Food System Strategy

A Plan for a Healthy and Sustainable Food System
The Elgin St. Thomas Food System Strategy was developed by a team of dedicated community members1 to improve the health and well-being of our residents by supporting a sustainable, resilient, and healthy food system. This strategy highlights key actions that support all aspects of a healthy food system, including production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and waste.

To strengthen our regional food system, stakeholders from various sectors must work together on the development and implementation of advocacy, policy, programming, marketing, and communication initiatives.

The Elgin St. Thomas Food System Strategy is based on principles from the Elgin St. Thomas Food Charter. The Charter describes our community’s vision of a healthy food system. The Charter outlines the values and beliefs about food in our community to provide guidance for decisions among government, businesses, communities, families, and individuals.

1The Elgin St. Thomas Food System Strategy and the Elgin St. Thomas Food Charter were developed by the Food For All committee located in St. Thomas and Elgin County.
Because we value **Health and Wellness**
we support...
- Affordable, safe, healthy food as an essential building block for physical, mental, spiritual, social, and emotional wellbeing

Because we value **Education**
we support...
- Understanding and awareness of the relationship between our food system and our environment, health, economy, and community
- Opportunities that strengthen the individual’s and community’s understanding of a healthy food system from farm to fork
- Initiatives that develop food literacy and hands-on food skills

Because we value **Sustainable Economic Development**
we support...
- A local food system that supports economically sustainable farming, processing, and distribution of food
- Mutually beneficial relationships among all stakeholders in the value chain
- Promoting our region as a food, agricultural, and culinary destination

Because we value **Environmental Health**
we support...
- Protecting farmland and freshwater resources for local food production and safe sources of drinking water
- Producing, processing and distributing foods in a way that reduces waste and conserves energy and the natural environment

Because we value **Culture**
we support...
- Promoting the dignity, joy, and sociability of growing, preparing and eating food
- Celebrating and promoting respect for traditional, cultural, and spiritual food diversity
- Connecting our rich agricultural history to our contemporary food practices

Because we value **Social Justice**
we support...
- Safe, healthy, and affordable food and water as a basic human right
- Income, housing, food, education, employment, transportation, and environmental policies that support access to healthy food for all
- Promoting food self-reliance through community food programs to reduce dependence on emergency food services
Due to the complex and interrelated nature of food systems, a systems-wide approach is necessary for creating a healthy and sustainable food environment. Healthy eating is essential for supporting healthy growth and development, preventing the development of chronic diseases, and promoting overall health and well-being. Food also plays an important social role in society; it represents an occasion for sharing and celebrating.

A healthy, sustainable food system emphasizes, strengthens and improves visibility of the interdependent relationships of sectors along the food chain, from farm to fork. Elgin County has a thriving agricultural sector, with over 1,300 family farms, which comprise 81% of land in Elgin County. Our local farmers are growing and raising a diverse range of farm products, including: corn, soybeans, field vegetables, pigs, chickens, turkeys, dairy and beef cows, and so much more.

A healthy agricultural sector contributes to the local community by providing jobs, ecological goods and services, and safe and nutritious food to the regional food system. Ensuring that local farmers have access to the transportation, processing, and distribution infrastructure they need is crucial to the vitality of the Elgin St. Thomas food system.

Nutritional health is affected by the quality, quantity, and types of foods consumed. In 2011, 15.8% of Elgin St. Thomas residents were living in low income, which can make it more difficult for them to afford and access a safe, sufficient, nutritious diet. Adults and children who are food insecure, which is the inadequate or insecure access to an adequate food supply due to financial constraints, are more likely to have poorer physical and mental health and are more likely to develop chronic diseases compared to food secure adults and children. Food insecurity can also impact an individual’s ability to manage their chronic health problems, creating a significant burden on the healthcare system. Research from 2015 showed that healthcare costs were 23%-121% higher for adults in food insecure households compared with adults in food secure households.

The impact of poor nutritional health suggests the need for sustainable approaches to address food insecurity and food access issues. A systems-wide approach needs to target the environment, institutions, and processes in which food is produced, processed, and distributed to consumers. These systems in turn will impact the availability and accessibility of healthy foods in a community. Additional strategies are required to ensure consumers can afford nutritious food and have the skills and knowledge necessary to prepare a healthy diet.

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4 Based on the after-tax low-income measure (LIM-AT) of $19,460 or less for a single-person household and $38,920 or less for a four-person household.
5 National Household Survey data, 2011
The resulting Elgin St. Thomas Food System Strategy is a comprehensive approach to improve the food system in Elgin St. Thomas. It is guided by three strategic directions including a thriving and resilient agri-food sector, food access and availability, and food skills and literacy. Suggested actions are listed for each strategic direction.
Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support economically sustainable farming, processing, and distribution of food.

Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support all residents in accessing safe, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods.

Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support all residents in making healthy eating choices through knowledge exchange and skill development.
STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1: Thriving and Resilient Food Economy

Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support economically sustainable farming, processing, and distribution of food.

Action Area

1.1 ADVOCATE AND CONSULT

Suggested Actions

1.1.1 Create an Agriculture Advisory Committee to encourage consultation with the agricultural community, and ensure that the comments are shared with County Council

1.1.2 Ensure that producers and processors engage with the Food For All committee, as needed

1.1.3 Consult with farmers on direct farm marketing, agri-tourism, and value-added policies

1.1.4 Dedicate a farmer representative to the board of the conservation authority to improve working relationships, particularly for reviewing permit applications

Action Area

1.2 LAND USE PLANNING

Suggested Actions

1.2.1 Clearly identify permitted uses in agricultural zones in municipal policies to encourage direct farm marketing and value-added agriculture (e.g. agri-tourism)

1.2.2 Inform Municipal staff about normal farm practices and related policies

1.2.3 Ensure that the roads department incorporates design features for roads, bridges and traffic circles that allow for the safe passage of large farm equipment

1.2.4 Apply for the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund (OCIF) to support rural infrastructure projects
1.3 COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL FOOD PLANNING

Suggested Actions

1.3.1 Conduct asset mapping to identify gaps and opportunities in the regional food system

1.3.2 Support the development of incubator kitchens, regional distribution hubs, food distribution portals, farmers’ markets, mobile grocery stores, and other regional initiatives

1.3.3 Promote consumer awareness of the benefits of local food through municipal or regional food system branding (e.g. Buy Local Buy Fresh maps)

1.3.4 Hire or designate a current staff member as a Local Food Coordinator, responsible for promoting local food to various audiences (e.g. events for the public, purchasing behaviours of institutions and organizations)

1.4 FINANCIAL INCENTIVES AND REDUCED COSTS

Suggested Actions

1.4.1 Enact a bylaw to exempt farm structures from Development Charges

1.4.2 Provide incentives for agricultural businesses to develop value-added opportunities on their farm (e.g. pick-your-own’s, corn mazes, processing their own farm products, retail markets)

1.4.3 Adjust the farm-tax ratio below 0.25 of the residential tax rate to reduce the tax burden on farmers
DESTINATION CHURCH FARMERS’ MARKET:

In order to support local food producers and increase community access to fruits and vegetables during the winter months, Destination Church began offering a farmers’ market in the opposite months of an existing, nearby summer farmers’ market. A test market, launched in the fall of 2015, demonstrated that there was a large group of supporters. The Destination Church Farmers’ Market has continue

FRESHSPOKE:

FreshSpoke is shaking up the food industry with an online marketplace for the growing cohort of wholesale buyers turning away from imported and processed foods in favour of those produced closer to home. FreshSpoke's platform handles the order, payment and delivery for food producers and gives institutions, restaurants and retailers a direct pipeline to fresh, local food, delivered to their door using an Uber-like delivery system. Instead of putting more trucks on the road, FreshSpoke leverages the excess capacity that already exists in the delivery system. This drives down costs and gives commercial drivers, including producers, the ability to earn extra income delivering local food. FreshSpoke has brought their innovative platform to Elgin St. Thomas!
Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support all residents in accessing safe, healthy, affordable, and culturally-appropriate foods.

**Action Area**

**2.1 ADVOCATE AND CONSULT**

**Suggested Actions**

2.1.1 Increase stakeholder understanding and awareness of food insecurity in Elgin St. Thomas by disseminating local Nutritious Food Basket and Rental Market Report data annually.

2.1.2 Advocate to respective levels of government for policies that improve individual and household income (e.g. adequate social assistance rates, minimum wage, Basic Income Guarantee, Living Wage, affordable housing, affordable childcare).

2.1.3 Advocate for tax incentives for full-service grocery stores to operate in underserviced communities.

**Action Area**

**2.2 LAND USE PLANNING**

**Suggested Actions**

2.2.1 Develop public transportation routes and “complete streets” to link consumers to nearby food retailers.

2.2.2 Implement zoning bylaws that support the development of healthy food retailers in close proximity to affordable housing units.

2.2.3 Implement zoning bylaws that support the use of available urban land for food production (e.g. community gardens, public orchards).
Action Area

2.3 COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL FOOD PLANNING

Suggested Actions

2.3.1 Conduct food desert and food swamp mapping to identify gaps and opportunities to improve access to healthy food

2.3.2 Develop a Local Food Procurement Strategy for Elgin St. Thomas

2.3.3 Expand the Good Food Box program to include at least one pick up location in each municipality and township in Elgin St. Thomas

2.3.4 Implement a mobile Farmers’ Market with at least one pick up location in each municipality and township in Elgin St. Thomas

2.3.5 Establish Community Food Centres or Good Food Organizations in East Elgin, Central Elgin/St. Thomas, and West Elgin

2.3.6 Implement a county-wide gleaning strategy to support improved food access and sustainable food waste management

Action Area

2.4 FINANCIAL INCENTIVES AND REDUCED COSTS

Suggested Actions

2.4.1 Implement incentive programs for existing retailers to offer healthy food options at a subsidized price in food deserts (e.g. subsidize the cost of healthy, fresh produce in convenience stores)

2.4.2 Implement a “Farm Market Bucks” program where low-income households are provided with an alternative form of currency to purchase local produce at participating Farmers’ Markets
Equitable Food Access and Availability

THE GOOD FOOD BOX:

The Good Food Box is a bulk buying program that increases access to healthy, affordable food. The box includes a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, yogurt, and cheese. Every month the box contents change based on what’s in season and available locally, member feedback, and the cost and quality of food. The Good Food Box includes a monthly newsletter, featuring tasty recipes, nutrition information, and information on community programs.

The program began in 2015 with 12 members and 1 pick-up site in St. Thomas. The success has continued, and currently, expanded to serve over 135 households at 5 pick-up sites throughout Elgin St. Thomas.

ELGIN GLEANERS:

Elgin Gleaners is a community group in Elgin St. Thomas that connects underused fruit trees with individuals in need. The initiative is based on other successful fruit tree programs such as FruitShare Barrie in Simcoe Muskoka and Not Far From the Tree in Toronto. The program trains volunteers to pick fruit from trees on interested homeowners’ properties, and the harvest is split 3 ways:

- 1/3 is offered to the homeowners
- 1/3 is offered to the volunteers
- 1/3 is donated to community groups

The Elgin Gleaners program aims to:

- Increase access to fresh, local produce for those in need
- Increase feelings of community connectedness
- Increase members’ skills and knowledge relating to caring for fruit trees and properly harvesting fruit, and
- Reduce food waste
Elgin St. Thomas encourages policies and programs that support all residents in making healthy eating choices through skill development and knowledge exchange.

Action Area

3.1 ADVOCATE AND CONSULT

Suggested Actions

3.1.1 Develop policies that create supportive school environments (e.g. offer opportunities for funded food skills and food literacy programming in school settings, provide food celebrations in classroom settings)

Action Area

3.2 LAND USE PLANNING

Suggested Actions

3.2.1 Implement zoning bylaws that support educational institutions and organizations to use available urban land for food skill development (e.g. teaching gardens)

Action Area

3.3 COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL FOOD PLANNING

Suggested Actions

3.3.1 Implement a public education campaign using multiple channels (e.g. print, radio, internet, television, social media, promotional materials) to increase awareness and knowledge of healthy food choices (e.g. updates to Canada's Food Guide, nutrition information on food labels, menu labelling at large food service premises)
Action Area

3.3 COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL FOOD PLANNING continued...

Suggested Actions

3.3.2 Promote comprehensive cooking programs that are supportive of knowledge and skill development to increase community participation (e.g. You’re the Chef, Kitchen Smarts)

3.3.2 Promote and provide reliable information about food systems, regional branding initiatives, food and nutrition, and general healthy behaviours (e.g. agri-tourism, on-site educational programs, supermarket tours, Registered Dietitian services)

3.3.4 Support the development of teaching kitchens in school and community settings

Action Area

3.4 FINANCIAL INCENTIVES AND REDUCED COSTS

Suggested Actions

3.4.1 Provide financial support for food skills educators and instructors in school settings to receive adequate training and support
YOU’RE THE CHEF:

“You’re the Chef” (YTC) is a cooking program designed to help develop the skills and confidence necessary to prepare healthy and tasty recipes safely. It was developed in 2005 by Registered Dietitians at Niagara Region Public Health and has since been adapted with permission by Elgin St. Thomas Public Health in 2016. The program is based on a train-the-trainer model, in which Registered Dietitians from Elgin St. Thomas Public Health train community volunteers from schools and interested agencies. YTC volunteer leaders take the information they learn during the training sessions, to teach youth, children, and adults basic cooking skills.

By the end of a YTC series, participants are able to:

- Practice safe food-handling and basic kitchen safety
- Learn how to cook on a budget
- Improve their nutrition-related skills and knowledge
- Develop confidence in their ability to prepare healthy meals and snacks

Over the past 2 years, almost 90 community volunteers have been trained to lead YTC in their organization or agency.

COMMUNITY GARDENS AND LEARNING GARDENS:

Community Gardens and Learning Gardens are valuable community resources that promote healthy communities. They provide individuals with the opportunity to engage in horticultural activities to grow and harvest their own food, thereby promoting healthy eating and food skills development.

In addition, participation in community gardening contributes to an individual’s health and well being through:

- Encouraging positive social interaction
- Providing opportunities for recreational activities and physical activity, and
- Providing a connection to nature and the environment

There are a number of gardening programs in Elgin St. Thomas where individuals can develop hands-on gardening skills, including the Moore Food Garden in St. Thomas and the West Elgin Community Health Centre Learning Garden.
Endorsements for the Elgin St. Thomas Food Charter

Central Community Health Centre
Destination Church
Earthmama Farms
East Elgin Community Assistance (Aylmer Corner Cupboard Food Bank)
EAT2LEARN
Elgin Children’s Network
Elgin Federation of Agriculture
Elgin County Holstein Club
Elgin St. Thomas Coalition to End Poverty
Elgin St. Thomas Public Health
Milestones Children’s Centre
Ontario Student Nutrition Program – Southwest Region
St. Thomas Elgin Food Bank (the Caring Cupboard)
St. Thomas Elgin Social Services
Thames Valley District School Board
YMCA St. Thomas-Elgin
YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin