***Submission of Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health:***

***Land Use Planning Co-ordinated Review, May 28 2015***

**Goal 1: Protecting Agricultural Land, Water and Natural Areas**

Public health nutrition professionals recognize the importance of the food system having the ability to provide our communities with healthy food both now and in the future. We appreciate the foundational relationship to this of planning for the protection of agricultural lands and water, in rural, peri-urban, and urban areas. We, therefore, support strategies described in the Discussion Document of this review that prevent the continued loss of food-producing agricultural lands and that preserve the region’s rich water resources. These strategies may include, as outlined in the Discussion Paper, increasing Growth Plan density and intensification targets; encouraging municipalities to go beyond the minimum targets; expanding the Greenbelt; and exploring new ideas through encouraging municipalities to develop sustainability plans for agriculture that address issues facing food and farming.

**Recommendation:**

**Act through land use planning and policies to prevent further loss of agricultural lands and to protect water resources.**

**Goal 2: Keeping People and Goods Moving and Building Cost-Effective Infrastructure**

Accessibility of healthy food (i.e. the opportunity to get to it) is a priority for all populations, but particularly for certain groups such as low income, seniors, those living in rural and remote areas, and people with disabilities. Transportation modes are integral to accessibility, so planning transportation infrastructure should take into account the needs of all people to be able to get to healthy food (at grocery stores, food markets, or other healthy food venues), whether by transit or by active transportation (i.e. walking, cycling, or other manual means).

We recommend modification of existing transportation infrastructure and/or master plans to consider safe, affordable, multi-modal food access means and routes, and transit corridors that connect people, not only from home to work, but also from home and work to healthy food sources.

**Recommendation:**

**Make safe, affordable, multi-modal access to healthy food a priority in land use plans.**

**Goal 3: Fostering Healthy, Livable and Inclusive Communities**

A healthy, livable, inclusive community is not complete without addressing all of the basic necessities of life, a prime aspect of which is healthy food. The costs of ill health are high and growing, increasingly affecting the sustainability of the health care system, and it is therefore very important to focus on prevention of disease, particularly chronic and non-communicable diseases. Fundamental to achieving this is to foster circumstances (social, economic, etc.) and environments (built, public, etc.) that provide opportunities for people to make healthy choices (Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health, 2013). Therefore, we recommend that the definition of a “complete community” include access to healthy food as one of people’s daily needs along with jobs, housing, etc.

Land use planning and policies can be used to improve the food options in a community (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2013). Intentionally planning for healthy food access for complete communities could result in preventing the formation of both food deserts and food swamps. A food desert is a geographic area where competitively-priced and nutritious food is difficult to obtain, particularly for those without an automobile, while a food swamp is a geographic area with an over-abundance of fast food establishments (Health Canada, 2013).

Food swamps are of particular concern to public health. The tendency of food establishments offering mostly unhealthy choices, such as, but not limited to “fast food” operations, to locate in close proximity to schools and low-income neighbourhoods increases the exposure of children and others living in these neighbourhoods to less healthy food (Fraser, 2010). As an illustrative case, data for the Region of Peel show that within that region, there is a higher density of food outlets selling less healthy food compared with food outlets selling healthy foods. In some areas, there are between five and ten less healthy food outlets for every healthy food outlet (Region of Peel, 2013). There is potential for land use policies, especially in new developments, to influence the type, number and location of food outlets to minimize food swamps (Fraser, 2010).

Land use planning should consider enabling other means beyond traditional food outlets of healthy food access. As a prime example, neighbourhood food centres serve as places where people can come together to grow, cook and enjoy food together. They are increasing in number across Canada and their model is consistent with fostering healthy, livable and inclusive communities. Complete communities should also have land designated for urban agriculture in existing and new urban and peri-urban communities as a way to further increase access to healthy local food. This will be discussed more under Goal 5.

Housing represents typically the greatest cost for low- and moderate- income households, increasing the likelihood of not being able to afford healthy food. This resultant condition of household food insecurity in turn increases risks for developing chronic diseases. Therefore complete communities also require a mix of housing types, including affordable housing. While various population groups may be at risk for household food insecurity, research has shown that this tends to be more prevalent for renters than for home owners (McIntyre, 2013). Multi-unit residential developments, such as semi-detached, townhouse, and multi-story, may be lower in cost than single family homes, but they are not necessarily affordable for low and moderate income households. An adequate supply of rental housing along with rent control and rent relief measures would assist families experiencing household food insecurity (Sriram & Tarasuk, 2015).

Also, as discussed for Goal 2, safe, affordable, multi-modal access (transit and active transportation) to healthy foods is a priority for communities.

**Recommendations:**

**Add healthy food access as one of people’s daily needs to the definition of complete communities.**

**Incorporate action items into land use plans to avoid food deserts and food swamps and to ensure a supportive ratio of healthy to less healthy food outlets.**

**Encourage and support alternative models for food access, such as neighbourhood food centres.**

**Increase the availability of affordable rental housing in communities to improve the ability of low- and moderate - income households to afford all basic necessities, including healthy food.**

**Goal 4: Building Communities that Attract Workers and Create Jobs**

As discussed in goals above, communities should include affordable, multi-modal access to healthy food, urban agriculture and affordable housing, and these factors help to attract workers and employers. A vibrant food system also creates jobs in a community (Cummings & MacRae, 2015). Recent reports have highlighted the important role of agriculture and food to the economy, and encourage planning and economic development sectors to work together to build on and expand from the current status. A highlight in these reports is the importance of promoting healthy foods by replacing imported fruits and vegetables with locally grown fruits and vegetables (Cummings & MacRae, 2015) and by educating consumers about healthy local food products (Planscape, 2012).

**Recommendation:**

**Work with the economic development sector to increase current levels of local and healthy agricultural and food production.**

**Goal 5: Addressing Climate Change and Building Resilient Communities**

Sustainability is a key concept to achieving this goal. Practicing sustainability requires developing agricultural and food production practices that both reduce environmental impacts and conserve resources, as well as providing for current and future food and nutrition needs. Eating patterns, such as Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide, that are based more on plant-based foods (especially vegetables and fruit) and lower in animal-based foods are not only healthier but are also more sustainable than current consumption patterns due to having less environmental impacts (e.g. GHG emissions) (Weber, 2008).

A promising practice for sustainability and resiliency is urban agriculture, which includes agricultural operations, as well as gardens in backyards, on rooftops, community plots, school yards, etc. From a health perspective, inclusion of urban agriculture in a community can have positive impacts such as food access and security, increased fruit and vegetable consumption, and food and health literacy (Golden, 2013). Urban agriculture also has well documented environmental benefits and can play a role in mitigating the effects of climate change. It can reduce urban heat islands through increasing tree and other vegetative cover and by reducing the heat island effect of streets and parking lots. In contrast to impervious surfaces such as roofs and pavement, urban agriculture can also increase soil permeability and water retention, reduce water runoff and alleviate demand on wastewater treatment and storm sewer systems (Dillon Consulting Limited, 2013).

**Recommendations:**

**Encourage agriculture that supports a shift in eating patterns to more plant-based diets.**

**Allow for and support urban agriculture.**

**Goal 6: Improving Implementation and Better Aligning the Plans**

Food is a basic human need; food systems are meant to deliver on that need. Land use planning decisions can affect food systems and thereby a community’s ability to achieve community food security. There is promise within the four Plans to address some aspects of a food system, but currently this is fragmented and incomplete. A food system is cyclical; it includes production/collection, processing, distribution, access, consumption and waste disposal. A food systems approach looks at the entire cycle, giving particular attention to the links between stages, components, and players (e.g. coordinating multi-ministries provincially, as well as collaboration with municipal governments). This perspective allows examination and change in order to achieve local, healthy, sustainable food systems (Brady, 2014). Applying a food systems approach to the planning process would better align the plans and contribute to creating communities where all residents could have optimal opportunities to access healthy food now and in the future.

A key, but missing, factor to support implementation and alignment of the Plans is to develop a provincial food and nutrition plan. Much work has been done on such a plan for Ontario under the leadership of the Ontario Collaborative Group on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity’s Design Team, hosted by Sustain Ontario. The mission of the Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy (OFNS) is to develop a plan for healthy food and food systems in Ontario (Sustain Ontario, 2014). All of the goals of this review could benefit from an OFNS, particularly its central strategy of a “cross-government, multi-stakeholder coordinated approach”, which speaks closely to Goal 6 regarding improved implementation and better alignment.

The *Growth Plan* calls on municipalities and the province to link planning for growth with planning for infrastructure, so that transit, roads, sewers, schools and other service are in place to meet the needs of growing communities. Likewise, we further urge that municipalities be encouraged to also develop food system plans, to complement and extend broader-level plans. Municipalities could create continuity plans for agriculture and food that provide affordable and varied access to healthy food, contribute to a vibrant local food economy, help attract workers and jobs, and even mitigate the effects of climate change.

**Recommendations:**

**Foster and implement a food systems approach that is comprehensive, cyclical, and coordinated.**

**Support collaborative work to develop and implement an Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy.**

**Encourage municipalities to develop local-level food system plans.**

# Bibliography

Brady, J. (2014). *Local Susntainable Food Systems. In Depth. HC Link.*

Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health. (2013). *Communicating the Social Determinants of Health. Guidelines for common messaging. .*

Cummings, H., & MacRae, R. (2015). Dollars and Sense: Opportunities to Strengthen Southern Ontario’s Food System.

Dillon Consulting Limited. (2013). *Community Garden Policy Scan. Halton Food Council.*

Fraser, e. a. (2010). The Geography of Fast Food Outlets: A Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health.*, 7(5): 2290–2308.

Golden, S. (2013). Urban agriculture impacts: social, health and economic: a literature review. *University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources*.

Health Canada. (2013). *Measuring the Food Environment in Canada.*

McIntyre, L. (2013). Housing as a determinant of health: Lessons from household food insecurity. (Invited, provincial, opening plenary). *Opening Doors Provincial Housing Conference, Calgary Housing Company, Calgary, AB, November 25-26, 2013.*

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2013). *A Practitioner’s Guide For Advancing Health Equity. Community Strategies for Preventing Chronic Disease.*

Planscape. (2012). *Food & Farming: An Action Plan 2021.*

Region of Peel. (2013). *Diabetes Atlas for the Region of Peel.*

Sriram, U. & Tarasuk, V. (2015). *Economic Predictors of Household Food insecurity in Canadian Metropolitan Areas*. Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition.

Sustain Ontario. (2014). *Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy. A Plan for healthy food and food systems.*

Weber, C.L., & Matthews, H.S. (2008). *Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States.* Environmental Science & Technology, 42 (10), 3508-3513.