

Now's the time for a local food revolution

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As a society, we are fat.
As a society, we are sick.
As a society, we are dying.

And now is the time to do something about, author and London city councillor Gord Hume told municipal officials at the Ontario Small Urban Municipalities conference in Stratford last Thursday.

Hume was a featured speaker in the Importance of the Local Food Movement workshop at the Stratford Rotary Complex, one of three concurrent sessions offered as part of the day's programming.

Earlier in the day, he launched his new book, *The Local Food Revolution*, at the conference.

Originally, he had set out to write

a lighthearted book on food festivals and community events, but as he researched further, it took a different turn.

"As I peeled that onion, the book became more and more solemn," he said.

The statistics he shared were startling: Twenty-five per cent of children heading into Kindergarten in the United States and 61 per cent of adults in Canada are overweight or obese.

Globally, nearly four million people die every year from diabetes, and currently we are raising the first generation of kids who will have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

"I don't know if that's something we should be proud of as a society," Hume said.

Part of the problem, and part of

the solution, lies in city halls, though most city councils have not yet connected the dots, he added.

Most civic leaders have not thought to iron out a local food strategy plan, despite the fact most small urban centres only have a three-day supply of fresh food at any given time, not enough to sustain its population through a border closure or serious natural disaster.

The global food supply is a complex and fragile interconnected system, he said.

There are also other major concerns for municipalities, including waste – we throw out 40 per cent of all food we purchase, which adds up to at least \$3 billion per year – and food and water safety.

In Toronto alone, lost productivity due to foodborne illness costs the

economy \$500 million per year.

He noted childhood poverty is the biggest contributor to poor nutrition, which results in high-risk kids.

"More at-risk kids means a higher price for governments, especially municipalities," he said, adding leaders can choose to "pay now, or pay later."

As the obesity epidemic grows and continues to strain the health care system, upper levels of governments will likely continue to download more services onto municipalities, and transfer fewer funds, he added.

How neighbourhoods are built also has an impact on the health of its residents. Studies show that people who live in older neighbourhoods are leaner, while those who live in new subdivisions are more likely to be overweight.

But why?

Hume said those new subdivisions don't have many neighbourhood shops and people jump into their cars to drive to big box stores to do their shopping.

Others live in "food deserts," where all the local stores have shut

down. Often, they are the poorest neighbourhoods and residents are left to buy bags of potato chips at convenience stores.

"If we're going to promote urban density in neighbourhoods, we have to provide families with options," he said, adding planners need to make sure people can access fresh, healthy food without driving to get it.

Economically, it only make sense that communities embrace local food. Food is a huge revenue generator and the economic driver that formed many municipalities.

Restaurants are key to a robust downtown and food is one of the best ways to bring back a neighbourhood in decline, he said.

"Food is really such an important part of how we live our lives," Hume added.

He said Stratford is a shining example of how to use culture and cuisine as a new economic stimulus, pointing to the success of a multi-year food tourism strategy that has attracted thousands of tourists to Perth County.

"Stratford is a good example of how that has been proven."

Civic leaders must show courage, vision