

A new look at our food choices

The Local Food Revolution examines the connection between food and municipal responsibilities

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Gord Hume set out to write a book about food that focused in a light-hearted way on how it connects to families and local municipalities.

It didn't take long, however, before Mr. Hume, a member of London city council's Board of Control, realized the issue deserved serious attention and careful speculation about just how important and far-reaching the issue really is. His efforts led to the publishing of *The Local Food Revolution*, which is being published by the creators of *Municipal World*, the oldest continuously published monthly municipal magazine in the world.

"When I first started to write the book, about two years ago, I had in the back of my mind the original concept, which was kind of a light-hearted look at food and fun and festivals and family and local municipalities," Mr. Hume says. "In fact, I wrote three or four chapters that I ended up throwing out completely and re-writing because the more I researched the issue, the more I got into it, the more I realized the fact that food is a critical factor in a lot of municipal decisions. We've got some really serious health issues in this country, in our municipalities. City Halls are the epicenter of the food crisis and most communities don't know that."

For Mr. Hume, the seriousness of the issue became clear when he started looking into the health concerns that Londoners – indeed all North Americans – are facing because of their relationship with food.

"Twenty-five per cent of kids in the U.S. going into Kindergarten are obese or overweight. That is from Johns Hopkins (a world-renown private research hospital and medical school); that is pretty reliable stuff. Stats Can had a report last year that said 61 percent of adults in Canada are obese or overweight. The tipping point – so to speak – is 36 years of age," Mr. Hume says. "The prediction now is that 15 years from now 400 million people will have diabetes. That's pretty serious stuff to me. That's in the world, but most of that will be in what we call the western society. And most of it frankly is lifestyle driven."

Mr. Hume says the statistics he discovered weren't as surprising as was the fact that despite all the publicity about obesity rates in recent years was the fact that parents and children aren't making lifestyle changes.

In fact, it was Mr. Hume's connection between various food-related issues – particularly in terms of their relationship to municipalities – that became the foundation of *The Local Food Revolution*.

"There is nothing new in these things; I have just collectively put them together and tied them to municipal operations, which nobody has ever done before. This book, from what I understand, from what people have told me, is a first in the world. Nobody has ever been able to find a book like this, to tie together the municipal, the food and the community," Mr. Hume says. "I firmly believe this book is a starting point; this is not an end point. We need to do a lot more research, a lot more thinking and talking about this."

One of the key hypotheses Mr. Hume puts forward in the book is that poor food choices will have greater impacts on communities than simply helping to create an ever-rising number of obese children.

"There is a chapter in the book I called *Fat, Sick and Dying*. That is the reality. One of the hypotheses I make in the book is that childhood poverty is resulting in poor nutritional decisions, which in turn is generating more at-risk children. That in turn will have a dramatic impact on municipal budgets in the future," Mr. Hume says.

"Social welfare, health, interaction with the justice system, those are all serious government costs, some of

which are going to be municipal. Some will be senior government, but at the end of the day there is one taxpayer and one taxpayer's pocket."

The book explores not only the impact of people's food choices, but examines how municipal decisions increasingly affect where people are shopping for their groceries in the first place.

"When you look at the spectrum of operations of what a municipality does, food has an impact on every one of them. Nobody has put that together before. Urban planning for one. First of all, a study in Utah a few years ago showed that people who lived in older neighbourhoods are leaner than people who live in more modern suburbs. The reason being they tend to walk more" Mr. Hume says. "Fifty years ago we built suburbs for people; today we build them for their cars. In our planning we have got away from small, local neighbourhood grocery stores, fruit markets, bakeries, butcher shops, all that stuff. Instead we have created these huge, big box, suburban, edge-of-the-city stores where we buy vast quantities of food that we eventually throw out."

And while Mr. Hume looks at how nutrition impacts different cultures, a key focus of the book is how communities as a whole rely on food for both physical and economic well being.

"We have had a pretty strong history in Canada of food innovation. A lot of this country was founded, its towns and cities, were founded on agriculture. From the little towns on the ports in the Maritimes, from the prairie cities that clung to the railroad. Look at canola oil for example; it's a \$6 billion industry now. Farmers markets are how we are going to support local growers, local suppliers. It's pretty interesting," Mr. Hume says. "One of the theories I have developed is that there is a whole new economic engine out there, culture plus culinary. Stratford is a good example of how the culture attracts a certain audience who also tend to be attracted to good food. So you think about how Stratford has married the two, it has become a remarkable economic driver for that community.

Obviously festivals, events and so on, food is a big part of that. Why do we always end up in kitchens at parties? It doesn't matter if it is in a farmhouse or a mansion; food is the driving force."

The book examines not only the impact food choices make on communities, but how its disposal is often a very costly problem for municipalities to face.

"Landfills are a huge issue for municipalities. About 40 per cent of the food we buy is thrown away. Most of that, almost all of it, ends up in our landfill. So from a municipal point of view, it's a huge expense," Mr. Hume says. "We have to go out and pick it up, which is very costly. We have to put it in our landfill, which is very costly from both a capital and operating budget point of view. Then we have to deal with the residue, methane gas, whatever. So from a food point of view, food is driving an entire municipal department."

Mr. Hume says he hopes the book will lead to further study of the points he writes about in *The Local Food Revolution*.

"The book is very clear; this is my hypothesis I am making. Do I have a grant to do that research? No I don't. Will someone in the medical field do it at some point? Yes I hope they will. I hope this book will be a catalyst to do a lot more community research into this kind of thing," Mr. Hume says. "Again, this is the beginning of the conversation, not the end of this discussion. If I can spark some discussion, some debate about it, then that is a really good use of a couple years of my life."

Want to know more?

To order a copy of *Local Food Revolution* call 1-888-368-6125, email mwadmin@municipalworld.com or visit www.municipalworld.com.

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