Abstract: This continuation of a previous project showed the value of hiring a local food coordinator to aid in advancing local food systems in southwest Iowa.

Dedicated staff has greatly improved the capacity of this regional food system. Review has shown that more staff is needed at the local and regional level in order to continue increasing local food system capacity and resiliency. Current systems in place to serve Iowa’s farmers have not adapted to the changes in agriculture to meet the rising demand for a local food system. Having a local food coordinator provided much needed services, technical support, networking and project development for food-based farmers and ranchers.

What was done and why?

Southwest Iowa is a predominately rural region, with more than two dozen farmers markets, a diminishing population, and a median household income that is declining. Council Bluffs (population 68,268) is the largest metropolitan area.

When this grant was submitted, Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors and concerned citizens had coordinated and organized Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork meetings and planning sessions. These meetings eventually led to the County Board of Supervisors appointing an eight-member, volunteer Local Food Council.

During the initial organization meetings, strategic planning needs were identified and the these goals developed: dealing with the lack of grower vendors (local food producers) in the region, addressing education and networking to improve the infrastructure to support a healthy, local food-based economy, and gaining support from decision makers and elected officials.

What did we learn?

Designing a systems-style approach to regional local food system development resulted in many successes. Having dedicated staff has allowed for the creation of improved communication pathways, more effective information dissemination, and a dramatic rise in mutually beneficial partnerships. All of these improved components have led to a rapid rise of local food projects starting and successfully developing in southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska. Nearly 50 new partnerships were created during the past two years to support local food system development.

The work of local food system development requires, time, patience and diligence. It involves public speaking, meeting facilitation, the fine art of conversation and would greatly benefit from more staff. The greatest needs going forward will be to continue to leverage suitable funds to support staff, develop better web-based tools that assist local food producers and buyers, and create a campus-style facility for the regional local food systems in southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska.