

REPORT

Climate Action, Planning and Development

To: Mayor Johnston and Members of Council
Date: November 27, 2023

From: Jackie Teed, Director
Climate Action, Planning and Development
File: 2391440-v3

Item #: 2023-779

Subject: Food Security Programs Update and Proposed Next Steps

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council direct staff to meet with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society and the Don't Go Hungry Food Program to better understand the issues facing them and to explore possible actions to minimize potential impacts on the clients of both programs, and to report back to Council based on an inter-departmental exploration of options.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is threefold: (1) to update Council on issues and uncertainty related to two food security programs serving New Westminister; (2) to document the potential impacts on those using the programs; and (3) to propose next steps related to both programs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food banks and community meal programs are meeting a significant need in British Columbia. According to Food Bank Canada's 2023 Hunger Count, there were almost 200,000 visits to food banks in British Columbia in March 2023, representing a 20% increase compared to March 2022. This trend is consistent in New Westminister, with local food hamper programs reporting consistently higher numbers over the past year. Moreover, food prices in Canada increased by 8.9% during 2022, while general inflation increased by 6.8% during this same year.

On November 3, 2023, the Mayor received an e-mail with an attached letter from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (Attachment #2). This e-mail and letter advised that it is operationally necessary to cease weekly food distribution at Olivet Baptist

Church at 613 Queens Avenue as of February 15, 2024. This program operates between 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and scans between 250 and 350 client cards and serves between 650 and 900 individuals on a weekly basis.

At the same time, another significant community-based food security initiative, the Don't Go Hungry (DGH) Food Program, which began in 2020 in response to food needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, is looking for additional funding to sustain its operations. The DGH Food Program operates out of three locations in New Westminster – i.e., the Queensborough Community Centre, Trinity Sapperton and Trinity West-End. It distributes free grocery hampers to over 270 households containing over 880 individuals on a weekly basis.

Given the large number of community members who rely on these programs, City staff met on November 9, 2023 to discuss the situation related to both food security programs. Based on this meeting, staff are seeking Council direction to follow-up with both programs to better understand the issues facing them; to explore possible actions to minimize potential impacts on clients; and to report back to Council based on an inter-departmental exploration of options

BACKGROUND

Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society

The Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) employed the following parameters in locating a potential single-day distribution site in New Westminster:

- accessible, preferably with no stairs;
- large enough to accommodate two food distribution queues;
- loading bay access and pallet jack friendly;
- rent free with regard to single-day distribution sites; and,
- street access and transit friendly.

Community Planning staff identified and shared five possible sites with the GVFBS; however, they only met some of the parameters. After some exploration, the GVFBS decided to operate out of Olivet Baptist Church at 613 Queens Avenue. Currently, the program operates between 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and scans between 250 and 350 client cards and serves between 650 and 900 individuals on a weekly basis.

Don't Go Hungry Food Program

The Don't Go Hungry (DGH) Food Program, which began in 2020 in response to food needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, is an important community-based, volunteer-driven food program. It operates in three neighbourhoods: Queensborough (Community Centre), Sapperton (Trinity Sapperton, formerly Knox Presbyterian Church), and the West End (Trinity West-End, formerly St. Aidan's Presbyterian Church), with each site experiencing significantly increased demand.

The DGH Food Program serves newcomers and those with uncertain immigration status; the precariously housed and unsheltered; the unemployed and working poor; and anyone in need of food. The Trinity West-End site also delivers hampers to individuals with health or mobility issues. In total, the three sites distribute free grocery hampers to over 270 households containing over 880 individuals on a weekly basis. Sixty percent of the clients served are families, with one-third being children.

EXISTING POLICY/PRACTICE

Existing policy is summarized within Attachment #1.

ANALYSIS

Increasing Need for Food Security Programming

Food banks and community meal programs are meeting a significant need in British Columbia. According to Food Bank Canada's 2023 Hunger Count, there were almost 200,000 visits to food banks in British Columbia in March 2023, representing a 20% increase compared to March 2022. This trend is consistent in New Westminster, with local food hamper programs reporting consistently higher numbers over the past year. Moreover, food prices in Canada increased by 8.9% during 2022, while general inflation increased by 6.8% during this same year.

DISCUSSION

Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society

On November 3, 2023, the Mayor received an e-mail with an attached letter from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS). This e-mail and letter advised that it is operationally necessary to cease weekly food distribution at Olivet Baptist Church as of February 15, 2024. The GVFBS noted that their current location is not suitable to their needs and, while they have continued to look for an alternative site in New Westminster, they have not found one that is suitable. They outlined three critical challenges with the existing site:

1. The food has to be unloaded, and non-distributed food reloaded, by hand as they are unable to use a forklift due to restricted space in the laneway and the lack of a loading bay. This slows down the process and increases the possibility of injuries.
2. The amount of food and supplies is restricted given the above challenges, which limits the diversity of food products, including dairy, meat and produce. As a result, clients are receiving less food which raises equity issues.
3. The GVFBS does not pay rent to operate their single-day distribution sites, and it is not an operational precedent they are prepared to set.

As a result, the GVFBS will be ceasing its operations in New Westminster and will expand distribution hours at its Burnaby warehouse, which is located at 8345 Winston Street. This location is 7.4 kilometres from its existing location at Olivet Baptist Church or four SkyTrain stations, plus a connecting bus ride and a 450 metre walk with a hill on the return trip.

Accessing the GVFBS warehouse will contribute to a number of challenges and hardships for clients from New Westminster, including: transit cost; increased and more difficult travel, particularly for those who may be frail or living with a disability, have young children, or pushing a stroller; and, transporting groceries further distances.

Don't Go Hungry Food Program

The Don't Go Hungry (DGH) Food Program is looking for additional funding to sustain its operations and is striving to respond to the increasing demand for food supports in New Westminster. The City provided a 2023 Community Grant in the amount of \$38,000 to the DGH Food Program. Of note, grant program criteria communicates that applicants can apply for amounts of up to \$20,000; however, a larger amount was awarded given post-pandemic food security needs. The DGH Food Program has applied for a 2024 Community Grant for close to \$60,000; however, only about a third of the requested amount is considered eligible.

If the DGH Food Program is unable to meet the increasing demand, then more households and individuals will experience food insecurity, and its associated health and social impacts.

Preliminary Communication with Both Programs

Staff have reached out to the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) to inform them of the possible impacts on clients and to ascertain if their decision is final. Staff have also posed a number of questions which could inform a search for an alternative site in New Westminster. At the time of report submission, staff have not heard back from the GVFBS.

Staff have reached out to the Don't Go Hungry Food Program. Although the discussion was of a preliminary nature, the organizers stated that City support and advocacy with regard to accessing grants and senior government funding would be of benefit to realizing a more financially sustainable operating model.

NEXT STEPS

Inter-departmental staff met on November 9, 2023 to discuss the situation related to both food security programs. As recommended, staff would meet with both organizations to better understand the issues facing their programs and to explore possible actions to minimize potential impacts on clients. Inter-departmental staff from Civic Buildings and Properties, Community Planning, the Intergovernmental Relations Office, and the Parks and Recreation Department would further explore options and report back to Council.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The preparation of this report has involved staff from Civic Buildings and Properties, Community Planning, the Intergovernmental Relations Office, and the Parks and Recreation Department.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report. If Council directs staff to meet with both food security programs, and financial implications are raised as a result of these meetings, then Council will be informed of them as part of a follow-up report.

OPTIONS

The following options are presented to Council for consideration:

1. That Council direct staff to meet with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society and the Don't Go Hungry Food Program to better understand the issues facing them and to explore possible actions to minimize potential impacts on the clients of both programs, and to report back to Council based on an inter-departmental exploration of options.
2. That Council provide staff with other direction.

Staff recommends option #1.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Existing Policy/Practice

Attachment 2: Letter from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:

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This report was approved by:

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