



# The City of Hamilton's Corporate Food and Beverage Policy



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In 2011, the City of Hamilton (City) adopted a healthy food and beverage (HFB) policy. The aim of the policy is to demonstrate the City's commitment to healthy eating by being a community role model for "food service that is free of industrially produced trans fats, and by promoting a safe and sustainable local food system (City of Hamilton, 2011)." The policy is corporate-wide and concerns all city buildings and public events where the City of Hamilton offers and funds food and beverages (City of Hamilton, 2011). This ranges from the food and beverages offered at City staff functions to the vending machines and concession stands within City recreational facilities. Currently, policy implementation is at various stages for each of the aforementioned areas. This story highlights the City's HFB policy process from start to present and provides insights from the City's experience facilitating healthier food environments through policy.

## Origins of the HFB Policy: A Decade of Preparation

The seed for the City's HFB policy was planted in 1989 when the Ontario Ministry of Health established the Mandatory Programs and Service Guidelines, which helped to chart a clear direction for boards of health across Ontario (Moyer, Verhovsek, & Wilson, 1997). One aspect of this provincial initiative involved the development of healthy eating guidelines in workplace settings as part of overall workplace health. Rooted in the idea that public health should act as a role model and take the lead in this area, Hamilton Public Health Services (PHS), along with public health departments across Ontario, began the development of healthy eating guidelines for employees. While the City of Hamilton endorsed the guidelines in 2000, there was limited implementation at the time.

**Moving the policy forward and having it adopted corporately, really adopted at the ground level, takes a lot of effort and time, and takes a lot of winning people over. We need people to feel good about the policy and to have great food and beverage experiences. And that can only happen over time.**

*Pat Elliott-Moyer, RD, Hamilton Public Health Services*

## From Guidelines to Policy: Giving Guidelines More “Teeth”

In 2004, Ontario’s Society of Nutritional Professionals in Public Health released a report calling for legislation on the creation of healthy school food environments (Valleau, Almeida, Deane, Froats-Emond, & Henderson, 2004). This encouraged Hamilton’s PHS to become more engaged in being a role model for healthy eating environments. PHS reviewed the healthy eating guidelines and started to explore how the formation of a HFB policy could give them more teeth.

Around the same time, Hamilton’s Board of Health and City Council were exploring strategies to support healthy eating in the community, spurred by action taking place in cities across North America to reduce *trans* fats and curb rising obesity rates. Although Council initially considered a bylaw to promote healthier food environments, they were legally advised to focus on an area over which they had immediate jurisdiction: how the City spent corporate money on food and beverages. As Pat Elliot-Moyer, Public Health Nutritionist with Hamilton Public Health Services (PHS) reflected, the PHS was developing a HFB policy that it hoped would go corporate, which provided City Council with an opportunity to say, “That’s what we can do.”

With Council agreeing to the development of the policy, it tasked PHS Registered Dietitians to write a ‘gold star’ or ‘ideal’ policy. During the process of writing the policy, the City made a point to connect with other departments to see how the HFB policy could support existing policies and initiatives (e.g. food safety, waste management, and no bottled water) as well as take into consideration current vendor contracts for vending machines and concession stands.

### Time for Pilot Testing

With a draft HFB policy formulated, the PHS presented the policy to the City of Hamilton’s Senior Management Team (SMT) for City wide adoption at the corporate level. The initial reaction from the SMT was that the policy presented a huge change for people outside of the PHS and that such a policy would require a significant shift in corporate culture and practices. For this reason, the PHS decided to pilot the policy within their department and then return to SMT for reconsideration of corporate wide adoption.

The policy was piloted for approximately two years within the PHS department. Reflecting on the experience, the time spent piloting the policy proved beneficial as it not only helped the City understand barriers to policy change, it also helped to determine strategies for moving forward with policy implementation.

## A Policy With Bite

In 2011, after the two-year pilot, the PHS had an opportunity to get the HFB policy back on the corporate agenda. Following a large educational process for City management teams, conducted by Human Resources (HR) and PHS, the policy was finally approved at the corporate level as a Human Resources - Health, Safety, and Wellness policy. Policy adoption was enhanced by the following key facilitators:

- high level support from champions, such as the PHS Director of the Healthy Living Division, Manager of Health, Safety, and Wellness, the Medical Officer of Health, and the City Manager;
- existence of a piloted HFB policy;
- persisting high rates of obesity in the community.

While the policy was adopted at the corporate level in 2011, the story of policy change was far from over. Indeed, actual implementation of the policy was straightforward for some groups within the City, such as those offering food during staff functions. However, it was far more complex for others, such as those managing recreational facilities with vending machines and concession stands. To help these groups make necessary changes, the City formed a one-year task force

chaired by Miri Freimanis, Healthy Workplace Specialist with Human Resources (HR) and Pat Elliott-Moyer, Public Health Nutritionist. Since then, implementation of the policy has been an ongoing process as departments continue to make changes over time, with the goal of moving towards policy compliance.

Thus far, a key facilitator of policy implementation has been the provision of ongoing policy supports. For example, Miri Freimanis, Healthy Workplace Specialist with HR and Pat Elliott-Moyer, Public Health Nutritionist work closely with caterers in the community to develop approved menus and provide nutrition consultation to City staff requiring assistance formulating menus that fit with the policy. They also continue to offer education through workshops, local TV spots, and resources, such as caterer lists and tip sheets.



Hamilton City Hall, Ontario

Throughout the implementation process, holding events such as recipe contests has also been important in terms of winning people over, generating support, and overcoming the perception that HFB policies are restrictive. Such events highlight innovative menu items and generate excitement about the food offered in the approved menus.

Another important aspect of the implementation process has been the continued involvement of high-level champions. For example, having the City Manager take time to

judge a recipe contest shows the City is serious about healthy eating, which contributes to positive shifts in the corporate food culture.

Reflecting on the HFB policy, Pat Elliott-Moyer and Miri Freimanis believe that the provision of ongoing resources and support for policy implementation and cultural change has been key to the positive changes made thus far. Indeed, moving forward, there is recognition that policy adoption and implementation takes time, and needs to be an ongoing process to engrain the policy within the City's corporate food culture.

## Key Lessons

- Recruit champions: leaders need to become and continue to be positive role models for healthy cultural change.
- Ongoing recruitment of supporters: successful policy change requires a groundswell of those who believe in the policy and who influence others through their words and actions.
- Look for opportunities: when one door closes, another one opens.
- Avoid re-inventing the wheel: find out what works and collaborate.
- Let go of what does not work and be open to changing direction.
- Be prepared for the long haul. Cultural changes take years. Have patience and never give up.
- Timing is everything. Be ready to move when your priorities align with other events and cultural readiness.
- Policies need to be supported by education, promotion, resources, and positive messaging.
- Make it as easy as possible for people to comply.
- Policies are followed successfully when accountability measures are in place.
- Be willing to change and adapt to new circumstances and people.
- Build a team. You will need the synergy from team work to make it through the long haul.

*by Miri Freimanis, Healthy Workplace Specialist (HR) and Pat Elliott-Moyer, RD, (PHS)*

## For More Information

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Read the original Hamilton Food and Beverage Policy [here](#).

## References

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