

## Engaging Community Planners and Local Elected Officials with Local Food Systems Producers to Integrate Local Food Systems into Community Plans and Policies

# Introduction and Overview

Encouraging local food production to meet demand is an economic development opportunity that could keep more food dollars circulating in Iowa communities.

### Introduction

This is the first of four bulletins that discuss the findings of a local food system research project, Engaging Community Planners and Local Elected Officials with Local Food Systems Producers to Integrate Local Food Systems into Community Plans and Policies, funded by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. This bulletin provides an overview of the project and three subsequent bulletins provide details on the substantive findings of the project.

### Overview of Project

Interest in local foods is growing in Iowa. Local food production is an economic, health, and cultural asset to communities and is increasingly seen as an indicator of resilience in areas hit by economic decline. Iowans value local food production and relationships with local food producers, and 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 12–13, 2009 it became clear that much of the focus on local food systems addresses production, marketing, food safety, and nutrition issues. However in Iowa there has been relatively little focus on local food systems by local government involving community planners and local elected officials. In other parts of the country there are examples of local governments playing a significant role in creating a framework within their community plans to foster the establishment of vibrant local food systems.

Planners are uniquely positioned within local government to inform and advocate with policy makers and the public the benefits of including policies and plans to encourage the development of local and regional food systems. Elected policy makers—city council members and county supervisors—are the final decision-makers in adopting new plans and policies in their jurisdictions and are crucial to the eventual adoption of plans and policies that support

and encourage local and regional food systems.

Likewise, local producers, farmers' market operators, and others involved in local food systems development would benefit from learning about the political, policy, and regulatory environment in which land use decisions are made at the local level that affect growing, marketing, and distributing local foods in municipalities and urban areas. With a deeper understanding in this realm, they should be positioned to better understand the challenges facing local elected and appointed officials and communicate to them the potential economic and health benefits of developing local and regional food systems.

This project brought together community planners, local elected officials, local growers, farmers' market leaders, food distribution and aggregation business leaders, and food policy council members to

- Identify barriers to production, aggregation, and distribution of local foods that local governments could address through land use planning, zoning codes, or other local regulations; and
- Identify policy and regulatory options that local governments can implement to capture the economic or health benefits of local food systems for their communities.

### Process

Three focus groups were created to obtain Iowa-based data on local food systems. The first two focus groups were conducted as roundtable discussions, where participants were asked to address three questions:

1. Are there barriers to production, aggregation, and distribution of local foods to consumers, restaurants, and institutions that local governments can address through land use planning, zoning codes, or other local regulations?
2. What are some policy and regulatory options that local governments can or should put in place to capture the economic or health benefits of local food systems for their communities?
3. What key knowledge would be required for local governments to successfully navigate the local food system?

The first focus group was held at the Urbandale public library on October 25, 2010. Most stakeholders were from central Iowa with one representative of a southwestern Iowa county. Stakeholder perspectives included three area farmers producing for local markets, two city and county planners, a city manager, a Buy Fresh Buy Local

coordinator, and a representative of an association of farmers' markets.

The second focus group was held at Coralville public library on December 6, 2010. Most stakeholders were from eastern Iowa, with one representative of a northern Iowa county. Stakeholder perspectives included two farmers producing for local markets, two city and county planners, one member of a county board of supervisors, one backyard gardener, one leader of a local food system initiative, and a representative of a company that purchases and aggregates local food to deliver to institutional buyers.

Discussions at these two meetings were wide-ranging, and included the following issues:

- land-use and public health and safety based regulation of local foods production and marketing;
- the importance of food policy councils and of progressive action by regulators and planners to encourage local farming;
- growing local food as a form of economic development;
- how local market farmers are redefining the scope of activities that are considered as agriculture in Iowa;
- the importance of scheduling planning public-input sessions when farmers can participate, and/or enabling rural dwellers to participate in public-input meetings by telephone or Skype;
- local food advocates need to be able to demonstrate the value of growing local food to elected officials and the public, and local market farmers and other stakeholders can assist in this process;
- there may be disagreements over the appropriateness of regulation, but animosity can be minimized if both sides (growers, regulators) approach regulation with the goal of supporting diverse farming methods while at the same time protecting public health and safety;
- local food systems councils are important for education and involvement of more stakeholders, and the new Iowa Food Systems Council may be a vehicle to help develop more local food systems across Iowa.

The key points from the first two focus groups were compiled into a document for discussion at the third focus group meeting held in Ankeny on February 23, 2011, which consisted of many of the participants from the first two meetings, plus two new participants. Stakeholder perspectives included farmers producing for local markets, city and county planners, a city manager, the coordinator of a Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, a community food systems professor, a member of a county board of supervisors, a leader of a local food system initiative, and a representative of a company that purchases and aggregates local food to deliver to institutional buyers. 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.

## Outcomes

From the discussions at three focus group meetings, the following issues were identified as 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**  
Iowa's County Zoning Enabling Act (Iowa Code, Chapter 335) exempts from county zoning regulations "land, farm houses, farm barns, farm outbuildings or other buildings or structures which are primarily adapted, by reason of nature and area, for use for agricultural purposes, while so used." The courts and legislature have provided little guidance to landowners and local governments about how to interpret the agricultural exemption. The Iowa courts have found that the "primary purpose and functional aspect," of structures are the primary consideration of whether they are for agricultural purposes, but have failed to clearly define what, in fact, constitutes "agricultural purposes."
- (2) **Smart growth practices and their impacts on agriculture in and near city limits**  
Local market farmers often prefer to locate on the city-county fringe, which allows easy access to city markets and to agricultural land. Unfortunately, the fringe is under the highest pressure for development, and local market farmers often cannot afford to pay the land prices asked by landowners (and paid by developers). City and county government zoning codes, and infrastructure and annexation policies generally enable traditional commercial, industrial, and residential (i.e., non-agricultural) development on the fringe with few barriers because local governments benefit from the increased tax revenue that such development brings.
- (3) **Lack of recognition of local food systems as an economic development opportunity**  
Encouraging local food production to meet demand is an economic development opportunity that could keep more food dollars circulating in Iowa communities. A recent study found that ten southwestern Iowa counties could generate \$2.67 million in labor incomes by reaching unmet demand for local foods (Swenson 2010). Local food production also brings community health benefits by encouraging people to think about their diets, and social benefits through farmers' markets and harvest festivals. Despite a slow economy, Iowa added 28 farmers' markets in 2009. Other studies have also found that local food can have a positive local economic impact. In Iowa, studies by Otto and Varner (2005) and Swenson (2006) document the economic

benefit and potential of local food systems to local farmers and the local economy. According to Swenson (2011), the economic opportunity from growing local foods appears to be greater in areas nearer urban markets.

Each of the above three issues are addressed in much greater detail in the related extension bulletins.

## Conclusion

The interest in locally grown food continues to expand both in Iowa and around the country. It can provide income for local growers and a supply of fresh, locally grown food to area residents that can lead to better nutrition and health. The expanding number of local-regional food groups of growers (now 16 groups covering over 80 counties in Iowa) collaborating to expand local foods illustrates the widespread interest across Iowa.

Much of the assistance from extension on local food systems focuses on production, business management, and nutrition issues. This study has examined local food systems from a community planning perspective and brought together community planners, elected officials, and local growers to examine the local regulatory environment and identify barriers to supporting and expanding local food systems. This study cites a number of innovative local food system plans and policies from select cities around the country that, if adapted and adopted in Iowa, could strengthen our local food systems. The authors conclude if local food system policies are incorporated into a community's plans and policies, local farmers, consumers, and communities will benefit.

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