

Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan

City of Hamilton, Ontario



The Initiative

A formidable partnership between the City of Hamilton's Public Health Services (PHS) and Recreation Division has resulted in positive changes in the food offerings at recreation centres, arenas, and a 55+ recreation facility.

The City of Hamilton

Hamilton is the fifth largest city in Ontario with a population of over 550,000 people. Located on the western tip of Lake Ontario, it is situated upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas and it is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. The city is divided by the Niagara escarpment, known locally as "the mountain" and is famously known for being the "Waterfall Capital of the World" boasting more than 100 waterfalls within the city limits. There are a number of conservation areas and trails to keep people active, including the Bruce Trail, Canada's oldest and longest marked footpath (over 900 km of main trail and 450 km of side trails).

The City of Hamilton is home to over 20 recreation centres, 19 arenas and three dedicated 55+ centres. Programming is available for all ages and abilities including, public skating, swimming lessons to sports and fitness programs. City of Hamilton arenas accommodate sports such as recreational and competitive hockey, figure skating, sledge hockey, speed skating and lacrosse along with hosting a variety of special events and Provincial and National championships.



Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan

Historically, the Recreation Division offered food services through arena concession operations, seniors centre kitchens and dining halls, and vending machines throughout the majority of community centres. Dating as far back as 2006, the City of Hamilton's Community Services Committee authored a report about Healthy Nutritional Environments in City Recreational Facilities. Over a period of 12 years, several strides were made:

- 2011- Senior management team approved the Corporate Healthy Food and Beverage Policy
- 2016 - the Hamilton Board of Health (BoH) endorsed a ten-year Hamilton Food Strategy.
- 2017 - A survey in 2017 of customers at arenas found that 67% of people were dissatisfied with the availability of healthy options.
- 2017 - City council approved that PHS and Recreation work together to investigate the feasibility of creating healthy choices guidelines in recreation facilities.
- 2018 - the Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan was created.

Suzanne Neumann, Registered Dietitian and a public health nutritionist with Public Health Services, played an instrumental role in the development of the Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan by providing support and expertise to the recreation division. Working with Romas Keliacius, Senior Project Manager, and Karly Brush, Manager, Sport Services they first developed a set of guiding principles: (1) Access to healthy food and beverages; (2) Free and convenient access to tap water; (3) Environmentally-sustainable drinking water; (4) Financially-sustainable food services; (5) Availability of nutrition information for customers; and (6) Socially-responsible marketing. The guiding principles laid the foundation for the development of the Action Plan. The main tenets of the Action Plan were:

1. Establish Food and Beverage Guidelines
2. Increase nutritious options
3. Reduce non-nutritious options
4. Promote tap water and reduce bottled water
5. Promote healthy food and beverage options
6. Monitor and evaluate



Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan Continued

A key part of the Action Plan is the *Food and Beverage Guidelines for Recreation Facilities (the Guidelines)*, created to improve access to and discernibility of nutritious foods that support good health and optimal participation in recreational settings. The nutrient categories were based on the guiding principles within Canada's Food Guide, national nutrient criteria recommendations, and latest evidence.

The categories used a traffic light nomenclature to describe the three categories of food and beverages – Green, Yellow, and Red. The goal was to sell more Green category items and less Red category items.

The traffic light categorization model was applied to the arena concession menu and an updated Snack vending contract with the obligation to provide 20% of "Green" options. Vendors for food services were also reviewed to ensure healthy food options and ingredients were available. After thorough review and analysis the percentage of red items decreased and green items increased by 25%.

The traffic light nomenclature is found on Page 10.

The Challenges of Changing People's Habits in Places that Sell Unhealthy Food

Prior to the development of the Guidelines, changes were made to foods served at concessions at the city's arenas, as well as at recreation centre vending machines. To say that the changes were not well received would be an understatement. Patrons felt that going to the concession was akin to going to a coffee shop and getting nothing you want, according to Karly Brush, Manager, Sport Services. The joint PHS and Recreation working group responded by developing the Guidelines that took a more balanced, and incremental approach. To introduce the changes, a nutrition education and marketing campaign was developed including new 'Green Choice' branding, digital menu boards, promotional materials, changes to placement of foods in the concession, and posters at concessions that provided patrons with a QR code to provide feedback directly to the city staff (rather than issuing complaints to the concession staff). Creating wayfinding within arenas to newly installed water refill stations with the option to purchase refillable water bottles at each concession as well as offering healthier alternatives to staple concession products such as popcorn with a smaller portion, prepackaged option were a few ways to guide customers toward a green choice!

Undeterred

City staff remained committed to the plan, despite challenges with customer expectations, product sourcing, food waste, and staffing. Challenges were prioritized and addressed with dedication to continue with the action plan.

Sackville Hill Seniors' Recreation Centre

Another interesting aspect to this work is the partnership that developed with Sackville Hill Seniors' Recreation Centre and Manager, Courtney Bryl. The Seniors' District is comprised of three facilities. All the programming is for older adults 55+ including drop-in and registered programs. The programs are recreational and social in nature and a number of workshops and community partnerships are hosted on an ongoing basis. A unique feature at Sackville Hill is a full commercial grade kitchen.

Pre-pandemic, the kitchen functioned as a full-service restaurant with servers and cooks. The menu was set but fluctuated regularly and there was no consistency with pricing. Many of the menu items were unhealthy (i.e., deep fried) and operated at a substantial financial loss to the division. While a review of the food services at Sackville Hill was always intended, as a result of the pandemic and the forced closure of the kitchen, an opportunity arose to capitalize on a lot of the great work done by Karly and Suzanne in the concessions. In fact, given the nature of the environment and the optics of the service provided at the Sackville kitchen, the closure brought on by the pandemic offered the opportunity to change the menu.

Post pandemic the facility was re-opened for programming, but the kitchen did not re-open right away to ensure appropriate infection control measures were in place. Eventually, the kitchen was re-opened with a limited menu with food prepared offsite in partnership with food services and brought in for sale. Further, the staff committed to an operational review and re-opening strategically in alignment with Recreation's Healthy Food and Beverage strategy. This allowed staff to evaluate:

- Corporate Strategies & Divisional Priorities for Food Services (i.e., Recreation Healthy Food and Beverage Action Plan, Strategy to Reduce Single Use Plastic, and Food Services Pricing Policy)
- The proposed menu, nutritional values and rationale for service delivery
- Inflation and Food Costs
- Staffing Challenges
- Aging Infrastructure/ Equipment

Sackville Hill Seniors' Recreation Centre Continued

Suzanne remained involved to provide information to 'make the case' for menu changes, advise on the menu and recipes, assist with product sourcing/selection, and inform the food promotion/labeling. The re-opening focused on alignment with Concessions, with an aim to keep a low cost, healthy food menu for the population. A new menu was developed, with a goal of having 60% green choice items and whole food ingredients that have more essential nutrients and less sugar, salt and saturated fat. The menu was proposed by the Chief Chef, and Public Health reviewed every recipe and made suggestions to enhance the nutritional value of each menu item. Another significant change was to focus less on demand service and have the restaurant function as a cafeteria (i.e., "grab-and-go") to address staffing issues.

One of the most important issues in making these changes was the need to address change management for both the patrons and the staff who had been involved pre-pandemic. The staff team started by raising awareness about why this change was required including the fact that (i) it aligned with the Council approved direction; (ii) inflation; and (iii) social responsibility to contribute to the overall health of the 55+ population (health, mental, emotional, and physical health). Marketing and promotion of the new menu was key to encouraging uptake of the new menus. For example, postcards were provided to patrons with the rationale as to why the changes were implemented and highlighted the good news about the menus such as the introduction of home-made soups to the menu which proved to be quite popular.

The staff were committed to bringing the members "along for the ride!". They kept the City Councillor, who championed this initiative, apprised, aligned re-opening with the annual AGM where they presented the new menu, focused on the positives and highlighted the good news, unveiled an expanded menu and offered menu sampling for free. The feedback received was positive, but still, a number of people wanted to know "why are you telling seniors what to eat?"

Challenges included dealing with political pressure, staffing issues (they were not competitive in the service industry), the cost of food and the desire to keep the prices competitive but fair.

Lessons Learned

Some of the lessons learned include:

- Change management is key. Changing behaviour is a long-term endeavour that requires an investment of time in working with staff and consulting with patrons.
- Make incremental changes in facilities rather than making a big leap into healthy eating.
- Spend time educating staff about the rationale for the changes and providing key messages that can be shared with patrons.
- Be flexible. For example, some less healthy foods were re-introduced for tournaments but in a way that still promoted healthier options.
- Provide people with information before they arrive, such as promoting the changes on the website and providing marketing materials at all sites.



Sample of the actions taken with arenas:

Researched and Adopted Food and Beverage Guidelines

- Reviewed successful nutrition interventions and nutrition standards for similar settings.
 - Selected the nutrient criteria used for public buildings in British Columbia for use with our Food and Beverage Guidelines within this action plan.
 - Surveyed arena visitors to determine customer needs and satisfaction with arena food services and product offerings.
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Increase Nutritious Options/Reduce Non-Nutritious Options

- Conducted audit of current food and beverage items sold (in concessions and vending machines) and assessed their alignment with our Food and Beverage Guidelines.
- Performed arena concession facility assessments, to identify equipment in need of repair, explored possible improvements to the aesthetic/layout, determined placement of marketing materials, and sorted out logistics for fresh food storage and preparation.
- Completed new snack vending RFP, with contractual requirement for 20% healthier options.
- Secured a new group purchasing account and new vendors who carry healthy options.
- Partnered with golf to prepare fresh items (and piloted fresh items that were prepared by a school chef).
- Reduced flavor and size options for less healthy “red” items.

Increase Nutritious Options/Reduce non-nutritious options Continued

- Introduced a new inventory management process to analyze all products and minimize waste.
 - Created Tournament Menus that offer a wider range of healthy options compared to single pads, which have less customer traffic.
 - Added new healthier options to the menu and eliminated some of the less healthy options with low sales volume.
 - Removed deep fryers, slushie machines, and popcorn machines.
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Promote Tap Water and Reduce Bottled Water

- Installed new drinking water fill stations at multiple locations.
- Updated (or plan to update) drinking water wayfinding at all arenas, to help arena patrons locate water fill stations. This included paint, vinyl wraps and triangles to direct patrons towards the fountains throughout the building. (some images below).
- Added refillable water bottles to concession menus, sold at cost to promote tap water and reusable bottles.
- Created tap water advertisements for menu boards.



Promote Healthy Food and Beverage Options

- Developed a 'Green Choice' menu labeling approach to simplify nutritional information and help customers identify the healthier options.
- Created communication tools to promote healthier options via posters, menu boards, and electronically.
 - Green Info Poster – for distribution to sports leagues
 - Postcard Stand – for the counter at arena concessions
 - Smoothie Poster – an ad for the menu screens and for plexi-glass frames mounted near the concession
 - Provided instructions for staff about how to prepare smoothies and posted them inside the concession
- Recruited new concession staff and offered training on healthier options and action plan.
- Completed minor concession upgrades to unify arena concessions under the food service operator.
- Purchased and installed electronic arena concession menu boards, to facilitate timely and regular menu changes.
- Priced "green choice" menu options affordably and increased prices on less healthy "red" items only.
- Communicated with arena user groups and large events to promote the new healthier options.

Recreation Food and Beverage Action Plan

The Traffic Light Nomenclature

Green Category

Green category items are the most nutritious options. Foods and beverages in this category are characterized by the following:

- Whole ingredients that are minimally processed
- High in essential nutrients
- Low in saturated fats
- No artificially produced trans fats
- Little or no added fat, sugar, and sodium
- No sugar substitutes

Example items in this category: Tap water; whole fruit; nut mixes; fruit smoothies made with fruit and lower-fat, unsweetened milk or yogurt; chili with extra-lean ground beef and lots of beans and vegetables; prepackaged popcorn; herbal teas.

Guidelines for Selling Green Category Items

- Offer more variety from this category
- Stock sufficient volumes to meet demand
- Offer at a lower price than comparable Red category items
- Provide courtesy cups and refillable water bottles to facilitate free access to municipal tap water



Yellow Category

Yellow category items provide less nutritional benefit and may have slightly higher amounts of sodium, sugar or saturated fat than those in the Green category. Food and beverages in this category are characterized by the following:

- Contain essential nutrients
- Moderate amounts of added fat, sugar, and/or sodium
- Minimal processing

Example items in this category: Chocolate milk, dried fruit, some yogurts and granola bars, some sandwiches.



Red Category

Red category items are those with little or no nutritional benefits, which should be limited to support health and wellbeing. Food and beverages in this category are characterized by:

- Little to no nutritional value
- High amounts of saturated fat
- High amounts of added fat, sodium, sugar, and sugar-substitutes
- Lack of whole ingredients
- High levels of processing

Example items in this category: Sugary Drinks, chocolate bars, chips, hot dogs, confectionary.

Guidelines for Selling Red Category Items

- Stock less variety and less quantity from this category
- Limit the portion size of these items to packages that provides on average no more than 100 kcal/individual serving, where possible
- Restrict placement to make less prominent
- Charge more for these items than Green category items