

food for thought

This is one of four summaries of the latest research on key issues affecting our access to safe, nutritious and affordable food.



Planting Seeds for Solutions: Building Communities with Food in Mind

Local governments and health agencies are paying more attention to the role of the “built environment” in creating healthy and sustainable communities. The built environment takes into account how we design, build and structure our communities, including homes, work-places, schools and transportation. It’s important because housing, access to grocery stores and urban agriculture are just some of the ways we can enhance our food security – our access to safe, affordable and nutritious food – and ultimately improve our individual and collective health.

While it takes many sectors in society working together to achieve food security, local governments can play a unique role, using tools such as planning, zoning and design. This summary of current research shows how the built environment can positively and negatively affect food security. It offers some food for thought for creating healthier, more equitable and sustainable communities.

“It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.”
James Thurber

The Built Environment Impacts the Food Environment

Access to food through stores, restaurants, farmers’ markets and food banks, etc. affects the quality and quantity of food that we consume.

- Research indicates that easier access to nutritious food is related to better health outcomes.
- Canadian studies found lower-income neighbourhoods tend to have less access to nutritious, affordable foods than higher-income neighbourhoods.
- US-based studies found higher rates of obesity and poor health in neighbourhoods that had fewer options for nutritious, affordable food.

- Lower-income neighbourhoods are at risk of becoming “food deserts” – areas that have few or no places to get affordable and nutritious food.
- Inadequate public transit or lack of other transportation options can reduce access to healthier food choices, especially for people in rural areas, the elderly and people living with disabilities.

The research highlights two further issues: food deserts and transportation.



Housing and Food Security

Rising food, housing and rental prices are creating challenges for food security, particularly for those at lower income levels. The high cost of housing in BC means people pay more for accommodation, leaving less for food. Research shows that when less money is available, individuals choose fewer fruits and vegetables.

Housing that provides adequate room for food storage and preparation can facilitate healthier eating for those living in lower cost accommodations. One extensive study recommends that single room accommodations include a small fridge and microwave or have communal kitchen facilities to support healthier eating.

Growing Food in Urban Environments

Backyards, rooftops, municipal parks, school grounds and vacant city lots provide excellent spaces for growing food, benefiting people of all income levels. Research shows that urban gardeners and their families:

- consume more fruits and vegetables
- have reduced grocery bills
- supply culturally valued fruits and vegetables in ethnic communities.

The Agricultural Land Reserve and Food Secure Communities

Land currently protected by the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) produces about 50 percent of the foods consumed by British Columbians. The research suggests that an integrated and balanced approach can help preserve farmland and promote urban agriculture, particularly in areas with significant development.

Food for Thought

Properly planned, the built environment can be a valuable tool to improve a community's food security, its health and prosperity. Working with other groups and agencies, local governments can:

- put land use planning tools to work to facilitate grocery stores, enhance public transit and improve food access in their communities
- improve the food security of vulnerable people by considering systematic and comprehensive approaches when planning for low-income housing
- help facilitate and expand local or urban agriculture with planning tools such as Regional Growth Strategies, Official Community Plans and Development Permits.

Local governments are vital players with the right tools and connections to create truly sustainable communities.



For More Information

This information sheet provides a summary of evidence drawn from current published studies and research papers. Please refer to Chapter 6 of the document *Food for Thought* for detailed information, available on the Provincial Health Services Authority website at www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth (under Food Security), along with the following research summaries:

- *New Ideas for Healthy Communities: The Link between Food, Health and Prosperity*
- *Bridging the Gap: Improving the Food Environment for BC Students*
- *A Sustainable Harvest: Weathering the Impact of Climate Change on BC's Food Supply*

Here are some additional resources for local governments, including ideas for action to help support healthy nutrition environments in our communities.

- *A Seat at the Table*: Resource guide for local governments to promote food secure communities. Showcases examples of food security projects in BC with ideas to stimulate action for creating more food secure communities. www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth (under Food Security)
- *Food Security Gateway*: This web portal provides links to projects, initiatives, organizations and resources to help build a food secure and healthy British Columbia. www.phabc.org/foodsecuritygateway
- *Bits & Bytes*: A searchable database on community food security. www.bitsandbytes.ca