

REPORT

Planning and Development

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council
Date: July 15, 2024

From: Jackie Teed, Director, Planning and Development
File: #2495337

Item #: 2024-453

Subject: Food Security Update

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council direct staff not to conduct further investigation with regard to hosting a weekly food program at Hunter Heights given the lease rate and communicated costs with regard to building retrofits.

THAT Council direct staff to continue to work with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society to help meet unmet food needs and to explore opportunities to enhance supports to community-based food security programs in New Westminister.

THAT Council direct staff to continue to work with organizations operating food security programs in New Westminister to better understand their needs and gaps, and to explore opportunities for collaboration, including by engaging them in the development of a new Food Security Action Plan.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is threefold: (1) to update Council on the status of the former Museum and Archives Annex building as a possible site for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society's weekly food distribution program; (2) to update Council on a possible partnership between the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society, Fraserside Community Services Society and the Don't Go Hungry Food Program at Hunter Heights; and, (3) to propose next steps for collaboration through the development of a new Food Security Action Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On February 15, 2024, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) closed its weekly food distribution program at Olivet Baptist Church. In an effort to accommodate New Westminster residents, it expanded distribution hours at its Burnaby warehouse. According to the GVFBS, data indicates that approximately 70% to 75% of clients from New Westminster frequent its other locations, including its warehouse, on Thursdays through Saturdays. It is suspected that the remaining 25% to 30% of clients are frequenting community-based food security programs in New Westminster. These programs are oversubscribed and are facing challenges, including related to funding for rent and utilities; purchasing of additional food and equipment; and securing of staff and volunteer support.

The former Museum and Archives Annex building at 302 Royal Avenue was explored as a possible site for the GVFBS weekly food distribution program, pending potential building retrofits. However, upon further investigation, the GVFBS determined that, along with the necessary building retrofits, site constraints such as the steep slope, would pose significant operational challenges, including related to safety issues for staff operating machinery. As such, it has been concluded that this site is not viable.

The GVFBS recently approached City staff about a possible partnership with Fraserside Community Services Society and the Don't Go Hungry Food Program for a weekly food distribution program at a commercial unit in Hunter Heights, which is located at 607 Twelfth Street. While there is interest from all three organizations in forging a partnership, there are lease, building and site-related challenges with the GVFBS estimating the total project cost at about \$1,000,000. For these reasons, City staff are recommending that this site not be considered for a weekly food distribution program.

Since January 2024, local food security programs have seen an increase in demand for food supports and other basic needs items such as diapers. It has also been noted that many food security programs are having to purchase additional food from their already tight budgets to meet the growing demand.

Given the large number of community members who rely on these programs, staff are seeking Council direction to continue to work with organizations operating food security programs in New Westminster to better understand their needs and gaps, and to explore opportunities for collaboration, including by engaging them in the development of a new Food Security Action Plan

BACKGROUND

On February 15, 2024, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) closed its weekly food distribution program at Olivet Baptist Church at 613 Queens Avenue. In an effort to accommodate New Westminster residents, the GVFBS expanded distribution hours at its Burnaby warehouse, which is located at 8345 Winston Street. According to the GVFBS, data indicates that approximately 70% to 75% of clients from New Westminster frequent its other locations, including its warehouse, on Thursdays through Saturdays. It is suspected that the remaining 25% to 30% of clients are now frequenting

other community-based food security programs in New Westminster. These programs are oversubscribed and facing challenges, including related to funding for rent and utilities; purchasing of additional food and equipment; and securing of staff and volunteer support.

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. Food insecurity in Canada is associated with a wide range of health and social issues, including income inequality, housing insecurity, child and family poverty, and poorer physical and mental well-being.

DISCUSSION

On January 22, 2024, staff presented a report to Council on challenges and opportunities facing food security programs in New Westminster. The report addressed: (1) a possible new location for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFBS) weekly food distribution site at the former Museum and Archives Annex building at 302 Royal Avenue; (2) one-time financial support for emergent needs at St. Barnabas-Shiloh Fifth Avenue Church and Hope Omid food programs; and, (3) an update on the Don't Go Hungry Food Program and other organizations operating food security programs in New Westminster, including opportunities for collaboration.

Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society

Following an exploration of five possible sites, the GVFBS determined that the former Museum and Archives Annex building at 302 Royal Avenue offered the greatest potential for its weekly food distribution program, pending potential building retrofits. Upon further investigation, the GVFBS determined that, along with the necessary building retrofits, site constraints such as the steep slope, would pose significant operational challenges, including related to safety issues for staff operating machinery. As such, it was determined that this building was not suitable.

The GVFBS recently approached City staff about a possible partnership with Fraserside Community Services Society and the Don't Go Hungry Food Program for a weekly food distribution program at a commercial unit in Hunter Heights, which is located at 607 Twelfth Street. While there is interest from all three organizations in forging a

partnership, there are building and site-related challenges. As with the former Museum and Archives building, retrofits would be required and there are site constraints (e.g., narrow passageway, rear door exits onto an alley, no loading bay, and the building will be undergoing major renovations under a contract with BC Housing). Furthermore, the GVFBS has stated that the partnership would require financial support from the City to proceed, including for lease and retrofit expenses to utilize this space.

City staff viewed the commercial unit on June 7, 2024. GVFBS staff had planned to also attend but were unable. Of note, GVFBS staff had previously viewed the commercial unit. Based on the viewing and discussions with Fraserside staff, pallet access from the rear of the building would require extensive alterations and likely be cost prohibitive, given constrained hallways, narrow doorways and three flights of stairs. Other challenges relate to shoring-up of the floor to withstand the weight of the full pallets, electrical upgrades and the removal of a non-structural, interior wall. Given that the commercial unit would only be used one day per week and for four to five hours, including set-up and dismantling, it would be difficult to justify the lease amount of \$10,500 per month and the cost of necessary retrofits.

City staff followed up with the GVFBS, who confirmed that their general contractor had conducted a thorough inspection and that, based on the identified retrofits, including necessary electrical and mechanical upgrades; ensuring safe access for pallets from the rear; and securing the appropriate use of equipment and refrigeration on the floor, they estimate the project cost to be about \$1,000,000.

Given the lease and the estimated cost for retrofits, staff are recommending that this site not be considered for a weekly food distribution program. However, given that approximately 25% to 30% of GVFBS clients from New Westminster are not reported as frequenting their other locations, including its warehouse, staff is seeking Council direction to continue to work with the GVFBS to meet unmet food needs and to explore opportunities to enhance supports for community-based food security programs in New Westminster.

Community-Based Food Security Programs in New Westminster

Since January 2024, community-based food security programs have seen an increase in demand for food supports and other basic needs items such as diapers. For example, the number of hampers provided by the Don't Go Hungry Program increased from 1,107 in January to 1,124 in May 2024, while the number of visits to the hamper program at St. Barnabas-Shiloh Fifth Avenue Church increased from 830 in January to 1,133 in May 2024. It has also been noted that many food security programs are having to purchase additional food from their already tight budgets to meet growing demand. Additionally, as of June 3, 2024, Hope Omid, who serve approximately 250 households weekly and offer culturally-appropriate emergency food, has closed their operations for June, July and August and it is uncertain if they will resume operations in the fall. Given the large number of community members who rely on these programs, staff are seeking Council direction to continue to work with organizations operating food security

programs in New Westminster to better understand their needs and gaps, and to explore opportunities for collaboration, including by engaging them in the development of a new Food Security Action Plan.

The City’s Food Security Action Plan was endorsed by Council in 2018 as a response to increasing levels of food insecurity and a number of barriers related to food security efforts in New Westminster, including lack of awareness, limited access and poor coordination. The plan involved over 30 community, faith, settlement and social service organizations in its development and includes 38 actions in six key areas. A new plan is needed as there has been significant change over the past six years. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses in our current food systems and demonstrated how some groups are more negatively impacted than others.

Work Program Implications

The development of a new Food Security Action Plan was part of the work program for Social Planning for mid-2024 and 2025. Given the urgency related to food security, efforts will be made to prioritize this work. The recent addition of staff to the Social Planning will facilitate this prioritization.

Of significance, there is the ability for staff to apply for a Healthy Communities PlanH grant, in an amount of up to \$15,000, to cover costs related to a new Food Security Action Plan, including retaining consultant services, providing honorariums for people with lived and living experience, and covering costs related to catering, communications and venue rental. In the fall, staff will bring a report to Council with a proposed workplan to develop a new Food Security Action Plan.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The preparation of this report has involved staff from Social Planning and the Intergovernmental Relations and Community Relations Office.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Staff will seek prior Council approval with regard to any costs associated with potential lease payments or building retrofits related to accommodating the GVFBS weekly food distribution program, or providing financial assistance to community-based food security programs.

Should Council endorse option 3, staff will prioritize the development of a new Food Security Action Plan and will apply for a Healthy Communities PlanH grant, in an amount up to \$15,000 to cover costs, including retaining consultant services, providing honorariums for people with lived and living experience, and covering costs related to catering, communications and venue rental. If directed by Council and if the City is not successful in its application for funding, staff will seek prior Council approval with regard to funding for a new Food Security Action Plan.

OPTIONS

The following options are presented to Council for consideration:

- 1. That Council direct staff not to conduct further investigation with regard to hosting a weekly food program at Hunter Heights given the lease rate and communicated costs with regard to building retrofits.
- 2. That Council direct staff to continue to work with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society to help meet unmet food needs and to explore opportunities to enhance supports to community-based food security programs in New Westminster.
- 3. That Council direct staff to continue to work with organizations operating food security programs in New Westminster to better understand their needs and gaps, and to explore opportunities for collaboration, including by engaging them in the development of a new Food Security Action Plan.
- 4. That Council provide staff with other direction.

Staff recommends options 1, 2 and 3.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Existing Policy/Practice

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:
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