



The City of New Westminster's Healthy Food Service Policy



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On March 2013, the City of New Westminster (City), British Columbia (BC), adopted the **Healthy Food Service Policy**. Developed in an effort to support healthier food environments, the policy specifies that each service site provide customers with a minimum of 50% healthy food and beverage options (City of New Westminster, 2013). The policy is applicable to concession services, cafeteria services, food and beverage vending, and Parks and Recreation department programs or services that involve food consumption. This story explores the development of the Healthy Food Service Policy, as well as challenges and lessons learned throughout the policy change process.

Healthy Food Service Policy Background

The City's efforts to promote healthier food and beverage options in public buildings was influenced by a number of province-wide initiatives underway in the mid-2000s. In 2005 and 2006 respectively, the Government of BC introduced two voluntary policies – *Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools* (Province of BC, 2015) and *Healthier Choices in Vending Machines in BC Buildings Policy* (Province of BC, 2014). These policies were designed to encourage healthy food and beverage offerings in communities and public facilities across the province. Around the same time, the BC Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) initiated the *Healthy Eating Strategy* and the *Municipal Recreation Food Environment Action Toolkit* project, which provided communities with strategies for increasing access to healthier food.



City of New Westminster, Wikimedia

We started to think about healthy food and beverages when the provincial government introduced the guidelines for public schools and public buildings.

*Jim Luu
Assistant Manager of
Queen's Park Facilities*



A Pilot Project: The Healthy Choices Program

As Assistant Manager of Queen's Park Facilities, Jim Luu is responsible for food services in the Parks and Recreation Department, which includes City parks, cultural services, and publicly-funded recreational facilities. With a number of wider initiatives taking place across the province, in 2007 the Director of Parks and Recreation approached Jim Luu and the Department's Manager of Business Operations to explore strategies for promoting healthy food and beverage product offerings. Considering that the mandate of public recreational facilities is to promote wellness, the City felt the recreational setting was a logical place to start.

In April of 2008, the Parks and Recreation Department set about launching an ambitious pilot project to explore the feasibility of providing healthier food and beverage offerings in recreational facility vending machines. Entitled the *Healthy Choices Program*, the pilot took place at Canada Games Pool, the City's busiest and largest recreational facility. Informed by the provincial nutrition guidelines, the pilot had an impressive goal of selling exclusively healthy items (as defined by the "Sell Most" or "Sell Sometimes" categories of the *Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools*) (Province of BC, 2015) .

Challenges with the Pilot

To accomplish the Healthy Choices Program's ambitious aim, amendments to the current vending contracts were required. However, when approached about this change, a key concern expressed by the vendor focused on the potential reduction in profits. Reflecting back, high-level support from Parks and Recreation Department Administration proved invaluable to addressing this impending barrier. Indeed, illustrating commitment to the pilot, the Administration agreed to take less commission from vending sales to encourage the contractor to comply with the vending guidelines.



Healthy Vending Machine, Flickr

Nevertheless, even with support from Parks and Recreation Administration, additional challenges emerged. For example, following the launch of the pilot, vending contractors at Canada Games Pool observed a considerable decrease in vending sales within the first six months, ranging between 30-40%. Tied to this drop in sales, the vendor began to replace some of the healthy products with unhealthy options, creating a challenge for management. Aware of the decrease in sales, Luu was hesitant to enforce the modified contract over concern it would jeopardize the City's working relationship with the contractor.

Ultimately, without enforcement, the vending machines slowly reverted back to selling the previous unhealthy snacks and beverages. Looking back, while the initial pilot may not have been an outright success, the City learned valuable lessons that would inform future efforts.

Building Capacity for Change: The Healthy Food and Beverage Sales Initiative

Not willing to give up, Jim Luu and the Director of Parks and Recreation became aware of an opportunity to submit a grant application to the *Healthy Food and Beverage Sales in Recreation Facilities and Local Government Buildings Initiative* (HFBS). Co-led by the British Columbia Parks and Recreation Association (BCRPA) and the Union of BC Municipalities, the HFBS was one of four initiatives

under the BCHLA's *Healthy Eating Strategy*. The goal of the initiative was to increase community capacity to provide and promote healthy food and beverage choices in government buildings and recreational facilities through the adoption of the provincial nutrition guidelines for vending in public buildings (Naylor, Vander Wekken, Trill & Kirbyson, 2010). Committed to moving forward with providing healthier food in their public facilities and parks, Parks and Recreation Administration approved the application to the HFBS grant and was successful in receiving grant funding starting in 2009.

Reflecting back, securing HFBS funding has been key to building capacity for change, including the eventual development of healthy food and beverage policy. For example, using seed funding from the HFBS initiative, the City hired a consultant to conduct a food service study called *Tradition and Vision: A Study of a Municipality's Food Services*. Grant funds were also used to support the promotion of healthy food and beverage options in facilities, such as new menu boards and signage. In addition, Luu worked in cooperation with vendors to develop labels to identify healthier choices in vending machines. To inform policy development, Luu also consulted with two other BC municipalities that had adopted nutrition policies in their facilities.

With the above information in hand, a Parks and Recreation Department Staff Committee was formed to develop the Healthy Food Service Policy. This committee included key partners, such as the Director of Parks and Recreation, the Manager and Assistant Manager of Arenas and Queen's Park Facilities, the Manager of Business Operations, the Manager of Community Development, and the consultant who had completed the food services study.

Learning from Experience: Developing the Healthy Food Service Policy

After having experienced a decrease in sales with the Canada Games Pool pilot of 100% healthy items in vending machines, the committee wanted to develop a policy that they considered “achievable.” With this in mind, they moved forward with writing a policy that states:

The Parks, Culture and Recreation Department will offer food and beverage service programs that provide customers with a minimum of 50% selection of healthy food and beverage ('Choose Most' and 'Choose Sometimes') products at each food service site (City of New Westminster, 2013).

The policy applies to all services provided by the Parks and Recreation Department, including

concession services, cafeteria services, food and beverage vending, and internal department programs and services that involves food consumption.

**Our goal was to make it
simple and easy to
understand.**

Jim Luu, Queens Park Facilities

Guided by the lessons learned from the HFBS initiative, the committee aimed to make the policy simple and easy to understand. To accomplish this aim, they introduced a stipulation in the policy that lowered the prices of healthy items to be equivalent or cheaper than 'less healthy' food products. The committee also recognized the need to train facility staff to increase their awareness of healthy eating.



Healthy Eating in Recreational Facilities, Wikimedia

The resulting policy was presented to a supportive City Parks and Recreation Committee and subsequently adopted by City Council in March of 2013. Ultimately, while it took some time and effort, Jim Luu recounts the development of the policy and its adoption by City Council as being straightforward due to the following factors:

- Availability of the provincial nutrition guidelines for food and beverage sales in public buildings (including recreational facilities) and schools
- Support from the BCRPA's HFBS initiative
- Strong direction from senior management
- Support of the City's Parks and Recreation Committee and City Council

If there were no *Brand Name Food List*, it would be very difficult to follow this policy. It is very important to have somewhere to go for information regarding which products are healthy and which are not.

Jim Luu

Assistant Manager of Queen's Park Facilities

Putting Policy into Action: Change Takes Time

For those involved in implementing the Healthy Food Service Policy, it has become obvious that, just as it took time to

develop the policy, it also takes time to implement facility changes. Ongoing policy supports from the HFBS initiative have been essential to this process. Specifically, the *Stay Active Eat Healthy* website, the *Brand Name Food List*, and *Dial-A-Dietitian* have provided the necessary support to identify, source, and provide healthier food choices in public buildings and facilities.



*Recreation Centre Exercise Class
Wikimedia Commons*

Jim Luu has led the implementation of the policy since its approval in 2013. It has been a challenge to find the time to focus his efforts, get others involved, and train staff to consistently provide healthy food choices. In addition, there have been other barriers to success, such as limited variety of healthy choice products, patrons not purchasing the healthier options available and, consequently, low product turnover, and expiration of these products.

To address these barriers, Luu highlights the importance of maintaining a collaborative relationship with contracted vending companies and working together to provide healthier choices. Additionally, Luu cites that regular audits of recreational facility vending machines have been essential to ensuring that vending contractors are meeting the requirement of providing at least 50% healthy choices.

Moving Forward: Areas for Improvement

To evaluate progress of the Healthy Food Service Policy and identify areas for improvement, a report outlining an action plan for sustainability was completed and presented to the City's Department of Parks and Recreation in late 2015. Moving forward, this report recommends:

- Utilizing additional policy supports available, such as public health dietitians, to assist food service coordinators in making healthy changes to menus and providing nutritional information to help customers make healthy choices
- Using sales data to identify top ten sales items and focus on finding acceptable healthy alternatives for these items
- Incorporating accountability tools, such as penalties, for not meeting targets for healthy options into future Requests for Proposals

Reflecting on the experience in New Westminster, Jim Luu recognizes that the policy change process takes time and that there is still room for improvement. However, the establishment of a policy that is clear and easy to understand, along with ongoing efforts to provide healthier food and beverage options, are steps in the right direction.

Key Lessons



- ♦ **Engage champions.** Support from high-level champions is essential to changing food environments in public settings.
- ♦ **Create networks.** Sharing of knowledge and experiences between jurisdictions can help facilitate the successful development and implementation of healthy food policy.
- ♦ **Utilize available tools and resources.** Capacity building tools and resources, such as those available through HFBS, are essential to policy development and implementation.
- ♦ **Educate and market.** Policies need to be supported through education and resources.
- ♦ **The policy change process takes time.** Be patient and work together to facilitate policy change.

For More Information:

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For more information on the Healthy Food and Beverage Sales in Recreational Facilities and other Government Buildings Initiative, including the Healthy Choices in Recreation Toolkit, please visit:

www.stayactiveeathealthy.ca.

For more information on BCRPA Healthy Eating initiatives, visit <http://www.bchealthyliving.ca/healthy-living/healthy-eating/>.

The BCRPA offers a new free online course that supports the development of a Healthy Choices Facility. Please visit: <https://elearn.bcrpa.bc.ca/courses/healthy-choices/>.

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