

A Seat at the Table: Resource Guide for Local Governments to Promote Food Secure Communities

How It Started

In June 2008, the Provincial Health Services Authority, Union of BC Municipalities, and BC Healthy Communities, released the resource guide, *A Seat at the Table: Resource Guide for Local Governments to Promote Food Secure Communities*. Developed under the rubric of the Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI)¹, it was a response to an expressed need for a resource that communities could use to engage local governments in taking action on critical issues around food – such as rising costs of food and fuel, poverty, obesity and increasing rates of chronic illnesses often related to diet.

The guide presented ideas for local government action, sourced from current practices, that fit within the local government mandate. Community gardens, farmer's markets, food policy councils, zoning and healthy food in public buildings are some of the ideas presented. Case studies, drawn from across the province, showcase local government leadership in BC. The guide was meant to pique curiosity and inspire action, whether the community was just starting out, or well on its way, to creating a strong and healthy food system.

Once the report was completed, UBCM circulated the guide to their members and posted it on their website. As well, the CFAI presented the report to local government elected officials at a UBCM Convention clinic in 2008.

A copy of the guide can be found here:

<http://www.phsa.ca/HealthPro/PopPubHealth/default.htm>

Where We Are Now

Fast forward to one year later, and the sponsors of the guide want to know if the document is being used and what further resources might be needed to encourage local governments to implement the suggestions from the *Seat at the Table*.

A survey was launched in the summer of 2009 and local governments were invited to provide their feedback on the guide as well as the actions they took to create food secure communities.

And the Respondents Said

Sixteen percent of local governments (31 respondents) participated in the survey. Although this response rate is fairly low, it is important to note that local governments are frequently asked to fill out surveys on a number of issues. Also, the survey was

¹ The Community Food Action Initiative is a health promotion initiative of the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, BC's six health authorities and the communities they serve. The Ministry provides funding and policy direction; the Regional Health Authorities distribute funding to communities and provides technical support; and the Provincial Health Services Authority provides provincial level coordination. The goal of this initiative is to increase food security for all British Columbians.

initiated in the summer months, when many local government staff is away on vacation. Both factors may have influenced the number of local governments participating in this survey.

Question 1: Have you seen the document 'A Seat at the Table'?

Question 2: If yes, how did you receive a copy?

The large majority of respondents, 71%, said they had seen the document.

Of the respondents that did see the survey, the largest proportion (35%) received it from the UBCM mailout. Another 30% found it on the Provincial Health Services website, 20% received the guide from the Local Government Management Association, and 15% received it at the UBCM Convention workshop. Three respondents received the document from more than one source.

Question 3: Is this resource guide useful?

Most respondents found the guide to be useful (54%). But 14% said they were not sure, and 4% said that the document was not at all useful. A significant number, 30%, had not yet read the guide. The reasons provided for why the respondents were unsure the guide was useful, or did not find it useful are:

- Regional board and staff don't have the capacity to undertake recommendations in the guide
- Limited usefulness for a suburban rural community
- Local issues were not mentioned, like provincial regulations on animal slaughter, which puts an end to legal locally produced meat
- ALR is already divided into plots too small to sustain farming but also too expensive for farming
- No agricultural land in the community with the available small land base

Question 4 & 5: Have you taken any of the suggested actions? If yes, please tell us what actions you have taken?

The majority of respondents, 59%, said they took some of the suggested actions from the guide, including:

- Starting or expanding farmers market and community garden programs
- Further establishing relationships between Food Policy Council, Health Authority and local government council
- Dedication of money by council for food security projects
- Incorporating food security in policy and visioning processes
- Establishing partnerships between the local government and the community for provision of water, land
- Forming committees, such as an agricultural advisory committee

What the survey did not clarify was if these actions were taken as a direct result of reading the guide. It is entirely possible that these communities may have already been implementing the ideas provided in the guide, which may have been inspired by other efforts.

Question 6: What resources helped you take these actions?

To assist local governments to take action, 11 respondents indicated that that groups and organizations within the community was the more helpful resource. Nine respondents said funding from local governments was resource that helped them take action and another 9 respondents said it was funding from another source. A few respondents found tools, such as the Community Food Assessment Guide, to be useful.

This question revealed that most respondents used one or more resources to help them take action. Some combined funding from local governments with funding from other sources. Others used funding with assistance from a community group or organization.

Question 7: What would help to take your action to the next level?

For those respondents that did take action, they said the following would have helped them take their action to the next level:

- Further community and municipal staff education to create “readiness”
- Clear policy direction (i.e. in an Agricultural Plan) at the local government level
- Ongoing predictable funding for infrastructure, community development activities and local food organizations, including funding for projects past the ‘pilot project’ stage
- The need for bureaucracy to support the initiatives (instead of erecting barriers)
- Updating community bylaws to require developers of multi-family housing to provide space for food production
- Removal of regulatory burdens, such as food safety standards
- A better idea of what the gaps are in terms of local food policy

Question 8: If you have not taken any action, can you tell us why?

Forty percent of respondents said they had not taken any action after receiving the guide. The most common reason given was that they had not read the guide. The next most common reason was a lack of time and staff constraints. Some mentioned they had competing priorities.

Question 9: (Of those respondents who did not take any action) What would help you take action?

Respondents said:

- Receiving the document
- Funding
- Learning what has worked elsewhere, especially for small rural communities
- Support from senior levels of government
- Elimination of health authority regulations for food safety
- Staff and resources
- Proper strategic planning supported by all partners
- Time to read the document

Question 10: Are there groups or projects addressing food related issues in your community?

The large majority (87%) answered affirmatively to this question. One respondent said there were no groups, and 3 respondents said they didn’t know.

Question 11: Who in your local government took the initiative?

Political leadership was the most common response to this question, closely followed by local government staff. One respondent did not know who took the initiative. When staff took the initiative, the departments that were involved were:

- Parks, Recreation and Cultural (most common answer)
- Community Services
- Social Development/Planning
- Planning and Development
- Other (Health and Social Development)

Question 12: Are you a....

This question asked if the respondents were municipalities or regional districts. Eighty percent of respondents were from a municipality and 23 % were from regional districts.

Question 13: What is the population within your local government?

Respondents came from a variety of community sizes. The smallest being a community of 750 people to the largest of nearly 500,000 residents.

Question 14: What BC region do you belong to?

Except for North Eastern BC, every region of BC was represented in the survey. The numbers below have been rounded to the nearest percent.

- 16% from the Lower Mainland
- 13% from North Western BC
- 13% from Kootenays
- 13% from Southern Vancouver Island / Gulf Islands
- 10% from North Central BC
- 10% from Okanagan
- 10% from Sea to Sky / Sunshine Coast
- 7% from Thompson
- 7% from North Vancouver Island
- 3 % from Central Vancouver Island
- 3% from Fraser Valley

Question 15:

The last question of the survey requested contact information from survey respondents to follow up on their work or specific issues. This information will be kept confidential, as respondents have not provided consent to release their contact information.

In Summary

The intent of the survey was to see if the guide was being used and what other resources were needed to assist local governments in making their communities more food secure. We received extremely useful feedback from the respondents, including:

- 29% of the respondents have not received or seen a copy of the guide. We need to find more avenues to promote the document.

- Local governments may view action related to food as yet another issue needing their attention and action. The purpose of the guide was to provide ideas that fit within local government mandate so that local government action on food requires doing regular local government activities differently. This point needs to be promoted and explored for potential barriers.
- More engagement of local government is needed to explore the benefits to communities and how these actions further local government goals.
- More resources are needed, including education, funding and collaboration with community groups involved in food security.

Resource requirements:

- Need to further explore resource requirements (funding, tools, groups etc.)

Next Steps

Improving food security in BC communities continues to be a priority for the PHSA and the UBCM. The results of this survey will be published in both the PHSA and the UBCM newsletters, and the groups will meet in the fall to discuss the development of further tools and resources for local governments.

A number of other resources are also being created by the PHSA, including the production of fact sheets on food security on:

- Food security and climate change
- Food security and the built environment/school environment
- Local meat production

Please visit the UBCM Healthy Communities webpage

(<http://www.ubcm.ca/EN/main/about/committees/healthy-communities.html>)

and/or the PHSA website (*insert web address*) for updates, and new tools and resources.