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Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork

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Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork

Abstract

Using a modest amount of seed money, the Pottawattamie County Local Food Council was able to support the development of local farmers markets, hire a local food coordinator, create the Grow Growers program, and make progress on local food system development.

Keywords

Community-based food systems, Food miles food pathways food system assessments, Market research and feasibility studies

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition | Marketing



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Abstract: Using a modest amount of seed money, the Pottawattamie County Local Food Council was able to support the development of local farmers markets, hire a local food coordinator, create the Grow Growers program, and make progress on local food system development.

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Golden Hills RC&D
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Pottawattamie County
Board of Supervisors
Council Bluffs

Budget:

\$6,000 for year one
\$6,000 for year two

Q Can we form a stable community-based food system in Pottawattamie County based on the use of a mentor program and a formalized county-based group of stakeholders?

A The mentor program was not entirely successful as no new growers were recruited, but other aspects of the local food shed have been greatly enhanced and a strong coalition of stakeholders emerged.

Background

The Pottawattamie County Local Food Council is working toward a healthier local food economy for area residents. The Southwest Iowa Farm to Food Initiative (SWIFFI) provided technical assistance for an area-wide needs assessment and gaps analysis. The Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors convened the needs assessment and asset mapping meetings in November 2007. The stakeholders who participated were concerned that the number of current producers was not sufficient to meet an increased demand for local food in the county.

The two main project objectives were to create a mentor program to increase the number of beginning producers and educate them through interaction with established producers and to develop a strategic plan with action agenda for the Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork Partner Team.

Approach and methods

Three local food producers agreed to serve as mentors for the project. They were chosen because their operations represented nearly every aspect of the food chain. A Grow Growers brochure was produced and widely distributed. Paper copies are available from the investigators.

A comprehensive strategic plan was prepared by a large group of dedicated stakeholders at multiple meetings held at various locations in the county. The plan outlined short- and long-term goals for the county to develop a stable, community-based food system that supports food-based agricultural and economic development. This strategic plan has been accomplished and a second plan is under development.

Results and discussion

Despite an increase in producers participating at the Riverside Farmers Market in Oakland, no new producers were attracted to the mentoring program by the end of 2009. Alternatives are being explored to redirect the program, including a possible partner-



MARKETING



*Pottawattamie County
delegation to Growing Power.*

ship with the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture. Other potential linkages are with Growing Power, a local Farm Service Agency office, 4-H and FFA groups, and Promise Partners.

The strategic plan (see www.swiffi.org) was put into place and will be updated in 2010. The board of supervisors appointed an eight-member Food Council and a local food coordinator was hired by the Golden Hills RC&D. Farmers markets in the county are thriving. There is a waiting list of communities that would like to sponsor markets, but the lack of producers to supply the markets has limited the county to two—at Council Bluffs and Oakland.

Conclusions

Pottawattamie County has a quantifiable demand for locally grown food. The limited pool of producers cannot meet the food supply needs of farmers markets, institutions or retail outlets. The food council claims a strong coalition of organizations, but needs even more creative thinking to apply to the problem.

- Investigators learned that it is much more difficult than they expected to recruit beginning farmers and ranchers into food production. They speculated that farming and ranching are not promoted or generally accepted as wise career choices, and are not common career paths in the United States. Also, the large information gap about U.S. food systems has led to most people not knowing where their food comes from or precisely how it is produced.
- They also learned that it is hard to document the number of existing local food producers, even though they exist. Having a local food coordinator for the last part of the grant period helped with this task, as well as other critical projects.
- The Local Food/Local Policy Councils appointed by the board of supervisors have proved to be effective in organizing the work to be done on local food systems.
- Having a state-level food policy council would greatly assist regional efforts to work through policy and cultural roadblocks. Creating a chain of command for development work, projects, research, and policy formation will help resolve issues and support the food systems.
- Basing food shed regions on the RC&D regions has shown clear positive impact in the RC&D regions that are involved in local food system development.

Impact of results

While the original project objectives were achieved, it was on a smaller scale than expected. Investigators think that more concerted efforts with 4-H, FFA, and other youth groups may be a good place to start, and immigrant groups and faith-based organizations may offer other opportunities. The models, however, remain suitable for use in other areas. SWIFFI has shared the model with other counties in the Regional Food Systems Working Group, with other groups at Leopold Center meetings and in other venues.

Overcoming the lack of new producers in the region proved more difficult than originally hoped. In early 2009, several people expressed interest in farming and two be-



Chefs share food samples.

came new growers in the region. One farmer sold at local farmers markets in 2009, and planned to expand in 2010, possibly with a CSA operation. The second new local food producer started raising food crops and heirloom chickens whose eggs were a big hit at the Riverside Farmers Market. Integrating crop and livestock enterprises.

Leveraged funds

A local food coordinator was hired toward the end of the project, and made significant contributions to finishing the work. Funding for this position came from Pottawattamie and Cass counties, the Iowa West Foundation, the Fund for Healthy Iowans and other groups.

***For more information,
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