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Briefing: City hall eats a little more local

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Egged on by environmental and farmer's groups, Toronto's government management committee today took baby steps toward adopting a new local food procurement policy for the city. 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 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 day cares. The committee also agreed to phase-in a local food procurement policy for city institutions only after city staff report back on how the day care 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 day cares, 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 tag and the idea got bogged down in a debate about the definition of "sustainable." Today councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby (Etobicoke Centre), the committee chair, 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 suggesting 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 set a target of 50% for the amount of local food it aims to serve.

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