaging and collaborating with Alberta agriculture, developing research grants and partnering with industry to research locally sourced agricultural products.
- **Create an information “clearinghouse”:** Given the many existing programs, initiatives, businesses etc. already involved with food and agriculture, stakeholders noted the need for a central location online where people can access information, farming advice, find out about resources, where to buy local food, local food assets etc. It was suggested by several people this would help them to better operate in their respective roles as well as collaborate and leverage resources with other people and organizations in Edmonton and the region.
- **Expand food education and awareness:** Stakeholders suggested classes for cooking, gardening courses, pest control, seed saving, food processing and there was a lot of interest in school gardens, connected to the curriculum. Some examples for education included: hire an experienced grower to teach at community gardens; develop educational resources in collaboration with local food organizations; and create a master food program similar to the master gardener program.
- **Use marketing and branding to celebrate local food:** Participants emphasised the need to enhance and market Edmonton’s food culture. Some suggestions included: Branding local food products using a labelling system to identifying local food and events; chefs cooking local food for a month; and festivals and

media releases. One participant noted, “People travel to experience the food and music of other cultures. What is Edmonton’s food culture?”

- **Encourage local procurement policies.** Although supply is currently an issue, local procurement repeatedly came up as an opportunity for generating investment in the local food economy and certainty for producers. Suggestions included creating a model in civic facilities and encouraging other institutions to explore the idea.
- **Offer funding and other resources such as space.** A need was identified for more long-term funding for programs and initiatives. In addition, it was suggested that start-up funding to get new businesses and farmers on their feet would be valuable.
- **Explore and commercialize new technologies:** Many stakeholders suggested a need to encourage entrepreneurial spirit and to create a place to encourage new innovations. This could be in the form of aquaponics, winter production and developing new niche products with existing crops, value-added products, food forests and edible landscaping.
- **Support new farmers:** The aging farmer population was a concern voiced by many participants. Opportunities to train young farmers and increase land access were noted as key opportunities. Including and reaching out to immigrants and refugees with agricultural or food expertise was also brought up as an opportunity for job creation and knowledge sharing.

## What can the City of Edmonton do?

There was some disagreement with regard to what the City’s role in food and agriculture should be. However feedback reflected a general sense that Edmonton can and should support resilient food and agriculture systems by amending policies, regulations and bylaws, integrating food and agriculture and food into municipal operations and through incentives and education opportunities.

- **Embed food and agriculture within municipal operations/organization.** Create a food policy council. Create a coordinator position, or an entire department. Undertake a thorough environmental scan of existing assets (beyond what is possible for this project).
- **Position the City as a leader.** Stakeholders suggested many ways that the City could become a leader in food and agriculture. These included promoting initiatives, branding, developing tools and incentives, pilot projects and buy- local marketing.
- **Update policies, bylaws and regulations** Those who were supportive of food and agriculture suggested setting policy directions that will lay the groundwork for food and

agricultural goals. In addition, lift restrictions and amend regulations to hens and beekeeping, patio and sidewalk use and park use for festivals. Stakeholders also emphasized the need for regulations to be consistent and appropriate. The issue around zoning and agricultural land preservation considerations was supported by many participants but contentious with some.



## Discussion

Overall the stakeholder workshops showed that food and agriculture is important to many different organizations in Edmonton and many are actively involved in some remarkable initiatives. The feedback around the challenges and opportunities for a local, resilient food system has crystallized some important “big moves” that the Strategy should consider. Additionally, many participants noted that the Strategy needs to include:

- A clear definition of terms
- The rationale for and benefits of different efforts including consideration for the end user or consumer
- A transparency of process

The project team came away understanding a lot more about the breadth and depth of what is already happening around food and agriculture in Edmonton. While there are divergent perspectives on a few important issues, there are also some exciting opportunities that can form the key planks of the Strategy.