



Thunder Bay + Area

Food Strategy

Connecting Food
and Community

THUNDER BAY + AREA FOOD + AGRICULTURE MARKET STUDY

OCTOBER 2017

SECTION 3.1.5 FOOD PROGRAMS



HCA

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INTRODUCTION

These are important community programs designed, generally to meet the needs of residents who find themselves short of food on a weekly or occasional basis. These organizations can source any variety of local product provided it is free or at a reasonable price and of sufficient quality to meet the needs of their clients.

A total of five organizations from the food program sector were interviewed as part of Thunder Bay and Area Food and Market Study. These are not for profit organizations that offer food distribution and/or preparation services for segments of the community (e.g. low income families, seniors, children/students). The organizations typically rely on food donations in large part or a combination of food purchases and food donations. Some of the organizations have been active in the community for more than 20 years and others for less than 10 years.

Four of the organizations are currently receiving / procuring locally grown / harvested foods within 100km of Thunder Bay (or food products made with ingredients grown within 100km of Thunder Bay). It was generally noted that the amount of local food items being received / procured is very small and is typically acquired through a range of sources including local farms, processors, distributors, and retailers. In some instances, local food is being provided by local community gardens and individual gardens.

Three of the organizations reported that a key motivation for sourcing locally grown / harvested foods is to provide their clients with fresh food options which they believe to be a healthier option compared to processed foods. Two of the organizations also reported that a key motivation for sourcing locally grown / harvested foods is to support local farmers. Another organization noted that their staff and volunteers are personally interested in promoting local food and do all they can to include local food options as part of the service they provide.

Two of the organizations noted that they can accept a certain amount of 'seconds' or blemished vegetables as these ingredients can be processed into other food products (e.g. soups) that they can offer as part of their food service.

The biggest limitation faced by these organizations is that they have very limited funds for procuring local food and local sources are only providing a small amount of their total food needs and so there is a heavy reliance on non-local food items. Several of the organizations noted that locally grown food items are higher priced than foods grown elsewhere which creates reliance on donations when it comes to accessing locally grown food items.

Another challenging factor is that some organizations have very limited cold storage / transportation resources which limits their ability to store perishable food items and to distribute these items to distant / remote communities outside the City of Thunder Bay. This forces some organizations to focus on processed food options for some destinations to ensure food is not wasted from spoilage.

The organizations were asked to share their views on what would make it easier for them to access / procure local food. The most common factors identified include accessing locally grown foods that are reasonably or discount priced and accessing a larger volume of locally grown foods. As noted by one organization, their budget is fixed and there is no opportunity to pass on costs to their customers. Another organization emphasized the importance of accessing the same fresh food options that shoppers experience when they shop at the Country Market.

CURRENT PROCUREMENT OF LOCAL / NON-LOCAL FOOD ITEMS

As noted above, these organizations are not currently procuring locally grown / harvested products in substantial quantities but some organizations are actively pursuing initiatives that will potentially lead to increased procurement of locally grown / harvested foods in their operations.

One organization is working toward establishing a social enterprise that will include a test kitchen and cold storage space and they will aim to produce value added products (sliced, diced, pureed, frozen, boxed, bagged) for the prepared food sector (businesses and institutions). Some of the initial products to be explored include potatoes, tomatoes and carrots. It was noted that these products will need to be procured at a competitive price to ensure that the enterprise covers its operation costs. It was further noted that because the enterprise is focusing on processing foods they will have a higher tolerance for blemished or imperfect / ugly vegetables.

Another organization is holding discussions with a local supplier to try and develop a delivery mechanism and schedule that suits the need of the organization and its client base. They are hopeful that they can stimulate enough demand through their client base to reach a volume that will enable / motivate the supplier to offer a discount on price. Products that have the greatest potential include carrots (need to be ready to eat baby carrots) and apples (need to be small sized apples ideally to reduce waste). There is also potential for eggs which they use as a protein item for the breakfast program. With respect to processed food items they see potential for locally made buns and wraps as well as muffins.

One organization noted that they have connections with vendors / farmers through the Country Market and noted that vendors / farmers are generous in donating food or providing a reduced price (e.g. local preserves, fresh produce, pasta). However, it is impossible to derive consistent volumes of food items through this process. They also noted that their needs can vary from week to week as they change their menu planning for their families and this complicates how they go about sourcing their food items.

CONCLUSIONS

Local food programs are unique in that they normally have a social purpose: the procurement of food for those who cannot afford to purchase all they need in a standard retail store. These programs are interested in sourcing local food but other factors (e.g. price, storage space / facilities, needs of local clients) are typically higher level considerations that they have to address.



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