

Counties and Local Food Systems

Ensuring Healthy Foods, Nurturing Healthy Children

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A Publication of the NACo Center
for Sustainable Communities

Written by Casey Dillon
Edited by Martin Harris

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About NACo – The Voice of America's Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.

About the NACo Center for Sustainable Communities

The NACo Center for Sustainable Communities’ primary mission is to provide a forum for county leaders to work with other governments, the private sector and communities to develop policies and programs that will lead to economic enhancement, environmental stewardship and social well being — the three pillars of sustainable communities. The Center helps local elected officials build sustainable communities by promoting community leadership initiatives, facilitating multi-jurisdictional and public-private partnerships, providing technical assistance and training, and conducting community policy and educational forums.

The Center provides local elected officials with assistance in using policies and tools necessary for creating sustainable communities. In particular, local elected officials are interested in finding more cost-effective and comprehensive ways to address such issues as transportation management, brownfields revitalization, environmental protection, housing, energy conservation, job training, health and public safety.

Although the Center’s primary function is to serve counties, it has been a facilitator of partnerships across jurisdictional lines. Through a six-year partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors focusing on sustainability and regionalism, the Center worked closely with America’s cities in addressing economic, environmental and equity issues, producing an extensive library of technical assistance materials to address the challenges facing local governments.

While the Center is not a repository of all relevant information on sustainable development, with its access to public and private sector leaders nationwide, it is a catalyst to help local government officials find solutions to problems facing their communities.

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For more information on the publication, the Center and its programs, please contact:

Casey Dillon
Program Assistant
Center for Sustainable Communities
National Association of Counties
25 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington DC 20001

☎ (202) 942-4243
✉ cdillon@naco.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Food Councils	5
Farm to School	9
Infrastructure for Local Producers	13
Agricultural Conservation Easements	17

Introduction

This publication contains four methods and case studies for how county governments can support their local food systems. It was written with a focus on obesity prevention, but readers interested in the links between agriculture and economic development, environmental protection, and food security will also find the content useful.

Youth Obesity and Access to Fresh Food

The NACo Center for Sustainable Communities (the Center) wrote this publication with the goal of assisting county governments to leverage their local food systems, combat youth obesity and build healthy communities. Numerous studies and the Center's own research have shown that access to healthy food is both a major challenge and a major opportunity for reducing obesity. Food access obstacles such as neighborhoods with few stores that sell fresh food and the high cost of fresh foods relative to unhealthy alternatives make it difficult for many children and families to obtain the fruits, vegetables and other wholesome foods they need in order to maintain a balanced diet. By working with local food systems to create communities in which there is ready and affordable access to healthy food, local governments play a key role in combating the obesity epidemic and creating a vibrant future for our children.

Local Food Systems

Local Food Systems are composed of all the interdependent steps and actors that go into producing the food that is grown and raised in a region. This includes: planting, raising, harvesting, storing, transporting, processing, packaging, marketing, and retailing of food, as well as actors such as farmers, suppliers, buyers and government.

Local food systems are an invaluable resource for creating healthy communities because their actors have the ability to increase the amount of affordable fresh food available in community stores, farmers markets, low income food basket programs, road side

stands and restaurants. Not only can actors of local food systems increase healthy food access, they can also provide food education to citizens, teaching them about how food is grown, processed, marketed, what its history is, how to cook it, etc. Such education often encourages people to begin thinking more critically about what they eat on a day to day basis, and is an important step towards creating community environments that promote healthy living.

Four Methods to Support Local Food Systems

The following pages contain detailed descriptions of four methods counties have used to build their local food systems into rich community resources. The four methods are: food policy councils, farm to school programs, infrastructure for local producers and agriculture conservation easement programs. They were chosen for the success counties have had in implementing them and for their significant impact. Each method is paired with a comprehensive case study which illuminates how the method plays out on the ground, and includes peer-to-peer advice.

1. Food Policy Councils

(Case Study: Dane County, WI)

- Bring stakeholders together
- Make recommendations
- Coordinate and deliver existing programs
- Create new programs
- Address policy barriers
- Community outreach

2. Farm to School

(Case Study: Missoula County, MT)

- Bring fresh food to school meals
- Educate children about food
- Instill lifelong healthy preferences
- Support the local farm economy
- Use less gas to transport food to schools

Local Food Systems are composed of all the interdependent steps and actors that go into producing the food that is grown and raised in a region.

3. Infrastructure Development

(Case Study: Woodbury County, IA)

- Enable farmers to offer new products to local purchasers
- Aid farm entrepreneurs
- Provide incentives for a new generation of small and mid scale farmers
- Retain existing agriculture infrastructure
- Respond to market changes

4. Agriculture Conservation Easements

(Case Study: Lancaster County, PA)

- Set aside land for farming now and in the future
- Ensure long term ability to grow local fresh foods
- Preserve community character
- Provide income for farmers
- Conserve green space

Leadership for Healthy Communities

Helping counties build healthy communities is part of the mission of the NACo Center for Sustainable Communities, and combating youth obesity is one issue to which the Center is particularly dedicated. For the past four years the Center has been an active partner in Leadership for Healthy Communities, a coalition of local government agencies funded through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that is committed to promoting active living and combating obesity. For information about the Center's ongoing work, past projects or publications please visit www.naco.org/sustainable or contact:

Casey Dillon

Program Assistant, Center for Sustainable Communities
National Association of Counties
25 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 500
Washington DC, 20001
202-942-4243
cdillon@naco.org



Food Councils



Promoting farmers markets is one action food councils can take to increase the availability of fresh foods in communities.

Locally grown food is central to the County's history, culture, landscape, economy and health.

Definition

A food council is a group of stakeholders that provides support to governments and citizens in developing policy and programs related to the local food supply. The members of a food council have a solid understanding of the local food system and represent a diversity of community interests. The structure of a food council will vary depending upon the character of the community it serves. For instance, many food councils are designed to advise governments on policy and are referred to as food *policy* councils, while others focus their energies on work within the community. Likewise, some food councils are official branches of government while others are recognized as advisory groups.

Background

Food and agriculture issues significantly affect public health, land use, hunger, community culture, economy, environment and quality of life. Although most counties have agencies responsible for these individual issues, many do not have a single government body illuminating ways that food production

and consumption impact these different areas, nor do they have a body making recommendations for promoting the sustainable development of the local food system. To address this gap, local governments have begun establishing food councils. Today, food councils exist in Dane County, WI; Palm Beach County, FL; Lane County, OR; Boulder County, CO; Jefferson County, AL; Pima County, AZ; and four California counties: Yolo, Oakland, Marin and Fresno. Food councils have also been established by several cities and states.

Food councils serve as a comprehensive bridge of communication between community stakeholders, ensuring that they are aware of a common vision for the community's food supply and of each others' actions that affect it. Food councils can make recommendations, coordinate programs, create new programs, and address policy barriers. Food councils also serve as a citizen resource and a source of inspiration for grassroots efforts to support farmers markets, community gardens, local food sourcing, etc. A useful resource for counties interested in starting their own food council is the Community Food Security Coalition (<http://foodsecurity.org/FPC/index.html>).

How County Governments Can Support Food Councils

County governments can support food councils in a number of ways. First and foremost, they can sponsor their creation, either at the county or regional level. Once a food council is established a county can provide technical support, in-kind support such as office space, funding or staff assistance. Political legitimization from elected officials is also invaluable to the success of food councils, and can be given in the form of participating on food councils, addressing policy barriers and by publicizing and supporting their work.

Best Practice Example: Food Councils

Dane County, WI

About

The Dane County Food Council was created in October 2005 by a County Board resolution and at the recommendation of a citizen advisory group that had been appointed by the county a year earlier to study the local food system: the Local Food Policy Advisory Subcommittee. Dane County, the City of Madison and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Wisconsin Food System Partnership) initially contributed a total of \$15,000 to support the Food Council in its first year. Since then, the Dane County Food Council has been an active and positive force in building the local food system.

There are twelve citizen members on the Dane County Food Council. They serve two-year terms and represent a range of interests and backgrounds including: small and large scale farmers, urban planners, nutrition and hunger prevention advocates, non-profit representatives, university professors and farmers market managers. These positions are appointed by the County Executive and two County Board Committees. This was a natural fit in Dane County due to its long legacy of citizen and community support for sustainable agriculture.

Dane County has a dynamic and growing local food system including highly productive farms, numerous farmers markets and restaurants, and unique community events such as the Food for Thought Festival, Breakfast on the Farm and Corn Fest. Locally grown food is central to the County's history, culture, landscape, economy and health. The Food Council grew out of this rich heritage. In 1997, a conference on urban food systems was held in Madison that built public interest around food security, access to fresh produce, and local farm economy and preservation issues. This conference was the result of a partnership of University and citizen groups funded by a W.K. Kellogg foundation grant called the Wisconsin Food Systems Partnership. It was because of strong citizen interest in



The mayor of Madison, WI speaks with local farmers about issues affecting agricultural production.

issues such as these that Kyle Richmond, Chair of Dane County's Environment, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, appointed the Local Food Policy Advisory Subcommittee in 2004. He directed the Subcommittee to study and make recommendations about the local food system. After a year of research and deliberation the Subcommittee made a number of recommendations in a document entitled "Recipes for Success," one of which was to create a food policy council. The Dane County Executive was supportive of this recommendation.

When it was approved in 2005, the Dane County Food Council was charged with implementing many of the other recommendations the Local Food Policy Advisory Subcommittee had made. In order to address these multiple recommendations and support local citizen efforts, Food Council members divided themselves into four subcommittees: the Farmers' Market Network Subcommittee, Institutional Food Purchasing Subcommittee, Market Basket Subcommittee and Education and Outreach Subcommittee. The Food Council meets monthly, and members on the four subcommittees meet with volunteers and partners more regularly. The monthly meetings are open to the public, and often feature speakers who broaden the Food Council's understanding of Dane County's food system and the factors affecting it.

Dane County's Role

Dane County supports its Food Council in a number of ways. Since the County recognized the Food Council as an official body in late 2005, the County has provided funding, in-kind assistance, and political support. The Environmental, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee has oversight over the Food Council's budget. The budget pays primarily for a part time staff person who is housed in the Planning and Development Department. These types of support al-

low the Dane County Food Council to function professionally and effectively. The Food Council has also benefited from the political support of county officials such as Executive Kathleen Falk, who recently presented recognition awards at the Food Council's annual conference in March 2007.

Dane County also provides guidance to its Food Council. The Board and Executive appoint new members to the Food Council when existing members exhaust their term limits. Food Council members check in on a regular basis with the county officials who appointed them and with the Environment, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, which hears and represents any policy proposals or comments that the Food Council wants to put before the Board.

Benefits to the Community

Since its creation, the Food Council has achieved a great deal. The Farmer's Market Network Subcommittee helped to create the Farmers Market Alliance for South Central Wisconsin, a network of farmers' markets in Dane County and the surrounding region, which supports and promotes the vitality of

markets by sharing resources and information. The Farmers Market Alliance is working to make WIC and food stamp debit machines available at all markets by offering workshops about this opportunity and raising funds for mini-grants. In addition, the Farmers' Market Alliance is raising funds for joint marketing and promotion projects.

The Institutional Food Purchasing Subcommittee worked with citizen groups and local farmers to pass a County Board resolution that encourages local sourcing of foods purchased for the County jail, juvenile retention center, and senior centers. The resolution supports the local farm economy and increases the likelihood that the people served in these county buildings will receive fresh food. The Subcommittee is also partnering with other groups addressing local food purchasing through Universities, schools, hospitals, hotels, and convention centers.

The Market Basket Subcommittee expanded a program that provides baskets of fresh fruits and vegetables to low income households. The program offers a choice of four baskets: regular box which serves a family of four, half box for seniors or individuals, organic box, and a box tailored to the Latino community. The

By sourcing directly from farmers and eliminating the middle man, the Market Basket program is contributing to greater food security and a more balanced diet, while at the same time creating a reliable market for small-scale farmers.



Dane County residents shop at the Southside Farmers Market.

cost ranges from \$8-\$26 per week, with a savings of \$6-\$15 over the retail price. By sourcing directly from farmers and eliminating the middle man, the Market Basket program is contributing to greater food security and a more balanced diet, while at the same time creating a reliable market for small-scale farmers.

The Outreach and Education Subcommittee planned the Council's first annual "Planting Seeds for Our Future" Conference in March 2007 which attracted more than 150 people. The Food Council solicited nominations from the community and hosted a recognition ceremony for 22 local leaders who are helping to create a vibrant community food system. The conference also included workshop sessions on topics such as childhood obesity prevention, lake fish as a food source, new immigrant farming, food waste in land fills and alternative composting operations, growing new fruit crops for market (i.e. Aronia), state legislation and the Farm Bill, and community gardens. At this event the Food Council also gained valuable insight and input from community members who will help shape its vision and sow the seeds for future action.

Peer-to-Peer Advice

Asked what they would say to officials interested in starting food councils in their own counties, leaders of the Dane County Food Council gave the following advice:

- Look at the intersection between food and important issues in your community such as hunger, obesity, the farm economy and land use. If it seems like the community would benefit from the leadership of a food council, call a meeting of affected stakeholders and have a discussion with them around the question: if we had a food council, what would it look like?

— Kyle Richmond, Chair, Dane County Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources Committee

- The Food Council should serve as a way for people and organizations concerned about food access, food production and food processing to interact and create a tapestry that can be stronger than the sum of its parts. Creating a local food system that is economically and environmentally sustainable should be a mission for every county across the country. But, keep in mind that going through the county government process of approving a food council takes time. It is important to speak to elected officials because to be successful political support is crucial.

— Ruth Simpson, Chair, Dane County Food Council

- Most counties have a connection to the Cooperative Extension system which provides many research-

based education programs related to food production, safe affordable nutrition practices through the Nutrition Education Program for low-income families, essential family living issues, sustainable community development and long-term environmental quality. Cooperative Extension is also directly connected to the Land Grant University which is an important ally as well.

— Lee Cunningham, Dane County, UW-Extension, Department Head

- Look for well-positioned resource partners. For instance local colleges and universities, especially those public "Land Grant" universities, are an excellent place to look for expertise, resources, and partners for grants; it is part of their mission to support local communities, they can be a source of faculty expertise and student volunteers and they often have access to grant money.

— Gerry Campbell, Professor, University of Wisconsin Madison Extension

For More Information

www.countyofdane.com/foodcouncil

Dawn Burgardt, Program Coordinator
Dane County Food Council
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd Rm. 362
Madison WI 53703-3342
(608)266-4540
burgardt@co.dane.wi.us

Farm to School

Definition

A farm to school program exists when a K-12 school district or school purchases fruit, vegetables and other fresh products from local farms to serve as part of school meals and/or snacks. There is often an education component in which students learn about nutrition and the food supply. Education varies by program, but it is common for students to take trips to local farms and taste test and learn about topics such as animal husbandry, soil fertility and harvesting. It is also common for students to participate in school gardens, learning how to grow their own food and how this ties in with science, math and other subjects. Older students often participate in nutrient mapping exercises and some schools offer cooking classes in which students prepare food using local ingredients. School size and capacity and involvement of local growers are three important factors that influence the scope of farm to school programs.



A Missoula Public Schools employee prepares locally grown peaches to serve with students' lunch.

Background

A national farm to school movement has been building for over a decade, bringing fresh nutritious food into school cafeterias while at the same time strengthening local farm economies. Supported by parents, schools, community groups, state preferential purchasing laws, the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Defense, farm to school programs now exist in 1,035 school districts in 35 states. The National Farm to School Network (www.farmtoschool.org/) provides information and resources to those involved. Farm to school programs are also part of a larger farm to cafeteria movement, which brings locally grown food into hospitals, jails, businesses, universities and other institutions.

Increasingly, community leaders are recognizing that farm to school programs have potential to counteract obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension among America's youth. If left unchanged the current eating habits of many of America's youth will result in significant consequences down the road: high medical costs, unnecessarily early death, and reduced quality of life.

Students eat up to 40% of their meals through the school meal programs. Thus, changing the menu and bringing locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables into cafeterias encourages America's children to consider the intersection between their health and their food. It puts nutritious options in front of kids in an era when they are surrounded by ads for fast food, soft drinks and candy. Though food does not necessarily have to be local to be nutritious, locally grown food is often more flavorful, and kids are intrigued by the 'cool factor' of knowing that the food on their plates comes from places in their community.

Another benefit worth noting of local food purchasing is that food only has to be transported a short distance. This reduces the fuel required to ship it and cuts down on carbon emissions, road wear and cost.

How County Governments can Support Farm to School

Due to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Defense programs, as well as laws in a number of states, many counties will find that the resources to create vibrant farm to school programs in their communities already exist, and that they can capitalize on these resources by encouraging school and farm leaders to collaborate and take advantage of them.

There is also a need for local leadership in facilitating

preferential purchasing and production, distribution and storage needs. Due to the current wording of USDA farm to school rules many food service directors feel they can not use federal funds to purchase local food unless it is less expensive than all other comparable options. Counties can assist farm to school programs by supporting local purchasing and by helping fund it. Another key county action is working with farmers to improve their ability to provide food to schools. Often times small and mid sized local farmers struggle to meet large orders of fruits and vegetables, lack processing facilities to transform their products into forms school kitchens can easily use (for instance washed, chopped, frozen vegetables that are ready to cook and serve) and lack an effective storage and transportation infrastructure to get their food to central school kitchens.

Counties can also support farm to school programs with general political, financial and educational assistance.

Best Practice Example: Farm to School Missoula County, MT

About

Missoula Farm to School began in 2005 thanks to a question asked by a young woman named Crissie McMullan. As a graduate student, McMullan started the farm to college program at the University of Montana. In 2004, excited about the success of the farm to university program, McMullan reached out to the Food Service Manager of Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS) and asked if any of Missoula's thirteen school districts would be interested in starting up a farm to school program. The Food Service Manager was interested, but realized that sourcing from local farmers would require staff hours she couldn't spare. Encouraged by the Food Service Manager's interest, McMullan began looking for ways to provide the necessary staff support. In 2005 she secured a private sector grant that paid for two graduate students from the University of Montana to help start and staff Missoula Farm to School. The program serves students in Montana County Public School District 1.

In its first year, Missoula Farm to School built



relationships with farmers and tested the feasibility of sourcing from local farmers with two "Montana Made Meal Events." In each event 3,000 school children received a meal made with locally grown ingredients. The first meal event, held in the fall of 2005, included one food item each day of the week that was made entirely of Montana products. The second meal event, held in the spring of 2006, featured an entire meal made of Montana products. Despite a few minor glitches, the Montana Made Meal Events demonstrated to the Food Service Manager that working with local farmers was doable, and Missoula Farm to School staff began working to purchase Montana grown food on a regular basis. Thanks to their effort, in the first part of the 2006-2007 school year over 16,000 lbs of Montana grown food were purchased, including: oats, whole wheat flour, peaches, apples, cantaloupe, carrots, cucumbers, potatoes, zucchini, cheese, pasta, honey and salad greens. Nearly all of these products were organically grown. Through cost analysis the school district found that buying these local seasonal foods was either less expensive or no more expensive than what it would have cost to purchase comparable foods through mainstream suppliers such as Food Services of America and Sysco.

Missoula Farm to School provides an educational component to complement its food sourcing. Staff works with community partners to provide lessons to students about the food they eat, where it comes from, and how it is processed and prepared. Programs include field trips to local farms, taste tests of Montana grown foods, a mobile cooking cart in which students grind their own flour and make biscuits and a nutritional activity linking USDA guidelines to food production. Thus far, in the 2006-2007 year alone, Missoula Farm to School has helped provide educational programs to over 1,600 K-12 youth.

Missoula County Public School District 1 has been very supportive of Missoula Farm to School. Last year the Board of Trustees passed a unanimous resolution supporting the program, and the Food Service Director and farm to school staff held meetings with farmers to discuss what they were planning to plant so that they could reliably supply the food MCPS would need during the school year. One of the reasons Missoula Farm to School got off the ground and gained support so quickly is because of the community assets to which it

Through cost analysis the school district found that buying these local seasonal foods was either less expensive or no more expensive than what it would have cost to purchase comparable foods through mainstream suppliers such as Food Services of America and Sysco.



Ariel Bleth, Program Coordinator of Missoula Farm to School, teaches students what foods grow in their state.

has access. There is broad interest in the Missoula region for community supported agriculture and nutrition education. County and city officials sit on the regional food council, the Missoula City-County Health Department is dedicated to utilizing local farmers and gardeners as a tool to improve citizen nutrition, community gardens are grown on land donated by the city, the University of Montana offers numerous locally focused agriculture programs, there is an established farmers market that accepts WIC/senior vouchers and Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, and there are local farmers who produce a large variety of food.

Thanks to this rich community environment, Missoula Farm to School had access to a pre-existing database of farmers, vendors and contractors, as well as contacts with producer groups such as the Western Montana's Growers Cooperative and a community of Hmong growers. Without this information, Missoula Farm to School staff would have had to spend significant time making cold calls to farmers figuring out how to supply and deliver enough products from different farms to meet school demand. Community contacts also helped Missoula Farm to School tackle the challenge of how to prepare locally grown products so that they meet the needs of school cafeterias. As in many public school districts, Missoula County Public School cafeteria and central kitchen staff have little flexibility in experimenting with new foods. Collaboration with the University of Montana, the Mission Mountain Market Enterprise and farms such as Common Ground Farm help

to create value-added forms of local foods, such as "carrot coins," which more easily meet the needs of institutional food procurement.

Missoula County's Role

Missoula County provides political support to Missoula Farm to School in a number of ways. The County encourages purchasing of local agricultural products in its legislation, such as the Missoula Greenhouse Gas and Energy Efficiency Plan and Joint Resolution Number 6889. Joint Resolution Number 6889 was passed by the City and the County in 2005 and is particularly important because it states that both governments will "actively support efforts to increase the security of the local food system so that it is based on sustainable agriculture." The resolution also supported the creation of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition, the Missoula region's food policy council, and stipulates that a county commissioner serve on it. Commissioner Bill Carey currently fills this role, bringing with him a long history of work in Montana's food and nutrition communities. Missoula Farm to School is under the umbrella of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition and shares in the support the County gives the council. The Missoula City-County Health Department also supports Missoula Farm to School as part of its promotion of local food system programs.

Benefits to the Community

Benefits of Missoula Farm to School are numerous. Perhaps most important among them is that students are receiving fresh produce and dairy products as part of their school lunch. Having fresh, flavorful and visually appealing foods on student's lunch trays increases the chance that they will eat them and obtain important nutrients, as does the fact that the students know the foods come from their home state. Fresh products also tend to contain less sugar, salt, food colorings and preservatives. Large amounts of these ingredients have been linked to obesity, high blood pressure and other chronic health diseases; by familiarizing youth with alternatives Missoula Farm to School helps instill a preference for healthy foods. Students also benefit from the nutrition education Missoula Farm to School offers. Learning to think about the food they eat and what their bodies need from it is a life long skill that will help them maintain balanced nutrition.

The farm to school program also has economic benefits. Schools are major food purchasers. Knowing that they are willing to source locally is a significant incentive for farmers to expand their existing operations, and for interested parties to start new farms. This growth in the local agriculture sector generates income, jobs and opportunities for new service providers such as processors and distributors to establish themselves in the community.

Other benefits of Missoula Farm to School include reduced environmental impact. Missoula Farm to School reduces the County's environmental footprint by lowering the amount of resources needed to transport food from suppliers to schools (fuel to transport it, energy to cool it, packaging to transport it in, etc.).

Peer-to-Peer Advice

Asked what they would say to officials interested in starting farm to school programs in their own counties, leaders in Missoula County gave the following advice:

- "Farm to School ideally links what happens in the cafeteria with what happens in the classroom, creating an entire school environment that supports healthy choices. For children to understand how their choices affect their own physical well-being, as well as that of their community and surrounding environment, it is essential that we provide them with the opportunity to build connection and relationship - with where their food comes from, who grows it and how it is prepared."

— Ariel Bleth, Program Coordinator, Missoula Farm to School

- All the communities in the country need to grow and prepare more of their own food. Missoula's Community Food and Agriculture Coalition and the programs it supports are on the leading edge of this effort."

— The Honorable Bill Carey, Commissioner, Missoula County

- "If you don't have a cooperative or a group in the community where people from the schools can meet with farmers and work out what foods are needed and how to supply them, start one. Communication is key to making farm to school programs work."

— Linda Samel, Food Service Director, Missoula County Public Schools District 1

- "The Missoula City-County Health Department got involved in efforts to grow locally available fresh foods and educate people about them because of the obesity and nutritional needs of our residents. This has proven a proactive way to improve citizen health and I recommend it to other health departments."

— Trudy Mizner, Nursing Services Supervisor, Missoula City-County Health Department

For More Information

www.umt.edu/cfa/Farm%20To%20School2.htm

Ariel Bleth

Missoula Farm to School Program

219 S 3rd St W

Missoula, MT 59801

(406) 549-0543

missoulaf2s@montana.com

Infrastructure for Local Producers



Woodbury County residents enjoy fresh food and good company at Fiona's Firehouse Bistro, a restaurant that serves locally grown vegetables, meat, and fruit.

Definition

Infrastructure for local producers means land on which to grow food, suppliers from which to purchase seeds, inputs, tools and machinery; facilities in which to store goods, processing and packing facilities to transform raw products into marketable ones, and shipping and distribution methods to deliver products to buyers.

Background

No matter the size of their operation, farmers need infrastructure in order to run effective businesses. To have a vibrant local food system, a county must have solid infrastructure to support it. In researching for this publication, examples of county-supported agriculture infrastructure development, particularly for mid and small sized farmers, were hard to find, though there were many calls for it.

In most agricultural communities at least some infrastructure is already in place to help farmers run successful

operations. Commonly, this infrastructure is geared towards large scale producers, and there is a growing need for infrastructure that accommodates mid and small sized producers. As Janie Burns, small farm entrepreneur from Canyon County, ID says, "The middle pieces are what's often missing for small farmers who want to expand their businesses. We can increase our supply, and we know that there is a demand for our products, but where do we process our foods and how do we transport and store them? Right now, most of those systems are designed to accommodate large scale producers and buyers rather than small operations."

Small and mid sized producers are most likely to sell their products locally, and infrastructure gives them the leg up they need to begin expanding production. It also encourages new small and mid sized entrepreneurs to start up operations. The federal government offers funding to communities who wish to build up community-oriented agriculture through USDA Extension grant programs such

The Board passed the Organics Conversion Policy and became the first county in the nation to make tax rebates available to farmers who convert to organic agriculture.

Money is staying in the community.

as Community Food Projects and SARE. Information about these programs can be found at www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm and www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/sustainableagricultureresearchandeducation.cfm.

Though smaller farmers are more likely to sell locally, producers of all sizes provide fresh foods to communities, and all of them can use infrastructure help from local governments when faced with challenges such as changes in market demand and loss of agricultural base. Changes in market demand often require farmers to start raising different types of food or following new certification standards, and these changes can necessitate new processing facilities, storage, and distribution. Loss of the agricultural base occurs when falling commodity prices and/or development pressures lead to farm closures. If a community loses enough of its farms, suppliers and processors who have for years operated in the community may move away and leave remaining farmers stranded.

How County Governments Can Help Provide Infrastructure for Local Farmers

Depending on the need, county governments can help provide local agricultural infrastructure in different ways. If there is a need to support small and medium scale producers, counties often have the greatest impact by assisting in the creation of storage, processing, and distribution infrastructure that accommodates smaller producers. County government can do this by: streamlining permit processes for such facilities, providing mini-grants towards their creation, donating county resources and helping farmers establish partnerships with community stakeholders who can offer these services.

If there is a need to respond to changing market conditions, counties can work with farmers and agriculture industry groups to support new products and certification standards. If a community is at risk of losing existing infrastructure, counties can offer infrastructure providers incentives to remain, such as tax rebates and political support. They can also ensure existing infrastructure providers that farming will remain a mainstay in the local economy for years to come through steps such as: conservation easements, financial aid for farmers, economic success strategies for local agriculture, political support and zoning.

Best Practice Example: Infrastructure for Local Producers Woodbury County, IA

About

Woodbury County has recently gained recognition as one of the leading counties in the effort to support local farm economies. A major reason for this is that in 2005 Woodbury County hired a Director of Rural Economic Development and charged him with determining why the county's traditional agricultural economy was declining and what they could do to stimulate growth while maintaining the rural character of the community. One of the recommendations the Director made to the County Board was to encourage local purchasing. Another was to begin producing organic niche products. Growing organic was not something that Woodbury County farmers had much experience with, but with a steady history of 20% growth or more per year and a gap in American suppliers, organic niche products seemed like a promising way to transition to a prosperous agricultural economy.

At the Director's recommendation, the Board passed the Organics Conversion Policy and became the first county in the nation to make tax rebates available to farmers who convert to organic agriculture. The Board also passed the Local Food Purchase Policy, which requires the County Food Service Contractor to purchase locally grown food, with a preference for organics. In addition, the Board Passed the Woodbury Health Initiative which established a public campaign for healthy lifestyles. One aspect of the campaign is initiating middle school cooking classes using local fresh ingredients.

It was in this context that the County and regional stakeholders began collaborating to build infrastructure to support local and organic farmers. One of the first steps was the opening of a store in Sioux City to sell locally grown and organic produce. Next, the County partnered with community stakeholders to renovate a commercial kitchen that is used by a local food/organic restaurant and will also soon be used to process organic salsa using locally grown ingredients. In the County's





Locally produced soaps are sold at the new Floyd Boulevard Local Foods Market.

most recent effort to improve infrastructure for local organic growers, the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Sioux City (county seat), and Woodbury County are taking steps to market an existing 280,000 sq.ft. cold storage/packaging/distribution facility as a major initiative to develop the entire region into the “midwest center of the organic food industry”.

The cold storage facility is unique among the County's efforts in that it is a large scale infrastructure investment by the firm of Jacobson-Bekin. It would be able to hold much more organic food than is currently produced in Woodbury County. The goal is to lease the entire space to organic growers from the greater area and develop a reputation for the Woodbury region as the place to go for organic agriculture services. This is not an unrealistic goal, considering that neighboring Cherokee County boasts BLOWA Natreseutical-Spectrum Organics' flax processing plant as well as American Natural Soy's processing plant. Entrepreneur Mark Schuett, founder of American Natural Soy, shares Woodbury County's desire to develop the region into an organic hub where growers send their products to be stored, processed, etc. He has seen his own business grow by tapping into the organics market, and believes that by investing in infrastructure to make the region a leader in organics Woodbury and Cherokee Counties could see huge gains in their economies and quality of life. Another step Woodbury County has taken in this direction is to acquire its own trademark, “Sioux City Sue” to brand foods produced from local ingredients. This brand will ideally function like other popular regional quality food labels such as Organic Valley.

Despite Woodbury County's efforts to support local and organic farmers, a change from traditional to organic agricultural practices has not taken place overnight. In a

community where farmers have been growing corn and soybeans for generations, many are not comfortable with changing their ways and are skeptical of ‘hippie farming.’ But some change has taken place. Local sales have increased and two farms have converted to organic. In addition, new jobs have been created due to the increased sales and the processing of local products.

Woodbury County's Role

Woodbury County played a major role in developing infrastructure to support local/organic farmers. That role began with the Board hiring a Director of Rural Economic Development and continued with their passing the Organics Conversion Policy, Local Food Purchase Policy and Woodbury Health Initiative. Encouraged by these policies, two farms shifted to organic production and other local farmers began diversifying their production and looking to sell more goods to local buyers. This resulted in a need for new infrastructure.

To help create that infrastructure the County supported the creation and expansion of a local food store via political support and by purchasing food from the store through the County food service contractor. The Board worked with a coalition of stakeholders to fund the renovation of the commercial grade kitchen, giving \$20,000 of the \$100,000 project. Currently, the Chamber of Commerce is taking steps to establish a working relationship with Jacobson-Bekin, the owner of the cold storage facility that the County would like to see made available to organic producers.



Woodbury County growers sell fruits and vegetables at the newly created Sioux City Organic Farmer's Market.

Benefits to the Community

Constituents benefit in a number of ways from the infrastructure Woodbury County has created to support its local and organic farmers – a local foods store, an organic commercial grade kitchen and steps towards an organic cold storage facility. They have more access to fresh food through the local foods store. Money is staying in the community because the store is purchasing from local producers, shoppers are purchasing food from the store, and workers are being hired and paid by the store and the new salsa processing operation. If the County is successful in leasing the cold storage facility, it will be a big step towards creating a reputation for the Woodbury/Cherokee region as an organic production hub. Becoming a leader in the growing organic segment of the agriculture industry would invigorate Woodbury County's entire farm sector and also has the potential to slow another problem the community has struggled with of late: youth flight.

Few young people have chosen to stay on and continue the family farm in recent years. Some reasons for this are the financial hardships that most mainstream farmers face and the fact that conventional farming relies heavily on machinery and agrichemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers. Across the nation, younger people are more and more often drawn to organic farming. Some are taking note of what is going on in Woodbury County. One couple who grew up in Woodbury County and then moved to Texas is coming back and starting an organic farm.

Peer-to-Peer Advice

Asked what they would say to officials interested in creating infrastructure and invigorating the economic prospects for producers in their own counties, leaders in Woodbury County and Cherokee County gave the following advice:

- “Most people think we have to look outside of Woodbury County to reinvigorate our economy, but we live in one of the richest agricultural areas in the world. We simply have to be willing to support local farmers and help them develop products that are lucrative in today's markets rather than putting them out of business just to save a few dollars in the short term.”

— Robert Marqusee, Director, Woodbury County Rural Economic Development Dept.

- The growing market for locally raised fresh foods and organics is often much more obvious in urban areas than in traditional farm communities like ours. Because farmers don't see those products in the grocery stores they shop at, they often need to be educated about these emerging markets and the profits that can be made in them.

— Mark Buschkamp, Executive Director, Cherokee Area Economic Development

- Incorporating as many infrastructure projects in the region as you can is key. This creates a preferred spot to have processing done and draws significant investment into the region. In terms of organic agriculture, a wide range of infrastructure services is especially important, because when you don't use pesticides you have to grow a greater variety of crops to keep the land fertile and weed free. Thus, you need not only corn and soy facilities, but also wheat and alfalfa facilities.

— Mark Schuett, President, American Natural Soy

For More Information

www.woodbury-ia.com/departments/EconomicDevelopment/index.asp

Robert Marqusee
Director, Rural Economic Development
(712) 279-6609
rmarqusee@sioux-city.org

Agricultural Conservation Easements



Agricultural conservation easement programs ensure that farms like these will remain available for food production for generations to come.

Definition

Agricultural conservation easements are deed restrictions landowners voluntarily place on their property to keep land available for agriculture. They are flexible documents tailored to each property and the needs of individual landowners. They may cover an entire parcel or portions of a property. Landowners (grantors) may either donate or sell easements to qualified conservation organizations, including: private land trusts, soil and water conservation districts and public agencies such as local, tribal and state governments. The conservation organization (grantee) is responsible for monitoring and enforcing the restrictions set forth in the agreement. After the easement is granted, the landowner retains title to the property and can continue to live on and/or use the property.

Background

At least 55 local governments and 27 states have developed programs to purchase agricultural conservation easements. Furthermore, the USDA Natural Resources

Conservation Service offers matching funds to established programs. Agricultural conservation easement programs and federal support for them exists because the farmland that is essential to America's food production is also flat, well drained and inexpensive to develop. By permanently protecting agricultural land, agricultural conservation easement programs preserve the capacity to produce food locally now and for future generations, setting the stage for community environments in which access to fresh food is something all citizens are accustomed to and rely on.

Many farmers who enter into agriculture conservation easements continue to grow crops and raise animals on their land, but a farmer does not necessarily have to farm under an agriculture conservation agreement. He must maintain his land in such a state that farming could resume in the future. Whether in use or not, communities enjoy the local history and culture, open space and environmental amenities that preserved farmland provides.

The community is not the only party to benefit when farmers sell or donate their development rights, farmers

benefit too. For those who want to keep the farm in the family for generations, agricultural conservation easements offer a form of estate planning. After selling their development rights farmer's taxes generally go down, and if they donate their rights rather than selling them there is a federal tax benefit. Selling development rights is also a way of tapping into the equity of one's property and gaining capital that can be put towards farm improvements, debt or retirement.

How County Governments Can Support Farmland Conservation Easements

County governments can support agricultural conservation easement programs first and foremost by making such programs available to their constituents. Counties can support legislation and funding for agricultural conservation easements or work through the state or federal government to provide farmers with a conservation easement option. Counties also can support a non-profit organization's creation of a land trust. Once a conservation agency has been established, county governments can support them by giving funds and/or political support.

Best Practice Example: Farmland Conservation Easements

Lancaster County, PA

About

In 1978, a group of Lancaster County citizens created an Agriculture Preservation Task Force and began lobbying the Board of Commissioners to take advantage of a recently passed state law that allowed for the purchase of development rights. They were motivated out of dismay at the loss of prime agricultural land and also out of a desire to preserve the farms that represented their livelihood, their heritage and their culture. After three years their work paid off and the Lancaster County Commissioners appointed a nine member Agricultural Preserve Board. Three years later, the county added staff members and made the Agricultural Preserve Board into an official department charged



with administering the purchase of development rights program for farmers.

During the nineties, the sizable Amish and Mennonite communities in Lancaster County became interested in conserving their farmland as well, and the Lancaster Farmland Trust was created. The Lancaster Farmland Trust functions as a compliment to the Agricultural Preserve Board, offering a non-governmental option for preserving farmland. In 1999, both conservation agencies became incorporated into the Pennsylvania state agricultural program.

Since their inception the two conservation agencies have preserved over 69,000 acres of farmland, with the Agricultural Preserve Board preserving over 54,000 acres and the Lancaster Farmland Trust preserving over 15,000. This represents over a tenth of the land in the county. Today, both organizations have wait lists; more farmers are interested in selling their development rights than the agencies have funds to purchase. Of course, for those who can afford donate all or some of their development rights, the wait list is much shorter.

A farmer may also have a shorter wait depending upon the characteristics of his or her land. The Agricultural Preserve Board receives a sizable portion of its funding from the state, and as such is required to use GIS technology to rank which farms it should buy development rights from. Using GIS, the Agricultural Preserve Board compares soil quality, development potential, farm potential, and clustering (how close the farm is to others that have sold their development rights). The Lancaster Farmland Trust receives less funding through the state but has greater flexibility in how it prioritizes farms. Donations from local municipalities also help the conservation agencies in their work.

The efforts of Lancaster County's two agricultural conservation agencies have a strong overlap with the efforts of the County Planning Commission. Since 1992, the County of Lancaster has been targeting new development to designated growth areas. Recently, the Commission also established designated rural areas. Because the state of Pennsylvania is a commonwealth, the County does not have ultimate authority when it comes to land use planning; the townships and Burroughs do. The Commission's plan is a suggestion, but generally the municipalities respect it. The work of the Agricultural Preserve Board

More farmers are interested in selling their development rights than the agencies have funds to purchase.

and the Lancaster Farmland Trust further strengthens the Commission's strategic plan by reinforcing the 'designated rural areas' with conserved farmland.

Lancaster County's Role

The County of Lancaster has played a major role in the agricultural conservation easement programs. The Agricultural Preserve Board is an official county department, with a nine member board and a staff of six people including a Director appointed by the Board of Commissioners. The county also provides generous funding to the Agriculture Preserve Board. In 2006 and 2007 it provided eight million dollars through a specially created bond. The county also supports the Lancaster Farmland Trust with one million dollars in 2006 and again in 2007.

The designated rural and growth areas that the Lancaster County Planning Commission has set have a significant influence on where the Agricultural Preserve Board and the Lancaster Farmland Trust purchase development rights. In addition, the goals and projects to which the Planning Commission is committed also influence their work. The Planning Commission is currently working to find

innovative ways to maintain a vibrant farm economy, such as using methane from manure to create a renewable energy source and looking to connect farmers with the niche markets of nearby cities on the Eastern Seaboard. The Agricultural Preserve Board and the Lancaster Farmland Trust keep this in mind when they interact with farmers.

Benefits to the Community

By putting aside 69,000+ acres of land for the sole purpose of farming, Lancaster County has created stability and assurance that agriculture will remain as a mainstay in the local economy. This is especially important for young people who have watched agricultural infrastructure dwindle in other agrarian communities due to changes in land use practices, but nonetheless want to remain in their community and continue in the tradition of their ancestors. Knowing that there is enough critical land mass to maintain farm suppliers and service providers such as shipping, storage and processing gives future farmers the peace of mind to follow their dreams.

Preserving farmland has also encouraged smart growth in Lancaster County. The County's zoning and agricultural conservation

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Conserved farmland in Lancaster County.

easement programs have resulted in seventy five percent of new buildings going up in designated growth areas, areas that are easily serviced by municipalities. This higher density development has saved local governments a significant amount of money in infrastructure costs.

Preserving farmland in Lancaster County is also beneficial because it ensures a constant future supply of fresh foods to constituents. Preserving farmland does not always have this effect, because in some counties farms are dedicated solely to producing a few commodity crops, but in Lancaster County there are a number of farms producing a wide range of fresh foods. These foods are sold at farm stands and farmers markets, and served in local restaurants.

Peer-to-Peer Advice

Asked what they would say to officials interested in starting agriculture conservation easement programs in their own counties, leaders of the Lancaster farmland conservation effort gave the following advice:

- There are plenty of reasons to conserve farmland: to prevent sprawl, to maintain a strong farm economy, food security both at the local and national level. Certain arguments will resonate more in different communities, and in some communities you'll face more skepticism than others. Always be prepared to answer the question: Would the value of the land be greater if it were put to other uses?

— Matt Knepper, Director, Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve Board

- The easy part is preserving the land. Preserving agriculture, which is the idea behind farmland conservation easements, is much harder. To do so, local governments must help farmers adapt to changing markets and the global economy and ensure that some kind of agricultural industry continues.

— Dean Severson, Lancaster County Planning Commission

- Farmland conservation agencies exist to assist people in maintaining a lifestyle and a community. The best way to go about doing that is to develop a reputable program and strong personal relationships with local farmers.

— Peter Olmstead, Lancaster Farmland Trust

For More Information

Lancaster County Agricultural preserve Board
www.co.lancaster.pa.us/lanco/cwp/view.asp?A=371&Q=384772

Matt Knepper
 Agricultural Preserve Board
 50 N. Duke St
 P.O. Box 83480
 Lancaster, Pa. 17608-3480
 (717) 299-8355

Lancaster Farmland Trust
www.lancasterfarmlandtrust.org/index.html

Peter Olmstead
 Lancaster Farmland Trust
 125 Lancaster Avenue
 Strasburg, PA 17579
 717-687-8484



25 Massachusetts Avenue, NW / Suite 500 / Washington, DC 20001
202.393.6226 / fax 202.393.2630 / www.naco.org



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