

Ref HEA-70-009



13 August 2008

The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam:

Inquiry into food production in Australia

Ten years ago Maribyrnong City Council and local health services identified food insecurity as a significant issue within the municipality. Since then, the Council has closely monitored different aspects of food insecurity, and more recently, broader issues related to the metropolitan food system. I would like to submit some of our findings and resolutions for your consideration as part of the Inquiry Into Food Production in Australia.

In 2006 Council in partnership with Western Region Health Centre, undertook a mapping exercise that examined the relative cost and accessibility of fruit and vegetables across the nine suburbs in the municipality. The results showed that, in general, the cheapest produce was available in the poorer suburbs and most expensive produce was sold in the wealthier suburbs. (NB. It has been well documented that grocery prices have increased dramatically over the past two years and this pattern may or may not have changed). However, the poorer suburbs had significantly fewer outlets. In fact, 66% of the municipality had such poor access it is classified as a food desert¹.

Access to food in these areas is further complicated by the fact that up to 21% of households in Maribyrnong's poorer suburbs have no car (compared to a Melbourne average of 9.5%) and so are much more dependent on public transport. The cost of transport to and from shopping precincts is a hidden cost in the affordability of food for consumers.

Council's strategic response to these issues is encapsulated in the Maribyrnong City Council Food Security Policy, 2002. Among other things, the policy includes the following directions:

- Council planning processes will work towards a situation where all community members have ready access to local sources of appropriate food supplies (including fruit and vegetables) and ready access to major food supply centres.

¹ A food desert can be defined as an area within the city where cheap, nutritious food is virtually unobtainable within a 500m radius.

- Council will foster community and business partnerships, and funding opportunities that provide accessible and affordable supplies of healthy food.

Council also has a five year action plan in place to address these issues. The plan specifies a wide range of activities that include increasing fruit and vegetable production and improving community transport options.

The following is an excerpt from the Maribyrnong City Council Peak Oil Policy, 2007. It identifies some of the issues that intersect all three of the inquiry's concerns – the affordability of food for consumers, the viability of production for farmers and the sustainability impact on the environment.

Peak oil is likely to expand food insecurity to a larger number of residents living in the Maribyrnong municipality as the cost of personal transport, food transport and food production increases. In some of the most pessimistic scenarios, food insecurity will spread to almost all residents.

Declining profits for farmers and food manufacturers may mean that less food production will take place if food producers decide to close down their businesses. International food imports are likely to decline dramatically due to the high cost of transportation. The declining availability of oil is likely to result in increasing food prices and shortages of some items, especially imported or highly processed items.

Our community is likely to experience a change in the types of foods that are available. Some examples of this are more reliance on seasonal produce, more locally grown items, fewer processed products, fewer meat and dairy products, fewer tropical and imported fruits and imported foods. While this may result in a healthier outcome in the end, the changes will require some adjustment to cooking processes and adaptation to eating unfamiliar foods.

This may cause some nutrition issues for people especially children and elderly people who may find it difficult to adapt and who are likely to limit rather than change their diet.

In addition some cultural challenges would be imposed by the inability to import or grow important cultural foods.

Some of the community based activities planned by Council in response to these issues include supporting increased fruit and vegetable production in public space – such as community gardens, nature strips and laneways, and in private space – such as the development of individual household edible gardens and urban agriculture. Council is also nurturing community-based economic activity like the development of food co-ops, food delivery services and trading of surplus produce from private vegetable gardens.

Lastly, Council has undertaken to adopt an advocacy and monitoring role on current and emerging issues relating to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). This is in response to GMOs becoming an increasingly mainstream issue, and the complex nature of the arguments, where competitive economic performance in global agricultural markets is pitted against potential risks to biodiversity and public health. These have been outlined in two recent reports made to Council.

I hope this information is useful in terms of providing a snap shot of some of the issues facing one inner city municipality's food production and supply, and its council's efforts to address them.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenny McMahon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial "J".

Jenny McMahon
General Manager, Community Wellbeing