



**Middlesex London Food Policy Council
Presentation to Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
Re: 2022 Pre-Budget Consultations**

MLFPC is a forum for discussing local food issues, empowering citizens to be involved in food system decisions, and creating, evaluating and influencing policy. We are volunteers who collaborate across sectors in the food system throughout London and Middlesex County.

Summary

We urge the Standing Committee members to prioritize the health and well-being of Ontarians by allocating significant resources to:

- municipally- and regionally-led strategies to strengthen local food systems, and
- preservation of agricultural land, support for sustainable agricultural practices, and investment in agri-food as a valued and viable vocation.

Food and Health

We know that food accessibility impacts every aspect of community health and well-being, and the Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted that food is not an individual concern – it is a communal one.

Access to locally-grown, fresh, nutritious food, as well as the means to grow, gather, prepare and share food improves health and well-being and consequently lowers health-care costs. It can address income inequity and the anxiety that results from not being able to afford to eat nutritiously or feed our families. It creates communities in which people want to live and be engaged.

Emergency food systems have been tested during the pandemic, and the need to support immediate food services including food banks and school food programs continues to grow. At the same time, this need highlights the failure to create and maintain long-term stable and sustainable food systems. In a province with the agricultural production and potential of Ontario, this is unconscionable.

Investment in long-term food strategies, focused on local solutions, will:

- shorten supply chains, which will increase stability during times of disruption due to climate events or pandemics, both of which we know will continue to occur
- improve health, leading to lower health-care demands and costs
- create a thriving labour market in agri-food production and related fields including food processing, food & beverage services, research & development, agri-tourism, and more
- address income inequity
- support and encourage agricultural practices which reduce GHG emissions and reduction in transportation
- address rapidly increasing demand from population growth

The province could financially support long-term strategies for stable food systems in two ways:

1. Supporting municipally- and regionally-led strategies

The 2021 provincial budget included additional funding for municipalities to help them deal with and recover from the impact of the pandemic. Although Covid is still with us, we urge

the committee to learn from the lessons of the past two years and allocate resources to long-term solutions addressing gaps and inequities in the current food system. If long-term strategies are not developed, the gaps and inequities will remain and our food systems will be no better prepared to deal with the next crisis.

As part of the mayor's task force and subsequent London Community Recovery Network discussions, MLFPC has been tasked by the city of London to facilitate research, public consultation and recommendations for long-term food strategies. Food policy councils and collaborative community groups in a number of other Ontario regions are undertaking the same work. While each municipality and community has its own demographics and needs, provincial support could come in the form of funding for municipalities to:

- conduct local food system assessments
- share resources such as online platforms and data, and
- implement long-term strategies which could involve expanding municipal capacity to coordinate extensive urban agriculture projects including soil testing, land reclamation, greenhouse gardening, distribution and composting facilities.

Food grown in urban settings could contribute significantly to meeting the demands of growing municipalities; currently this is hampered by outdated bylaws and policies that require significant resources to redesign. Resources are also needed to ensure all communities are part of the redesign process, particularly those who are systemically marginalized or overlooked. The knowledge and traditions of the First Nations allowed them to thrive here for millennia without threatening the resources on which they depended; that knowledge was almost obliterated by colonial settlement and needs to be thoughtfully and respectfully honoured and nurtured. This kind of relationship-building is essential to forming long-term solutions to food system issues.

2. Preserving agricultural land, supporting sustainable agricultural practices, and investing in agri-food as a valued and viable vocation

More than 200 different varieties of fruits, vegetables, grains and livestock are grown and processed in Ontario. The Ontario government's *Local Food Report 2021* reports that in 2019, the agriculture and agri-food sector in this province contributed \$47.3 billion to the economy and supported more than 860,000 jobs.

The same report states:

Ontario's local food system is a key economic driver for our province and in the past year, we have experienced the need for and the importance of a strong local food supply chain. Our agri-food heroes have continued to ensure that Ontarians can access local food in communities across the province, even during the unprecedented challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognizing the essential nature of the agri-food industry and valuing "agri-food heroes" means investing in both.

There is only so much land on which we can grow food. According to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, 5% of land in Ontario is prime agricultural land, and it is located within the most densely-populated area of the province. Crops grown in other parts of the province are

impacted by shorter growing seasons and soil that is less conducive to the variety of crops grown in Southern Ontario.

But right now, the equivalent of 175 acres of farmland per day is lost to urban development.

While land use planning is not part of this standing committee's mandate, prioritizing the health of Ontarians means allocating resources to preserve agricultural land that can feed a growing population. Losing prime agricultural land to development means increasing our reliance on importing food, making us more vulnerable to disruptions in supply and price increases.

By contrast, investing in land preservation, sustainable practices and agri-food as an industry would add to the labour market and the economy. The top 10 most imported fruits and vegetables alone would add \$250 million to the economy and add more than 3,000 jobs if they were grown here instead of imported.

While the government recently announced an investment of \$90 million over the next three years in education and apprenticeships in the skilled trades, including a new agency, Skilled Trades Ontario – funding provided to AgScape for developing curriculum and activities drawing youth to careers in the agri-food industry totalled \$400,000 in 2021. The discrepancy in funding calls into question how valued the agri-food industry is in the eyes of the provincial government.

In the words of then Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Ernie Hardeman, in OMAFRA's 2021 report:

For me, it's important that Ontarians understand and appreciate where their food comes from, and that young people learn about this essential sector.

They are the farmers, researchers, equipment specialists, cheese makers, butchers and chefs of tomorrow.

