

Date: May 2, 2022	Originator's files:
To: Chair and Members of General Committee	
From: Jodi Robillos, Commissioner of Community Services	Meeting date: June 1, 2022

Subject

Urban Agriculture Strategy

Recommendation

That the Corporate Report dated May 2, 2022 from the Commissioner of Community Services entitled "Urban Agriculture Strategy" and Appendix 1 attached, be approved.

Executive Summary

- Since 2006, the City of Mississauga has supported residents in food growing and providing access to healthy local food through activities including the Community Gardens program. Today, the City has 9 community gardens and 1 teaching farm. The food grown provides food to residents, local organizations and food banks.
- The development of the Urban Agriculture Strategy (UAS) is in response to two critical issues: the growing need for food security as a result of COVID and to help the city adapt to and mitigate climate-related impacts by strengthening community resilience and preparedness (Action 9-4 in the Climate Change Action Plan).
- Urban agriculture includes activities like community gardens, vertical growing, and urban farming that enhance health and wellness while stimulating the local economy.
- Equity, diversity, and inclusion has been at the pinnacle in the development of the UAS. Deliberate efforts to engage widespread, and often oppressed communities, has led to a successful community engagement process and a strong UAS that articulates the role of the City and that of our community.
- The UAS is inclusive and includes 18 actions; 11 City-led and 7 Community-led. The actions are designed to encourage, remove barriers & engage equity-deserving groups to enable urban agriculture in Mississauga. The strategy is meant to be a living document to increase access to healthy local food, overcome biases and community barriers while at the same time building trust with our residents.

Background

Urban agriculture includes activities such as community gardens, vertical growing, urban farming and composting. Sustainable urban agriculture provides multiple environmental, social, economic, and public health benefits and services. Urban agriculture increases access to healthy, sustainable and local food, enhances health and well-being while stimulating the local economy.

These activities also help our city adapt to and mitigate climate-related impacts by strengthening community-level resilience to extreme weather events and flooding. Cities around the world are recognizing urban agriculture as an important part of their climate-related responses. Important steps include keeping food supply chains local, ensuring strong urban-rural connections, enhancing pollinator habitat, and supporting community food initiatives to build resilient healthier cities.

Since 2006, the City of Mississauga has partnered with Ecosource, a local charitable, environmental organization, to deliver the City's Community Garden Program. There are currently 9 community gardens and 1 urban agriculture teaching site in City parks. The community gardens facilitate shared spaces to grow food, encourage active, healthy living, and help green the city. Community Gardens become special places where community pride shines, the gardens bring culture and a sense of community to our parks. Mississauga residents can sign up for an individual plot or volunteer to care for community plots. Community plots are shared among a local community group, corporate group, or organization. Food from these plots is donated to local food banks or used in a community program. Mississauga residents can sign up for an individual plot or volunteer to care for community plots. Community plots are shared among a local community group, corporate group, or organization. According to Ecosource, a total of 10,660 pounds of food was grown on City land through individual and community plots in 2021 and almost half of the total (e.g. 47%) was donated to local food banks. The gardens provide opportunities for young adults who want to see, and be part of, change and can be life-changing for some community members.

The community garden program supports food security in the City where 85% of garden users report food access as a primary motivation for gardening and 68% of gardener's reports that they make three or more meals per week with their harvest. More than 50% of gardeners also reported an annual income of less than \$49,999 and over 50% of gardeners were born outside of Canada. There is a clear linkage between the City's existing support for urban agriculture and the food security needs of the community.

Present Status

Within the City of Mississauga there is a demonstrated need for greater access to local, healthy and culturally relevant food. 14% of the Region of Peel residents experience food insecurity and the cost to feed a family has increased 26% between 2009 and 2016 ([Peel Food Charter, 2017](#)).

As a result of recent inflation and other impacts of COVID the cost of food is increasing even further; this is evident in the increased demand for support from foodbanks. Mississauga food bank usage increased by 14% from June 2020-May 2021 compared to same period last year and emergency food bank use increased 167%. Food bank use is higher among visible minorities; 80% of food bank clients are visible minorities while visible minorities make up only 66% of the general population ([Mississauga Food Bank, 2021](#)). There is a clear need to support our community, in particular visible minorities and other equity deserving groups who are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.

Mississauga has an active, committed and growing community of people involved in urban agriculture and a number of evolving and vibrant food action and urban agriculture networks exist in Mississauga and Peel region. The Peel Food Action Council, Ecosource, the Mississauga Urban Agriculture Network and a diverse range of other organizations support the development of urban agriculture and food security across the City.

Through our engagement we heard that improved equity, inclusion, diversity, justice, food security and food sovereignty were of great importance to the community.

All community gardens currently have a wait list, in total there are over 900 residents waiting for the opportunity to participate. The waitlist demonstrates the strong community interest and ongoing need for the City to expand its support for urban agriculture. Through our engagement we also heard that there is a strong interest from the community for the City to continue to support the development of urban agriculture.

Comments

Actions outlined in the UAS focus on creating strong relationships and connections - social and ecological - throughout Mississauga and between the City, the community, and the Region of Peel. The actions in the UAS are organized into three Action Pathways identified during the community consultation and are accompanied by actions identified as the most appropriate for either the City or the community to lead.

The UAS is unlike traditional city strategies in that actions are led by both the City and the Community. City refers to municipal staff who are involved in urban agriculture-related work. Community refers to residents, not-for-profit groups, local businesses, institutions, and community groups. The actions identify the necessary steps to advance urban agriculture and provide direction on the City and community's roles for achieving Mississauga's urban agriculture vision. The actions are accompanied by "Ideas for Implementation" which represent examples of specific and more detailed opportunities to implement the strategy actions and have been gathered throughout the consultation process. The UAS is attached as Appendix 1.

Vision for the Strategy

The City of Mississauga will support access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, while preserving the ecological and cultural heritage of the land. Through community education, health, wellness and healing, the City will increase creative and diverse opportunities for urban agriculture where entrepreneurship and innovation will be encouraged. Through the Urban Agriculture Strategy, the City will encourage healthier lifestyles; support communities' existing skills related to growing and harvesting produce; empower communities in learning new skills; improve food security; and support local businesses.

Goal of the Strategy

The strategy is intended to grow a better future for all; a resilient city where everyone has access to food and is included in creating and enjoying the benefits of a just, equitable, and prosperous community.

The Role of the City

The City and community play important roles in encouraging, removing barriers to, and enabling urban agriculture. The City plays a key role in creating conditions for urban agriculture to flourish in Mississauga. Some of the most important roles for the City include creating policies that support urban agriculture, facilitating access to land, supporting community members and organizations working at the frontlines of urban agriculture, and being responsive to the needs of the community. The City can enable and collaborate with community partners and other levels of government to grow a healthy urban agriculture sector in Mississauga.

Benefits of Urban Agriculture

Benefits of urban agriculture enhance community and ecological health. The relationship between people, communities and the land is at the heart of urban agriculture. While growing food in the city helps to create healthy communities for residents, it is also a restorative activity that brings people into close contact with the ecological processes of the natural world. Urban agriculture connects us, intimately and directly, with the health of the soil and pollinators, air and water, and the natural cycles on which all life depends. Further strengthening of urban agriculture networks including diverse leadership from across the community and active participation from the City and community members will provide the foundation for a vibrant urban agriculture sector.

The global food system is a significant contributor to climate change and is responsible for an estimated 21 to 37 per cent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. It is also vulnerable to climate change impacts including extreme heat and weather events (such as flooding and drought), land degradation, water scarcity, and wildfire damage. Urban agriculture can mitigate climate change effects in cities when:

- Food is grown in the city to reduce food miles.
- More greenspace to cool the local environment and reduce the urban heat island effect.
- Green infrastructure is supported to allow for more stormwater absorption.

- Organic, sustainable growing methods and composting are promoted which improves the soil's capacity to store carbon.
- Food waste is reduced and plant-based diets are encouraged.

In addition to supporting the City's climate goals, sustainable urban agriculture provides multiple additional environmental, social, economic, and public health benefits. Urban agriculture supports biodiversity and creates pollinator habitat. Economic and social benefits include supports for local food entrepreneurship, reduced food costs and food insecurity and strengthening community togetherness. Urban agriculture also encourages healthy, nutritious food, offers a way to exercise, improves physical and mental health and reduces social isolation among other benefits.

Areas of Focus

Actions in this strategy are organized into the three Action Pathways identified during the community consultation:

Cultivate Relationships: 1) Encourage Urban Agriculture Grow

Share the Harvest: 2) Remove Barriers to Urban Agriculture

Plant and Steward Seeds: 3) Enable Urban Agriculture

Cultivate Relationships: Encourage Urban Agriculture

The importance of strong relationships and networks was highlighted throughout the consultation process. Urban agriculture should be understood in the context of pre-existing Indigenous and land-based relationships that have been and continue to be impacted by colonialism, oppression and racism. The strategy seeks to create opportunities to address colonial legacies, explore reconciliation and healing and to learn from Indigenous teachings.

Urban agriculture networks are growing and should be strengthened to provide the ideal conditions, resources, targets, and metrics to ensure the successful implementation of the actions. The actions outlined in this pathway focus on creating strong relationships and connections throughout Mississauga and between the City, the community, and the Region.

Actions under this pathway will:

1. Strengthen networks by working with a broad range of community partners to encourage participation and leadership in urban agriculture.
2. Create City linkages with other levels of government by aligning City of Mississauga plans with Regional, Provincial and Federal policies, strategies, and programs.
3. Educate and communicate to further grow public interest in urban agriculture and deepening knowledge of the urban agriculture community.

Grow and Share the Harvest: Remove Barriers to Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture activities also need to be better defined in the City's zoning bylaw, which currently focuses on community gardens and farmers markets. While the City allows produce to be sold on public land through a permit process, raising livestock including backyard urban hens is restricted. The public consultation process identified barriers faced by the community when engaging in urban agriculture. These include land cost and ownership, policy barriers to growing and selling locally produced food, and access to land for equity-deserving groups.

Urban agriculture is well suited for underused spaces such as commercial facilities, rooftops, greenhouses, front lawns, boulevards, and other spaces, which would be made available by creating appropriate land-use categories. City facilities can also be used for urban agriculture, where appropriate. The City plays an important role in encouraging other institutional land holders to make space available for urban agriculture activities that are accessible for all ages and abilities.

Actions under this pathway will:

4. Enable urban agriculture through policies and bylaws and address barriers to growing and selling locally produced food.
5. Facilitate equitable access to land and space within the City and expand the Community Garden Program.

Plant and Steward Seeds: Enable Urban Agriculture

The City's Community Grant Program currently provides a portion of the funding to support the Community Garden Program as well as other local food initiatives. The City also provides operational support to establish and maintain community gardens. There are a number of innovative gardens, farms, businesses, and initiatives in Mississauga, but they need resources to grow and thrive. Urban agriculture resources, grants, incentives, and rebates are limited and not easily accessible, making it a challenge to grow programs and expand gardens. There is currently no long-term dedicated funding source related to local food from the City or Region.

Entrepreneurs face barriers to entry for new ventures such as navigating planning and land-use policies, accessing land and space, business development, technical assistance and marketing. The City can play a key role in supporting, cultivating, and promoting urban agriculture innovation by addressing these barriers. Funding, resources, guidance, and incentives are key elements to supporting urban agriculture. Acting on these elements will help grow urban agriculture activities across Mississauga. Programs that support development and growth will help drive innovation and new opportunities not only in the city, but throughout the region.

Actions under this pathway will:

6. Provide support, resources and guidance which can help build community capacity to secure funding opportunities.
7. Cultivate and grow incubation and acceleration programs that support innovation and opportunities across Mississauga.

Next Steps

Moving the strategy beyond aspiration and into action represents a pivotal moment in the advancement of urban agriculture in Mississauga. It also offers an important opportunity for the City and residents to work together, in positive and productive collaboration to address climate change mitigation and adaptation.

With Council approval of the strategy, staff will develop community engagement and implementation plans to advance the strategy and begin work immediately on high priority actions. The team will review, reflect and report on outcomes of the strategy to stakeholders on an annual basis and continue to implement longer-term actions as the strategy advances.

Strategic Plan

The Urban Agriculture Strategy supports the four pillars of the City's Strategic Plan:

- **Belong:** the UAS supports the strategic goal to ensure the City Thrives on its Cultural Diversity.
- **Prosper:** the UAS supports the strategic goal to Create Partnerships for Innovation.
- **Green:** the UAS supports the strategic goals to Lead and Encourage Environmentally Responsible Approaches; Conserve, Enhance and Connect Natural Environments; and Promote a Green Culture.

The Strategy is also developed as a first step in the response to the City's Climate Change Action Plan, Action 9-4: Develop an urban agriculture and food security strategy.

Engagement and Consultation

The engagement process sought input, visions, ideas and thoughts from members of the local food and urban agriculture community and members of the public. While initially scheduled as a three-month consultation process, our consultants, Hoffmann Hayes, and City staff extended the time to six months to account for deeper, more meaningful engagement and consultation and to account for the planting, growing and harvesting seasons for individuals who were directly engaged. Throughout this process we heard from ~2,400 people. Approximately 100 individuals and representatives from 30 organizations participated in in-depth discussions. The process was adapted when questions arose and as more policy research was done, which contributed to further information and ideas.

We welcomed and encouraged participation from all communities in urban agriculture-related programs and initiatives in Mississauga. We especially encouraged and enabled involvement from equity-deserving groups who have been under-represented. We did this in a variety of ways – through our consultants and working with our own internal equity, diversity and inclusion consultants and Indigenous relations staff. Our approach to further engage equity-seeking individuals and groups included one-on-one conversations and story telling as well as offering honorariums, user-friendly technologies and alternative communications including the option of providing verbal input on the draft strategy through the 311 system.

As part of the engagement, and at the request of Council, a full consultation on urban hens was also conducted. Public consultation on allowing a City-wide urban hen program was held from July 12 to August 8, 2021 through an online survey, a public education session and a public engagement session. Of the more than 4,000 people who expressed interest online, 1,858 people responded to the survey and 72 attended virtual public education and engagement sessions. A slim majority of survey respondents – 53.88% – support residents being allowed to keep urban hens in backyards on a residential property in Mississauga. Main reasons provided to support urban hens included educational opportunities, general enjoyment and access to eggs while the main concerns included attraction of pest and wildlife, noise and odor and animal welfare. The City will continue to consider an urban hen program following the completion and assessment of a small urban hen pilot in 2023.

Needs and priorities were identified through community input. The ideas gathered through this process have guided the development of the strategy. The importance of strong relationships and networks was highlighted throughout the consultation process. People spoke about the importance of social connections in a resilient city, as well as the need to nurture ecological connections. Central to every aspect of the strategy is the recognition that urban agriculture in Mississauga can only reach its full potential when it is inclusive of the community's diversity.

Financial Impact

Implementation and funding of UAS actions will be subject to the annual budget process.

Conclusion

The UAS will provide a roadmap for development of urban agriculture in the City of Mississauga over the next 10 years. Dedicating appropriate resources to the implementation, engagement and communication of the UAS will ensure the City realizes the vision and goal of the strategy, to grow a better future for all; a resilient city where everyone has access to food and is included in creating and enjoying the benefits of a just, equitable, and prosperous community.

Attachments

Appendix 1: Urban Agriculture Strategy



Jodi Robillos, Commissioner of Community Services

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