

Exploring the Concept of an Urban Eco-Farm in Halton

Preliminary Findings for Discussion | November 1, 2021

What did we set out to learn?

The Halton Environmental Network, with generous funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, has taken some time to explore the feasibility of establishing an **urban eco-farm in Halton Region** that could serve as a learning centre to increase residents' awareness of the impact of the food system on climate change and the environment.

The purpose of the feasibility study was threefold:

1. To assess the viability of establishing a year-round operating urban eco-farm in Halton Region.
2. To learn if there are models in other cities that can be replicated in Halton.
3. To determine if an urban eco-farm, through the delivery of educational programs, would result in citizens changing the way they produce, consume and waste food in order to reduce their carbon "foodprint"?



We set out to determine:

- The level of community interest in an urban eco-farm
- The degree to which it would serve the needs of the community
- Potential partners/supporters
- Suitable locations and requirements for land use
- Project costs and methods to obtain funding
- The potential for an urban eco-farm to be financially self-sustaining

What were our key findings?

On the level of community interest in an urban eco-farm:

- There is a **high level of community interest** in this project (with the caveat that the community members who participated in this process were self-selected and therefore likely to already be interested in urban agriculture).
- Citizens have **many different expectations** of an urban eco-farm – who it should serve, what its primary purpose should be, the elements it should incorporate etc.

On the degree to which it would serve the needs of the community:

- Like many other communities, Halton Region faces a **range of challenges**, including those related to climate-change adaptation and mitigation, an agriculture sector with an uncertain future, food insecurity, income disparity, and hidden poverty.
- An urban eco-farm has the **potential to address and ameliorate these challenges** by reducing negative impacts on the environment, fostering research and innovation pertaining to agriculture and climate change, increasing food security, promoting the local economy, and strengthening social cohesion.

On potential partners/supporters:

- Our research suggests that a not-for-profit, such as HEN, operating alone, *could not* establish, run, and fund an urban eco-farm; if HEN were to undertake this project, **it would require collaboration and partnerships**. The amount of work involved in setting up and operating an urban eco-farm cannot be understated.
- While there is excellent potential for community-based partnerships, the effort required to convene, collaborate, and organize partners would be substantial.

On suitable locations and requirements for land use:

- Citizens strongly expressed that they want an urban eco-farm that is **local and accessible**, a significant challenge in a region as large and varied as Halton. Micro-sites may be one way to address this challenge.
- There was some debate amongst community members about whether the eco-farm should be located in the northern (more rural) or southern (more urban) part of the region. One potential solution could be to offer a combined model, with the farm's central hub located in an urban-adjacent area and satellite offshoots located in urban settings.

On project costs and methods to obtain funding:

- Our research indicates that other, similar initiatives have had **large-scale institutional funders** and/or **collaboration among several invested partners**.
- There is currently **no immediate, available source of funding** to establish an eco-farm in Halton Region.

On the potential for an urban eco-farm to be financially self-sustaining:

- Our research indicates that the most significant operational challenge for other, similar initiatives is access to **sustained, adequate, and ongoing revenue sources**.

Exploring the Concept of an Urban Eco-Farm in Halton

Preliminary Findings for Discussion | November 1, 2021

Key findings on HEN:

- An urban eco-farm **aligns with HEN's mandate** around local climate action.
- While HEN has **demonstrated capacity to deliver relevant programming** (via Halton Food, OakvilleReady, Greening Sacred Spaces), these initiatives are not well publicized.
- HEN is **interested in this project**, especially in components related to climate change mitigation and adaptation and as it aligns with several United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- HEN would have a **key role to play in education and research**, including research pertaining to agriculture and climate change.
- HEN is widely perceived to have a **strong capacity for partnership brokering, relationship building, communication, and outreach**.

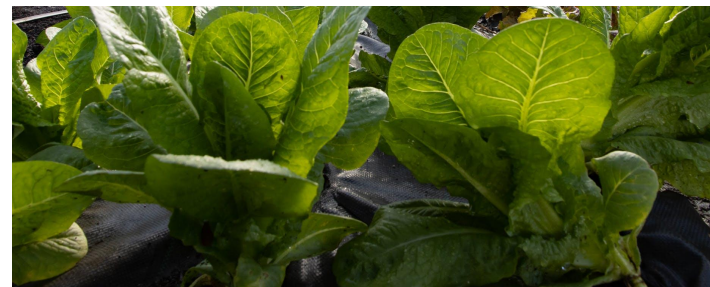
Other key findings:

- This feasibility study revealed the **connections between food access, food security, and climate change**, and how these issues are amplified by one another.
- HEN, or any other entity that proceeds with establishing an urban eco-farm, will need to have a **clearly scoped mission and vision**. A clear mandate with specific goals will be necessary to avoid scope-creep.
- While the research revealed a generally supportive local policy framework and an openness to the concept from decision-makers and community leaders, **Halton still lacks municipal and regional policies that would support the development of this project** specifically, and urban agriculture more generally (e.g., an urban agriculture strategy, a food strategy, and/or a climate change action plan).

What are our recommendations?

HEN is interested and aligned, conceptually, to work towards the establishment of an urban eco-farm in Halton. However, the lack of funding and limited resource capacity would make it difficult, if not impossible, for HEN to lead and nurture a new, large-scale urban eco-farm in isolation.

If HEN desires to expand its impact in the urban gardening sphere, it may start by **expanding the Halton Food program**. If HEN desires to expand its impact in the urban eco-farming space, HEN could build on its strengths to further **explore the concept of an urban eco-farm in Halton, in collaboration with community partners**.



The other elements that would support a collective movement towards an urban eco-farm in Halton could be:

- **Strong municipal support** by way of supportive land use policies and funding
 - An urban eco-farm aligns with regional and municipal priorities, such as health and well-being and responding to our climate emergency
- **Recognition and compensation** for the hidden labour involved in gathering and convening partners across Halton to bring such an entity to life. The unfunded nature of this work is difficult for a small organization to sustain

- A **deliberate programmatic connection** between the urban eco farm and local climate action; for HEN to be involved, there needs to be direct alignment with HEN's mission
 - The mission or vision of the urban eco farm could focus on climate change; including research (on topics such as soil quality or carbon sequestration, for example) and/or partnerships with universities to help create additional funding opportunities
- Ensuring an **inclusive, Halton-wide approach** in all four local municipalities
 - Many participants requested a "local" approach rather than a "destination"; a hub and microsite approach could address HEN's (and the community's) desires for access to programming

HEN welcomes comments, questions, and ideas about this preliminary summary. Please email andrea@haltonenvironment.ca

