

Smart Cities Project Update

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

The Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Since the last [Smart Cities Project Update Report](#) to the Board of Health (March 2023), remaining intervention funds were distributed, food equity programming concluded, a food insecurity campaign launched and final impact reporting was submitted to Infrastructure Canada.
- In total, the Nutritious Foods Workstream allocated \$416,500 to 48 actions to improve food access across Guelph-Wellington.
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health continues to lead local work related to food access and uses lessons learned from this project to inform broader health promotion work in the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) community.

Background

Our Food Future – A Smart Cities Initiative

In May of 2019, the City of Guelph, and County of Wellington (Guelph-Wellington) were awarded \$10 million from Infrastructure Canada's Smart Cities Challenge to create Canada's first circular food economy. In January of 2020, Guelph-Wellington officially launched *Our Food Future* which aimed to reimagine how our community produces, distributes, sells, and consumes food. Rather than a linear take-make-dispose model, *Our Food Future* intended to create a circular food system that increases access to nutritious foods, recognizes the value of waste and creates space for businesses to adapt their operations and implement circular practices.¹ *Our Food Future's* governance structure included three workgroups that focus on each pillar of the circular food economy: 1) Nutritious Foods Workstream, 2) Waste Workstream and 3) Business Workstream.

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDG Public Health) was one of many community partners that contributed to and supported Guelph-Wellington's Smart Cities proposal. Two public health staff specializing in public health nutrition and health promotion were members of the Nutritious Foods Workstream (NFW). Between 2020 and 2024 WDG Public Health led workstream activities and oversaw the NFW budget. *Our Food Future* ended, and the Smart Cities Office closed in January 2024.

Nutritious Foods Workstream

The NFW was comprised of various health and social service agencies, municipal staff, academic researchers, and community groups. The workstream's goal was to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods by 50% by 2025. The workstream recognized that nutrition plays a major role in growth and development, mental health and preventing lifestyle-related chronic diseases. It aspired to create a supportive environment where everyone can achieve food security. Food security is defined as all people, at all times, having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.² Using a results-based accountability framework, the NFW completed a food environment assessment to identify local gaps and opportunities, followed by a community-driven intervention strategy.

In March of 2023, a [Smart Cities Project Update Report](#) was shared with the Board of Health. The report described funding allocated to community-led food access initiatives and the release of Guelph Wellington's Food Security Action Plan.³

Discussion

Progress Since March 2023

Food Equity and Community Resilience Series

Launched in November of 2022, *Setting the Table* was a series of gatherings and discussions co-created by community members to learn about community resilience, food equity and how the two topics relate. In August, the working group allocated remaining funds for programming and events. The Community Co-Lab Collective – a group of food access-oriented community partners – were granted \$15,800 to improve access to affordable nutritious food in the south end of Guelph through markets and food baskets. To conclude the *Setting the Table* series, two wrap-up events were hosted. The events featured free community meals prepared by local food access programs and food-based social enterprises. The first event was on September 14 in the City of Guelph at Shelldale Community Centre and the second event was on September 20 in Mount Forest at the Mount Forest Community Garden. Both events featured space to gather and share resources about local food access initiatives.

Guelph-Wellington Food Security Action Plan

Released in January of 2023, the [Guelph-Wellington Food Security Action Plan](#) identified six strategic priorities to be mobilized by community-led action tables: 1) Food Access and Healthcare, 2) Local Food Infrastructure, 3) Building a Food Movement, 4) Integrated Funding Strategy, 5) Community Food Growing Strategy and 6) Regenerative Agriculture. The Food Access and Healthcare table has been developing a food insecurity screening toolkit for clinical settings to identify and support food insecure clients. The Regenerative Agriculture table has been running [regenerative agriculture pilot programs](#) with a goal of growing local food using climate friendly practices. Four action tables (Integrated Funding, Local Food Infrastructure, Community Food Growing and Building a Food Movement) began meeting together due to shared interest in sourcing permanent warehouse space for food access initiatives. The action tables continue to meet on an as-needed basis.

Food Insecurity Awareness Campaign

In 2023, members of the Food Insecurity Community of Practice (CoP) hosted by the Centre Wellington Community Foundation identified the need for a communications campaign to increase public awareness about food insecurity and calls to action. Since then, NFW staff and the Guelph-Wellington Poverty Taskforce have worked with a local communications firm to create communication materials and a campaign strategy. The campaign, *Income Security for Food Security*, launched in January 2024. To view campaign materials and calls to action, [visit the campaign webpage](#).

Final Impact Reporting

In total, the NFW allocated \$416,500 to fund 48 actions to improve food access across Guelph-Wellington. Both of the key performance indicators (KPI) that were identified to measure the success of this project were successfully achieved by December 2023. The first KPI, required that there must be programming in at least five out of ten geographic priority areas (i.e., 50% increase). Ten geographic areas with low food access were identified at the onset of the project. The second KPI, required that more than 50% of program participants must agree or strongly agree their access to affordable nutritious foods has improved (i.e., 50% increase).

There was action in at least 8/10 geographic priority areas and over 50% of surveyed program participants agreed or strongly agreed they had improved access to affordable nutritious foods. For example, [Food Equity with Dignity \(FEWD\)](#) is a mobile food security initiative serving various locations across Guelph-Wellington with participants consistently reporting the program brings a sense of belonging and social connection to their community. Likewise, the Nutritious Foods Coordinator hired by the Centre Wellington Community Foundation works with food access organizations to increase community members' access to food through collaboration, strategic planning and encouraging the adoption of dignified food access best practices.

One reason *Our Food Future* was successful is because it allowed many sectors to build connections and relationships to coordinate work that has led to economic, environmental and social benefits. According to the Smart Cities Office's [December 2023 annual report](#), *Our Food Future* funded food access initiatives distributed more than 169,799 meals to community members and recovered \$2,054,915 worth of edible food that would have otherwise been wasted. The fact that *Our Food Future* was able to complete a five-year project over three years during a pandemic shows the impact that can be achieved when partners work together.

Next Steps

New Community Food Lead Role through Arrell Food Institute

The Smart Cities *Our Food Future* program has demonstrated the value coordination can bring to a regional food system, specifically for organizations and programs seeking to increase access to affordable, nutritious food. The NFW agreed to contribute \$50,000 to help establish a two-year Community Food Lead position hosted by the University of Guelph's Arrell Food Institute to continue community engagement and food access coordination activities. This is a contribution partnership alongside the Smart Cities Office (City of Guelph and County of Wellington) and Arrell Food Institute. The position is expected to be filled by February 2024.

WDG Public Health's Healthy Eating Portfolio

WDG Public Health uses the lessons learned from this project to inform broader health promotion work in our community. Public Health staff continue to convene partners originally from the NFW to maintain strong partnerships and facilitate evidence-informed planning. Access to nutritious food is essential to foster the healthy eating patterns that meet nutrition requirements at every stage of life. In 2024 the healthy eating portfolio looks towards exploring new projects to support healthy eating behaviours and reduce health inequities. Such as convening partners through the food access subcommittee of the Dufferin County Equity Collaborative (DCEC) to enhance collaborative food programming in Dufferin. We will continue to collaborate with community groups and local initiatives working to improve the food environment in our region.

Health Equity Implications

Food insecurity is defined as inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.⁴ People cope in many ways such as skipping meals, postponing bill payments, borrowing money or cutting their food budget to prioritize other critical expenses like rent, utilities, childcare, etc. Post-secondary students often apply for loans and bursaries, seek different employment opportunities, or use credit cards.⁵

People experiencing food insecurity also experience health inequities. For example, they are more likely to report poor general health, adverse mental health outcomes and multiple chronic conditions.^{6,7,8} People particularly at risk for food insecurity include low-income households, households with limited assets (e.g., home ownership, savings, etc.), Indigenous and other racial or cultural groups, female-led lone parent households and households reliant on income supports.⁹

As described in the [Nutritious Foods Basket 2023 Board of Health Report](#), rising inflation and housing costs threaten to make food insecurity worse. WDG Public Health and partners continue to prioritize equitable food access by integrating this work into the overarching plans at their agencies and participating in community conversations about systems change.

Conclusion

Since the last Board of Health update in March 2023, remaining intervention funds were distributed, food equity programming concluded, a food insecurity campaign launched, and final impact reporting was submitted to Infrastructure Canada. In total, the NFW allocated \$416,500 to fund 48 actions to improve food access across Guelph-Wellington. A final report describing impact of the Smart Cities Initiative was released by the Smart Cities Office in December of 2023.

Our Food Future has demonstrated the value that coordination can bring to a regional food system, specifically for organizations and programs seeking to increase access to affordable, nutritious food. For this reason, a Community Food Lead was hired by the University of Guelph's Arrell Food Institute to support food access coordination. Likewise, WDG Public Health continues to convene partners originally from NFW and uses lessons learned from this project to inform broader health promotion work in our community.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- Improve health outcomes
- Focus on children's health
- Build strong partnerships
- Innovate our programs and services
- Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health System

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