Engaging community planners and local elected officials with local food systems producers to integrate local food systems into community plans and policies

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Abstract
Researchers examined three key obstacles to making progress in local food systems from a planning and land use perspective that could be handled by applying community planning tactics.

Keywords
Community and Regional Planning, Community-based food systems

Disciplines
International and Community Nutrition | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

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How can we integrate local food systems into community (city and/or county) plans to foster the establishment and growth of vibrant local food systems?

This project identified the three most significant challenges facing the development and expansion of local food systems: (1) Defining and administering the agricultural exemption to county zoning found in Iowa Code 335.2, (2) Smart growth practices and their impacts on agriculture in and near city limits, and (3) Lack of recognition of local food systems as an economic development opportunity.

Background

Local food production is an economic, health and cultural asset to communities and increasingly is seen as an indicator of resilience in areas hit by economic decline (Hodgson, et al). The demand for locally grown food is currently greater than local market farmers can supply. From discussions at the Town/Craft Food Systems Roundtable held in Perry, Iowa on August 12 and 13, 2009, it became clear that there is a need to engage city, county and regional planners in discussions with those who are involved with various aspects of local food systems. Currently, relatively few community planners in Iowa are deeply involved in the local foods area, and they could aid in the development of local food systems.

The project objectives were to:

1. Advance the understanding of local foods stakeholders, community planners and elected officials of the barriers, opportunities and strategies for the integration of local food systems into the plans and policies of local governments.

2. Identify and document examples of community comprehensive plans from around the United States that include policies, plans and ordinances that address local food systems and/or local food production, food processing, farmers’ markets, community gardens, urban gardens and farm-to-market issues.

3. Using the information developed in the previous steps, develop and disseminate local policy guidelines and an Extension publication to inform city and county planners, local policy makers and local food producers on resources and strategies to promote the adoption and/or expansion of local food systems in more communities across Iowa.
Approach and methods

Three Iowa focus groups involving individuals who represented a broad range of constituencies were conducted in Urbandale, Coralville and Ankeny. The Ankeny group focused on key points gleaned from the first two meetings. The input of the third focus group was used to refine the list of issues and identify significant challenges facing the development and expansion of local food systems.

Results and discussion

From the discussions at the three focus group meetings, the following three issues were identified as the most significant challenges facing the development and expansion of local food systems:

The Agricultural Exemption to County Zoning. This is an issue unique to Iowa because many counties’ definitions of a “farm” don’t include local market farms as well as large-scale operations. Due to the array of business models employed among local market farms and the learning curve facing planners on local food systems, a new collaborative approach to regulation could be useful. County planners and farmers both expressed a desire for a regulatory approach that minimizes the need to ask permission or grant waivers, and farmers also appreciate having a staff member who can serve as a “one-stop shop” to answer all the related regulatory questions. City and county planners can encourage local market farms by re-working their existing regulatory system to better reflect the realities of farming for local consumption.

Smart Growth and Agriculture Near and Within the City Limits. The inclusion of land for farms in city and county comprehensive plans and zoning regulations could help preserve land for local market farmers and also protect open space without the use of public funds. In addition to planning for agriculture on the fringe, cities can encourage local food production within city limits. Iowa cities are largely positive environments for gardeners, but few cities understand or make adequate provisions for the needs of urban farming. While urban farming is often more intensive than gardening and some urban farmers need larger plot sizes, the primary difference is that farmers sell a large portion of their produce, as contrasted to personal or hobby gardening. This means that cities need to enable and accommodate marketing activities--basic infrastructure such as on-site stalls or truck garden options---for urban farming to be profitable.

Local Food as Economic Development. Entrepreneurship is growing at the food system levels because demand is growing for food that comes with greater health, environmental, economic and social benefits. This leads to economic development opportunities on at least three fronts. First, significant market opportunities exist for smaller-scale producers because consumers and institutions are increasingly asking for healthy, green, fair and affordable food. Second, new local and regional distributors are needed to start businesses and open new market channels for local market farms. Aggregation allows producers to combine their products to deliver the quantity and consistency that grocers, restaurants and other buyers need. Third, a community
is in a better position to win new business investment when good food and strong farms help define it as a quality place to live.

As Iowa communities continue to engage with and expand local food systems, planners and local elected officials could learn from innovative responses both within and outside of the state. Some relevant plans, policies, and ordinances that address local food systems and/or local food production, food processing, farmers’ markets, community gardens, urban gardens, and farm-to-market issues come from Minneapolis, the state of Michigan and the America Planning Association.

**Conclusions**

The first identified challenge to integrating local food systems into community plans is the Iowa agriculture exemption to county zoning. The researchers suggest that the state create a task force of city and county elected officials, planners, local food growers, public health professionals, state legislators and other interested parties to study this exemption to county zoning. They could make recommendations to the state legislature on ways to adapt it to local food systems so it could be uniform across the state and help local food systems to grow while protecting public health and safety.

The next challenge was a conflict between smart growth planning principles and the practice of agriculture in the city. The investigators determined that educational efforts are needed to expose planners and local officials to possible policy alternatives that emphasize local food production, processing and distribution – such as the policies put forth by both the Minneapolis and Michigan plans. Community planners are well positioned in local government to provide insight on regulatory issues that must be addressed and can help pave the way for integrating local food systems into comprehensive plans and policies. Local elected officials play a crucial role as policy makers in the process of bringing local food systems into local plans and policies. Community planners are well positioned in local government to provide insight on regulatory issues that must be addressed and can help pave the way for integrating local food systems into comprehensive plans and policies. The key is to get best practice ideas into the hands of these decision-makers. ISU Extension Community and Economic Development has long-standing relationships with these decision-makers, and could play a key role in such educational efforts.

The third challenge is viewing growing local food as economic development. Despite studies showing that growing local food can make important contributions to local economies, local market farms are not seen as a serious alternative economic development strategy – by economic developers or local leaders – when compared to more traditional commercial or industrial development.

For communities interested in developing a local food system, a good place to start would be to create a local food policy council, if none exists. The Iowa Food Systems Council can provide assistance and so can the Leopold Center and the Regional Food Systems Working Group. If a food council exists in a county, these members should be involved and the key stakeholders identified. A meeting should include local food growers, local elected officials, city/county/regional planners, public health officials and other interested parties to discuss the opportunities and barriers to create a local food system. It is vital to get the interested parties in the same room in the same conversation at the outset. If cities can create a ‘friendly environment’ for local...
food systems, they may be able to attract more local growers, which often is cited as one of the biggest challenges that local food systems face. Local food systems offer economic opportunity as demand often outstrips supply.

**Impact of results**

This project brought together—some for the first time—community planners, local elected officials, local growers, farmers’ markets leaders, food distribution and aggregation business leaders and food policy council members. This new collaborative of local food systems advocates has the potential to become a partner of the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG, a statewide network once facilitated by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University) to bolster the development of local food systems around the state. As a result of this project, the authors anticipate that more city planners and local elected officials will consider the potential benefits of local food systems.

**Education and outreach**

Four ISU Extension bulletins (SP415A, SP415B, SP415C, SP415D) are in the process of being published.

**Leveraged funds**

No additional funds were leveraged by this grant.