

plan to grow



Scaling Up Local Food in Kingston & Countryside

REPORT SUMMARY

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Plan to Grow: Scaling Up Local Food Production in Kingston & Countryside

REPORT SUMMARY

Plan to Grow was a research-based initiative of the NFU New Farm Project designed to talk to farmers, processors, retailers, buyers, and food security advocates in the Kingston area. We have gathered their perspectives on assets, challenges and opportunities within our local food system and we have developed priorities for action that will stimulate both the supply of and the demand for local food. As we collectively build this *Plan to Grow*, the economic viability for farmers is of primary concern.

Over 40 food system participants provided input and identified opportunities as we chart the path toward a sustainable local food system for Kingston and its countryside. This document is a summary of the full report which presents the results of the engagement process. Areas of focus are: 1) Planning and Coordination, 2) Value Chain and Infrastructure Development (the “middle”), and 3) Farm Viability Through Training and Support.

A recipe for success: Planning and coordination

While much has been accomplished in recent years through community engagement of local food and food security issues, our research demonstrates that we are not yet well-coordinated across our local food system. With active coordination of the many food and farm initiatives underway, we can better influence policy, generate funding support, and be strategic with the resources available to us.

Plan to Grow identifies the following opportunities for improved planning and coordination amongst groups addressing local food and farm issues:

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

- Forming strategic partnerships between the NFU, government, public institutions, non-profits, and community groups.
- Participation in and/or supporting the activities of the developing Local Food Council (as coordinated through the Healthy Eating Working Group under the administration of the KFL&A PHU).

NEW ACTION

- Feasibility study of cross-sector coordination needs and opportunities for collaborative staffing of coordinator position/team.
- A community food assessment project to identify community food needs geared at informing a local and regional multi-year food-system plan.
- Market research to determine and prioritize the unmet needs of consumer demographic segments, and to investigate areas for growth in direct-market channels.
- A multi-year regional food system plan with tangible goals/objectives and targets (for example, 500 trained farm workers, 200 more local farmers).
- Initiation of a research project on local land use opportunities, threats and best practices in urban/rural land development, through the lens of conserving farmland.
- Creation of a paid position for personnel to work with a network of groups to coordinate local food system development strategically.
- Improved policy development and local food and farm advocacy in the following areas:
 - ✧ develop municipal bylaws on land-use planning, agricultural zoning
 - ✧ explore opportunities for land trusts to help address prohibitive prices of farmland
 - ✧ local food procurement policy development within the public sector
 - ✧ contribute to the Sustainable Kingston Plan from rural and farming perspectives ¹

Opportunities to build on existing strengths include, supporting the current work of the Healthy Eating Working Group to develop a Local Food Council, and work through FOCUS Kingston to contribute to the Sustainable Kingston Plan. New opportunities include assessing options for resourcing planning and coordination efforts to meet such needs identified across sectors, and initiating a comprehensive community food assessment project to develop a thorough understanding of local food activity and needs. Market research would provide an opportunity to determine and prioritize unmet consumer group needs and can enable informed targeting of growth in terms of new farmers, expanded trained farm worker and coordinated production.

A key aspect of coordination includes meeting the need for increased accountability and measuring the economic success of these initiatives in order to maximize their impact, direct future efforts, and leverage funding sources. This can be done in



1 www.cityofkingston.ca/pdf/cityhall/sustainability/SustainableKingston_D9-1011F.pdf

part by taking advantage of existing data and studies currently being carried out, partnering with future studies, and strategic measurement of key indicators.

Rebuilding the middle: Value chain and infrastructure development

Buyers frequently identified challenges with efficiently accessing the amounts and varieties of produce needed. Few farmers in the region are currently interested or set-up to grow for wholesale markets and the prices they offer. The availability of adequate storage and processing facilities for produce in the area, and of local abattoir capacity were identified as significant challenges. Buyers had concerns that improper packaging and labelling could limit what they choose to purchase from farmers, and they recognized that support for smaller farmers is essential to enable them to ready their products for sale.

Kingston has seen a considerable amount of activity to enable the development of food skills and of programs to improve food access for everyone, regardless of income or circumstance. Improved coordination and access to resources are identified as challenges in making local food accessible to lower-income households.

Plan to Grow identifies the following opportunities for “growing our middle” in order to stimulate both the supply of and the demand for local food:

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

- Improve public awareness by:
 - ✧ Supporting the *Food Down The Road* publication and website
 - ✧ Strengthening local food promotion efforts – explore Local Food Plus certification for farmers and other branding initiatives
 - ✧ Making use of existing capacity to communicate availability and customer demand
 - ✧ Reducing barriers for local businesses by surveying and engaging local lending institutions on the what, where, why and how of local food investment
- Expand local processing, packaging, and storage capacity
 - ✧ Support local efforts (NFU) to expand abattoir capacity, especially for poultry

NEW ACTION

- Evaluate and develop aggregation system(s)
 - ✧ Introduce further innovative and scale-appropriate ways to pool and distribute products (for example, mobile market development to meet additional demand in the community, farmer cooperatives, etc.)
 - ✧ Investigate feasibility of developing a central location/space/facility to pool produce/product

- ◇ Conduct feasibility study of an Equi-terre-like model, used regionally to coordinate CSAs and collectively increase membership.
- Under One Roof - Local Food Centre Development
 - ◇ Create an urban-community-located food centre space: to bring together food access programs and to offer food handling/preserving/cooking skills (prefaced by a feasibility study reviewing location and partnership opportunities)
 - ◇ Explore food business incubation project through Ontario Training Board
- Build (and use existing) local processing, packaging, and storage capacity
 - ◇ Support local efforts (NFU) to expand abattoir capacity, especially for poultry
 - ◇ Explore opportunities for co-packing, freezing, packaging, and storage facility and supports (including an environmental scan to review availability of facilities: under utilized space, co-location possibilities, etc.).

Ensuring that the community is aware of and able to easily access local food is critical to building our local food system. Opportunities for scale-appropriate aggregation that meet current producer needs will encourage sustainable growth in production and increased amounts of local food in the system. Further work will be required to better understand what demand looks like in the area to accurately assess scale. Participants from across the food system recognize the importance of the connection between food security and access to local food. Efforts to achieve adequate resources will be required to facilitate this relationship in a way that is beneficial to farmers and those living on low incomes.



Farm productivity and viability: Developing training and support capacity

Plan to Grow research demonstrated that coordinated training and support for farmers is essential to a healthy, reliable and high-quality local food supply. The NFU New Farm Project has had many successes in the Kingston region in its first four years. Ongoing coordination, leadership, and training opportunities are needed. An urgent concern recognized by all farmer training stakeholders is to ensure our farms are viable, resilient and financially profitable. Viable farms are the prerequisite to a sustainable local food system. Successful farms form the productive foundation of the entire food system.

Locally-orientated ecological farming is in a state of constant innovation. Recipes for success require continual on-farm innovation and open sharing of successful production and business models. Long-term success is not dependent on a certain farm size, but on a large number of factors influencing farms on local to national scales.

Interviews revealed that farmers are looking for detailed knowledge and skills, ranging from business planning to advanced production techniques that are appropriate for the scale of their operations. This includes knowledge and skills related to scale-appropriate tools and machinery. Farmers are not getting all the information they need from workshops and conferences, which tend to be too general in level of detail. Farmers interviewed recognize there is potential for increased sharing of skills and knowledge between farmers. Farmers learn best farmer-to-farmer and need stronger peer-to-peer and mentorship relationships to increase opportunities for sharing of resources and knowledge, as well as to form beneficial partnerships. Farmers in the region recognize there are skills and knowledge to share with other farmers



Local food infrastructure, stable markets and financing opportunities are key determinants of viability for farmers, and need to be suitable for the scale of the producer. Although there is demand in wholesale markets, farmers are hesitant and need support visioning and evaluating whether or not scaling up their operations is a good fit for their farms.

Plan to Grow identifies the following opportunities for developing effective farmer training and support programming in order to achieve both productivity and viability:

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS:

- **Expanding CRAFT:** Discuss extending training days into the off-season, focusing on business management topics. To assist with this transition, CRAFT could currently apply for two streams of production club funding available through the Agricultural Management Institute (AMI) and Organic Council of Ontario (OCO).
- **Pilot a Production Club:** Using current OCO and NFP funding and resources, support interested producers in forming a production club in early 2012.
- **Develop Two New Workshops:** Partnering with Eastern Ontario farmer training organizations, develop and offer the following workshops for farmers:
 - ✧ 'One-crop workshop' The workshop would examine the feasibility and opportunity of scaling production, marketing, storage and distribution of one crop on diversified farms and market gardens.
 - ✧ Develop and offer a one-day introduction-to-business planning workshop to show realistic approaches and the increases in profits business planning can provide.
- **Increase Access to Government Funding:** Host a Growing Your Farm Profits workshop providing the entry way for 50-75 percent cost-share funding for farmers to improve their businesses. NFP could provide on-going support to help farmers make use of the funding.

NEW ACTIONS:

- **Initiate a regional multi-stakeholder farm viability task force:** Bring together local food stakeholders to find realistic and immediate solutions for ensuring local farm financial success.
- **Regional Extension Service:** Investigate the potential for developing a regional extension service launched in partnership with COG Ottawa, Homestead Organics, Farms At Work and Just Food.
- **Determine Business Planning Barriers:** Investigate barriers to detailed business planning for farmers. Determine whether time/availability, interest and/or a lack of skills are likely barriers.
- **Regional comprehensive farmer training and support plan:** From the beginner to the established farmer, identify available opportunities, specific gaps and future training direction through the development of a comprehensive training plan.
- **Eastern Ontario Farmer-To-Farmer Un-conference:** With regional training stakeholders, organize and host a farmer-to-farmer un-conference. Workshops at un-conferences have short detailed presentations and are facilitated to share the knowledge and build connections amongst farmers who attend the session.
- **Local livestock and vegetable e-mail listserv:** Develop and pilot a knowledge-sharing listserv service or blog for a group of interested producers.
- **Pilot a regional database of farmer skills and resources** of farmers who are willing to share information. This could provide a system to increase farmer-to-farmer connections regionally.

Conclusion



Much work is needed to continue building our local food system in ways that encourage an increase in local production for local consumption, stimulate further development of local food infrastructure, and nurture an engaged local food community that drives economic activity through its demand for local food. While many opportunities and challenges exist on the road ahead, the Plan to Grow report focuses on the dominant themes that emerged from the research: planning and coordination, value chain and infrastructure development, and developing training and support capacity. The Fall Gathering provided an opportunity to prioritize “next steps” for the creation of a thriving local food system. We welcome and appreciate the input of all participants and look towards the future of local food in Kingston and the surrounding countryside with enthusiasm.