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Local food for renewed thought

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Egged on by environmental and farmers' groups, Toronto's government management committee yesterday took baby steps toward adopting a new local-food procurement policy. But as the National Post's Allison Hanes explains, the committee's actions fell short of some people's hopes.

What's new The committee yesterday authorized \$15,000 for a pilot project in the department of child services, which will work toward increasing the amount of local produce served in 37 city-run daycares. It also agreed to phase in a local-food procurement policy for city institutions only after city staff report back on how the daycare pilot project works out.

What's behind it The idea is to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases emitted during the transport of food imported from around the world by buying locally grown fruits, vegetables and other foods. Spin-off benefits would include fresher, perhaps cheaper, seasonal produce, higher nutritional value and an economic boost to Ontario's farmers.

What happened before Last May, the government management committee rebuffed a report by city staff calling for a policy requiring 10% of the food served at city daycares, nursing homes and homeless shelters, among other places, be local and sustainable. The initial policy called for \$100,000 to be added to the city's \$11-million food budget to account for the sometimes higher cost of sustainable and organic foods. Several councillors on the committee balked at the higher price and the idea got bogged down in a debate about the definition of "sustainable." Yesterday councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby (Etobicoke Centre), the committee chairwoman, said the initial policy was flawed: "If we had gone whole hog last time when this came before us, we would have made grave mistakes."

What happened since then City staff went back to the drawing board, dumping the sustainable aspect of the initial policy and suggested a more cautious, phased-in strategy for procuring local food. But the Toronto Environmental Alliance has been lobbying the city to take bolder action, delivering apples to city councillors this week to push the city to set a target of 50% for the amount of local food it aims to serve.

What happens next After failing to get committee members to latch on to its target of 50%, the Toronto Environmental Alliance said it would continue campaigning in the hopes other city councillors would champion the cause and propose such an amendment at next week's council meeting.