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Narrative

Food charter as a critical food guidance tool in a rural area: The case of Bruce and Grey Counties in Southwestern Ontario

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Abstract

Food charters have been one means of mobilizing critical food guidance relevant discussions among stakeholders and policy makers in rural areas. As actors in the rural food system of Grey and Bruce counties, we describe the counties' charter development led by the Food Security Action Group. We deepen discussion of each of the six domains (health, social justice, culture, education, sustainable economic development, and environment) through examples of alternative food initiatives and practices, which both informed the charter and were supported by it. We emphasize the cross-domain synergies realized as examples of critical food guidance, while cautioning about the constraints facing county efforts in the face of ongoing changes at provincial to global levels that are not consonant with the Food Charter vision.

Keywords: Food charter; rural; food security; sustainability; agriculture

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Introduction

As noted in the introduction to this special issue, one of the efforts to provide critical food guidance has been the development of food charters (Mendes, 2017). As articulated by Sustain Ontario (n.d.), "a Food Charter is a broad community statement and/or a set of goals that describe how the members of a specified geopolitical community want their food system to be." In this article, we will describe how the Bruce Grey Food Charter has provided a framework for participation in critical food guidance. We interpret critical food guidance to involve "academic and citizen groups … devising an assortment of directives, recommendations, principles, and charters to promote alternative food environments and food behaviours, which directly or indirectly challenge the capitalist economy and its growth-oriented and exploitative approach to food" (Sumner & Desjardins, 2022, p. 4).

Rural areas face unique challenges in and opportunities for developing sustainable approaches to healthy food systems (Sumner, 2005). Rural residents can face barriers to physical access to food along with higher prices for both transportation (Lenardson et al., 2015) and food (Miller et al., 2016; Piaskoski et al., 2020). Morton and colleagues (2008) found that, compared to poor urban households in Iowa, fewer rural households in poor Iowan counties accessed redistribution channels such as food banks. On the other hand, they engaged in more reciprocal sharing of fresh vegetables and fruits. Buck-McFadyen (2015), conducting research in Southern Ontario, found that limited access to rural childcare and employment opportunities were particular challenges related to income and food security among women-headed households. Being able to grow produce and hunt and fish to procure food were opportunities available in the rural environment, a practice in which urban dwellers were less able to engage.

A key part of the development of food charters has usually been a thoroughgoing discussion among a wide range of stakeholders of the state of the food system, including assets and barriers to food security in the region, as well as what can be done about the latter (Johnston & Andrée, 2019). In rural areas, agricultural commodity markets, weather, food prices for consumers compared to sale prices for farmers, and food access (e.g., transport of isolated rural seniors for food shopping) often dominate discussions about food, hence the discourse (Spoel & Derkatch, 2016) is likely to be different. Critical discussions about food, health, and sustainability provide an opportunity for questioning and mutual learning about local contexts within the broader food system.

Simultaneously, a variety of alternative food initiatives, such as consumer-producer cooperatives and community supported agriculture (CSA) operations (Levkoe, 2017), as well as alternative food practices (MacLeod, 2017), have emerged in rural regions. By alternative, we mean different from the dominant agri-food system, through programs and practices oriented towards different goals. They may harken *back* to the values and practices involved in agricultural production, fish harvesting (Lowitt et al., 2019), and food distribution and consumption practices from earlier in the rural region's history. They also envision *forward*, aiming for change in keeping with food citizenship efforts. Renting and colleagues (2012)

describe these as part of civic food networks, providing large scale examples globally of primarily rural initiatives in which civil society plays an active role in relation to the state and markets. Such food citizenship initiatives or alternative practices may provide an incentive for the development of a food charter with the hopes of scaling up concrete examples. Additionally, a food charter may act as a stimulus to growing new alternative food initiatives and practices. Both are part of Sumner and Desjardins' (Sumner & Desjardins, 2022) broad approach to critical food guidance, which promotes more nutritious food choices and more sustainable food systems simultaneously.

In this paper, we recount the conjoint development of a food charter and the alternative food initiatives and practices that provided input to the charter or were stimulated by it. We live and work in the two closely associated counties in Southwestern Ontario involved. Although all supportive of alternative food initiatives and practices, we provide different experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and perspectives, in keeping with critical food guidance approaches. Donald Cole is an environmental health physician, ecological farm member, and former community engaged scholar. Laura Needham is a public health nutritionist with a strong equity orientation. Philly Markowitz is a municipal economic development officer with a long history of supporting agri-food initiatives. As a practice report, this paper is primarily based on the authors' experience and participation: Philly Markowitz and Laura Needham were involved in charter development and supporting related initiatives. We supplemented these with a review of reports, documents, and websites. As well, Donald Cole conducted key information interviews with prior consent, took notes, and passed them by interviewees for comment and correction (member checking), in keeping with ethical research practices, although formal ethics review was not conducted given the practice report nature of the work.

After a brief history of the Charter's development, we flesh out each domain of the Charter and its values. We then provide examples of activities that embody cross-domain linkages and exemplify potential for the Charter to be seen as a critical food guidance tool within the larger tent of Sumner and Desjardin's (Sumner & Desjardins, 2022) definition. We argue that the Charter has been capable of facilitating learning as well as crystalizing key shifts at multiple levels: from regional food system policies, to food system organizations' programs, to everyday practices by food producers, consumers, service providers, and the many others involved in rural food systems. We conclude with some reflections on the constraints to be addressed in deepening the use of the Charter as a critical food guidance tool.

Development of the Charter

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force came together as a collaborative project involving approximately eighty organizations and members committed to reducing and mitigating the impacts of poverty in the community. Food security is one of the primary pillars of action within the task force, which aims to support *local* collaboration, advocacy, and systems changes

towards achieving a food-secure Bruce Grey. This territory, or Saukiing Anishnaabekiing to use its Indigenous name, is more delimited than the provincial interpretation of "local" as any food produced in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2021).

A Food Security Action Group (FSAG) of the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force was formed in 2013 and included two of the authors. Informed by other rural regions' guides to food charter development (Jaquith, 2011) and the generation of food security and economic development (Watson, 2013), the FSAG members engaged in broad public and stakeholder consultation, through both online surveys and stakeholder focus groups. Efforts were made to engage representatives from a variety of food systems perspectives, including producers and farming unions, food entrepreneurs, municipalities, community agencies, health professionals, and environmental advocates. Based on other regions' food policies, food councils, and food charters, along with community consultations, the FSAG identified six domains as relevant to a sustainable local food system: health, social justice, culture, education, sustainable economic development, and the environment. Complemented with a vision for a healthy, just, and sustainable food system, the six domains became part of the Bruce Grey Food Charter (BGPTF, n.d., see box 1).

Box 1: Bruce Grey Food Charter (BGPTF, n.d.)

A guiding document to assist in the development of policies and programs to promote a healthy and just food system in Grey and Bruce Counties. …In acknowledgement of the basic right to food, the Charter is a commitment to work together to build a vibrant, sustainable, food secure community. Based on community participation, a sustainable local food system will prioritize health, social justice, education, economic development, the environment, and culture.

BECAUSE WE VALUE **HEALTH**, WE SUPPORT

a) Public policy that recognizes food's contribution to physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being
b) Making food readily accessible for our rural and urban residents, including adequate transportation links, neighbourhoods that encourage walkable and bikeable access to healthy food
c) Strategies to prevent and manage chronic diseases through access to affordable, healthy, safe, adequate, and culturally appropriate food
d) Baby friendly policies that protect, promote, and support breastfeeding through informed decision making

BECAUSE WE VALUE **SOCIAL JUSTICE**, WE SUPPORT

a) Making sure everyone has access to healthy food
b) A fair wage for the production of food, and a safe and respectful environment for all farmers and food workers
c) Allowing land access for people interested in growing and/or processing food
d) Income, education, employment, housing, and transportation policies and practices that support access to healthy, sustainable food

BECAUSE WE VALUE **CULTURE,** WE SUPPORT

a) Celebrating and promoting respect for and inclusion of traditional, cultural, and spiritual food diversity
b) Enhancing the dignity and joy of growing, preparing, and eating food
c) Strengthening links between rural and urban communities
d) Opportunities for all community members to be included and to make connections through the experience and sharing of food.

BECAUSE WE VALUE **EDUCATION**, WE SUPPORT

a) Food literacy and skill building initiatives that engage youth and students integrated in school curricula
b) Programs that train current and future farmers, home gardeners, food producers, and others involved in the food value chain
c) Integrating food literacy, community gardening, and seed saving into communities
d) Developing community gardens at schools and other public settings
e) Public education about the connections between our health, the environment, and our food choices
f) Public awareness of the role of agriculture in our lives

BECAUSE WE VALUE **SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**, WE SUPPORT

a) Increasing the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of foods from Grey and Bruce
b) Promoting our region as a food, agricultural, and culinary destination
c) Food and agricultural research that is innovative, sustainable, and includes alternative food systems
d) Services and infrastructure that support local farms and the development of local food-related programs and businesses
e) Practices that recognize the detrimental impact of food transportation and strive to minimize environmental burden

BECAUSE WE VALUE **ENVIRONMENT**, WE SUPPORT

a) Farming practices that protect and enhance watersheds, wildlife habitat, soil, and biodiversity
b) Food production methods that sustain the natural environment in rural and urban settings
c) Sustainable development of agriculture, water, land use policies, and practices that support the production of healthy food

The Charter has become an important tool to inform local policy concerning food and agriculture. It has been a way to both develop a common understanding among agency members and food system activists, and to share that understanding through depositions to municipal councils—most of whom have members in the agri-food sector. Importantly, the Bruce Grey Food Charter has become part of the local policy landscape without cost to municipalities. With the COVID-19 pandemic laying bare multiple vulnerabilities in food systems, FSAG members

have utilized the Charter to facilitate more holistic discussions. Similar to other food system planning exercises (Clark, 2019), FSAG members include representatives from civil society (e.g., United Way, Salvation Army, Meeting Place), coalitions (e.g., Healthy Kids Community Challenge of Southeast Grey), food specific non-governmental organizations (e.g., OSHaRE in Owen Sound), and government at regional (public health), county (Grey County economic development), and municipal (multiple municipalities, including Owen Sound) levels. Municipalities particularly have turned to FSAG resource people to better understand issues of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative network formed around Charter development has been able to serve marginalized community members without interruptions, even enhancing efforts through increased participation in food rescue and greater sharing of food.

Member organizations have also been able to modify their approach to food programs guided by the Charter. For example, the Grey Bruce Health Unit shifted from traditional, downstream nutrition programming (mostly individual behaviour-based guidance and education) to a form of critical food guidance based on an "upstream" food system approach (Raine, 2010) involving policy development, advocacy, and community capacity building. This systemic, more preventative approach combines food security, nutrition, and the social and ecological determinants of health (Lang, 2005; Raphael, 2003). Public-health dietitians and other staff are empowered to act on systemic issues that influence eating behaviours and health disparities (McCullum et al., 2005). This shift has resulted in a greater emphasis on community building, partnership development, and advocacy for health-promoting planning, policies, and programs (Desjardins et al., 2011), as exemplified in examples of initiatives and practice relevant to each domain of the Charter, which we now explore.

Health

All aspects of health—physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual—are regarded as relevant in the Charter (item (a) under Health in Box 1). Here, we provide examples of practices consistent with the Charter engaged in by coalitions, an inter-professional committee, an Indigenous community, and a vanguard chef.

The Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU) has supported programming and policy changes to improve health through nutrition, including advocacy for built environments that make healthier food choices more accessible, for example through a good food box delivery programme. The Southeast Grey Healthy Kids Community Challenge engaged a variety of sectors including local government, private business, schools, and public health. Communities, families, and children were inspired to support healthier food practices under the themes "Choose to Boost Your Veggies and Fruit" and "Water Does Wonders."

GBHU dietitians further collaborate with their primary care colleagues through the Grey Bruce Nutrition Committee (GBNC). This committee has recognized the value of addressing barriers to nutritious food choices across practice settings. The members have shared experiences

and established consistent language and resources related to food insecurity, breastfeeding, infant feeding practices, and malnutrition among older adults in our communities. By combining the voices of these professionals, the GBNC has been able to enhance their impact and encourage the use of best evidence in nutrition among other professionals.

Another initiative has been the planting of a 'Gtigaan Ki' Forest Garden (Hutter, 2013) by Saugeen First Nation. The garden includes fruit trees and traditional wild medicines. The coordinator of the Forest Garden reports to the Wellness Program coordinator of this Indigenous community, who also runs programs for the many members with diabetes. Similarly, the Bruce Botanical Food Gardens produces a wide range of heritage and rare plants from the counties, with substantial inputs for soil health (e.g., coffee grounds from a nearby franchise and green fertilizer from comfrey, which is high in potassium). With goals of preservation and education paired with practical application (e.g., children pick snails out of the garden), the gardens are open to all to pick produce and provide a donation as they are able. There is often extra produce supplied to needy families and food banks in nearby towns (Nan Grant, personal communication, Sept 2018).

Alison Rowe, a Walkerton-based chef, decided to reduce reliance on meat for her own and her husband's health. She led a monthly potluck called "Our Healthy Plate" and conducted a three-evening Transitions course in the local high school to help people transition from an "over-reliance" on meat sources to plant sources, with an emphasis on local foods. Her programming presaged the move exemplified by the most recent Canada's Food Guide (Health Canada, 2019). She has received referrals from local health providers for counselling people with chronic conditions that require dietary transitions (e.g., those with gout, obesity, and heart disease).

These examples link to items in the Health domain addressing food accessibility (b) and prevention and management of chronic diseases with culturally appropriate foods (c). Historically, the Healthy Communities Partnership addressed municipal and county policy (a) and the Grey Bruce Health Unit addresses baby friendly policies (d), while education efforts are addressed under the Education domain below.

Social justice

The Charter clearly recognizes that all Canadians have the right to food. Through public and stakeholder consultation, social justice action was identified as important to the vision for the Grey Bruce food system. Many Grey Bruce households struggle to reliably access the food they need due to financial constraints (FSAG, 2016). According to the 2019 Grey Bruce Nutritious Food Basket (GBHU, 2019a), costing for a reference family of four was $217.99 per week, or 36% of the maximum Ontario Works income. United Way of Bruce Grey (n.d.) hosts the Food Bruce Grey app, which reports meals provided on a monthly basis, with inputs from a wide range of produce distributors, food banks, and meal programs. Between March 1, 2020, and Feb 31, 2021, more than 160,000 meals were provided to community members in need, and 9,942 households (19,242 individuals) were served through food banks in Grey Bruce. This represents

a commitment of 25,811 volunteer hours (United Way of Bruce Grey, n.d.), yet the FSAG has maintained that use of local food charities is by only a fraction of the 20% of Grey Bruce households experiencing food insecurity in our region (GBHU, 2019b).

The second annual Fall Food Gathering (September 20, 2018) combined the work of the United Way's Food Bank Summit with the broader-based mandate of the Fall Food Gathering. Co-sponsored by the Grey Bruce Sustainability network and the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force (BGPTF), the collaborative effort brought together food system players to connect, collaborate, share, and learn about current needs and opportunities to improve food security for all in Grey Bruce (BGPTF, 2018). Participants included not only those from a range of health and social services, but also people with experience living on low incomes, who inform and advocate for inclusion of their views.

Maryanne Buehlow from the Walkerton Food Bank described how she forged a partnership with the Foodland grocery store in town, gleaning meat when it was no longer saleable at the store according to corporate policies but could be prepared safely for a large community dinner sponsored by the food bank. The Fair Fields CSA (community supported agriculture) offered weekly shares of fresh, ecologically farmed produce for the food bank as well, donated by physician family friends of the farm. In Wiarton, the Salvation Army and GBHU initiated, and then the Green House of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), assumed leadership of a Good Food Box site as a "collective buying program [which] provides a grocery bin of fresh seasonal produce at a low price, encourages nutritious food choices, and promotes fresh fruits and vegetables" (Grey Bruce Good Food Box Program, n.d.).

The Grey Bruce Food Gleaning project has been working actively with farmers who lack the labour or time to harvest their entire crop. Initially enlisting students from Georgian Community School to pick raspberries, organizations like the Knights of Meaford now bring their hockey team to help. Volunteers take about 20% of the pickings, and 80% goes to programs. So many apples were gleaned that, after sharing them with school children, adolescents, and food bank members, some could be converted to apple sauce for sale through local markets. As word has spread, other organizations outside Meaford have become involved (e.g., the Southeast Grey Community Health Centre in Markdale). Food gleaning efforts continue to grow as local businesses and community organizations join the Food Rescue network that facilitates communication between the two sectors whenever excess food becomes available. Some local grocers have now established regular donations of food not anticipated to sell, saving disposal fees while reducing their contribution of organic waste and its associated greenhouse gases (Nikkel et al., 2019).

Co-chair of the Fall Food Gathering Jaden Calvert returned from food systems, horticulture, and organic farming training at the University of Guelph to his native Meaford to engage in community food system activities. A community organization, Golden Town Outreach, wanted to develop a community garden near geared-to-income housing, involving children and youth. The food bank and the high school provided land for plots and labour to build raised beds to improve accessibility for those with physical challenges. Together, they

wove participation in garden activities into school curricula, providing children from low-income families with education on nutrition and practical skills in gardening to impact their own and their families' food choices. The Community Mental Health Association aligned an outreach counselling service, linking food security (social justice) with mental health (health). Both the Meaford Community Gardens and CMHA have demonstrated leadership in establishing a Grey Bruce Community Gardens Network. The Network has hosted events with the support of the Grey Bruce Sustainability Network to engage others in establishing or enhancing their own community gardens locally.

These examples emphasize multiple efforts around Charter Social Justice item (a), to improve access to healthy food for everyone, and (c), providing land access for those interested in growing and processing food. Wages for food producers and workers (b) are more difficult to address, while the broader range of social determinants of access to healthy food are addressed by other BGPTF Action Groups, for example those on Income Security, Housing, and Transportation.

Culture

Dietitians of Canada has recognized that culture and food are intertwined, and that culture should be considered by dietitians in developing a sustainable food system in Canada (Carlsson et al., 2020): "Canadians value food, its origin and quality, and express identity and culture through foods" (p. 7). As the first humans on Saukiing Anishnaabekiing (now Grey-Bruce), Indigenous people developed a food culture which drew upon the vast fisheries resources of nearby Lake Huron and Georgian Bay (Cleland, 1982). Despite persistent fishing conflicts with settlers (Warry, 2000), the Chippewas of Nawash (Neyaashiinigmiing) continue to exert their food sovereignty by gathering sufficient fish for their own consumption and to sell through local outlets (Lowitt et al., 2019). Youngblood (2017) reports that "First Nations People in this area are already seeing changes … that could be related to climate change, such as smaller, unripe and harder-to-find berries, shorter and less abundant sweet grass, changes in timing of ripening and maturing of plants, lower lake water levels, less flowing water in creeks and streams, fewer wildlife, fewer fish and a general feeling that the environment is degrading" (p.24) (see also Environment domain 6 below). This highlights the importance of valuing all species in an area, as was done in the opening of the 2018 Grey Bruce Fall Food Gathering by Shirley John of the Saugeen First Nation. In keeping with Haudenosaunee food tradition (Gordon et al., 2018), she gave thanks for all the food plants. These Indigenous food systems contribute to food security of Indigenous people and sharing of food-based traditions.

Food-based traditions are also observed within the settler agricultural sector in Grey Bruce. Since agriculture became a major activity in the counties in the 1800's, agricultural societies have promoted fall fairs with a variety of historical and cultural activities (e.g., crafts, past agricultural practices). Although virtual during the pandemic, they help connect rural and urban members of the counties with local food production and processing. For example,

Sydenham's fall fair has been running for over 160 years and is geared to young students to encourage them to "plant gardens, create arts and crafts, […] raise livestock, take photos, and create short films" (Sydenham Fall Fair, 2020). Other agricultural societies have promoted community gardens to share the joy and continue the practice of growing food among children, as well as those with health challenges, in collaboration with the community health centre and mental health association.

Cultural initiatives involve embracing diverse cultures and their cuisines as well. The Eat Well Market in Hanover includes "Patricia Morgan, originally from Jamaica, [who] sells traditional West Indian prepared foods at the market. A former restauranteur, she moved with her family [to Hanover] last year and is now a regular vendor. Her food offerings… include such dishes as fried plantain, callaloo (spicy greens), and stewed goat" (Kenny, 2018). Chef Alison Rowe in Walkerton responded to those interested in learning about different food cultures by creating cooking classes in which participants learn to prepare dishes from different parts of the world. She notes that what has become accepted as traditional cuisine in Grey Bruce has actually been transformed over time, "from meat once or twice a week to several times a day" (Alison Rowe, personal communication, September, 2018) for many people. Previously part of the Grey Bruce Agriculture and Culinary Association, she aims to increase the diversity of cuisines that people can appreciate, particularly those with long traditions of plant-based foods. Hence, examples can be found for all Charter items (a-d) under Culture.

Education

Consistent with Sumner's (2005) emphasis on its role as part of the civil commons, education is a key domain in the Charter, and plays a prominent role in alternative food practices. GBHU members have worked on food literacy (LCDP, 2017), expanding this to include all the attributes, knowledge, and skills needed for healthful eating. Student nutrition programs in schools and the Grey Bruce Good Food Box program represent key opportunities to apply the food literacy framework and strengthen outcomes. A particular focus has been placed on inspiring health early in the lifecycle, in part by supporting at-risk prenatal and perinatal households through the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP). In partnership with Keystone Child, Youth, and Family Services, CPNP delivers group education, skill building, and peer-support opportunities to improve food literacy and health outcomes during pregnancy and early infancy.

"Grown in Grey" provides curriculum-matched education for grades four to six, with an emphasis on agriculture and related industries, including activities around food choices (grade four), nutrition facts and media influences on food choices (grade five), and biodiversity and healthy eating (grade six). Such programs are particularly important as fewer and fewer children grow up on farms, even in rural areas. For youth in Hanover, the

> Launch Pad Youth Activity and Technology Centre, a town-supported facility serving youth, between the ages of twelve and eighteen, in the Grey and Bruce County region… offers skills training to grow youth's aspirations and help them set and achieve personal goals. This year the Launch Pad added entrepreneurialism to its skills development program, and on June 2, became a vendor at Eat Well Market. Youth […sell] items they have created themselves or as a group from the Launch Pad's commercial kitchen utilizing in-season fruits and vegetables (Kenny, 2018).

Vendors have also started hiring youth to attend to shoppers at various market stalls, providing links to livelihoods.

For adults, cooking classes are provided both by independent chefs and through community programs. For example, in 2014, Golden Town Outreach partnered with the Municipality of Meaford to deliver cooking programs that bring all walks of life together to learn, cook, and share nutritious, culturally diverse meals. These cooking programs are designed to build food skills, to reduce social isolation, and to increase access to healthy food. They are supported by Grey Bruce Public Health's Healthy Babies Healthy Children program. New programs include the "Cooking with the Good Food Box" group in Walkerton, a virtual program with food kits for participants out of the Meeting Place in Tobermory that started during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a program based on a partnership between the Southwestern Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC) and M'Wikwedong Indigenous Friendship Centre that also includes elements of Indigenous Food Sovereignty and traditional foods. These Education domain activities emphasize items (a-c) and (f). Others described above included community gardens (d) (Social Justice domain) and public awareness and education (fall fairs in the Culture domain).

Sustainable economic development

The majority (58% or 4265 km^2) of the total land area of Grey and Bruce Counties is farmland, mostly (65%) devoted to cash crops. In the province of Ontario, "Grey County lead[s] the production of apples (45% of provincial apple acreage), flaxseed, and area planted to canola, barley, and mixed grains" (FSAG, 2016, p. 7; Cummings et al., 2015). Further, unlike many rural areas, the number of farmers is actually increasing, with an influx of members of the growing Mennonite community as well as alternative kinds of producers, such as CSA operations. However, new farms are primarily smaller, as medium-sized farms decrease and large farms grow (Grey County, 2019). Bruce County has one of the longest functioning community pastures in Canada (fifty-five years), another form of land usage partnered with the Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority (Dadson, 2016). The commitment to build on both their agricultural heritage and newer food options led the counties to commission a Business Retention and Expansion study focused on agri-food (Ainley Group, 2018). It also stimulated the development

of an agri-food strategy for Grey County (Planscape, 2017). The latter included emphasis on supporting local food production, services, infrastructure, processing, and innovation, consistent with the Charter.

Supports for sustainable agricultural production are a key concern for local governments and farmers' organizations, as evidenced by Ecological Day in the 2018 Grey Bruce Farmers' Week, when two alternative producers were highlighted. Tarrah Young of Green Being Farm produces and directly markets pastured pork, poultry, eggs, and grass-fed beef, with a mandate of raising animals in a way that does not compromise their dignity or that of the environment (see Suderman, n.d.). Similarly, Linton Pasture Pork is a small farrow-to-finish operation, primarily an in-pasture family farm. It strives to ensure its animals are raised in a sustainable environment, are treated humanely, and are fed a diet that supports their natural growth cycle.

Historically, livestock markets thrived in the counties (e.g., Keady Livestock). More recently, farmers' markets have developed an explicit interest in promoting fresh and locally produced foods as a way to reduce food miles and encourage relationships between consumers and producers. For example, the Eat Well Market was started in Walkerton by chef Alison Rowe in 2011 to fill the gap in terms of health foods and alternative cuisine options in the area. She described long-term engagement with customers who made changes to their diet by incorporating more vegetables, thereby reducing their weight and becoming more energetic (A. Rowe, personal communication, September 19, 2018). Rosemary Crick, a nearby biodynamic vegetable producer, initially participated as a vendor in the Eat Well Market before taking on the volunteer coordinator role and working with the City of Hanover to support establishment of the market in the Hanover town square (Kenny, 2018). Crick took on the challenge of growing the market by gradually increasing vendors and reaching out to residents from Hanover and surrounding towns with the intention of developing a sustainable and socially responsible business option for local producers. She actively networked with other farmers' markets through the Green Belt Foundation's farmers' market group to gather ideas and garner support.

Another link to sustainable economic development is through Eat Local Grey Bruce, a food co-op with an online ordering system that delivers locally grown food to member-consumers' doors. It was launched in early 2015 and spearheaded by Thornston Arnold, who is a co-producer with his wife Kristine Hammel of Persephone Market Garden, co-founder of the Grey Bruce Centre for Agroecology, and consultant to the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. Governed by both producers and consumers, Eat Local Grey Bruce is incorporated as a not-for-profit co-op so it can receive donations and grants for co-op development work, start-up staffing, and volunteer coordination. Ahren Hughes was a producer board member from Blackshire Gardens who supplies ecologically grown beans, mushrooms, and other produce to the co-op, which he describes as one route among "a diversity of ways for people to access local food" (personal communication, August 2018). In relation to equity, much of the food they provide has been more affordable due to bulk buying from the former Ontario Natural Food Company, as well as from the Huron Mennonite auction. Further, they donate any surplus of fresh produce to the food bank in Owen Sound (connection to C.2, social justice). Ahren has

enjoyed the ongoing learning and contribution to the co-op as a viable model for providing food to people (as promoted by the Local Food and Farm Co-op) and for improving "collective well-being" in Grey Bruce. Eat Local Grey Bruce experienced a surge in demand and members from the start of the pandemic, transforming its operation to better serve its stakeholders (Kralt & Cole, 2021).

Supermarkets in the region have represented a more challenging aspect of sustainable economic development, particularly given their power in the agri-food marketplace. For grocery store franchises, such as Foodland and the Independent, "local food" encompasses food grown anywhere in Ontario, with distant greenhouse operations featured on in-store signage. Overall company policies designed to reduce risks of contamination (e.g., meat only from federally inspected slaughterhouses instead of provincially inspected ones) limit store managers' choices (Store managers, personal communications). However, some managers are authorized to procure five to ten percent of their stock from closer operations, including fresh produce such as corn and pumpkins grown in Grey Bruce, as well as preserved products such as apple cider produced on nearby organic apple farms (Filsinger's Organic Foods). Other local products, including sweeteners (honey and maple syrup), dairy products (cheese and yogurt), cured meats, and wine and ciders sold in the off-license area of their stores, are all available in the Owen Sound Foodland, for example.

Agri-culinary tourism is promoted as a way to stimulate the local food economy and form connections between producers, processors, and consumers. Once a hotbed for bootleggers during Prohibition, Grey and Bruce counties now have Vintners Quality Assurance (VQA) wineries, craft breweries, and heritage cideries using locally grown grapes, hops, and apples. Many can be visited on the Saints and Sinners Trail (Grey County, n.d.). The Grey Bruce Agriculture & Culinary Association promoted public awareness of local produce, preparations, and preserved foods. Its initiative resulted in a variety of agro-culinary trails to highlight both historical and current products of the region, such as the Apple Pie Trail. Hence, items (a-d) in the Sustainable Economic Development domain of the Charter are areas of activity, perhaps due to the involvement of the Grey County agri-food economic development staff in Charter formulation, with (e) needing more attention.

Environment

Both Grey and Bruce counties incorporate a wide variety of terrain (fields, forests, wetlands, urban areas, shoreline, and parkland) and soil types (Hoffman & Richards, 1954). Available environmental indicators framed around ecosystem health (Lam et al., 2014) found generally good conditions, although with important data gaps around biodiversity and trends in soil quality. The Grey Bruce Sustainability Network arose after the contamination of Walkerton's wells with runoff from livestock operations, resulting in many town members becoming ill and some dying (Ali, 2004). Partly as a response, more farmers developed Nutrient Management Plans, and these are now required provincially.

Early on, Grey County farmers were active in the development of Environmental Farm Plans, "an assessment voluntarily prepared by farm families to increase their environmental awareness in up to twenty-three different areas on their farm" (OSCIA, n.d.). Emphasis is on mitigating the potential for biological and chemical contamination of people, products, and environmental media. Over 2,500 people participated in workshops in the first decade (Ray Robertson, personal communication, October 2018), although implementation is harder to assess (Schmidt et al., n.d.). At the same time, pesticide application continues to threaten bee populations (one owner lost one third of their hives in a recent season), despite an increase in the number of apiaries in recent years (Grey County, 2019).

Concern has been voiced about declining fertility on leased farmland, where the incentive to invest in building the soil is reduced. One response is to link with farmers who follow healthy land management practices, either online or through face to face (F2F) matchmaking events (see Caldwell et al., 2015). Substantial numbers of newer farmers in Grey County are members of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, experimenting with more sustainable practices on their farms. Similarly, increasing numbers of farmers are active with Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) Grey Bruce, which "currently supports projects such as tree planting, wetland creation, buffer enhancement, exclusion fencing, grassland plantation/preservation, and pollinator habitat…" (ALUS, n.d.) The Grey Bruce ALUS coordinator has noted that "older farmers are involved to preserve their land for their grandchildren, while younger farmers are experimenting with multi-land-use systems as part of integrated farm operations plans" (Keith Reid, personal communication, October, 2018). The 2018 *Ag 4.0* conference included a focus on "innovation in agriculture and food production and also in soil and water conservation and climate change mitigation." (Grey County, n.d.) As those involved in a study of the agri-food sector (Ainley Group, 2018) noted, sustainable livelihoods were seen to depend on good crop rotation practices. As one farmer put it, "every farmer's aim should be to leave farmland better than they found it." Building organic matter ("the king") through green and barnyard manures is an example of re-discovering historic practices which were part of agri–culture (McLean & Atkinson, 1951; Shutt, 1898; Shutt & Wright, 1927).

Conservation authorities (Grey Sauble and Saugeen Valley) actively promote tree planting in the watersheds under their responsibility as part of erosion (due to water and wind) reduction and water source protection, particularly re-establishing strategically placed fence (hedge) rows. Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority sponsors a farmer-to-farmer outreach series entitled "Coffee, Crops & Donuts," with topics ranging from soil health to the economics of stewardship. Jaden Calvert, a municipal councilor and community food activist who served on the board of the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, noted how doing both helped to "push forward social and environmental goals in municipal strategic plans". Terms like "ensuring sustainability" and "caring community" have begun to appear in municipal plans (Jaden Calvert, personal communication, October 2018).

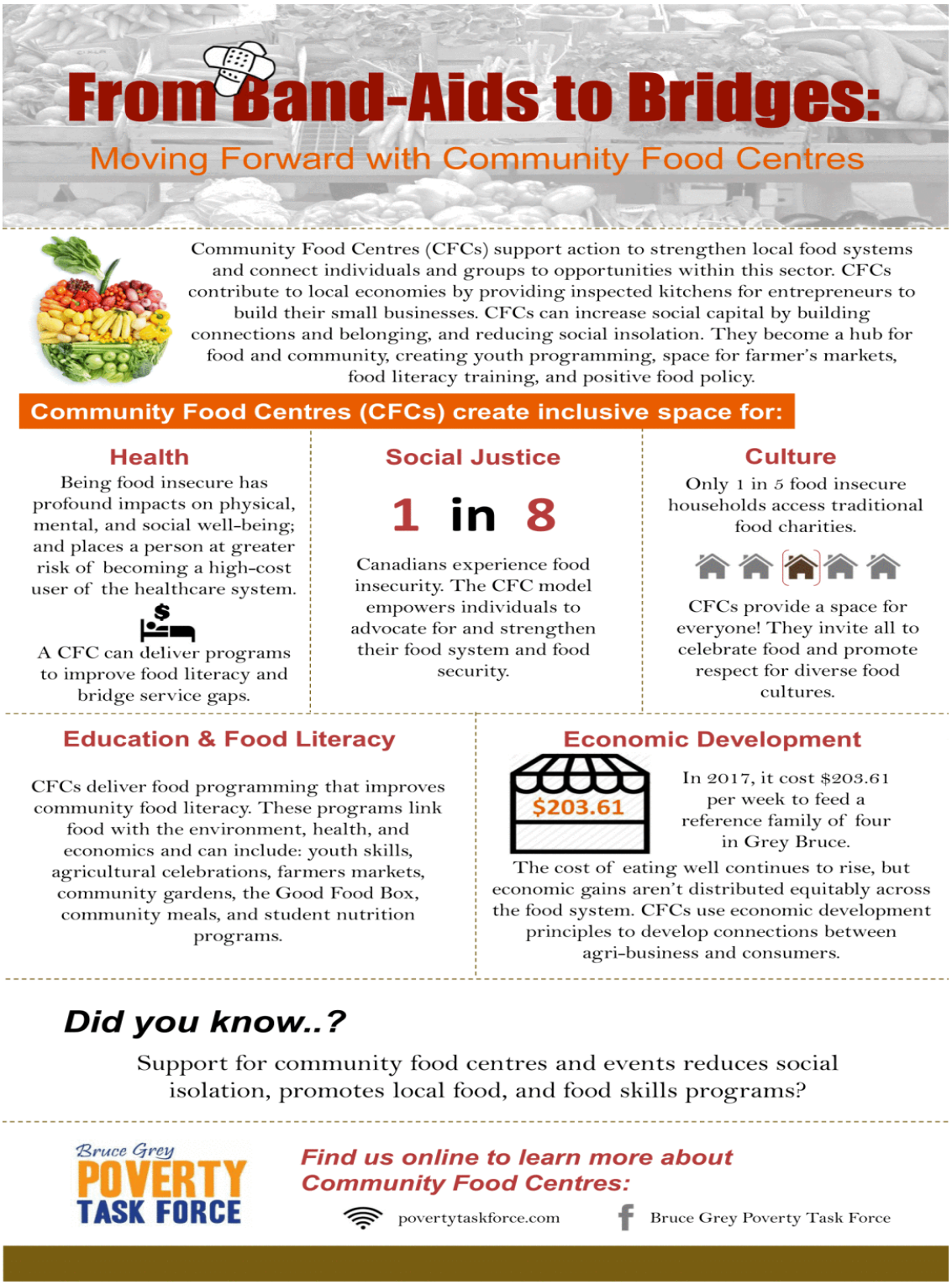
More recently, the Healthy Communities Partnership hosted a virtual Climate Change Conference (Oct 2020). Elements of the food system were discussed through concurrent sessions

on regenerative agriculture, food recovery, and food waste production. Building on the success of this event, the Grey Bruce Sustainability Network launched a virtual Sustainable Living Series (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLc7JvbEAIJLN0fcoeNqJqwd_988ux5faT) with keynote interviews including topics such as community gardens, regenerative agriculture, waste management, and nature-based solutions to improve carbon sequestration as key targets for both emission reduction and adaptation to climate change. These series allowed community members to engage with local experts and explore how individual and collective actions can positively influence the environment. Therefore, all (a-c) items in the Environment domain are being actively pursued in the counties.

Linkages across domains

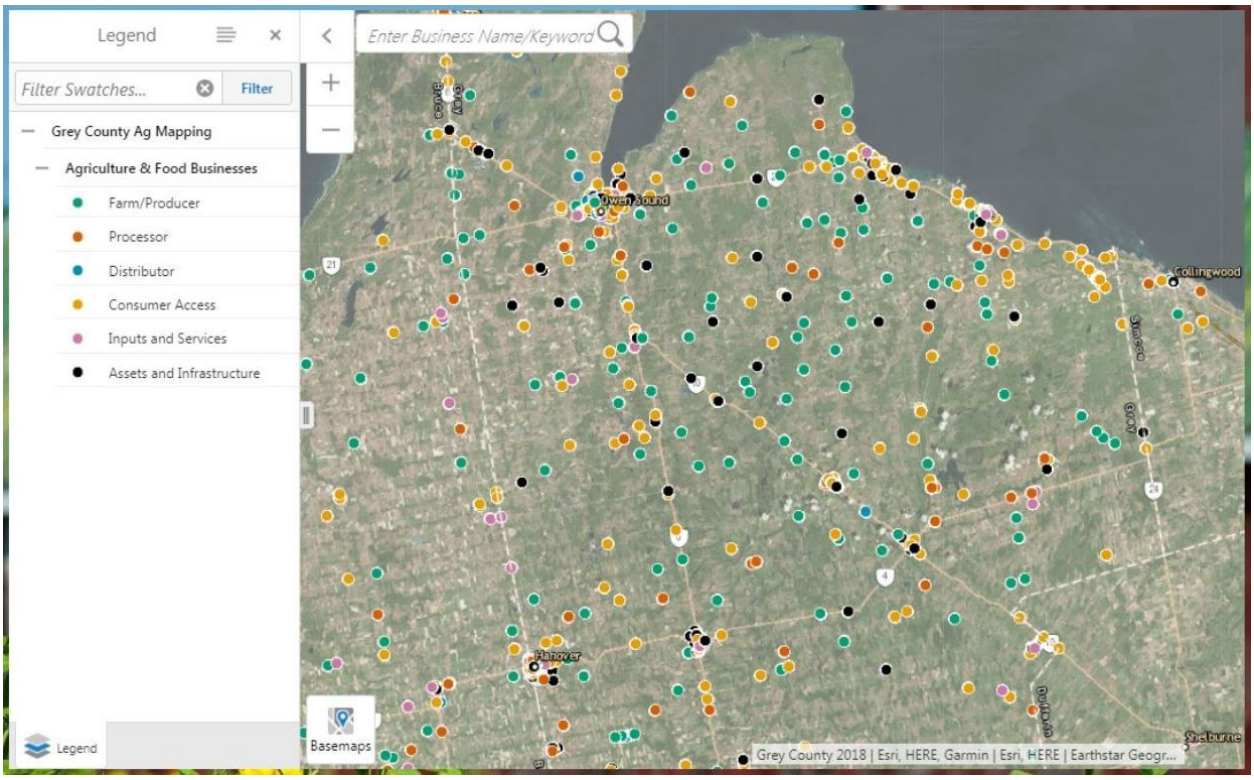
Linkages across domains are part of the message the FSAG wanted to convey in bringing the different domains together in the Charter. These linkages enhance the Charter's potential as a critical food guidance tool, given the breadth of sectoral involvement in Charter development and its value-based approach. For example, the FSAG engaged with the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula and the Meeting Place, a local food charity, to adopt a more inclusive community food centre model. Community Food Centres are a prime example of integration across domains, incorporating health, social justice, culture, education, and economic development (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: From band-aids to bridges: Moving forward with community food centres



To bring production and consumption together with food security, Grey County set up a geographic information systems-based, interactive Agri-Food Asset Map (Grey County, 2019) (See Figure 2). It aims to support new connections in the food system towards alternative production and marketing options, food security, celebration of food hospitality, and social and economic development. The FSAG has partnered with Grey County to plot a more complete picture of food security assets, including how each asset connects with others. It aims to integrate food security across the value chain (i.e., values for consumers of food as well as for producers of food), in keeping with sustainable community food systems approaches. Nevertheless, the Agri-food Business Retention and Expansion research survey (Ainley Group, 2018) identified gaps in the value chain locally. In particular, several stakeholders identified a lack of abattoirs and distribution, which has been crucial during COVID-19 with large facilities closed across the country.

Figure 2: Map. Agriculture and food businesses



Screenshot from Grey County Agri-Food Asset Map

Bruce Botanical Food Gardens has built strong relationships with the nearby Old Order Mennonite community—a cultural handshake—reclaiming tools used in the past. They have reached out to nearby chefs and breweries using ingredients from the garden (culinary culture). Through workshops, they share food knowledge with children and adults, such as how to cook

with material from the garden. Similarly, although the primary drivers for attendees at Alison Rowe's workshops may be health concerns or inter-cultural interest, the response is one of education. Agro-culinary trails not only promote local economies, but also share history, grounding people in the stories of their food past.

Conclusion

Development of the Bruce Grey Food Charter was informed by existing alternative food initiatives and practices, through an ample, primarily multi-stakeholder collaboration, to borrow the term in Laforge and colleagues' (2017) typology. Applying Andrée and colleagues' (2019) analysis, FSAG members mobilized sufficient instrumental resources in a rural political-economic context, in which resting control was not seen as an option, in order to focus primarily on food security. Its accomplishment was primarily a discursive one, smoothing over the potentially conflicting interests and discourses that occur and can lurk behind Charter statements (Lafferty, 2015).

However, the Charter has encouraged innovations, in keeping with the mobilizing role of critical food guidance. These include change at municipal policy and regional organization levels (GBHU and Eat Well Grey Bruce), community food centres and farmers' markets at the community level, and community-supported agriculture at the family-household level. Such diversity is consistent with multiple levels in socio-ecological models of community food systems (Mader & Busse, 2011). In this way, the Food Charter has been a critical food guidance tool for nudging food systems at multiple levels.

One can argue that the initiatives described here predominantly exemplify demonstration projects and paths to transition rather than larger structural changes (see McInnes & Mount, 2017). The cooperative Eat Local Grey Bruce only involves about one percent of farmers and serves an equivalent percent of households in the region (Kralt & Cole, 2021). Similarly, meals served through the network of meal programs are estimated to serve a minority of those in need. Although sound data are not publicly available, supermarkets still sell the majority of food, and most of it comes from outside the two counties. In the wider provincial to global context, other changes are needed (MacRae, 2017).

Nevertheless, the Charter recognizes that food sovereignty policy development must be holistic and promote an understanding of food systems (Robinson & Penner, 2018), upon which change can be slowly built. Such a shared understanding was manifest in the documents and reports cited, the interviews conducted with food system actors for this paper, and our own experience as agri-food system actors. The sense of the whole was palpable across sectors and roles, along with insights into persistent challenges and emerging opportunities. Despite this, the ongoing commitment of Food Security Action Group members to maintaining a constructive dialogue in Bruce and Grey Counties remains essential for ongoing reflection and adaption required in critical food guidance. The introductory paragraph to the Charter notes, "the Charter

is a commitment to work together to build a vibrant, sustainable, food secure community." Efforts may wax and wane, as different food system actors have different interests and priorities over time (Johnston & Andrée, 2019) – many currently dominated by the COVID pandemic. Yet creative responses to the pandemic, highlighting growing food insecurity and the need for actions consistent with the Charter, have highlighted the Charter's role (United Way of Bruce Grey, n.d.). Hopefully, Bruce Grey citizens and food system actors continue to ask questions, to promote the Charter, and to build alternative food initiatives and practices into the future which gradually move the food system towards embodying the Charter values.

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