

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report “*Backyard Chicken Policy: Lessons from Vancouver, Seattle and Niagara Falls*”, explores the practice of urban agriculture in the cities of Vancouver, British Columbia; Seattle, Washington; and Niagara Falls, Ontario. Because urban agriculture is such a broad field, this report focuses on the specific example of backyard chicken policy.

Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned about access to locally and sustainably produced food, and there is a growing commitment by planners to address concerns about food security. Urban agriculture is rapidly gaining popularity in Canadian municipalities as a means for providing an alternative and local food source. North America has seen growth in municipalities incorporating sustainability principles into policy. Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia are leaders in urban agriculture, and smaller cities such as Niagara Falls, Ontario are hopeful examples. The purpose of this report is to share insights into how backyard chicken policy has developed in larger and smaller cities and offer lessons learned from the process.

The objective of this research is to determine the ways in which municipal planning documents facilitate or mitigate the development of urban agriculture initiatives, specifically backyard chicken policies. An increased understanding of how urban agriculture is implemented through planning documents will assist planners when developing the necessary municipal by-laws, policies and zoning to support urban agriculture. The objective of the research is to share lessons with other municipalities about urban agriculture, specifically backyard chicken policy.

This report explores in detail how planning documents for the cities of Vancouver, Seattle and Niagara Falls were updated to incorporate urban agriculture activities. The research methods used include a literature review, a municipal documents analysis, and a series of semi-structured interviews. These three methods allowed the researcher to investigate the topic from multiple angles and fill in missing pieces of information.

The purpose of the literature review was to address academic research and urban agriculture planning policy and provide an intellectual context. The literature review explored the history of urban agriculture and its re-emergence today as an alternative method of food production. It also incorporated three case examples of North American cities which permit backyard chickens (Vancouver, British Columbia, Seattle, Washington, and Niagara Falls, Ontario).

The analysis of municipal documents outlined the municipal planning process and past accomplishments of the three cities in terms of urban agricultural policies. A table of key backyard chickens policy components was created in order to determine similarities and difference between the three cities. The table identified important elements of the process of legalizing backyard chickens including public education, local food initiatives, and subsequent changes to municipal zoning by-laws. Key documents analyzed include Animal Control By-laws, Zoning and Development By-laws, and Official Plans of the three cities in this study.

The analytical framework for this report was based on: the concept of urban agriculture; zoning and land use; and, the role of the planner. Fourteen key backyard chicken policy components were analyzed to determine similarities and differences between the three cities (Vancouver, Seattle and Niagara Falls). These components identified important aspects in the process of legalizing backyard chickens including community support, additional urban agriculture policies, and subsequent changes to municipal zoning by-laws. The components were categorized as either legislated information or process-oriented.

Two interviews with informants from the City of Vancouver and the City of Niagara Falls were conducted to provide validation and verification of key components identified by the literature review and municipal document analysis. Semi-structured interviews with municipal planners were conducted via telephone. These participants provided knowledge and information on the process of legalizing backyard chickens; issues of food access and security; and public support and participation in terms of urban agriculture for their respective municipalities.

Clearly this study of one large and one small municipality does not allow for generalizability of findings to all municipalities. However, it is the intention of this research to facilitate greater transfer of knowledge about existing attempts and successes at developing and implementing backyard chicken policy. As such, the following are recommendations for municipalities in the process of developing backyard chicken policy:

1. Public consultation

Public consultation is an important stage in the process of creating and implementing backyard chicken policy. Municipalities need to conduct thorough public consultation in order to obtain input and feedback from residents. Consultation provides the opportunity for the public to voice their concerns, and allows the municipality the opportunity to address concerns and create awareness.

2. Keep the process simple

“Keep the process simple” applies to finding information on backyard chickens guidelines, registering backyard chickens, and updating by-laws. The fewer steps and opportunities for misunderstanding there are, the more likely that a policy is successful. Information on backyard chickens policies, by-laws and guidelines should be concentrated in one area (eg. the municipal website). The process of registering chickens with the city should be simple administratively and have an online option. Relevant by-laws should be updated rather than writing new ones, keeping the provisions together in one document.

3. Importance of education and information

Proper education and provision of information is critical in the success of a policy. Members of the public need information about proposed changes and possible impacts, and the municipality needs to educate the public about how they are mitigating their concerns. Information on urban agriculture, backyard chickens, and local food access should be available to the public online or in pamphlet form at city hall. Information and education should be part of the consultation process as well as an on-going monitoring program.

4. Council support

New initiatives such as urban agriculture need strong support from city council. Council members need to be committed to improving their city's sustainability and supportive of green policies. This support helps set the foundation for action and sends a message about the city's priorities.

5. Role of Food Policy Councils and local food initiatives

Food Policy councils and local food initiatives play an important role in developing a sustainable food system for residents. They help create standards for sustainable and local food production, environmental responsibility, nutrition, and community development. These types of organizations are also often the starting point for actions such as the backyard chicken movement. They can function as a source of knowledge for municipalities considering the practice and a forum for discussion.

6. Involve the right people

When creating a new policy such as permitting backyard chickens within city limits, it is important to involve the right people during the process. Allowing stakeholders to voice their concerns and/or support will help develop the best guidelines possible. Relevant stakeholders include but are not limited to citizens groups, municipal government departments, and humane societies. Obtaining input from multiple angles helps establish fair and comprehensive guidelines.

7. Municipal Enforcement

Enforcement plays an important role in implementing a successful policy. Including proper provisions in by-laws for backyard chickens makes it possible for the municipality to enforce them. Enforcement is important for protecting the city as well as residents.

The report concludes that urban agriculture is growing in popularity in Canadian municipalities as a solution to issues of food security and accessibility. While the practice of urban agriculture is not a new idea, many municipalities are incorporating urban agriculture activities into their by-laws and official plan policies for the first time. This report examined the components involved in the process and developed a series of recommendations meant to act as "lessons learned" for other municipalities trying to facilitate backyard chickens in their cities.

Areas for future research include examining the relationship between backyard chickens and communities gardens. Most backyard chicken policy requires that the owner live on-site to ensure care and maintenance of chickens and coops. Community gardens are generally located on public land, and thereby backyard chickens are not a permitted use despite meeting other requirements (e.g., setbacks, maximum number of chickens permitted, coop and run dimensions). Community gardens and backyard chickens are both growing practices of urban agriculture, and in the future, community groups will likely campaign to include both practices on the same piece of land. Additional research on how the two practices interact could benefit municipal planning, which will likely have to consider this issue in years to come.