

Does Local Food Have to Cost More?

Image



Sandra Hamilton pioneers initiative to supply local food into Vancouver Island hospitals

Is it possible to supply local food into public institutions without a financial premium? Business consultant and marketing specialist Sandra Hamilton is driven to answer this question just in time for the [North Island Hospitals Project](#) (NIHP), which involves the construction of two new hospitals on Vancouver Island, B.C.

Sandra has been meeting with B.C. government officials about this issue, including assistant deputy minister of agriculture, Melanie Stewart, and director of the ministry, Grant Thompson. They agreed that in order to bring local food supply into the new hospitals in the Comox Valley and Campbell River on the island, Sandra

would need to [research](#) and establish an economically viable solution.

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Sandra Hamilton promoting sustainably grown B.C. oysters pictured with Chef Ronald St. Pierre of [Local's Restaurant](#) in Courtenay, B.C. and Richard Hardy of [Komo Gway Oysters](#).

Since the 1990s, [many Canadian hospitals have outsourced food service](#) to large companies because of budget cuts. As it stands, structural implications like contractual obligations prevent hospitals from ordering locally grown food or from [acquiring information about the ingredients and the sources of their food](#). The accountability and traceability of the publicly funded hospital food supply system is in dire need of change, Sandra says. Most of the food is not locally grown.

“As a British Columbian, I’m not ready to accept that we can’t take a potato out of the ground in the Comox Valley and serve it inside the hospital more cost efficiently and with the resultant socio-economic and environmental benefits than we can deliver a potato from Mexico,” Sandra says.

By matching supply to demand, and by using a seasonally adjusted menu, Sandra believes that it could be economically viable to introduce a brand new, socially innovative local supply chain into the two new hospitals, one of which will be built in the riding of Don McRae, Canada’s first Minister of Social Development and Social Innovation (at the provincial level).

In the last year, Sandra transitioned out of a career in corporate consulting into community economic development and social enterprise. She was instrumental in creating Canada’s first M.B.A and Executive M.B.A. in Social Enterprise Leadership at the University of Fredericton where she is currently enrolled in the [Sandermoen School of Business](#). “I don’t want this to be a purely academic process,” she says. “As I go through my master’s program, I am looking for ways that I can actually use

my education and my business experience to benefit local communities.”

As a resident of the Comox Valley, Sandra is acutely aware of the issues around food security and supply on Vancouver Island. She sees the two new local hospitals as an opportunity to drive up demand for local food production within an existing agricultural community. She also sees this as an opportunity to demonstrate social innovation — to leverage taxpayer dollars and stimulate rural economic development while reducing the carbon footprint of the new hospitals.

“On Vancouver Island, we have food arriving in a refrigerator, on a truck, on a ferry. Food transportation produces a significant carbon footprint which is currently being ignored by hospitals required to be carbon neutral,” she says.

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Dr. Tom Chan, chief of staff at The Scarborough Hospital, samples congee during an event for the hospital's ReFRESHing our Menu project on Oct. 5, 2011. Photo courtesy of The Scarborough Hospital.

“Hospitals are the worst greenhouse gas emitters in the public sector. Despite B.C.’s carbon neutral legislation, food transportation is not currently included in the carbon footprint of a hospital. And that’s something that was never intended of the legislation — it’s not sustainable and it is a bit of a loophole.”

In Ontario, The Scarborough Hospital is proving to be a leader in local food supply. It received a grant from the [Greenbelt Fund](#), a non-profit organization that supports the sustainability of agriculture in Ontario. This enabled the hospital to launch the ReFRESHing Our Menu project in 2011 to add more local, fresh food cooked from scratch. A report from The Tyee notes that before the hospital’s menu was revamped, a “shockingly low” number of ingredients were sourced from Ontario. The number of products labeled with their origin was also surprisingly low.

Sandra is determined to find and use all the necessary data to predict the market demand for NIHP, including seasonal variation, and to cost it out so that she can match industry prices with locally supplied food. Her vision is to feed locally grown, nutritious food to hospital patients through a community-owned company whose profits fund social programs. In 2012, B.C. became the first jurisdiction in Canada to create a new way in to incorporate such a business — a hybrid social enterprise structure called a Community Contribution Company (C3).

Throughout Sandra's time in the Comox Valley, she has seen more and more people leave the area to raise their children in large cities. As an experienced corporate consultant, she is passionate about unearthing the potential economic engines to make private business solutions viable in small, rural places so that in the end, more children can grow up immersed in nature.

"I have no illusions about this — this has to happen at an economically viable price. "Taxpayers are not going to pay more for local food in hospitals," Sandra says.

"There's a huge interest in local food, but we've almost allowed it to become elitist," she adds. "Are we really ready to say that the only future for B.C. farmers lies in small-scale, premium priced, boutique production for farmers markets?"

As a BC Partner for Social Impact, Sandra is grateful to be part of a network of individuals who welcome big ideas and innovation, especially since trying to do things in a new way can often be a lonely experience.

"Today it would be unthinkable to construct a public building without meeting environmental standards," Sandra says. "It is my hope that 10 years from now, it will be equally unthinkable to spend a taxpayer dollar without ensuring that it has been fully leveraged to achieve the maximum social benefit for society."

For updates on this initiative, visit www.SandraHamilton.ca.

Farm to Cafeteria Canada, a national network, is hosting a teleconference on Jan. 28 about its findings in Canada's first nationwide survey of activities taken by Canadian schools, universities, colleges and healthcare facilities to provide local food. [Learn more](#).