

Halifax Green Network Plan Submission

1. What is the role and/or mission of your organization?

Since 1971, the Ecology Action Centre has worked to build a healthier, more sustainable Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada. Our vision is to foster the development of a society that respects and protects nature and provides environmentally and economically sustainable solutions for its citizens.

The Ecology Action Centre's **Our Food Project** (www.ecologyaction.ca/ourfood) is working to strengthen individual and collective food access and self-reliance in Nova Scotia. Our vision of community food security means that everyone has access to enough affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food that is produced in socially, economically and environmentally sustainable ways. We also envision healthy and vibrant communities, in which there is self-reliance and social justice. We aim to support individuals and communities in developing more environmentally and economically sustainable ways of growing, purchasing, processing and consuming locally produced foods. We do so by fostering food action and activism, re-valuing local food and farmers/fishers, food skills training and education, and promoting engagement in food policy.

2. What are some of the open space values (what is important) or issues as they relate to your organization's activities?

Strong local food systems require a healthy environment, but also offer critical opportunities in enhancing individual and community health. Building healthy, just and sustainable food systems requires holistic approaches to food, social, environmental and economic policy. It depends on understanding the influence of multiple factors on community food security and the central role that food plays for ecological, personal and community health, as well as economic sustainability. The open space values that relate to this include: land and resource preservation, promotion of biodiversity and ecological health, and providing community gathering places and infrastructure that support food access and community development.

Increasing food self-reliance also represents an important component of mitigating and adapting to climate change. For example, the average distance traveled by a food item listed within the National Nutritious Food Basket¹ from its origin to Halifax, NS is 3,976 km. This distance does not include farm inputs or additional kilometres for warehousing or shopping trips.²

3. What is your vision for a future regional open space network?

Our vision for the open space network in relation to food is one that enhances personal and ecological health and values the mutual benefit and importance of a healthy open space network and community food security.

4. How do you think the Plan could help your organization reach its goals? How do you think it could impede your organization from reaching its goals?

¹ The *National Nutritious Food Basket* is a list of minimally processed foods that reflects the typical eating habits of Canadians and meets their nutritional needs. It is used to estimate the cost of a healthy diet.

² MacLeod, M. and Scott, J. (2010). *Is Nova Scotia Eating Local? And if not...where is our food coming from?* Halifax: Ecology Action Centre.

The creation and implementation of the Plan could aid in supporting key goals of the Our Food project such as protecting and promoting important food resources to support community self-sufficiency, re-valuing local food and farmers/fishers, promoting health and sustainability, as well as fostering community dialogue around issues of importance, creating a platform for engagement and action on community food security.

5. Is there any technical data or information you would like to share?

Community food security captures both the formal food economy (e.g., farming, fishing, processing, etc.) and the informal food economy (e.g., self-sufficiency efforts by individuals, such as hunting, wild harvesting, gardening, fishing, etc.).

1. **ECOSYSTEMS:** Natural systems that support plant and animal life. Water resources, vegetation, wildlife connectivity, and climate change.
 - **Protection of food pollinators:** Ensure the health and sustainability of vital food pollinators (e.g., bumblebees, (non-native) honeybees, butterflies, flies, moths, etc.) through habitat protection and elimination of pesticide use.
 - **Appropriate/sustainable access and health of fresh-water fishing areas:** Protection of fresh-water ecosystems from pollutants, development, and conflicting uses for ecological health and food self-sufficiency (small-scale, informal food economy). Access needs to be appropriate and managed to ensure sustainability, with recognition of access rights and cultural significance for First Nations peoples.
 - **Appropriate/sustainable access and health of coastal harvesting and marine fishing areas:** Protection of saltwater ecosystems from pollutants, development, and conflicting uses for ecological health and food self-sufficiency (small-scale, informal food economy). Examples include shellfish harvesting, mackerel fishing, etc. Access needs to be appropriate and managed to ensure sustainability, with recognition of access rights and cultural significance for First Nations peoples.
 - **Appropriate/sustainable access and health of wild harvesting areas:** Protection of wild harvesting areas (e.g., forests, bogs, etc.) from pollutants, development, and conflicting uses for ecological health and food self-sufficiency (small-scale, informal food economy). Examples of wild harvesting include: mushrooms, marsh greens, fiddleheads, berries, hunting and trapping (e.g., rabbit, deer). Access needs to be appropriate and managed to ensure sustainability, with recognition of access rights and cultural significance for First Nations peoples.
2. **WORKING LANDSCAPES:** Places that support economy activity. Forestry, agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and extraction activities.
 - **Preservation of food resources:**
 - a. *Conservation of agricultural areas (e.g., Musquodoboit Valley) through:*
 - i. Encouragement of sustainable farming practices that support ecosystem health and the future of farming.

- ii. Protection of prime agricultural land from conflicting/infringing uses, now and into the future, e.g., through zoning and buffer areas.
- iii. Facilitation of opportunities to ensure that agricultural land remains as agricultural land. For example, according to Food Counts, 57% of farmers are over 55 years of age.³ There is also evidence that farmers face barriers retiring, as their assets are often tied to the farm business. This creates an incentive for farmers to sell agricultural land to developers to fund their retirement. At the same time, new farmers (not part of generational succession) struggle to access capital to purchase land or begin with significant debt to be serviced through farm income.⁴

To support the conservation of agricultural land and ecological health, we encourage Halifax to use incentives for intensification and restricting urban sprawl and disincentives for the development of prime agricultural land. We also support mechanisms to enable new farmers to take on established farm businesses and allow current owners to retire, fostering the next generation of farmers and the future of farming. Examples include: lease-to-own programs and improved access to low-interest loans.

b. *Conservation of fishing areas through:*

- i. Protection from conflicting/infringing uses, now and into the future (e.g., buffer zones, zoning, wharf/right of way access), related to both fish-related infrastructure (e.g., processing, distribution, storage) and activities that could negatively impact coastal and marine ecosystems.
- ii. Protecting coastal and marine ecosystem health, including encouragement of sustainable fishing practices to protect the future of fishing.
- iii. Recognition of access rights and cultural significance for First Nations peoples.

- **Agri-tourism**

An environmentally sustainable agri-tourism industry could help residents appreciate the green network, celebrate food resources, improve access to food (e.g., u-pick, gleaning, farm shops), support rural economic vitality, and augment farm income (which could be used to support sustainable farming practices). Agri-tourism represents an important, but underdeveloped, economic opportunity for Halifax and Nova Scotia.

- 3. **COMMUNITIES:** Places we live, work, and play close to home. Rural and urban settlements, plus employment nodes.

The following kinds of open spaces should be considered priority uses, where possible, to support access to healthy, local, and sustainable foods, as well as supporting community building and community health.

³ Halifax Food Policy Alliance. (2014). *Food Counts: A Halifax Food Assessment*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Health Authority.

⁴ Activating Change Together for Community Food Security. (2014). *Making Food Matter: Strategies for Activating Change Together*. Halifax, NS: Food Action Research Centre (FoodARC), Mount Saint Vincent University.

- **Outdoor community food spaces:** This includes places for community members to come together, building social networks and social capital. Such places also allow for food to be shared, improving food access and are intergenerational learning sites about sustainable food. Examples include: Park Avenue Community Oven (and other shared food-processing and preservation infrastructure e.g., food smoking, drying, etc.) and picnic areas.
 - **Areas for food sales:** This includes outdoor (and adjacent indoor) spaces for farmers' markets, as well as mobile food buses, food truck venues, and "tail-gate" sales (e.g., fish and berry stands, etc.).
 - **Community agriculture & infrastructure:** This includes supportive zoning and infrastructure for edible & medicinal landscaping, gardens (rooftop, community, personal), greenhouses, root cellars, urban orchards, and associated bylaws and infrastructure for small-scale livestock. Issues of access and prohibiting conflicting uses are also of importance, as are height restrictions and setbacks to ensure solar access (e.g., through transferable land rights). Water access should also be considered. Community agriculture presents opportunities in brownfield redevelopment.
 - **Food hubs/centres:** Food hubs and centres are emerging as vital links in creating sustainable local food systems. These hubs/centres help bridge food distribution with food access and could form vibrant employment nodes related to a green and food economy.
4. **RECREATION AND TRAILS:** Places we go for fun and well-being, and facilities we use to move around. Natural parks, developed parks, commuter and recreation trails, and waterways.

Recreation trails can offer important access points to wild harvesting food areas (e.g., berry picking), as well as opportunities for physical activity, community building, facilitating outdoor and environmental education and raising awareness of cultural landscapes.

In recognition that there may be conflicts in use of recreation trails for food harvesting, trail areas should be reviewed to ensure that there is safe and appropriate access to wild harvesting areas that do not compromise environmental health, but that are also well-buffered from conflicting uses (e.g., hunting areas).

5. **CULTURAL LANDSCAPES:** Places that connect us to our history and define our regional identity. Landscapes associated with a historic event, activity, person, or group of people.
- **Culturally/historically significant places in relation to food:** It is important to consider the preservation, interpretation and education of green network features related to food. Examples include the Halifax Commons, which has a history of food production, as well as traditional Mi'kmaq harvesting and gathering areas. This is also an important opportunity to raise awareness and celebrate the cultural and spiritual connections of Mi'kmaq peoples in relation to the natural environment (including food).

- **Food skills and cultural heritage:** A number of non-profit groups run important educational facilities and programs that help all generations learn about farming and build food skills (e.g., Hope Blooms, Common Roots Urban Farm, the Deanery Project, Cole Harbour Heritage Farm, Spryfield Urban Farm). These should be supported and connected to the green network.

6. Do you have any other comments or concerns to share about the project?

In other jurisdictions, the creation of a green network or greenbelt has included plans for fostering a positive relationship between residents and green network features. There are several food-related opportunities well-suited to help build appreciation of green and open spaces through education and experiences (e.g., farmers' markets, agri-tourism). These require facilitation and support to be effective. A communications/marketing plan and *in situ* information would aid in building investment and appreciation of the green network, as would financial and infrastructure support for activities that help residents experience, celebrate and value green network features.

7. Are there any key stakeholders or individuals we should engage in this process?

It is important to include stakeholders from across the food system. For example, food producers (fishers and farmers) should be included through associations and networks (e.g., the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, Atlantic Canada Organic Regional Network). It is also important to engage food businesses that may connect or relate to food processing and distribution systems, including retail (e.g., Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia).

As recently reported in *Food Counts: Halifax Food Assessment*⁵, Halifax has the highest reported household food insecurity among 33 major urban centres in Canada; the number of households experiencing difficulty affording food is now one in five households in Halifax (2013). Income level is a social determinant of health, as are race, ethnicity, gender, education, and ability (among others). As a result, those most vulnerable to food insecurity often experience multiple, combined and systemic barriers to participating in public engagement processes and their concerns will likely be underrepresented. Those who disproportionately experience food insecurity would also benefit disproportionately from the protection of community food resources and enhancement of environmental health. Engagement could include representatives from community development organizations, community health teams and associations/networks working with these diverse groups (e.g., women/family/seniors' resource centres).

8. How would your organization like to be kept informed and/or involved?

The Ecology Action Centre's Our Food Project would like to be involved in any conversations related to community food security and welcomes the opportunity to provide additional information.

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⁵ Halifax Food Policy Alliance. (2014). *Food Counts: A Halifax Food Assessment*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Health Authority.