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

Smart growth and local food systems

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About the Project

Through a project[1] funded by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, community planners, local elected officials, local growers, farmers' markets leaders, food distribution and aggregation business leaders, and food policy council members came together 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.

From the discussions at three focus group meetings, the following issues were identified as the 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
(3) Lack of recognition of local food systems as an economic development opportunity

This bulletin presents the context and options for addressing the second issue through local plans, policies and land use regulations.[2]

Smart Growth and Local Foods Systems: The Context

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

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on the fringe with few barriers because local governments benefit from the increased tax revenue that such development brings.

Other local market producers see benefits in locating within city limits, bringing them even closer to potential markets. In many struggling cities, such as Detroit and Cleveland, urban agriculture operations have been actively promoted as a way to put abandoned, underutilized land to productive use. In cities that are not seeing the same level of decline, however, local officials prefer to pursue infill development strategies—redeveloping vacant and underutilized parcels—rather than putting those parcels to agricultural use. "Smart Growth" planning policies favor redevelopment because in the long run it is more economically efficient to direct development to locations where public infrastructure (sewer, water, roads) is already in place, rather than to locations where the municipality would need to add these services. These efficiencies, along with the increased tax revenue brought by development, outweigh current interests in promoting urban agriculture. Moreover, in older urban areas contaminated soils pose additional barriers to agriculture on vacant lots.

The pressures for development inside the city limits and on the fringe push local market farms further from urban areas. This drives up local food growers' costs of transporting products from the farm to the market, and reduces the potential to draw consumers to the farm for on-site sales and marketing events. Increased distance also weakens the special link that local food advocates say often exists between producers and regular customers, especially for Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription producers. Greater efforts to foster urban agriculture require the recognition that the local food system can be a key component to public health and neighborhood revitalization, and the development of policies and codes that incentivize or at least enable urban farms, community gardens, and small-scale production on residential owner-occupied lots.

Smart Growth and Local Foods Systems: Policy and Regulatory Responses

In the face of pressure to convert agricultural lands to residential, commercial, and industrial development, local governments must make explicit policy commitments to preserve agricultural land on the city-county fringe. The inclusion of land for small, market farms in city and county comprehensive plans and zoning regulations could go a long way towards preserving land for local food production and also protect open space without the use of public funds. Local governments can encourage subdivision developments that cluster dwellings together and leave more open area for local agriculture, which has the added value of maintaining gains in tax revenues. Planners can encourage these policy changes while also advocating increased emphasis on long-term preservation of agriculture as a community asset. Such a focus may become increasingly valuable to communities in the future as younger generations may be more open to non-traditional development designs.

In addition to planning for agriculture on the fringe, cities can encourage local food production within city limits. While Iowa cities are largely positive environments for gardeners, few cities understand or make adequate provisions for the needs of urban farming. Recreational gardening can be a good use of surplus parkland or vacant lots. Cities such as Des Moines, Ankeny, and Ames have supported community associations to establish gardens by advising leaders, preparing the ground, and providing water access. While personal and hobby gardening provides some of the cultural and health benefits of local food systems, farmers/growers—who are in the business of growing food and selling it locally for a profit—are essential for communities that wish to capture the economic benefits. 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.

Smart Growth and Local Foods Systems: Example Policies and Regulations

As Iowa communities continue to interact with and expand local food systems, planners and local elected officials could learn from innovative responses both within and outside of the state. Example plans, polices, and ordinances from around the country have been identified that address some of the issues raised during focus group discussions including Minneapolis, Minnesota; Cleveland, Ohio; Oakland, California; Dane County and Madison, Wisconsin; the State of Michigan; and the American Planning Association.

Protecting and Promoting Local Food Systems through Local Plans and Policies,

The Minneapolis Urban Agriculture Policy Plan was developed over two years by the Department of Community Planning and Economic Development, Planning Division, with the input of a wide variety of food-system stakeholders. The plan grew out of the 2009 Homegrown Minneapolis Report and was adopted by the Minneapolis city council on April 15, 2011. The plan itself is a high quality example of protecting and promoting local food systems in local plans. A few recommendations in the Urban Agriculture Policy Plan speak to the inclusion of food systems-related goals

in other Minneapolis planning documents:

- Review the city inventory of public lands and sell and lease more parcels that are not desirable for development, but are well-suited to urban agriculture.
- Specifically incorporate urban agriculture uses into long-range planning efforts for conservation lands, park lands, and open space areas.
- Consider farmers' markets, urban farms, market gardens, and community gardens for inclusion when small-area plans are developed.

The Michigan Good Food Access for Families and Communities report was produced by a coalition of food-system stakeholders led by the C.S. Mott Group of Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University, the Food Bank Council of Michigan, and the Michigan Food Policy Council. The Good Food Access report was finalized in January 2011 and presented to state and local governments. Among the planning recommendations in the report were the following:

- Integrate local food systems and good food access into planning for housing, transportation, employment, and community development, working with local food systems councils to help manage the additional workload.
- Enable and encourage community gardening on vacant city-owned land and the establishment of communit gardens by connecting gardeners with university extension and local nonprofit organizations for technical assistance and seed money.

Madison, Wisconsin has undertaken a number of planning efforts since the late 1980s that have included, in varying degrees, planning for local food systems. In a presentation made at the 2009 Town/Craft Local Food Systems roundtable Mark Olinger, Community Development Director for the city of Madison, highlighted the most relevant policy recommendations from these planning documents:

- Identify access to food as an important policy goal in the comprehensive plan.
- Assess the need for neighborhood grocery stores and the suitability of blighted parcels for such stores.
- Actively pursue recruitment of and financial assistance for grocery stores willing to locate in needed areas.
- Develop policies that place high priority on creating permanent sites for farmers' markets and urban agriculture.
- Encourage community gardens that are operated, sustained, and developed as neighborhood focal points.
- Identify and map agricultural operations within city limits. Maintain existing operations by helping farmers access incentive programs that will help them continue farming.

- Identify areas on the city's periphery suitable for long-term preservation for diverse agricultural enterprises.
- Support Dane County's numerous efforts to promote the sale of foods grown in Dane County.
- Strive to create one community garden site for every 2,000 households in Madison.

Other policies discovered for this project include:

- Several cities have established differential water rates for urban agriculture users.
- An increasing number of cities are establishing city food policy councils or contributing funds to existing councils.
- At least three cities use Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to develop urban agriculture projects.
- Many cities provide logistical, marketing or other support to local farmers markets, either through a local economic development agency or in cooperation with the local extension office.

Protecting and Promoting Local Food Systems in Local Zoning Codes

Over the last five years the number of cities and counties across the nation that have amended local development codes to promote local foods has mushroomed. As a result, the code amendments being adopted are increasingly diverse and innovative. Some of the common (and not so common) alternatives uncovered for this project include

- Allowing market gardens in multi-family, commercial, industrial, and urban garden districts, and requiring fencing or landscaping as buffers where necessary;
- Allowing market gardens to be located on rooftops in high-density residential districts;
- Allowing for planting beds in front yards and developing maximum height and minimum setback requirements for planting beds;
- Including market gardens as allowable outdoor operations in home occupation standards;
- Including hoop houses as an enumerated accessory use with development standards in residential zones;
- Allowing limited small livestock raising within city limits, but doing so with appropriate restrictions such as maximum numbers of animals, setbacks, minimum lot sizes, and permits to insure responsible animal husbandry that is compatible with surrounding land uses;
- Allowing small-scale apiaries (bee houses with beehives) with appropriate development standards in residential zones;
- Establishing an urban garden zoning district that specifies permitted structures and uses for sites zoned as urban gardens; and
- Adopting small acreage farming zones, located on the fringe of cities, in county zoning codes.

Conclusion

City and county 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. The key is to get best practice ideas into the hands of these decision-makers. This bulletin is designed to serve as a "jumping-off" point in the search for best practices that can be implemented by Iowa communities.

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Notes:

[1] For further background on the project please see Bulletin 1, Introduction and Overview

[2] The other issues are addressed in bulletins 3 and 4

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