



Promoting Healthy Food Environments in the City of St. Albert through Request for Proposals



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The City of St. Albert (City), home to over 64,645 residents, is a thriving community located northwest of Edmonton, Alberta. Recently, the City ranked at the top of several national surveys as the “#1 City to Raise a Family in Canada” and the “#1 Healthiest Community in Canada” (St. Albert, 2016). To support community health and promote physical activity, the City boasts multiple recreational facilities and parks. While these settings promote health by encouraging physical activity, many City recreational facilities offer unhealthy food and beverages, which make healthy eating choices difficult. As Mark Edwards, Business and Marketing Manager for the City’s Recreation and Parks, reflects, “If you wanted to eat something [after a workout]...it was either going to be high in salt, or, high in fat, or high in sugar.” Disturbed by the popularity of junk foods among children in recreational facilities, Mark was determined to make the healthy choice not just the easy choice, but an option in the first place.

This policy story describes the City’s efforts to create healthy food environments in recreational facilities by strategically redeveloping their vending machine and concession stand Request for Proposals (**‘Healthy Food RFPs’**), as well as highlights key lessons learned along the way.

Developing the Healthy Food RFPs

Beginning in 2012, Mark began to notice potential windows of opportunity to promote healthier food options in City recreational facilities through the development of Healthy Food RFPs. First, in 2012, the City’s vending contracts were coming up for renewal. Mark saw this as an opportunity to update the vending RFP that promotes the sale of healthy items. Second, in 2014, Mark’s team also began to consider privatization of selection concession stands operated by the City. This change of ownership presented an opportunity to introduce a concession stand RFP requiring the sale of healthy items.

**Walking around
and [seeing]
who’s selling
chocolate bars
in a recreation
centre, it
always
bothered me.**

*Mark Edwards
City of St. Albert*



As a first step in the change process, Mark reviewed the existing vendor contract. While it was filled with a lot of standard legal jargon, there was a specific section regarding what the vendor was expected to provide in their vending machines, creating an opportunity to incorporate healthier food options at City facilities. This newly developed section could then be included in the upcoming RFP renewal for food vendors. Put simply, Mark thought that redeveloping the vending RFP was a feasible strategy and “the right thing to do.”

Next, Mark reached out to the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA), a respected non-profit organization in the province, to seek expert support. ARPA connected Mark with a policy analyst at Alberta Health, who agreed to provide support in developing Healthy Food RFPs for the City. As part of this expert support, Alberta Health provided sample wording and RFP templates to assist Mark and his team.

Mark also brought his own expertise to the process as he had a wealth of knowledge and experience in the business sector. Throughout the process, Mark put on his “business hat” and worked simultaneously with potential vending bidders to “test the waters” and assess the feasibility for this proposed RFP change. Through these discussions with local businesses, Mark learned that while vendors were not enthusiastic about the proposed change, they were not



*City of St. Albert, Alberta
Wikimedia Commons*

surprised by the new requirements. Mark recalls that businesses were already anticipating a push towards healthier options given general health and wellness trends in the City.

In addition, Mark connected with City staff and council members to inform them of the proposed changes to the RFP. Mark believed that because health and wellness were already a large part of the City’s “brand”, he did not have to “make the case” for City staff and elected officials. According to Mark, creating healthy food environments through an updated RFP was not a political issue; it was, again, just the “right thing to do.”

Mark’s “policy temperature gauge” was right on the mark. City staff and elected officials were very supportive of the proposed change. Indeed, Mark received a note from the Mayor acknowledging the great work he was doing. With this strong level of support from City officials, the vending RFP was formalized in 2012.

Launch of the Vending RFP

To kick-off the vending RFP in 2012, Mark and his team announced the change through a media release. Looking back, he was genuinely surprised by the amount of positive media attention the new RFP received. This was possibly due to the fact that the initial launch of the RFP was ambitious; vendors were required to submit menus that contained 80% “Choose Most Often” items, 20% “Choose Sometimes” items, and 0% “Choose Least Often,” based on the *Alberta Nutritional Guidelines for Children and Youth* (ANGCY) (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2012).



Healthy Eating in a Recreational Facility, Wikimedia

Despite positive feedback from the media release, Mark faced challenges in implementing the RFP change. Even with the previous business consultations, Mark quickly learned that it was too early for businesses to implement such a large revision. Upon consulting potential vendors, Mark received concerns that selling mostly healthy food would be unprofitable. Considering this, the RFP

was adjusted to reflect 80% “Choose Sometimes” and 20% “Choose Most Often” items, but Mark was firm in keeping “Choose Least Often” items at 0%.

With this adjustment, proposals began to roll in for vending machines. Mark and his team diligently assessed vending menu proposals using the Healthy Food Checker website available through Alberta Health Services (Alberta Health Services, 2011). This website helps users compare nutritional information from a Nutrition Facts Table to the ANGCY and allows users to check whether a food or beverage item falls into the “Choose Most Often,” “Choose Sometimes,” or “Choose Least Often” category (Alberta Health Services, 2011). Mark admits this was a tedious task, but one that helped his team select vendors that met their requirements.

St. Albert prides itself on being a healthy community... When you ask the average person here what are the top five things you love about St. Albert, they're all around a health and wellness lifestyle.

Mark Edwards
St. Albert

Launch of the Concession Stand RFP

The second phase of the change process involved the privatization of concession stands. In 2014, Mark identified potential concession venues around the City, such as football fields and hockey arenas, for private businesses to takeover.

Similar to the development of the vending RFP, Mark consulted with potential businesses regarding the incorporation of healthy items into concession menus. Businesses were then selected through the development of concession stand RFPs. Unlike the vending RFP, each concession stand had different requirements based on the needs of the area. For example, concession stands close to vulnerable populations, such as school children, were required to have more healthy options available for sale.

Working Together with Businesses to Support Change

Once businesses were selected to operate the vending machines and concession stands, Mark continued to work with businesses throughout the implementation process of the Healthy Food RFPs. For example, if businesses were concerned about losing revenue, they worked together to identify ways to make the partnership more profitable (e.g. licensing more vending machines). In addition, a City staff member, assigned to support business operations, visited the facilities and assisted with

implementation of healthy menus.

One of the biggest wins for the City of St. Albert was switching from a costly City-owned concession model to a private model. This helped to reduce expenses and generate revenue for the City. In the case of vending machines, Mark reflects that while profits had been on the decline prior to the RFP changes, they have now stabilized. Overall, Mark calls the Healthy Food RFPs both “financially and nutritionally healthy.”

Key Lessons Learned

Reflecting on successes to date, Mark recalls four key lessons learned in the change process:

1. **A highly qualified champion.** Mark Edwards, a champion of the RFP redesign, was well-suited to lead this process. First, in his position with the City, Mark had the decision-making power to take action on the development of the Healthy Food RFPs. Second, he had a strong business background that allowed him to meaningfully collaborate with business vendors. In addition to tackling the issue from a health perspective, Mark’s knowledge of the businesses’ perspective helped him see two sides of the same coin.

2. **Connecting with knowledgeable**

stakeholders. Mark knew he had to connect with health experts to design the RFPs. While Mark was passionate about bringing a healthier food environment to the City, he by no means had the nutritional expertise needed to write the Healthy Food RFPs alone. He connected with organizations, including ARPA and Alberta Health, who were able to provide the expertise needed in the development of the Healthy Food RFPs.

3. **Working with the business community.**

Engaging businesses in the Healthy Food RFPs development was key in supporting the transition towards healthier food options at City facilities. Mark engaged businesses very early in the change process and continued to support successful applicants through the implementation stages. For example, Mark provided educational resources and capital investment opportunities for businesses.

4. Public support. Having general public support was important, as it gave Mark and his team the go-ahead that it was the “right thing to do.” According to Mark, residents of St. Albert have a history of supporting health and wellness. “When we do our community surveys, the things that people value are trees, nature, trails, parks, recreation facilities... they’re all around [a] health and wellness lifestyle” says Edwards. The public’s

support for health and wellness, in turn, was reflected in the city councillor’s backing for the Healthy Food RFPs.



St. Albert Place, Wikimedia

Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Hurdles

One of the biggest challenges Mark and his team faced was getting vendors and concession stand operators to take the leap of faith to support healthier food options. Mark acknowledges that there is still room to grow in making a strong business case for healthier food environments in recreational facilities. The reality of the present situation is that unhealthy foods like French fries and burgers continue to be more profitable to sell compared to healthier options, such as salads.

One strategy that Mark used to help businesses see the opportunities coming from the Healthy Food RFPs was to provide businesses examples of the range of healthier options they could capitalize on. For example, if vendors were offering a combo meal, Mark would suggest swapping the soft drink with water.

Another strategy Mark and his team used to help support wary concession businesses was to provide them with capital support as part of their lease agreement. For instance, instead of concession owners buying and maintaining their own kitchen equipment (an expensive investment), businesses could lease equipment from the City. As a result, the City had some influence over what types of equipment would be available. For example, the City could substitute deep fryers with warming ovens to make baked potato wedges instead of French fries. In sum, educating vendors and providing capital incentives were two helpful strategies Mark used to gain support and buy-in from businesses.

Final Thoughts

The Healthy Food RFPs have been a big success for City of St. Albert residents. New healthy concession stands continue to be revamped across the City, giving sports and recreation enthusiasts and spectators alike more healthy options to choose from. Mark is very encouraging to other community leaders looking to implement a similar healthy policy. He leaves us with two main takeaways from his experience.

- ◆ **“Just do it.”** Mark has been invited to give presentations on the success of the City’s Healthy Food RFPs. His biggest piece of advice for others looking to go down a similar path is to just get started and do it. “It’s not as hard as [you] think it’s going to be... the risks are not significant.” He encourages other champions to get creative in thinking of ways they can make up for the possibility of lost revenue (which he sees as “a drop in the bucket in the grand scheme of things”).
- ◆ **“Think big, take a stand, but be patient.”** While Mark sees himself as more of a realist than idealist, he also believes that you can’t “dip your toe in the water halfway to do something progressive.” For example, he has seen other groups move unhealthy products to lower shelf levels, but he doesn’t believe that minor changes such as these will encourage citizens to choose healthier food options. He believes that it is important to take a stand and find flexibility within the healthy requirements you have put in place. Mark reflects that, with time, he has seen the business community move closer towards innovating around healthier food options, take ownership in the process, and identify ways to increase profitability. In this way, Mark suggests that taking a stand has been a catalyst in promoting healthier food environments.



For More Information:

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Media coverage on St. Albert's concession changes: <http://www.stalbertgazette.com/Concession-changes-coming-for-city-facilities-20140607>

More media coverage: <http://www.stalbertgazette.com/Changes-coming-for-Fountain-Park-concession-20150110>

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