

Community Food Systems:

Strengthening Community Health & Economy

Planners have historically focused on air, water, shelter and food. In the 19th century, as cities expanded, light and air gained prominence in an effort to combat public health concerns and disease. In the early 20th century, the garden city movement addressed the role of food in relation to planning. This relationship was lost for decades, but now food is moving to the fore once again - regionally, nationally and globally. Public health and welfare concerns are evident when issues such as ‘food deserts’, healthy eating options and rising obesity rates are addressed by planning organizations. Communities seeking to transform their food systems to promote access to affordable and nutritious food for everyone can do so through planning tools (e.g. zoning and community planning) and grassroots initiatives.

What is a Community Food System?

A community food system connects production, distribution, consumption and disposal of food. These components can be manifested through farming and community gardening, local food processing and distribution to local grocery stores, restaurants and institutions. Nutrition programs such as school meals, food stamps and food banks can also be an integral part of a community food system.

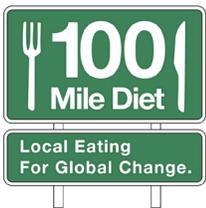
A community food system doesn’t seek to replace the conventional food system. Instead, it seeks to capitalize on the particular strengths of the community and re-build a local infrastructure to support equitable and affordable distribution and access.

Defining ‘Local’

‘Local’ is a relative term that can be defined in terms of miles (‘The 100-mile Diet’), geographic region (Virginia Grown) or time (e.g. 2-hour drive). In Charlottesville, for example, the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) defines ‘local’ as a 50-mile radius around its service area and moving outward in concentric rings at 50-mile intervals. For its initiative to incorporate local food into the meals it serves, JABA seeks to utilize nearby local food producers before moving to producers located further away (Berger).



Courtesy of www.safarmersmarket.com



Courtesy of www.livinggreentoronto.com

In addition to defining ‘local’, community food systems seek to increase understanding and appreciation for seasonal foods as well as extending the seasons through storage and production of value-added products (such as applesauce from local apples).

Benefits of a Community Food System

Healthy food systems are linked to healthy communities and economies, healthy citizens and a healthy environment. Community food system initiatives can generate farm business reforms and assist market development, and the demand for local food can mean thousands more jobs in farming, marketing and distribution. The production and availability of local food is key to public health efforts to reduce obesity and diabetes. The availability of fresh fruits and vegetables is critical for health and nutrition of at-risk populations, such as youth, seniors, and food bank clients, who typically have less access to these foods. Furthermore, the availability of local food is fast becoming a metric for “quality of life” in communities nationwide. Food security and healthy lands and waters are inextricably linked because working landscapes are conserved landscapes.



Photo Courtesy of www.lanefood.org

Healthy Communities & Economies

Community food systems improve local food security because local food production increases continued availability of food when weather or other factors might keep non-local foods from reaching the marketplace. Stronger community links may be formed as citizens gain understanding of community food needs as well as the quantities and types of food and products that local farmers can supply.

A community food system creates jobs in many sectors including agriculture, transportation, distribution, value-added food production, marketing and retail. Local food growers typically supply a small percentage of food items in a local food system compared to industrial food producers. As such, a greater number of growers are needed for a community to achieve a measure of self-reliance. Also, local growers can offer more flexible response to specific needs of local consumers, restaurants and institutions.

Virginia Cooperative Extension identifies the Foundation & Benefits of a Community Food System (*Bendfeldt*)

- Healthy, Vibrant Communities
- Rural & Urban Quality of Life
- Food & Value-Added Entrepreneurship
- Sustainable Farms & Landscapes
- Market & Distribution Infrastructure
- More Farm-to-Table Options
- Job Creation & Retention
- Asset-Based Economic & Social Development

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According to Virginia Cooperative Extension, if households in the five-county Thomas Jefferson Region spent \$10 per week of their total food budget on fresh, local food, over \$50 million would be generated annually for the regional economy (Benson). This type of economic sustainability is an important component in measuring the viability of a community food system.

Healthy Citizens

Proximity between farmers and consumers decreases storage and transportation needs, and increases availability of fresh and, therefore, tastier and healthier food.

Availability of local food is critical to addressing public health concerns such as rising obesity and diabetes rates, especially in children. Additionally, availability of fresh fruits and vegetable is important for the health and nutrition of at-risk groups like young children and senior citizens.

Healthy Environment

The role of transportation is debated in terms of its environmental impact (specifically its carbon footprint) in a local, versus industrial, food system. In a local food system, each food item travels less distance, but smaller quantities are moved at once, making more short trips necessary. In an industrial food system, economies of scale come into play, so when huge amounts of food are transported over greater distances, the average miles traveled per food item is reduced. However, on average, food travels 1500 miles from farm to fork, which some experts suggest is not a sustainable model over the long term (Pirog).

Community Food System Activities

Community food systems can include a variety of activities that support the local community in several ways. Initiatives such as CSAs, Farm-to-School programs and emergency food outlets target specific populations, whereas Farmers' Markets and Community Gardens can be accessed by the public generally. This variety of activities contributes to the overall health of a community by establishing or improving a community food system.



Courtesy of Regine Kennedy



Courtesy of Regine Kennedy



Courtesy of www.coonamessettfarm.com



Courtesy of Regine Kennedy

Virginia Cooperative Extension found that over \$555 million would be generated annually in Virginia if households spent \$10 per week of their food budget on local food. *(Benson)*

The local dollars generated, by region, would be (in millions):

- Rappahannock-Rapidan Region - \$32.9
- Thomas Jefferson Region - \$50.7
- George Washington Region - \$57.2
- Northern Virginia Region - \$414.5

- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – Intended to reduce the farmers’ risk by having consumers buy “shares” in the farm in exchange for a weekly delivery of food. CSAs are becoming increasingly popular throughout Virginia as the number of farmers offering shares of their harvest continues to grow. Services and organic certification varies by producer, and some producers offer ‘work-share’ options, which provides an opportunity for subscribers to work on the farm for a specified numbers of hours per week.
- Community Gardens – Shared gardening spaces in urban and suburban areas.
- Emergency Food Outlets – Local food distribution sites such as food banks and soup kitchens.
- Farm-to-School – Programs that connect schools with local farms in an effort to improve the meals served in school cafeterias, improve student nutrition and provide health and nutrition education.

FOOD SYSTEM FOCUS	
<i>Community/Local</i>	<i>Conventional/Industrial</i>
food quality	economies of scale
affordable & easy access to healthy & nutritious food at all times	abundance of cheap food at all times
community health & social justice	efficiency
community-wide stakeholders	stakeholders are corporations and agri-business
relationship between producers and consumers	segregation of producers and consumers
<small><i>Courtesy of www.seedsintheearth.com</i></small>	<small><i>Courtesy of Regine Kennedy</i></small>

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The Hartford Food System, founded in 1978 in Hartford, CT, developed programs that address “the underlying causes of hunger and poor nutrition facing lower-income and elderly Connecticut residents” (Hartford Food System). Cultural literacy has enabled better connections with the community and neighbors, leading to programs that respond to specific community needs. These programs include three urban garden sites, a farmers’ market located at a senior center and a Healthy Retailer program that responds to the needs of low-income and elderly people in the community. *Photos courtesy of Regine Kennedy*



- Farmers’ Markets – A group of farmers sell their products once or twice a week at a designated public place like a park or parking lot. Farmers’ Markets provide opportunities to meet local farmers and purchase fresh, local food.
- Nutrition Education – Programs through school, cooperative extension or other institutions that promote healthy lifestyle choices such as increased physical activity and healthy food choices.
- Food Policy Councils (FPC) – These councils “convene citizens and government officials for the purpose of providing a comprehensive examination of a state or local food system. This unique, non-partisan form of civic engagement brings together a diverse array of food system stakeholders to develop food and agriculture policy recommendations” (State & Local Food Policy Councils). To date, Food Policy Councils (FPC) at various levels of development are found in over thirty states across the country. FPCs can be created through state or local governments or through grassroots efforts. In Virginia, the first food policy council working group was established in October 2005 on the Eastern Shore. In 2008, the Richmond Food Security Task Force was established. At the state level, a Food Security Summit in May 2007 led to the formation of a working group that is exploring different ways to establish a statewide council.

Local Food Systems in Virginia



Courtesy of www.realcentralva.com

Communities across the Commonwealth that are concerned about their local economy, farmland preservation and the health of their residents are increasingly beginning initiatives to support community food systems. Some are seeking ways to access a range of federal programs addressing issues of food safety, nutrition information and food access.

Charlottesville. In Charlottesville, generally, demand exceeds supply of fresh, local food. While more information is needed to determine the precise drivers of why this is the case, it appears the area lacks an efficient distribution infrastructure. A second reason buyers may not be able to access local foods in the volumes they would like, appears to be a communication gap between farmers and buyers. Farmers must have a higher degree of predictability and regularity in demand and pricing to make optimal planting and harvesting decisions. These challenges, while significant, are not impossible to overcome. A local effort led by the Jefferson Area Board for Aging seeks to address these challenges by creating a communication and distribution hub.

The start up of a Local Food Hub, a local non-profit organization, is anticipated by Charlottesville-area residents. The Hub will provide infrastructure and networking resources that are currently lacking, including: local food purchasing, processing, wholesale and direct distribution, warehousing and essential services to the Thomas Jefferson Planning District. The project seeks to address the growing demand for local foods, support expansion of local agriculture and put healthy and fresh food into our schools and our senior populations. It will also help bring economic growth to rural communities. *(Vrooman)*

The first “Buy Fresh Buy Local” guide in Virginia was initiated by the Piedmont Environmental Council for the five-county, Thomas Jefferson Planning District. Other chapters are now being established in the Shenandoah Valley, Northern Virginia and Richmond. These guides provide lists of farmers markets, grocers, CSAs, orchards, specialty foods and restaurants that produce or sell fresh, local food. Additionally, a list of reasons to buy local produce informs readers about the nutritional, environmental and social benefits of buying fresh, local food.

Blacksburg. As one of the state land-grant universities in Virginia, Virginia Tech works with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) to disseminate information about the benefits of local food as well as local food initiatives. A number of VCE Community Viability

Why the Toronto Food Charter supports Food Security

1. Food Security means no-one in the city goes to bed hungry
2. Food Security makes the city more affordable
3. Food Security means every child gets a head start
4. Food Security saves on medical care
5. Food Security means more local jobs
6. Food Security is environmentally friendly
7. Food Security reduces traffic pollution
8. Food Security is good business
9. Food Security means ‘waste not, want not’
10. Food Security is neighborly

www.toronto.ca/food_hunger/pdf/food_charter.pdf

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Specialists focus specifically on assisting regional food systems.

The Catawba Sustainability Center is a land-based enterprise center with a Landcare Incubator that works with individuals and businesses that care for the land. The Landcare Incubator develops skills through training, technical advice, certification and protocol support and access to assistance programs; all in a low risk environment. It also identifies current and emerging regional economic systems, and pursues opportunities to network and build partnerships that achieve economies of scale, enhance market opportunities and retain value with producers. Finally, the Landcare Incubator seeks support and opportunities to facilitate cooperative business partnerships; provide infrastructure for value-added processing; and create links, networks and hubs for producers and consumers. *(Gabbard)*

Lynchburg. The local food system in Lynchburg is centered around a community garden called 'Lynchburg Grows' which provides work for the mentally challenged. The system also includes a community market, which is located at a parking ramp that has been enclosed due to popular demand of the market. The market is open for year round sales on Saturdays and Wednesdays, with local farmers offering local produce, meat and cheese. Space is also provided for local artisans to sell their wares. During the summer, outdoor stalls extend the numbers of local artisans and food suppliers that can participate in the market.

Harrisonburg. One of the many highlights of the local food system in Harrisonburg is 'Our Community Place', which was started by the collective owners of the The Little Grill. 'Our Community Place' is a community center and homeless shelter that grows its own food. Another highlight is the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction, which features fresh produce and local products from farmers throughout the Shenandoah Valley. Produce auctions are held weekly during the first part of the season (May through Mid-July) and twice weekly during the second half of the season (Mid-July through Mid-September).

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), located in western Massachusetts, created a 'Local Hero' campaign, which is a local network that connects farmers to organizations that want to buy local food. Making those initial connections can be a difficult hurdle to overcome for communities initiating a local food system, so creating a network can be a critical first step. Additionally, the 'Local Hero' logo is a simple and clear way for stores, restaurants and institutions to declare their support for local food. *Photo courtesy of Regine Kennedy*



The **2008 Farm Bill** provides for the continuation of its programs through 2012. Three sections within the bill contain provisions that affect local food systems: 'Nutrition', 'Rural Development' and 'Horticulture & Organic Agriculture'.

Nutrition provisions include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - food stamps), food distribution programs, fruit and vegetable promotional programs, farmers' market and community food promotion, community food security and emergency food grants, school meals and nutrition monitoring. Overall, the 2008 Farm Bill expanded eligibility for SNAP through increased benefits and adjustments for inflation; increased funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program; and created initiatives for community food security, promoting locally produced foods and healthy eating patterns.

Rural Development provisions include funding for planning, coordination and implementation of rural community and economic development programs. Overall, the 2008 Farm Bill emphasizes value-added agricultural activities, including renewable energy and locally and regionally produced agricultural products .

Horticulture and Organic Agriculture provisions include reauthorization of block grants for states to enhance specialty crop competitiveness, funding for farmers' markets and increased funding to help producers and handlers with organic certification costs. Specialty crops are defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, nursery crops, and flowers.

USDA website: www.ers.usda.gov/FarmBill/2008/

In Connecticut, New Milford Hospital's Plow-to-Plate initiative enables the hospital to position itself as a community leader in disease prevention, in part, through its promotion of fresh, local food. The hospital has a contract with a dining services management company that required them to serve fresh, local food in the cafeteria and patient meals. The program has seen much community support, including from the mayor, who, along with her staff, walks to the hospital from her office to eat in the cafeteria. This type of program puts the local food agenda of an institution at the top of its decision-making process. Along with providing improved options for better nutrition, this type of program is an integral part of a strong local economy. *Photos courtesy of Regine Kennedy*



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Resources

Virginia Food System Websites:

- Buy Local Virginia - www.buylocalvirginia.org/bfbl/index.php
- Eastern Shore - www.eslocalfoodproject.org
- Harrisonburg - www.buylocalshenvalley.org
- Localcultural www.localcultural.com/content/view/333/153/
- Lynchburg Grows - www.lynchburggrows.org/
- Richmond - www.eslocalfoodproject.org
- Save Our Food (Virginia Farm Bureau) - www.saveourfood.org
- Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services - www.vdacs.virginia.gov/news/buylocal.shtml

Food Policy Council Websites:

- Chicago Food Policy Council www.chicagofoodpolicy.org/
- Connecticut Food Policy Council www.foodpc.state.ct.us/
- Iowa Food Policy Council www.iowafoodpolicy.org/
- North American Food Policy Council www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/
- Portland Food Policy Council www.portlandonline.com/OSD/index.cfm?c=42290
- State and Local Food Policy Councils www.statefoodpolicy.org/
- World Hunger Year (Food Security Learning Center) www.worldhungeryear.org

Community Food Systems Websites:

- Discovering the Food System (Cornell University) foodsyst.cce.cornell.edu/primer.html
- Food Routes www.foodroutes.org/
- Sustainable Table www.sustainabletable.org/issues/buylocal/
- Understanding your Local Food System (SLA Learning Center, Chicago) <http://www.cslearningcenter.org/what/faq>

Food Security and Food Policy Websites:

- Community Food Security Coalition www.foodsecurity.org
- Farm and Food Policy Project - www.farmandfoodproject.org/
- The Food Project (MA) www.thefoodproject.org
- World Hunger Year (Food Security Learning Center) www.worldhungeryear.org

Books, Articles and Documents:

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