

Organic Food Action Cambridge



Social Planning Council
of Cambridge and North Dumfries

July 2004

Organic Food Action Cambridge

Organic Food Action Cambridge (OFAC) is a group of Cambridge citizens concerned about the availability and accessibility of organic food in the area. Over the period of about a year this group met and discussed how the community could *develop accessible, equitable and sustainable community infrastructure to grow and distribute organic food, and educate vulnerable residents of Cambridge about the benefits of local organic food* (Organic Food Action Cambridge Vision Statement). OFAC defines vulnerable residents as those whose access to organic food is limited by *income, time, mobility and awareness*.

The OFAC group approached the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries in the spring of 2004 to partner with them to develop a community forum, which would bring together various groups and individuals in the community to work toward an organic food strategy for Cambridge and North Dumfries.

The Organic Food Forum

The forum was held on June 14th, 2004 in the Toyota Room at the Cambridge Centre for the Arts. The forum was attended by close to 30 people from a variety of backgrounds and interests, but with the common thread of concern regarding the quality of the food they eat.

The forum was structured in three sections; first there was an introduction to the OFAC group and the organic food issue, second, a small group discussion period, and finally a report back from the discussion groups to all forum participants. This was followed by a short discussion on next steps and the agreement to set a second meeting date for those interested in working further on the issue.

Through research and discussion prior to the forum the Organic Food Action Cambridge (OFAC) group developed **three goals** essential to realising the vision were introduced as follows:

The Goals

- Education and Outreach
- Organic Food Distribution
- Organic Food Production

Forum participants were asked to choose a goal which they would be interested in discussing in small working groups. Participants broke into three groups based on their interest. The groups were each given seven questions to guide the discussion. The questions are as follows:

- Why are you inspired by this goal as a starting point?
- What inspires you about specific activities as a starting point (1 or 2 of the top selections)?
- What community groups and resources already exist which might support this idea?
- Who needs to be involved or might want to be involved?
- How do you think we can get there from here?
- Is this time sensitive or seasonal?
- Do you have other ideas or initiatives to add?

BACKGROUNDER: Why Organic?

A study done by the National Institute of Health demonstrated that by feeding children organic food, many neurotoxic and carcinogenic pesticides were dramatically reduced in children's body fluids and tissues.¹

Certified organic food is pesticide free and thus reduces the chemical levels in the soil and in our food.

Yields from organic production are 4 to 10 times higher than chemical production.²

Coordinated & Published by:



Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries

Forum Findings

The findings of the forum discussion are summarized in the following section. The findings are grouped by the goal areas previously mentioned.

Education and Outreach

The goal of education and outreach is to develop awareness of the health benefits of eating organic among vulnerable residents in Cambridge.

Why are you inspired by this goal as a starting point?

- Awareness creates demand and consequently a market
- Real environmentalism begins in the social environment
- Launching a community currency system
- Need infrastructure to bring everything together so it is not disjointed
- The importance of eating well
- Lack of understanding of what organic is and why to choose it
- Misinformation concerning the costs of organic food and our food safety
- Getting people involved through interaction and fun

What inspires you about specific activities as a starting point?

- Inform people of current initiatives
- Link people and initiatives both within and outside the community
- Being personally aware
- Feeding people
- Taste and Try – a natural lead into how to grow and how to cook
- Education on food alternatives

What community groups and resources already exist which might support this idea?

- Good Food Box
- Community kitchens
- Market
- Pfennings
- Four-Fold Farms
- Existing barter networks
- Health Fair website (maps and listings)

- Cruickston Organics Agriculture Project
- Food Link
- Private land loans to use for organic food growing
- Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC)

A concern of the group was that this initiative needs to be very mainstream and available to people regardless of their income and access to the market.

Who needs to be involved or might want to be involved?

- Schools
- Native people (Anishnabeg Outreach)
- Low/No income
- People who are unwell and wanting to get better
- People wanting to eat well
- Busy two-income families restricted by time realities

How do you think we can get there from here?

- Connect existing efforts through a newsletter, website, newspaper, word of mouth and community bulletin board
- Meet every few months to discuss, plan and include “taste and try” events
- Create community connections
- Education on food choices e.g. food bank orientations

Organic Food Distribution

The goal of organic food distribution is to make local, fresh organic food available and accessible to vulnerable Cambridge residents.

Why are you inspired by this goal as a starting point?

- Need more accessibility and affordability
- Don't want to have to travel to find food
- Give communities back to communities
- Connecting interested people
- Finding different ways to get food

What inspires you about specific activities as a starting point?

- Exploring common shared agriculture
- Interested in a food co-op
- Start within Cambridge with a common agriculture
- A “one-stop” co-op giving visibility accessibility

- Set-up informational website with on-line food ordering and a local pick-up centre
- Small scale neighbourhood food clubs

What community groups and resources already exist which might support this idea?

- Supporting local vendors and increasing their organic market revenue
- Organic food at the Guelph Farmer's Market
- Order Food Box through Toronto
- Cruickston Organics Agriculture Project
- Model Waterloo's Ebytown Food Co-op

Who needs to be involved or might want to be involved?

- Linking producers and consumers

How do you think we can get there from here?

- Critical mass of people (30-40 people) organizing
- Critical mass of people buying
- Bring the consumer and the producer

The group members did not feel that this was time sensitive or seasonal. Group members also indicated that it is important for community members to pressure elected representatives to support the organic food movement in Cambridge. Through this movement citizens would have greater control over and knowledge of what they are eating.

BACKGROUND:

There are presently four farmers' markets in the Waterloo Region.³

Annually consumers spend \$20 million at farmers' markets.⁴

Buying local food is somewhat or very important to 87.1% of Waterloo residents.⁵

Organic Food Production

The goal of organic food production is to develop local urban and rural participation in organic agriculture in the Cambridge area.

Why are you inspired by this goal as a starting point?

- Total control over products
- Starting at the source – Must produce before you can distribute
- Very few certified organic producers in the Region
- Price of organic food versus non-organic food
- Backyard food production
- Concerned about the level of production
- Understanding the costs of production
- Disconnect between people and food production

What inspires you about specific activities as a starting point?

The group identified that any initiative needs to start at both the urban and rural levels.

Urban

- Community gardens at schools
- Community garden because less expensive than green houses
- City schools creating policy to serve organic foods
- Roof top gardens

Rural

- Adopt a farmer – Sponsor farmers to change
- Explore the differences between organic and natural farmers
- Helping farmers share the risks of going organic by connecting them with markets
- Community shared agriculture
- Land tax breaks for farmers who go organic

The group noted that it is very costly for farmers to switch to organic production in the first few years. As a result the group felt that the community would need to be prepared to support their local farmers. Presently in the area the locally grown movement is stronger than the organic movement. This may be a reality of the initiative high costs and risks associated with organic production.

What community groups and resources already exist which might support this idea?

- City of Kitchener has start up grants for community gardens
- Community Garden Network, Waterloo Region
- Waterloo Region Police – Crime Prevention Unit supports community gardens
- Department of Community Health
- "Friends of the Environment" – TD Canada Trust

Who needs to be involved or might want to be involved?

Urban

- Waterloo Region Community gardens
- Neighbourhood Associations – Community gardens

Rural

- Canadian Organic Growers
- Link with Perth, Waterloo and Wellington Regions
- Food Link
- Waterloo Federation of Agriculture

The group members concluded that to ensure greater success the organic initiatives must have the involvement of the local and regional government, the growers and consumers.

How do you think we can get there from here?

- Get politically active
- Buy organic
- By-laws enforced regarding pesticides and disposal
- A committed group of people

Is this time sensitive or seasonal?

- Produce is seasonal
- Meat/Dairy/etc. is year round

BACKGROUND:

Food Production in the Waterloo Region

There were 1,444 farms in Waterloo Region in 2001 compared to 1,590 farms in 1996.⁶

Farms in the Waterloo region are smaller than the provincial average.⁷

Livestock farms account for 66% of all farms in the region as compared to 42% of all provincial farms.⁸

Twenty-one farms or 5% of farms in the Waterloo Region are presently producing certified organic products. Growing consumer interest in organics would suggest that there is room for growth in this market.⁹

Summary

The community members who gathered for the organic food forum demonstrated a desire and interest in developing greater community awareness about the organic food issue. They also showed interest in the importance of developing both local organic production and a means for distribution. The community members present were in agreement that the three goals of education and outreach, food production and food distribution must be integrated and coordinated in order to attain the OFAC objectives. In addition, there was also an awareness that the vision of the OFAC group to have available and accessible organic food can only be fully reached with the engagement and support of community members.

What's next?

Coming out of the community forum a group of forum participants expressed an interest in forming a small group to work toward developing strategies which will improve the accessibility and production of organic food in the Cambridge and North Dumfries area.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Ferrie, Helke. *Growing up Healthy in a Toxic World*; The critical role played by environmental and nutritional medicine. *Vitality Magazine*, December 2004/ January 2004.
- ² Harrison, John Bede. (1993). *Growing Food Organically*.
- ³ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.
- ⁴ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.
- ⁵ Region of Waterloo Public Health, February, 2004. *A Fresh Approach to Food; Local Food Buying in Waterloo Region*.
- ⁶ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.
- ⁷ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.
- ⁸ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.
- ⁹ *Growing Food and Economy*. Economic Impact Study of the Agriculture and Food-Related Sectors in Waterloo Region.