

THE STORY COUNTY LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM--

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

PRESENTED TO: THE STORY COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
THE STORY COUNTY PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION

PRESENTED BY: THE STORY COUNTY PLANNING AND ZONING DEPARTMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere we look, whether it is the television, a newspaper article, or billboard, we see more and more people exclaiming the importance of “eating local”. What is less clear is why it is important and what if anything Story County can do to facilitate this growing movement. The purpose of this report is review over nine months of ongoing research by County planning and zoning staff that attempts to answer these questions.

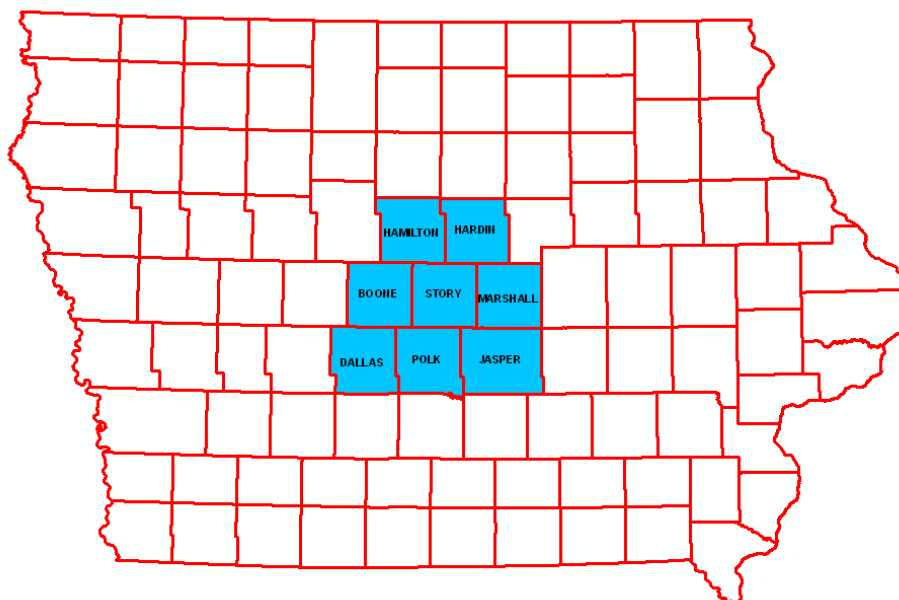
First, this report defines exactly what “eating local” means and the definition of food systems planning. Second, this report discusses the many ways citizens and decision-makers have found local food systems planning to be important, as well as the benefits it can bring to our community. Next, the report looks at what the State of Iowa and two counties in the Midwest are doing to facilitate the local food system.

Finally, this report recommends that the Board of Supervisors consider **forming a local food systems steering committee** comprised of local stakeholders, food systems experts and citizens to discuss issues and opportunities in the Story County Region including:

- Public education of local food issues;
- Institutional purchasing of local foods;
- Regional collaboration on food system issues and policies;
- Recruiting and retaining more local food growers;
- Niche farming opportunities;
- Feasibility for a regional food processing facility;
- Allowing for small acreage farming; and
- Fostering more equitable access to healthy foods;

WHAT IS FOOD SYSTEMS PLANNING?

Food systems planning involves examining, from a policy standpoint, every aspect of a community’s region in terms of all the players that bring food from the field to the plate. This includes farmers—be they from Iowa or Southeast Asia, processors, distributors, retailers, and finally consumers. Local Food Systems Planning then looks at all the food that is grown and raised in the local region and is brought to market in the local region. The local region can mean many different things depending on where you are from, but in the case of this study, includes what the report calls the Story County Region comprising the counties of Story, Polk, Boone, Dallas, Marshall, Jasper, Hardin and Hamilton.



The Story County Region

From a policy-making standpoint, local food systems planning involves examining the local food system, or foodshed (terms used interchangeably throughout the report), identifying deficiencies, inefficiencies, or negative externalities in the system, and implementing policies or programs to fix these problems, to achieve a result that provides a benefit to *all* the players in the food system.

Historically, a local food system is supported by a small group of food growers growing/raising produce on a relatively small piece of land. These same producers market their products, usually directly, (from grower to consumer lacking a middleman) to a small number of devoted consumers whom derive many benefits from this process.

The majority of the produce is grown either via an organic process (using no chemicals involving an intensive certification process through the USDA) or a natural/sustainable process (minimal use of fertilizers or pesticides). The use of human capital rather than machines is a common theme among local food producers.

More and more people are discovering the benefits of consuming food directly from farmers in their area. The United States had 340 farmers' markets in 1970, 1,700 in 1994, almost twice that in 2002. By 2004, the number was 3,700. Community Supported Agriculture farms, or CSA's have been growing at a

similar speed.¹ At the turn of the century, consumer demand for organically grown products has been growing at a pace at 20 percent year.² People are demanding more of these locally-grown products so much so that everywhere we turn we see a sign or a newspaper headlines encouraging us to “eat local”.

WHY EAT LOCAL?

The question then becomes why should we “eat local”? Many people, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation are convinced that it is important to do. In fact, the reasons are many and spread their wide arms through almost every aspect of policy-making in our society, including public health, environmental protection, agricultural preservation, homeland security, economic sustainability, and social health. It is for this reason that eating local or looking at the local food system appeals to so many different people.

Healthy Communities

Many proponents of working with local food systems look at it from the aspect of helping to create more healthy communities. The National Association of Counties, (NACo) in July of 2007 completed a publication regarding four counties working with their local food system. The impetus for the article is to help counties “combat youth obesity and build healthy communities.” They cite that,

“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 children and families to obtain the fruits, vegetables and other wholesome foods they need in order to maintain a balanced diet.”³

This is not just an issue in the poorer neighborhoods in urban areas. Rural communities and rural residents experience this issue as well. An Iowa State University Extension Article noted that in 1976 there were 1920 grocery stores in Iowa, and by the year 2000, there were only 911, a more than 50 percent decrease in 25 years.⁴ As the grocery stores have consolidated from smaller towns into larger grocery store chains in larger towns, more rural residents have had to travel longer distances to obtain healthy, fresh produce. This poses a health threat to rural residents, especially those without reliable transportation to

¹ Community Supported Agriculture Farm, or CSAs are farms that receive payment (or shares of ownership) at the beginning of a growing season for the bounty the farmer produces over the entire season.

² McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy* (New York: 2007).

³ Dillon Casey, Martin Harris. *Counties and Local Food Systems, Ensuring Healthy Foods, Nurturing Healthy Children*. The National Association of Counties, (NACo) July, 2007

⁴ Stone, Kenneth E. and Georgeanne M. Artz. 2001. Trends for Iowa Retail Businesses. Iowa Retail Trade Data by Industry, FY76-FY00. Iowa State University Extension, Ames, Iowa.
<http://www.econ.iastate.edu/retail/page7.html>

the grocery store such as the growing elderly population. Working with the local food system helps to ensure equitable access to healthy foods for everyone in the community.

Environmental Protection

Another angle from which proponents of local food systems view the argument is through environmental protection. In our present national/global food system, our food travels an average of over 1,500 miles from its source to our plate. One study showed that in Iowa the average carrot had come 1,690 miles, from California, the average potato 1,292 miles, from Idaho, and the average chuck roast over 600 miles from Colorado.⁵ The following image says it even better:

This ultimately translates into carbon dioxide and other contaminants being released into the air. By one study's findings, we could decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere five to seven-fold, by using local and regional food systems as opposed to national or international.⁶

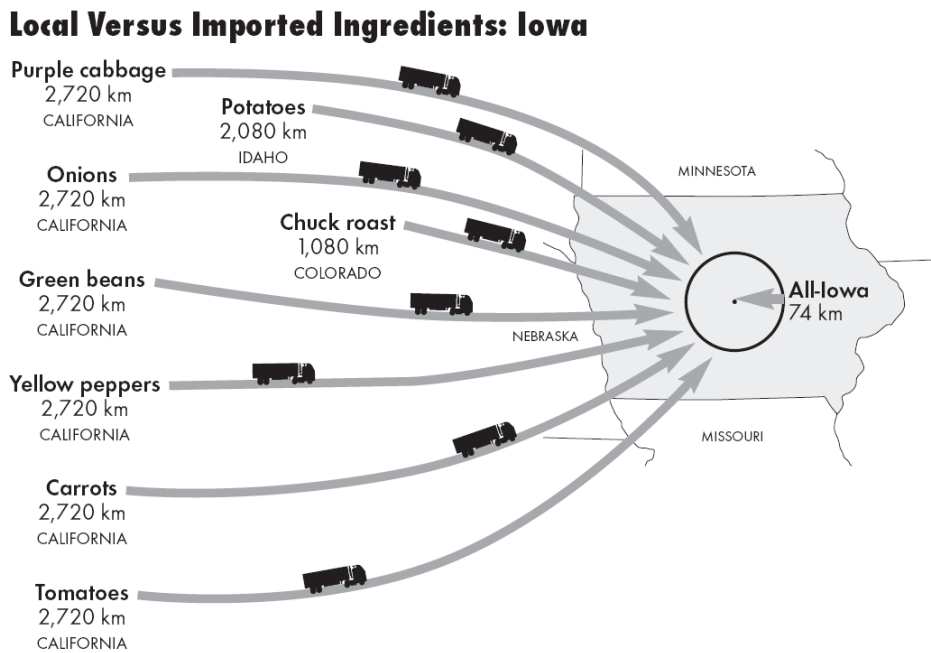


Image courtesy of Rich Pirog et al., *Food, Fuel, and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions* (Ames, Iowa: Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, 2001), pp. 1, 2. Taken from Halweil, Brian. Homegrown.

⁵ Halweil, Brian. *Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket* (New York: 2004), p. 68

⁶ Pirog, Rich, et al. *Ibid.*

In order for most food to travel that many miles as cheaply as possible, packaging of the food is important as well. That packaging ends up in our landfills whereby one source estimates that food waste accounts for as much as a third of total land-filled waste.⁷

The global food system also relies heavily on fertilizers and pesticides inputs, chemicals that pollute our water. Local food systems rely more on human inputs, generally using less chemicals in its natural or organic growing process.

Food Security

Still others look to food systems planning from a standpoint of security. Many have seen that our centralized food system is vulnerable to sabotage. This point of view has never been more prevalent than in post-9/11 America. A *New York Times* article published in May of 2005 pointed out that by simply pouring a few grams of botulism toxin into an unlocked milk tank on a farm, a terrorist can contaminate over 400,000 cartons of milk throughout the entire country.⁸

Our food is threatened not just by sabotage. A catastrophe, either natural or human-caused, which cuts off a community or region from the world, is vulnerable to famine. A more decentralized food system, one in which communities are growing more of their own food, are less prone to this risk.

Economic Sustainability

Perhaps the most important aspect of helping to nurture and facilitate the local food system in the Story County Region is its potential impacts on the economy, and the opportunities it provides the region for economic development. Economists and policy-makers have long understood the importance keeping products and services purchased by its consumers close to home. This circulates money through the economy creating more jobs and more income for everyone--commonly referred to as the *multiplier effect*.

On a macro-economic level, one can view our present experience of high and rising oil prices as an argument for adapting our present commodity crop agricultural model. The present model that has been in place and growing for over 150 years has seen the most plentiful and cheap food in the history of the world. It is a model constantly and steadfastly preaching efficiency in the process. As a result, the consolidation of farms experienced has led one

⁷ Kameshwari Pothukuchi and Jerome Kaufman. Placing the Food System on the Urban Agenda: The Role of Municipal Institutions in Food Systems Planning," *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 16 Number 2, 1999, p. 217.

⁸ Lawrence M. Wein, "Got Toxic Milk?" *New York Times*. May 30, 2005. Taken from McKibben, Bill *Deep Economy* (New York: 2007).

researcher to note that since World War II, America has lost a farm about every half hour.⁹

Regardless of whether you view this progression as a positive or a negative, few can argue against the fact the same model progressively ridding of the “inefficiency” of the small, family farm, has done so almost exclusively by relying on two very important resources to achieve its monumental heights of efficiency—oil and water.

Over 70 percent of water used by humans goes to irrigate crops.¹⁰ One ecostatistician found a correlation between the more than tripling of demand of water over the last half century and a “near depletion of aquifers”, and has concluded that as a result, “we have created a food bubble economy, artificially inflating food production by means of an unsustainable reliance on underground water.”¹¹

Additionally, it takes almost half a gallon of oil to produce a bushel of Midwestern hybrid corn: a quarter of it is used to make fertilizer; 35 percent to power the farm machinery; 7 percent to irrigate the field; and the rest to make pesticides, dry grain and to perform all the other tasks of industrial farming.¹² In other words, as the number of farmers has decreased, they have been replaced by barrels of oil. As scholar Bill McKibben noted in his book, *Deep Economy*:

“Because of its reliance on cheap energy, the efficiency of our vast farms and the food system they underwrite is in one sense an illusion, and perhaps a very temporary one. The number of farmers has fallen from half the American population to about 1 percent, and in essence those missing farmers have been replaced with oil. We might see fossil fuel as playing the same role that slaves played in early American agriculture--a ‘natural resource’ that comes cheap.”¹³

This does not even take into account processing, packaging, and distribution of the food from the field to the plate. The Swedish Food Institute found that growing and distributing a pound of frozen peas required ten times as much energy as the peas contained.¹⁴

Is all this meant to demonize the present global agriculture industry? Certainly not! The farmers, processors and distributors and others that make up this industry are merely working within a system giving them little choice to do anything else. It is a model that has fed and continues to feed more people than ever before in the history of the world. It has kept over “one billion people from

⁹ Cook, Christopher. *Diet for a Dead Planet* (New York: 2004).

¹⁰ McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy*.

¹¹ Brown, Lester. As quoted by Bill McKibben in *Deep Economy* (New York: 2004)

¹² Imhoff, Daniel. *Paper or Plastic* (San Francisco: 2005), p. 112; Danielle Murry, “Oil and Food, a Rising Security Challenge,” *Earth Policy Institute*, May 9, 2005.

¹³ McKibben, Bill

¹⁴ Pretty, Jules. *Agri-Culture* (London: 2002). P. 84

hunger, starvation, or even death.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, integral to understanding the importance of local food system, is realizing how much that same system is tied to oil, and oil prices. If our present food system is tied to the price of oil, it is not complicated to see how the price of our food will increase in turn, as we have already begun to see all over the country, creating a need for more diversity in the system; one less reliant on oil to hold food prices stable and sustain our economy.

Indeed, that is exactly what the local/regional food system model is. With a local food system you produce more food per acre using human capital as opposed to oil. According to a recent USDA Census of Agriculture, smaller farms produce far more food per acre, whether you measure in tons, calories, or dollars. As Brian Halweil points out,

“In terms of inputs into outputs, society would be better off with small-scale farms...As population continues to grow in many nations, and the amount of farmland and water available to each person continues to shrink, a small farm structure may become central to feeding the planet.”¹⁶

Again, local food systems generally substitute people for oil, whereas the global industrial food system is substituting oil for people. Because of the relative price of oil inputs, Mr. Halweil’s comments are contrasted with the fact that with big farms you get more food per *dollar*.

Also important is a discussion not only between large and small farms, but distinguishing between conventional farming practices and sustainable/organic farming practices. Sustainable, or natural agriculture is a system that employs minimal use of oil based fertilizers and pesticides relying on more natural, alternative methods of fertilization and pest management, as opposed to organic which is a more stringent USDA certification with specific requirements, and utilizes virtually no chemicals in its process. Agronomist Jules Pretty, who has studied two hundred sustainable agriculture projects in fifty-two countries found that after seeing an almost 98 percent increase of farmers employing sustainable agriculture practices in the past decade that the practice “has led to a 93 percent increase in per hectare (acre) food production.”¹⁷

How does this translate to dollars and sense for Iowans? Dave Swenson, Economics Professor at Iowa State University, does much of his research work regarding Economic Impact Analysis. Economic Impact Analysis involves looking at a specific industry and its potential and realized effects on the total regional economic product. In 2006, he completed an analysis entitled “*The Economic Impacts of Increased Fruit and Vegetable Production and Consumption in Iowa: Phase II*”. His analysis involved looking at several

¹⁵ Borlaug, Norman

¹⁶ Halweil, Eat Her. P. 54

¹⁷ Bill McKibben interviewing the agronomist on July 29, 2005

scenarios where generally lowans would produce enough fruits and vegetables so that it could supply an lowan consumer demand of 25 percent of their fruits and vegetables from producers within the state. For complete details of his thorough analysis, including methodology and assumptions the complete report has been included in the appendix disk of this report, or is available on Story County's website at www.storycounty.com. Table 1 displays the total economic impacts of one of the scenarios in his study:

Table 1

Total Economic Effects (in Dollars) – Accounting for Existing Production – Scenario 1

	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Total
Total Industrial Output	83,090,335	24,192,384	32,615,679	139,898,402
Labor Income	35,467,985	8,250,353	10,477,877	54,196,216
Jobs	1,358.4	262.1	411.0	2,031.5

Swenson, Dave "The Economic Impacts of Increased Fruit and Vegetable Production and Consumption in Iowa: Phase II" 2006. P. 14

It is important to note that all these numbers take into account the estimated acres of commodity crops taken out of production and the present impacts of those crops to the state economy. Direct outputs refer to the outputs to the total economy brought about by an agriculture industry producing and directly marketing 25 percent of the State's fruit and vegetable consumption. Indirect outputs refer to the affect the direct industry has on supporting industries such as tractor manufacturers and seed companies. Induced outputs look at the income collected by all the increased jobs in the economy and how those workers affect the economy by purchasing products with their income.

Overall, the total economic output to the state by increasing production of fruits and vegetables in the state to 25 percent of total consumed fruits and vegetables is almost \$140 million and an increase of over 2000 jobs. It is also important to note that this is the most conservative output of all the scenarios in his analysis. By doing a consumption analysis looking at all lowans consuming five one-half servings of fruits and vegetables per day (the USDA's daily intake recommendation), the economic impacts more than double. They also do not take into account any value-added products derived from the produce, or restaurants purchasing the produce for their menus. The multiplier effect increases dramatically if one were to take this into account.

By interpolating these numbers based on the Story County Region's share of total state population, we could expect to receive over 20 percent share of the total economic output. Story County's specific share of the impact is more difficult to determine, as an economic impact analysis is less reliable on a smaller, local level, but would nevertheless be realized in increased revenues

from sales and property tax. These numbers offer some opportunities for using local food systems for economic development.

Of course, there is the issue of getting consumers to choose locally-grown products. Mr. McKibben has pointed out that the biggest problem local food faces is that people have gotten so used to paying so little for food. He points out however, that overall food prices are comparable, and even CSA's can generally deliver produce for half the price supermarkets charge.

Leanne Harter, Planning and Zoning Director for Story County is currently in the middle of an experiment whereby her household supplants a majority of their grocery shopping with local grown food. Table 2 on the following page shows a month-by-month comparison of her grocery bills in the past two years from May to August. This table is part of a memo Ms. Harter completed for this project. The entire memo is located on the appendix disk.

The Harter family consists of her, her husband and three children all under the age of eight. If you take away June, in which she purchased twenty chickens to freeze and eat over time, the average expenditures for groceries over the four months are comparable even as the percentage of local groceries versus non-local is switched. This provides optimism, specific to the Story County foodshed, regarding the affordability of locally-grown food for an average household.

Table 2

Harter Household Grocery Bills May-August 2007 and 2008

Month	Local	Local Percentage (of total)	Non-Local	Total Grocery Costs
2007 – May	\$9.19	4.7%	\$185.90	\$195.09
2008 – May	\$263.01	77.3%	\$77.80	\$340.09
2007 – June	\$27.53	20.3%	\$532.01	\$559.54
2008 – June	\$637.11 [^]	78.6%	\$173.95	\$811.06
2007 – July	\$31.14	15.3%	\$444.01	\$475.15
2008 – July	\$200.56	71.2%	\$80.94	\$281.50
2007 – August	\$20.39	15.7%	\$300.47	\$320.86
2008 – August	\$378.73 ^{^^}	81.5%	\$86.07	\$464.80

[^] This amount included the purchase of 20 chickens; as of the time this memo was prepared, over half remain.

^{^^} A greater amount of produce was purchased in August so that additional items could be prepared – whether frozen or canned – for the coming winter months.

But even if you look at some very successful food systems in the US where the price for produce is comparable to that of the grocery store, it is difficult to compete against the time convenience of getting a processed meal to pop into the microwave. This does present some challenges to those that endeavor to bring locally-grown foods to more people, but as this report outlines, some

counties are doing some pretty interesting things to help facilitate their local food system.

Social Health

Finally, there are the intrinsic applications of local food systems planning to the social and communal health. Many people like the idea of knowing the face of the person who grew the side of asparagus on your plate. Additionally, many people like the idea that the five dollars you spent on that asparagus went to your neighbor rather into a pool of money in a far-off land owned by a huge multinational corporation. This provides many with a greater sense of community. Take what Bill McKibben had to say after spending a year having his family only eat local food:

“That good taste was *satisfaction*. The time I spent getting the food and preparing it was not, in the end, a cost at all. In the end it was a benefit, *the* benefit. In my role as a eater, I was part of something larger than myself that made sense to me—a community. I felt grounded, connected.”

Furthermore, while locally-grown foods take longer to prepare, many people like the idea of spending time with their food. In fact the “Slow Food Movement” rose out of a desire for people to take back control over what they eat and take more pleasure in the act of eating. The movement advocates spending more time preparing familial and communal meals, using fresh, in season ingredients. Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food Movement argues, “We’ve lost the tastiest, juiciest fruits, because they could not be transported, or it cost too much to process them, and crop breeders have instead developed varieties and breeds on the altar of mass production.”¹⁸ These are strong words, but there are many and a growing number of people who believe them.

From the farmer’s perspective, they can choose what they want to grow and how much they want to grow of it. Rather than being a small link in a really big and really long chain, they are able to get out off their combines and commune with the land. They are able to interact and connect with their consumer directly, and get to keep one hundred percent of the revenue they sell.

THE STORY COUNTY FOOD SYSTEM

In May of 2008, Story County staff administered a qualitative survey to over 15 local food producers to determine the size and issues of the food system, including:

- What they are growing;

¹⁸ Quote taken from Halweil, Brian, *Home Grown*.

- How much they are growing;
- Their employment numbers;
- How they market their products;
- What organizations they belong to
- Challenges they face; and
- How Story County may be able to help their operation.

The results of that survey, along with information gathered from other secondary data sources, has provided us with the following picture of the Story County's local food system.

The Story County region has a relatively strong regional foodshed compared to the rest of the state. Research from several sources showed that in Story County alone, there are over 18 food growers marketing their produce in the region, and when one looks at surrounding counties, that number increases to over 50. It is important to note that this is most likely a conservative number as we were only able to obtain information for those growers that are marketing their products through some sort of advertisement. There may be several growers that only sell their produce to a few, select people using more informal methods such as truck gardeners.

The Story County Region is growing a plethora of fruits (including berries and grapes) and vegetables, and nuts. The region has several producers of eggs, beef, bison, pork, poultry, lamb, and mutton. The region is also producing several value-added products including dairy products including cheese, preserves, honey, personal care products and wine. Pretty much everything that can be grown/raised in Iowa's climate and hardy zone is being grown in the Story County Region.

Determining how much is being produced of each product we found to be a much more nebulous task. Many growers weren't comfortable sharing their numbers with us, or even more frequently did not keep track of how much they are growing, either by tonnage or by acre. Several CSA's, for instance, are growing several different items on the same piece of ground and are constantly rotating crops through a small piece of land throughout the growing season, making tracking yields almost impossible. We overwhelmingly found, and indeed we were surprised by the fact, that Story County growers have no problem selling their products, with most experiencing an excess of demand throughout the season.

Growers in the Story County Region are using all known methods to market their products. In fact, we found many producers are using multiple methods. According to a 2006 survey by the Iowa State University Extension, Story County has the most CSA's in the state, and there are over 17 CSA's in the region. There are currently two farmers' markets in Story County, both in Ames providing local goods and produce to the community four days a week. There are several

restaurants in the county purchasing and marketing locally-grown foods. For example, The Café in Ames goes so far as to put the name of the local grower on their menus. Grocery stores, both large and small are purchasing local products, and marketing them at local grocery stores, including, but not limited to, Wheatsfield Cooperative in Ames, as well as Hy-Vee and Fareway Stores, throughout the county.

Another interesting finding in the survey was that few, if any, producers in the region are looking to expand their operation to meet excess demand in the region. They are not interested either because they are happy with things the way they are, or are facing several challenges. One of those challenges is a difficulty finding enough labor to help them during their most busy times of the season. Other challenges include a perception of lack of easy access to capital for expansion and lack of more land. A few growers are looking to expand their operation by adding greenhouses to increase the number of days per year they have produce available.

Other challenges growers are facing relate to adding value to their produce. More than one respondent stated they see a huge benefit to having a meat processing plant for organically-raised meat in central Iowa; and Story County, specifically would be a great place for it to be, given its central location.

Most respondents in the survey belong to or are involved in at least one organization devoted to helping local growers or local food systems. These include Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Iowa State Extension, Iowa Fruits and Vegetables Grower's Association, the USDA, the Iowa Farm Bureau, and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Most growers participate in these organizations only a little, using them for information gathering and as a medium to talk about issues with other growers. Many were aware of grants and loans available to local food growers, but most, if not all, agreed they had little time for the application process. One went so far as to comment that "Most of the grants available are for feasibility studies. How many feasibility studies do you need before it is actually time to do something?"

We were surprised to find that most were able to think of ways that Story County could help them and help the food system in Story County. Zero respondents thought that Story County should not be trying to help them in any way. We will focus on specific feedback regarding this in the recommendation section of the report.

WHAT OTHER COUNTIES ARE DOING

The question of who should be the authority to help a local food system is a broad one. There are several private organizations in Central Iowa, whose focus is to help create sustainable agricultural systems in Iowa including Practical

Farmers of Iowa and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, to name a few.

The public sector is also in a position to facilitate local food systems in Iowa. Indeed, the Iowa Department of Agriculture has two programs in place to help small farms wishing to pursue locally-grown products. The first is the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which helps to connect locally-grown fruits, vegetables and herbs from farmers' markets and farmstands to nutritionally at-risk women, infants, children and low-income seniors. It does this by working with farmers' markets to accept WIC vouchers. The second is the Farm-to-School program, which connects local farmers with school cafeterias. Bill Northey, Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, describes the program as:

"There is a growing interest statewide in locally-grown and produced food. The Iowa Farm-to-School program provides farmers and schools with a chance to connect and share resources. This is a tremendous opportunity to tell the story of agriculture and the important role it plays in Iowa's economy."¹⁹

County governments have a role to play in helping the local food system as well. In their publication previously mentioned, the NACo Center for Sustainable Communities provided four case studies of counties supporting their local food system. They wrote the publication with the goal of "assisting county governments to leverage their local food systems, combat youth obesity and build healthy communities."²⁰ A copy of this article is located on appendix disk or on our Story County's website.

The first case study was Dane County, WI (Madison). In October 2005, the Dane County Board of Supervisors passed Resolution 90, 05-06, thereby establishing the Dane County Food Council; a twelve member committee to work on issues such as, "Develop strategies to increase the amount of locally produced food the County and other local governments purchase, and "Assist[ing] with the further study of the formation of a Central Agriculture Food [Processing] Facility."²¹ Since then, a lot of work has been done to help their food system in terms of increasing public awareness regarding eating locally and creating an alliance of farmers' markets to increase communication and collaboration between them.

Another case study examined Woodbury County, IA. Also in 2005, Woodbury County hired a Director for Rural Economic Development to help answer the following questions: Why was their traditional agriculture economy waning and how they could stimulate growth, while maintaining the rural character of the county. The Director made two recommendations. One, encourage local purchasing, and two begin producing organic niche products. Shortly thereafter,

¹⁹ From the Iowa Department of Agriculture website. <http://www.agriculture.ia.state.us>.

²⁰ Dillon Casey, Martin Harris. *Counties and Local Food Systems, Ensuring Healthy Foods, Nurturing Healthy Children*. (NACo Center for Sustainable Communities July 2007)

²¹ County of Dane, WI. Official Resolution 90, 05-06.

the Board passed the Organics Conversion Policy, becoming the first county in the nation to provide tax rebates to farmers who convert to organic agriculture.²² They also began an initiative called the Woodbury Health Initiative. One aspect of the initiative is to conduct middle school cooking classes using local fresh ingredients. The Board also partnered with community stakeholders to renovate a commercial kitchen to process salsa grown by local ingredients providing \$20,000 towards the project. Finally, the Board is currently working to partner with an owner of a 280,000 sq ft cold storage/packaging/distribution facility.

At the time of this report, the Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors (Pottawattamie County, Iowa) followed suit passing Resolution No. 40-2008, establishing the Pottawattamie County Food Council. In the same resolution they allocated not less than \$30,000 per year for five years to fund a full-time administrative position for the council.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Making specific policy recommendations at this point would be short-sided given the wealth of knowledge among many stakeholders in the county, and the Board of Supervisors has yet to receive their input. This report therefore recommends to the Board the establishment of a temporary local food system committee - "Grow Story County" - made of up citizens, stakeholders, and food system experts. The primary objective of this committee is to discuss the many possible actions the County may take to facilitate the local food system. This report also recommends that the Board of Supervisors' "Grow Story County" committee appointments occur during January of 2009, lasting 18 months, with presentation to the Board within one year of the initial appointment outlining recommendations for specific action. An additional six-month appointment period is built in to allow committee members involvement in implementation strategies as needed.

A list of potential organizations and entities forming committee membership includes:

- Story County growers
- Story County consumers
- Iowa State University Extension
- Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
- Practical Farmers of Iowa
- Large grocery store(s)
- Small grocery store(s)
- School district representative(s)

²² Dillon and Martin. P. 14

In order to focus the discussion, County staff does recommend the committee discuss the following issues in the county's food system and work to create recommendations addressing each of these issues. In addition, staff recommends the Board of Supervisors adopt the initiative for the remainder of the 2008 calendar year and the 2009 calendar year work programs of the Planning and Zoning Department.

Public Education Outreach

While a growing number of people are becoming aware of the importance of the local food system in their lives, many people have not realized its many positive attributes and health and economic implications. This education could manifest itself as simply as the County using its website to publish information, Story County hosting education forums, or the County working with local schools to implement the State's Farm-to-School program. Also tying into this issue is a possible branding campaign, either adopted such as the "Buy Fresh Buy Local" brand, or by the County establishing its own unique brand, such as *Sioux City Sue*, or *Edible Iowa River Valley*.

Institutional Purchasing

The committee should address the feasibility and opportunity the County has to purchase locally-grown foods. Iowa State University Dining currently has a local food purchasing policy, as well as both counties discussed in case studies presented in this report. Story County should look at adopting a similar policy for County departments regularly providing meals and such programs, such as the Community Life Program and the Story County Sheriff's Office.

Regional Collaboration

While the Board's constituents lie within the political boundaries of the County, Story County's foodshed exists beyond its borders. Staff is uncertain if any surrounding counties are discussing possible programs or policies for their county. The committee should make contact with these counties to determine if any work is being done and provide opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Recruit and Retain More Local Farmers

The most interesting finding staff gained from the grower survey was that there is an excess demand for locally-grown products in the County. At the same time, almost none of the growers had ambition to increase their operation as a result. The foodshed is left with a need for new farmers to enter the market. Additionally, the County, as the entire state, is experiencing the "brain drain" of recent college graduates leaving the state. Many such graduates are very qualified to begin a local food farming operation in the County. The committee should discuss possible actions for the County to take to recruit new local food

farmers to enter the market and to retain qualified graduates from local colleges. This could be in the form of leveraging the County's taxing authority to provide tax rebates to local food growers, setting aside unused or underused County-owned land for local farmers to cultivate, or setting up a mentorship program between current local food growers and those interested in getting into the business. It should be mentioned that several respondents expressed interest in mentoring persons interested in local farming.

Natural and/or Organic

Most of the respondents in our survey stated they raise food using sustainable or natural methods as opposed to organic. The committee should discuss whether the County should focus on encouraging any type of local food production or only certified organic and recommend specific policy amendments or new policy development.

Regional Food Processing Facility

The committee should discuss the feasibility of setting up a regional-scale food processing facility or facilities. One respondent to the survey stated that organic meat producers in Iowa currently have only one USDA-inspected processor to process their meat. Additionally, local growers could market their produce year-round with a facility to preserve their fruits and vegetables and/or create value-added products to market. The committee should also evaluate possible public-private partnerships to accomplish this.

Small Acreage Farming

Most local food producers farm only a small parcel of land for their operation. Many County laws do not necessarily allow this type of activity to take place. The committee should look at the ways County laws may need to change to allow for the creation of farms on less than 15 acres, and provide specific recommendations regarding regulations and amendments thereto.

Food Access

There is an issue of access to healthy foods to certain residents in unincorporated and incorporated areas Story County. Several of Story County's smaller communities lack a grocery store, and a couple do not even have a convenience store. Likewise, rural residents near these underserved areas lack the same access to healthy foods. Additionally, some incorporated area residents live in area where they do not have access to healthy foods. These residents must rely on traveling relatively long distances to access healthy foods. The committee should work to identify underserved areas and citizens, and develop policies to help create easier, and more equitable access to healthy foods.

CONCLUSION

This report defines “eating local” and the many benefits it brings to our communities. The recommendations contained in this report build upon the formation of a volunteer local food system steering committee to address opportunities and issues involved in the Story County Region. While there is no silver bullet to deal with the issues facing our food system, addressing the issues of the food system at a local level in Story County provides us the opportunity to be leaders in a growing movement towards a more sustainable future.