

# Healthy *Communities*

AND PLANNING FOR

# *Food* Planning for Food Systems in Ontario

## A Call to Action



Ontario  
Professional  
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Institut des  
planificateurs  
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# Healthy Communities and Planning for Food

## *Planning for Food Systems in Ontario*

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### **Overview**

The growing demand for local food is testament to the desire of many to become more connected to their sources of food. In turn, there is an increasing need for coordinated solutions to food systems issues. Food systems have long been linked to planning and are a key consideration for complete and healthy communities. A greater understanding is emerging on the importance of planners being more involved in planning for food systems and that this can result in healthier outcomes for Ontarians.

The Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) has prepared this Call to Action to raise awareness and to highlight key issues so that Ontario's planners and communities can address the challenges associated with planning for food systems.

OPPI is the recognized voice of the Province's planning profession. Our more than 3,000 members work in government, private practice, universities, and non-profit agencies in the fields of urban and rural planning and development, urban design, environmental planning, transportation, health and social services, heritage conservation, housing, and economic development.

### **Background**

OPPI members are committed to creating and fostering healthy communities throughout Ontario. Planners recognize how planning impacts quality of life and how these decisions shape communities and their residents in many ways, including affecting obesity, heart disease, mental health, social connections, air quality, nutrition and access to food. Planners also recognize the social, economic and environmental dimensions of food systems.

Agriculture, food processing, retailing and service industries contribute billions of dollars to the provincial economy. At the same time, food systems have a fundamental connection to the environment through the use of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, as well as, linkages to climate change mitigation.

In October 2010, OPPI held a symposium in Guelph, Ont., entitled “Healthy Communities and Planning for Food – a Harvest of Ideas.” This event brought together a record number of urban and rural planners to discuss issues associated with creating and fostering healthy food systems. This Call to Action is based on the learnings from the symposium and an [associated survey](#) of OPPI’s membership. Both the symposium and the [survey](#) highlighted the fact that many planners are already involved in community planning for food, but importantly, many more wish to be involved.

### **Key Planning Issues of Food**

Food systems are complex and operate simultaneously and at multiple scales. A food system is generally defined as a set of food related activities including agriculture, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management, each with its attendant social, environmental and economic dimensions. Planners are in a unique position to identify problems and challenges within the food system and to lead and foster the development of solutions.

Issues associated with food systems present many challenges related to community planning. Important planning issues include:

- Using good planning principles to connect the planning needs of urban and rural communities and promote efficient, complementary land use systems.
- Incorporating food systems into the framework of planning policies such as Places to Grow, the Greenbelt and the Provincial Policy Statement.
- Including consideration for food systems in an integrated community sustainability plan, Official Plan, secondary plan, zoning by-law, and public health reports.
- Understanding and connecting stakeholders and in multiple geographic regions to break down institutional barriers in addressing the impacts of planning policies on food systems.

The following food planning issues are particularly influenced by human impacts on our environment:

- Managing water demands across sectors, especially in response to shifting global climates and precipitation patterns that will affect food production.
- Supporting best management practices in agriculture related to soil quality, pest control and nutrient management.
- Integrating diverse and productive agricultural landscapes with natural corridors to build adaptive capacity for climate impacts.
- Protecting farmland as a critical non-renewable resource for current and future generations. To ensure long-term food security, urban and scattered non-farm development should be prevented in productive agricultural areas.
- Addressing climate change and environmental crisis points such as declining pollinator species and extreme weather events.

Food systems intersect with many aspects of regional and local economic development, education and research sectors to create opportunities such as:

- Multiplying regional spending impacts by connecting urban and rural markets for goods and services within a cluster of food processing, distribution and retail establishments.
- Fostering food entrepreneurs, agricultural diversification and value-added products to improve competitiveness in both local and international commodity markets.
- Planning for on-farm renewable energy facilities that provide new revenue streams, energy sources and improved viability.
- Promoting agri-tourism, direct, cooperative farm sales and small-scale food processing as part of a regional identity food marketing strategy.
- Supporting municipal tax base and real estate incentives and alternative land arrangements for agricultural development, while minimizing land speculation and fragmentation.

## **Professional Planning Practice**

Professional planning practice embodies those approaches, strategies and techniques that planners use to help achieve societal goals.

One of the best known policy efforts of planners has been growth management. This policy supports the preservation of farmland, ensures food production and food security, maintains agriculture in the economy, allows for stewardship of the countryside, and protects a vital resource for future generations.

Our practice as professionals includes many more opportunities to engage in planning for food in all sizes and locations of urban and rural communities. The Symposium outlined the interconnected elements of the food system. The total journey that food takes from “farm to fork” -- including the inputs, processing, marketing, distribution and waste along the way -- is important for planners to understand. Examples include reviewing Official Plans, zoning etc. through a food system related lens. The planning framework affects food systems and vice versa. Understanding these connections provides opportunities for better planning of the food system.

## **Leadership**

Planners provide vision and leadership. Our skills include critical thinking, the appreciation of values and innovation, and the anticipation of future needs and solutions. Planners can take a lead on food system planning through the following actions:

- Become more familiar with the concept of food systems and identify where the components fit into rural and urban communities and the types of information and knowledge that are required to support decision making.
- Review local documents with a food systems lens (e.g., integrated community sustainability plan, Official Plan, secondary plan, zoning by-law, public health reports).
- Consider which planning tools may be appropriate, and whether current policy and regulatory frameworks stifle initiative and innovation.
- Use effective communications, including skills in listening, conveying information and knowledge, and developing internal and external relations to facilitate a connection between rural and urban communities and to foster an integrated understanding of the issues.

- Recognize when to be proactive and when to provide a supporting role to allow others to take the lead.
- Identify and nurture partnerships that will enhance the possibilities of success.
- Find ways to engage new voices in debates within your community.

### **Government Direction**

The actions of all levels of government have a fundamental influence on food systems and, in turn, on the health and sustainability of communities. All levels of government are encouraged to work cooperatively to address the basic human need for safe, nutritious food. There is much opportunity for innovation in addressing the issues identified within this Call to Action.

The Provincial government is encouraged to maintain its leadership role as evidenced by the Provincial Policy Statement and legislation (e.g., Greenbelt, Places to Grow). There is the potential to enhance each of these documents in relation to food systems planning. The Provincial government is encouraged to develop a mandate related to food systems planning. Actions may include support for local initiatives, inter-ministerial collaborations (e.g., between production agriculture, land use and health) and staffing to pursue food systems planning at both a provincial and municipal level (and could include joint provincial-municipal initiatives).

Municipal governments need to maintain a focus on planning for food for present and future generations. Decision makers need to be aware of issues connected to food systems planning. Municipalities need to engage fully qualified and informed planners to review local documents through a food systems lens.

### **Planning Education and Research**

Food systems are complex and multi-faceted and not the purview of any one discipline or interest. This reality poses a challenge for educators and researchers that should be addressed. There is a need for on-going research into the agriculture and food systems to better understand the complexity, inter-relationships and processes.

Planning students should be encouraged and enabled to explore this field. Planning schools need to pursue further research in this area. Practicing planners and their knowledge and experience should be incorporated into related research.

## **Stakeholders and Partners**

Food systems connect us all and present a unique opportunity to bring together and connect rural and urban communities throughout the Province. However, an understanding of the issues and challenges, and the development of solutions, will require a diverse group of stakeholders working together.

Planners have an integral role to play in reaching out to increase communication and integration among these diverse interests, and in understanding and acting upon the fundamental linkages in food systems.

## **Citizens**

Because food is everybody's issue, it is in danger of becoming nobody's issue. Do what you can to learn about the food system of which you are a part.

- Become more familiar with the concept of food systems.
- Read about OPPI's *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities* initiative at [www.ontarioplanners.on.ca](http://www.ontarioplanners.on.ca)
- Help make your own community healthier and more sustainable by working with a residents' group, a school, a community centre, or any other neighbourhood institution to help address planning for food systems.
- Contact your local and provincial representatives and ensure that your community is supporting and promoting sustainable and healthy measures that emphasize food systems planning.

## **Our Position**

OPPI calls upon planners, citizens and all stakeholders to make healthy community planning, and in particular, planning for healthy food systems, a priority.

## **Food Systems Planning Resource List**

Do you want to learn more? OPPI has compiled a [Food Systems Planning Resource List](#). Readers are encouraged to explore these resources.

## **For further information, please contact:**

Loretta Ryan, MCIP, RPP, CAE  
Director of Public Affairs  
Ontario Professional Planners Institute  
416-668-8469  
[policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca](mailto:policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca)