



Message from the chair

May 20, 2011

On May 9, 2011 I was asked to present a five-minute deputation to the Toronto Board of Health. As it turned out that Monday was a beautiful sunny day and perfect for getting some fieldwork done on the farm. It really is too bad we can't reliably predict the weather and schedule our meetings on rainy days like today and, in fact, the last five days. At least I don't feel guilty sitting here writing this letter while watching the rain outside my office window.

At that meeting I gave a brief history of the Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTA AAC) and how we formed an alliance with the City of Hamilton and the Niagara Region to work on the Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy and Action Plan 2021. I also talked briefly about the Summit, which was held on March 30, and the excellent cross section of stakeholders who attended and would lead some of the key actions that were proposed. I was amazed how fast the five minutes passed by.

I am slightly embarrassed to report that I didn't finish all that I wanted to say, only making it to the first proposed action. Fortunately, the action I talked about was, "To develop and implement a compulsory, broad based, agri-food curriculum in the Ontario school system designed to achieve food literacy for all ages and to raise the awareness of health, employment and career opportunities in agriculture and agri-food", with all the benefits it would eventually have in the health system for the present generation and future generations by educating parents of the students. This proposed action was very well received by the Board, which will hopefully facilitate further discussions on how the GTA AAC and the Toronto Board of Health can work together.

I stayed to listen to some of the other presenters who were talking about specific cultural needs in food procurement and urban gardening projects. The presenters were well prepared and articulately presented their requests and reports. One notable presentation was by Robin Newman of Not Far From the Tree, who, describing her organization, talked about the almost 20,000 pounds of fruit that was harvested from local back yard fruit trees in the city. The fruit was picked by volunteers and divided into thirds, with one third going to the homeowner, one third split by the volunteers and one third going to local food banks, shelters and community kitchens in the neighbourhood. I was very impressed. When the subject of urban gardening is raised at farm meetings, there are usually a lot of raised eyebrows and a fair amount of snickering around the table. The truth is, a lot of food can be grown within the city limits and Toronto Public Health takes this initiative very seriously.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy and Action Plan update

The steering committee and regional planners working group met with Margaret Walton and her Planscape team on May 12 to review the draft strategic plan. Specific tasks were assigned to the 15 main actions formulated at the Summit. The tasks will also have leads or champions assigned with partners, a timeline, and a way to measure the progress and success of each task. The committees will have until May 30, 2011 to comment and make revisions, after which, Margaret's team will write a third draft for us to review by mid-June. A fourth draft will be written based on the discussions of that meeting and will be presented for public review and consultations. Consultations will be conducted with strategic partners and champions to discuss the tasks and the architecture of the alliances.

The Toronto Food Policy Council's (TFPC) submission to the City of Toronto Official Plan, called "Feeding the City from the Back 40", quotes a study done by Caroline Van Bers, from the Journal of Sustainable Agriculture, saying that Canadian cities could produce 20 per cent of their fruit and vegetables from within the city limits. The TFPC suggested that the City of Toronto adopt an Urban Agriculture Development Strategy to facilitate urban farming. Toronto Public Health was also very impressed with the "Not Far From the Tree" report questioning its author for more than twenty minutes. I believe the GTA AAC should acknowledge urban farming as a serious source of local food and food security for cities.

It looks like this is going to be a busy summer. Hopefully we aren't going to see any more rain for the next week or two and there will be the odd rainy day in July and August to sustain our crops and for me to justify being indoors at a meeting. I'm going to do a "no-rain" dance this weekend!

Respectfully,
Nick Ferri, Chair, GTA AAC

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