Community Food Needs & Opportunities

by Amy Souza

Across North America, many people are looking to improve their community food systems, in which food is grown, processed, distributed, and consumed locally.

The Food System

A food system begins where food or ingredients are grown and ends at your plate. (The system also includes waste and recycling, but for this article we stop at consumption.) Another term for community food system is foodshed, which the Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project defines as: "borrowed from the concept of a watershed, [and] coined as early as 1929 to describe the flow of food from the area where it is grown into the place where it is consumed." The term, though not used widely, provides a good metaphor for looking at local food issues.

Most community food systems have both local and national (and even international) components. Berries from Florida, fish from Australia, wine from California, corn from a local farmer, and salad greens from a kitchen garden might share a table in a North American home. For the most part, elaborate systems bring this food from large-scale producers to large distributors – food processors, grocery stores, food brokers, and institutions – before it gets to our plate.

Food in the U.S., on average, travels well in excess of 1,000 miles from producer to consumer. *See Hannah Twaddell's article, on page 18 of PCJ #63 for more on this.* Environmental costs of this system include the use of fossil fuels to transport food over long distances by ship, truck, train, and even plane. In addition, food that travels many miles can be less nutritious. Produce can take seven days or more to go from farm to store shelf. Each day after being picked, produce loses nutrients – not to mention taste. And, food that needs to travel is often protected in waxy coatings or is selected (sometimes genetically modified) for consistency in size and shape for efficient packing.

> A GROWING NUMBER OF CITIES, COUNTIES, AND STATES HAVE BEGUN TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY FOOD ISSUES, THROUGH MECHANISMS SUCH AS LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENTS AND FOOD COUNCILS.

Another important issue is also at play. The global food system does little to keep money in the local economy. If you live in New York but purchase California apples, or blueberries grown in New Zealand, your dollars have left your region. And if your community is highly dependent on out-of-state food suppliers, then you're at greater risk of food shortages in times of crisis.

Planners are increasingly recognizing the importance of these issues. The American Planning Association's "Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability" (adopted in April 2000), includes as examples of actions planners can take in support of sustainability, "promoting local food production and agriculture that reduces need for long-range transport of food" and encouraging "locally-based agriculture … providing a nearby source of fresh, healthy food for urban and rural populations."

Another cause for the burgeoning interest in food systems is public health – in particular, the sharp increase in obesity rates. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 32 percent of Americans, or nearly 60 million people, are obese. An additional 34 percent of the adult population are considered overweight.[1] Obesity/overweight rates are especially pronounced among low-income adults.[2]

The seeming paradox of low income and high body weight makes sense when you look at what types of food are often available to the poor. Though some social observers view obesity in terms of personal responsibility and bad choices, can people make healthy food choices if healthy food is not readily available to them? Not surprisingly, the most glaring food system issues disproportionately affect low-income citizens in both urban and rural communities, particularly when it comes to nutrition and access.

What Can Planners Do?

A white paper prepared by the American Planning Association's Food System Planning Committee earlier this year, notes that "the land use implications and impacts of the food system are pervasive and cut across many of the areas in which planners are involved – economic development, environment and natural

What is Local?

When examining a local food system or talking about supporting local farms, what is meant by "local"? It could mean a neighborhood or a state. The Michigan Food Policy Council focuses on state issues, so "local" to its members means Michigan as a whole. In Dane County, Wisconsin, food council members have yet to define their version of local. It may refer only to Dane County, but more likely will include the nine surrounding counties as well.

1 See "Prevalence of Overweight & Obesity Among Adults," in the *National Health & Nutrition Examination Survey* (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

2 See "Body Weight Status of Adults: United States, 1997-98," in *Advance Data No. 330*, p. 6 (Centers for Disease Control, 2002).

resources, transportation, open space, energy, water resources and quality, neighborhood revitalization, and public health."[3] As a result, the paper urges planners to become more actively involved with food systems as a local planning issue.

Bringing planners to the food table, as it were, would add a level of necessary expertise. Planners know their cities and towns – they understand the infrastructure, economics, and how to go about changing things that don't work.

A first step in approaching food concerns in your community is often to gather interested citizens to begin a conversation. Bringing together a broad range of stakeholders – including farmers, nutritionists, social justice workers, and planners – helps everyone examine the topic in a more holistic way. A growing number of places have done this by conducting a community-wide food assessment.

Community Food Assessments

A community food assessment is just what it sounds like – an appraisal of a community's food system, helping to identify assets as well as needs. "It's a systematic process examining food-related issues," says Raquel Bournhonesque from the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), an organization working on local and regional food system issues across the U.S. and Canada. *The CFSC.*

Mark Winne, one of CFSC's founders and its communication director, was for 25 years executive director of the Hartford (Connecticut) Food System, a private, nonprofit focusing on hunger issues. In the early 1990s, HFS met with the heads of all city departments and asked them, "How do you address food needs and nutrition?"

"First they'd stare at you blankly," Winne says. "But then after asking some leading questions we found out that most of them actually were doing some kind of work that related to food. It's just that the consciousness was lacking."

Today, he adds, there is a growing awareness of city government's role in food needs, and that those needs encompass more than just the obvious, like healthy school meals. "City governments are beginning to see that land use affects an area's ability to provide fresh, healthy food to its residents. Twenty-five years ago there was no understanding at all."

HFS conducted ongoing assessments of their community's food needs, "before anyone came up with the name 'community food assessment,'" Winne says. "We were constantly looking at prices, transportation, land use decisions, schools, and food pantries. Basically all the ways that people could get food and that the quality and price of food could be affected."

At least two of their findings led to changes at the city level. First, HFS found a lack of food outlets – including supermarkets and farmer's markets – inside Hartford proper. Winne brought that information to the city, and Hartford officials made a commitment to bring food stores back into the city limits through community development work.

In addition, HFS created a detailed view of how people in low income neighborhoods were getting to food stores. "We conducted interviews with people, sat down with maps of bus lines, and mapped area stores," Winne says. "We found a dysfunctional relationship between public transportation and food outlets. As a result of that information, and advocacy, we got a new bus route

continued on next page

3 "Food Systems Planning White Paper," prepared by APA Food System Planning Committee (2006); currently available online at: <www.planning.org/divisions/pdf/foodwhitepaper.pdf>.

The CFSC

The Community Food Security Coalition offers free training and counseling to communities embarking on local food assessments or interested in creating food policy councils. In addition, CFSC's web site – <www.foodsecurity.org> – includes case studies from around the country.

No Fast Food Nation?

One traditional way that planners have addressed food issues, albeit indirectly, is through zoning, such as to maintain agricultural lands. Zoning has also been used to partially or entirely restrict fast food restaurants, either due to matters of aesthetics (as in Concord, Massachusetts) or to curb drive-through traffic.

Some researchers in the public health field have suggested using such zoning to limit access to fast food for health reasons. That idea may not sit well with citizens and some politicians, of course, since it is aimed at regulating people's personal eating habits. A better solution, perhaps, is to increase healthy food access in low-income areas, and to work with community agencies to offer nutrition education and sign up eligible people for federal food programs.

Municipal Food Policies

The City of Hartford, Connecticut, has an adopted policy that "city agencies and employees in determining the use to be made of city parks, school yards, rights-of-way, surplus properties and redevelopment parcels, shall give special consideration to the benefit of using such sites, at least in part, for food production, processing, and distribution." City policy also calls for the preservation, at the regional level, of "farmland for truck farming which will serve as a nearby source of fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs, and milk."

Hartford's food policies are overseen, in part, by a 15-member Food Policy Advisory Commission which, among other things, conducts a bi-annual food store price survey of supermarkets within the city.

Community Food Needs & Opportunities
continued from previous page

established that took people from the lowest income neighborhood directly to a new suburban grocery store."

Food assessments, stresses Bournhonesque of the CFSC, "should be done at the neighborhood level and be very participatory."

In Fresno County, California, the Fresno Metro Ministry, an active interfaith organization founded in 1970, took the lead in conducting a countywide food assessment. "We worked with local community leaders to find out what they wanted to know," says Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministry's hunger and nutrition program coordinator. "The community was adamant that they wanted to retain qualitative data."

To that end, over 80 neighborhood leaders conducted more than 850 surveys of residents – and 131 surveys of retail stores. "We had people looking at their own neighborhoods," Jessup says, "and it gave us people to go back to once the survey was done."

One surprising finding from the Fresno food assessment was that many low-income citizens, particularly from minority populations, shopped for fruits and vegetables at the area's popular flea markets. At the time of the assessment, however, flea market vendors could not accept EBT (debit) cards. Food stamps in most states, including California, are only available on EBT cards, thus limiting access to fresh produce for food stamp participants. As a result, says Jessup, "we put new effort into helping vendors get authorized for EBT, which has now happened."[2]

Food Policy Councils

An increasingly popular "structure" for focusing on local, regional, and even state-level food issues has taken the form of the food policy council (or commission).

Mark Winne's work in Hartford led to the creation of both the city's Food Policy Commission and the Connecticut Food Policy Council, two of the first such councils in this country. Today, there are at least 45 such councils in the U.S. and Canada. Members often come from food-related industries, such as farms, farmers' markets, retail markets, or restaurants, and also typically include nutritionists, health workers, and policy makers. Most times a council's role is advisory.

In Michigan, for example, a 21 member state-level food council (supported by a two-person staff) is focusing on four big issues: expanding food related businesses and jobs; improving access to fresh and healthy foods; promoting Michigan foods; and enhancing agricultural viability. "We have a really big scope in our mission," says Kristen Brooks, the council's executive coordinator. "We could have a full council on any one of those issues."

There are pros and cons to working inside or outside of government. "We

2 A report summarizing results of the assessment can be downloaded at: <www.fresnometmin.org/fmm/pdfs/CFA_Summary_9-14-05.pdf>

Community Supported Agriculture

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) directly links farmers and consumers. In these programs, farmers grow food for a group of consumers who have purchased subscriptions (or shares) at the beginning of the farmer's season. The subscription agreement covers where, when, and how the food is to be delivered, and information about the anticipated bounty (subscribers share some risk if the crop is less than anticipated, while benefiting if the season is better than expected).

CSA enables farmers to receive much needed capital at the beginning of the growing season — and a guaranteed outlet for the year's crop. Subscribers receive a regular supply of high quality food, often at lower cost. Both also benefit from more direct delivery of the products, and lower transportation costs.

A national survey of CSA farmers found that most CSA operations are relatively small in size, with a median of three acres being devoted to CSA-related production. For most of these farmers, community-supported agriculture provides an additional means of marketing their products and generating income.[1]

CSA can provide a "win-win-win" situation: benefiting farmers through increased income; benefiting consumers with fresh local food; and benefiting communities looking to preserve local agricultural land or hoping to develop a commercial agricultural base. Perhaps this explains why the number of CSA enterprises has mushroomed over the past 15 years from 60 to more than 1,000.

A number of comprehensive plans are now citing CSA as a strategy that can help strengthen local and regional agriculture. The American Planning Association's adopted "Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability" also calls for encouraging their use.

For additional resources on CSA, go to: <www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/> and <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/csa.pdf>.

1 "CSA Across the Nation" (Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin-Madison, October 2003); available at: <www.cias.wisc.edu>.

The 180 shareholders of the Full Moon Farm CSA in Burlington, Vermont, can pick up their food twice weekly during growing season. Farmer David Zuckerman (on right, speaking with a member), also chairs the Vermont House of Representatives' Agriculture Committee.

went a very structured route, with the council embedded within government," says Brooks. "By working within the system it really ensures us buy-in."

The path you choose depends much upon the members' desires as well as the political climate of your community, but the CFSC's Bournhonesque stresses the need to build strong relationships with government however a food council is organized.

In Wisconsin, the Dane County Food Council began meeting this past January. The county is home to the city of Madison, where small fruit and vegetable farms predominate. Elsewhere in the county, however, commodity growers of soybeans, corn, and milk predominate. Differences obviously exists between these agricultural camps.

Of the four farmers on the council's 12 member board, three run small-scale diversified farms, the fourth is a corn and soybean grower and former president of the County Farm Bureau. Other council members include nutritionists, marketers, and faculty from the University of Wisconsin (including a retired professor of planning). A county planning department staff person and the director of the county extension program also attend meetings.

Dane County, the City of Madison, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have contributed a total of $15,000 for 2006 to support the Council with part-time staff, housed in the County's Planning and Development Department.

One of the Council's initial projects focuses on encouraging the county food service to purchase more local foods for county-run correctional facilities and senior centers, thus providing economic advantages to farmers and health advantages to consumers. Other issue areas include establishing a countywide network of farmers, supporting farmland preservation, and promoting local foods to improve health and nutrition.[3]

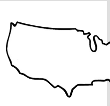
Summing Up:

In recent years, a growing number of cities, counties, and states have begun to address community food issues, through mechanisms such as local food assessments and food councils. Planning departments and commissions should consider taking an active role in this work. With their knowledge and expertise, planners can help ensure that food-related issues are addressed within the broader community-wide planning and zoning framework.

Like our watersheds, our food supply networks also cut across jurisdictional boundaries. This means that efforts to deal with food issues need to be comprehensive and inclusive. The problems of hunger, nutrition, and access may not be easily solved, but getting the conversation started is a welcome first step. ◆

Amy Souza is a writer and editor. Her previous article for the Planning Commissioners Journal, "Planning for Dogs: Exercise vs. Restraint," appeared in PCJ #55, Summer 2004.

3 For more on the Dane County Food Council: <www.countyofdane.com/foodcouncil/>.



A Place to Grow

by Jim Flint

The tradition of public green space has deep roots in America, where the first settlers created town commons to provide community land for pasturing farm animals. Now as a new generation of immigrant families arrives, "community gardens" offer a place to grow culturally familiar foods in settings that help to facilitate social integration. And for rural immigrant families relocated to densely populated areas, these garden plots help create a sense of food security and a connection to nature.

At the Starr Farm Community Garden in Burlington, Vermont, gardeners from China grow prized winter melons using trellising techniques passed down through generations. In a nearby plot, Bosnian gardeners talk together about their families and homeland, finding in the community garden a safe place to grow fresh food and nurture lasting friendships.

The Starr Farm garden is a veritable "patchwork quilt" pieced together by 100 gardeners of diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities. Self-reliance and a sense of belonging are developed as gardeners work side-by-side in a common pursuit, even while speaking different languages. Through the community garden, new and long-time Americans share, borrow, and create cultural and horticultural traditions. Community gardening activities and events help develop social cohesion, mutual trust, and leadership skills, while people work together to improve their garden site and neighborhood.

In some American cities, community gardens are viewed as a temporary use of land. Community garden planners, however, realize that gardens established on permanent sites accessible to neighborhoods – and preserved by local ordinances and sustainable practices – build social capital and yield an array of health and recreational benefits.

For more information, please visit the American Community Gardening Association at: <www.communitygarden.org>.

Jim Flint has community gardened in Burlington, Vermont since 1987 and serves as the executive director for Friends of Burlington Gardens. He is editor of "Patchwork: stories of gardens and community," (Community Works Press, 2005; <www.burlingtongardens.org/Patchwork.htm>.

JIM FLINT

Sabrina Zhu cultivates a plot at the Starr Farm Community Garden in Burlington, Vermont.