

# Organizations Interviewed - Profiles

## Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable

**Type of Organization:** 18-member roundtable staffed by regional health authority

**Area served:** Region of Waterloo, ON

**Population:** 534,900

**Main urban centres:** Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge

**Founded:** 2006

**Interviewed:** Marc Xuereb- staff support (Region of Waterloo Public Health)

[www.wrfoodsystem.ca](http://www.wrfoodsystem.ca)



### Background

The Roundtable is a networking and policy-making group working on building a strong voice for a healthy food system in Waterloo Region. They are a group of eighteen representatives from key sectors and interests of the local food system who share the goal of a healthier food system in Waterloo Region. Representatives include local farmers, emergency food providers, food processing, distributing and retail, business and health professionals, and more.

### History

The Region of Waterloo Public Health led a process in 2005 to develop a food system plan (“*Towards a Healthy Community Food System for Waterloo Region*”). The plan identified priority issues relating to the region’s food system. The community was then consulted via focus groups and a forum and was invited to comment on the plan and suggest strategies to address those priorities (about 80 participants in total). The decision to form a Roundtable to address those priorities came out of that forum. To assure widespread support for the development of a food system organization, a notable effort was put into inviting all food system stakeholders and the public to the forum. The 60 participants at the June 2006 forum were asked to vote on the identified priorities. Using the results of the vote and taking into consideration the level of interest among participants to engage with the priority areas, staff then put forward the six most common themes which became the Roundtable’s *Food System Priorities*. There were some people who disagreed with the process, in particular, believing there were already enough organizations in the region working to enhance the food system. The energy of the majority, however, believed there was not yet an organization taking a ‘birds-eye’ view of the food system. A start-up committee of 8 was formed and was made up of those who were most active at that forum. They went on to spend one year developing the Roundtable’s Terms of Reference. A call for applications was put out and the Committee reviewed the applications and decided on 18. A launch event was hosted to announce the Roundtable’s formation.

### Mission

To champion a vibrant and healthy local food system.



### Goals

To increase awareness of food systems issues and communicate with a common voice to promote action.

“I’d recommend to try and include as many people as possible and get someone skilled in facilitation and trusted by disparate partners to lead a process that’s seen as transparent and inclusive of people’s different opinions but yet is firm in trying to move the process forward with clear goals and clear values and who is able to say, “join us if you agree this is what we need”.”  
- Marc Xuereb

### Priorities

- Food Sovereignty – food democracy, food skills, food education.
- Food Policy – advocate for joined-up policies @ local, provincial and federal. Monitor their implementation.
- Urban Agriculture – encourage expansion of food grown or raised in urban areas & wild foods.
- Local Food Infrastructure – rebuild processing and distribution infrastructure required to make more local foods available. Farm-Institution programs.
- Farm Viability – advocate for policies/initiatives which return a larger portion of the food dollar to farmers.
- Access to Healthy Food – advocate for policies/initiatives which ensure everyone has access to enough nutritious food (adequate incomes, emergency food, walkable food, culturally appropriate foods).

The priorities were discussed by members of the Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable for several months in 2009, and

were endorsed in a motion passed at its meeting in January 2010. In establishing these as priorities, the Roundtable looked at the priorities that had been previously identified by the Roundtable in past years, and assessed them based on what changes had occurred in the food system since then. They also took into account the Declaration of the Waterloo Region Food Summit held in November 2009, which involved over 140 people. The Summits (2009/2011) act as opportunities to reassess the organization's Food System Priorities.

## Activities

The WRFSR identifies itself as carrying out five functions:

- Networking/education – build new partnerships
- Coordinate/analyze – identify and prioritize food system needs and support creation and implementation of initiatives
- Evaluation – establish benchmarks and targets for achievement of mission/goals
- Funding – lever community resources to support mission/goals
- Policy – identify policy changes which support goals and advocate for their implementation

Of the five functions above, the bulk of the Roundtable's attention is paid to networking/education. This is achieved via meetings, events (i.e. Healthy Food System lecture series), communication activities and food summits (2009/2011).

The Roundtable focuses considerable attention on reassessing and updating their food system priorities. The organization also works on supporting other organizations by writing letters of support to funders. Not much effort is currently put into the funding piece of the organization's stated activities. Since its inception the Roundtable has focused its attention on 3 policy issues.

## Meetings

The Roundtable meets a minimum of five times per year.

- Half hour of business (requiring decisions)
- Half hour of updates from each of the 18 members
- Two hours of presentations and discussions on issues related to current priorities/campaigns
- Quorum is 6. Meetings usually have 12-13 in attendance

## Public Input

- Suggestions for agenda items are invited and the Co-Chairs handle requests. It is recommended that suggested items also indicate requested time for presentation and discussion; relevance to Roundtable goals and food system priorities; and whether or not a decision is requested of Roundtable.
- At least one meeting per year is open to the public.
- Minutes of all meetings are available to the public upon approval by the Roundtable.
- Decisions by the Roundtable are by majority vote except on decisions related to the adoption of public policy positions, which require unanimous approval. Policy positions are restricted to focus largely on endorsing positions of member organizations where consensus exists.
- Task groups or Ad Hoc committees may be formed.

## Membership / Governance

- Members of the Roundtable are recommended by a nomination committee appointed by the Roundtable with final decisions made by the Roundtable itself. Candidates are invited to apply and careful consideration is given to the food system sectors the candidates work within.
- Up to 18 members can be members at any one time.
- Members may, but are not expected to formally represent or speak for their organization but will be selected on the basis of their ability to speak to issues from the sector or key interest they come from.
- Identified Food System Sectors: farmers, emergency food, food manufacturers, urban ag. advocates, food distributors, academics/researchers, educators/teachers, food retailers, land-use planners, restaurants, institutional foodservice, purchasers, low-income consumers, ethnic food retailers/consumers, organic food advocates, economic development organizations, health professionals, food justice advocates, food marketing, public health.
- Members must endorse the mission, goals, and values of the Roundtable.
- The Roundtable's membership strives to reflect Waterloo Region's diverse population including but not limited to race, rural/urban residency, gender and socioeconomic status.
- 2-year terms w/half expiring in odd numbered years.
- Missing 3 meetings a year w/o prior discussion with a co-chair is deemed equivalent to a resignation. The Roundtable will appoint new interim members during the term as needed.
- At the beginning of each term, the Roundtable will elect 2 co-chairs. Duties of the co-chairs include proposing meeting agendas; inviting guests; chairing meetings; facilitating dialogue among members between meetings; liaising with Roundtable support staff; acting as spokespeople.

## Steering Committee

Five Roundtable members sit on a Steering Committee which addresses some of the more administrative functions of the Roundtable. Their tasks include making agenda decisions, handling requests for information, authoring letters of support, etc. The Committee is not empowered to make decisions and instead brings recommendations to the Roundtable.

## **Staffing / Resources**

The Region of Waterloo Public Health provides staff support to the Roundtable. Since the Roundtable's founding, Marc Xuereb has devoted half of his time as a Public Health Planner to the activities of the Roundtable. The Roundtable may enter into agreements with organizations to provide additional administrative and/or research support to the Roundtable or may directly hire staff (these options are currently not being utilized).

The organization has struggled to find volunteers to commit to taking on organizational tasks, so the bulk of time put into the Roundtable's activities is by the staff support and the volunteer Roundtable members.

## **Funding**

The Roundtable does not operate with a budget as its primary expense (staff support) is provided by the Region of Waterloo Public Health (RWPH). The RWPH provides some direct funding each year to be put towards the web site and public events. Because the organization does not identify itself as a 'doer', funding to sustain the activities of the organization is not necessary.

## **Communication**

Staff distribute a bi-weekly newsletter to over 400 people in the region ("[WRFoodNews](#)"). The newsletter offers summary information and links on items of local, national and global interest and includes upcoming events.

The web site for the WRFSR is one of the more comprehensive sites of the organizations interviewed for this report, and contains detailed information on the structure and activities of the Roundtable itself. The web site is also home to an RSS feed and a [Blog](#).

## **Greatest Success Story**

Input into the Regional Official Plan for the Region of Waterloo. The document contains the planning policies needed to "direct growth and change in Waterloo Region over the next 20 years".

[www.wrfoodsystem.ca/forum/viewthread/10274](http://www.wrfoodsystem.ca/forum/viewthread/10274)

## **Points of Interest**

- Despite the organization operating like many food councils abroad, the term 'Roundtable' was chosen. Marc Xuereb does, nevertheless, support organizations using the term 'council' as it can help unite an organization with the many other food councils working to achieve similar goals.

- Discussions have taken place on introducing working groups to get non-Roundtable members involved in carrying out tasks, however, those discussions have also acted as a reminder to the organization that those seemingly needed tasks are not in line with the purpose of the organization and has reminded the WRFSR that it serves more of a 'big picture' function than that of a 'doer'.

- Since its inception, the Roundtable has not believed being housed within the Region of Waterloo Public Health has posed any barriers to its function. The relationship is such that the Roundtable's activities can be carried out quite independently from RWPH. The Roundtable has discussed the possibility of being independent of RWPH, but has never identified a secure enough source of funding to sustain the current role of the staff support which RWPH provides.



## **Words of Advice**

Marc Xuereb refers to the wisdom of the former Coordinator of the Toronto Food Policy Council; "Don't focus on the things that divide you, focus on the things that you agree on... there's so much that needs change that everyone can probably agree on."

## **Documents of Interest**

(available on WRFSR web site)

- [Towards a Healthy Community Food System - for Waterloo Region](#) (November 2005)

- [A Healthy Community Food System Plan](#) (April 2007)

- [Terms of Reference](#)

- [Waterloo Food System Roundtable Developmental Evaluation: Organizational History](#) (2011)