

Food and Agriculture Policy Councils: What to Consider When Developing a Council

By: Pam Roy

New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

Food and Agriculture Policy Councils (Councils) are a long-term commitment to working on food system issues. They should be comprised of a broad based group of dedicated individuals, from both the private and government sectors, who bring different talents and knowledge to the table. These Councils are inherently complex and take a great deal of slow thoughtful work with the understanding that it is a partnership and that all participants are willing to learn from one another, share information, develop decision making processes that provide “win-win” solutions, and that people are willing to listen and collectively come to decisions. This does not mean that there is always consensus. Even if there isn’t consensus, the meaningful outcome may be that those involved have a clearer understanding of the issues they face in their community’s food system.

Benefits/Reasons to begin a Council:

- It is an opportunity for the broader community interested in food and agriculture issues to work side-by-side with local government.
- Policy Councils give the group, both community participants and government, an opportunity to make decisions from a broader base of information and knowledge, likely providing a more informed outcome.
- The group educates itself and is better informed to make decisions that relate to government decision making.
- Councils help to develop, coordinate and implement a food system policy linking economic development and social impacts with farming and urban issues.
- Councils review and comment on proposed legislation and regulations that impact food and agriculture policy and security.
- Councils make recommendations to the executive and legislative branches of government on food and agriculture policy.

Steps to developing a Council:

Why have a food/agriculture policy council? Ask yourself why this body of individuals, organizations and government agencies should work together. What would be your vision? A vision may include:

- a. Focusing on key food and agriculture policy issues and opportunities that are affected by government and legislation;
- b. Strengthening education and advocacy among consumers and communities for food and agriculture; and,
- c. Creating policy priorities that best suit the needs of your state or region.

What would be potential outcomes? Outcomes could include:

- d. The development of a group that integrates all of the important things that influence and form food and agriculture decision making and policy; food, agriculture, environment, hunger, education, nutrition, transportation...;

- e. Ultimately strengthening the state's food and agriculture system; economically, socially and environmentally;
 - f. Developing legislation to influence food and agriculture;
 - g. Educating the public about food and agriculture issues and policies;
 - h. Finding resources needed to maintain and economically enhance local food production, supply and security;
 - i. Optimizing access to food ;
 - j. Optimizing access to food and nutrition education;
 - k. Providing greater access for farmers and ranchers to local markets;
 - l. Providing greater access for people in need to nutritious foods at reasonable prices, in both rural and urban communities; and,
 - m. Promoting the preservation of open space/ and working lands to ensure the viability of farming and ranching in New Mexico and the conservation of natural resources.
- 1) **Develop a simple one-sheet statement** that includes what a food/agriculture policy council is and can do and the benefits of developing it. Include a simple vision statement and goals (such as listed above).
 - 2) **Create a list of potential participants** from government, non-profit organizations, and individuals who are involved and interested in the food system. These may include and are not limited to:
 - a. Departments of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Services, Human Services, Health, Education, Environment, Transportation, Natural Resource Conservation Districts, Organic Certification Programs and other government agencies.
 - b. Businesses and industry involved in food issues such as food processors, distributors, grocers, restaurants, and school districts.
 - c. Organizations such as cattle, beef, dairy, sheep, wool, apples, pecans, chile, corn, soybean, and other large agriculture or commodity producers, organic producer groups, farmers' markets, cooperatives, and other groups;
 - d. Non-profit groups that support agriculture, hunger programs such as food banks, water and land use, environment and food issues such as children's education programs, land preservation groups, Slow Food conviviums, garden groups, farm and ranch education and marketing groups, foundations and other potential funding groups; and,
 - e. Individuals interested in their community and strengthening the local food system.
 - 3) **Visiting Key Participants:** After identifying key agencies and organizations it's time to set up meetings to introduce the Council "concept" or "initiative". When beginning a Council based on food and agriculture policy issues it is important to introduce the idea to those agencies and organizations most directly affected by or that work specifically to affect food and agriculture policy.
 - a. Engage people you know who are sympathetic to the issue and would be interested in working on it. Ask them to go with you when you visit other agencies and organizations.

- b. Next approach the agencies and organizations that have been identified as potential key stakeholders. Discuss the Council concept with the staff person who may be the policy or legislative person. Then ask for a meeting with their director. Likely these people would be the governor's cabinet members; Secretary's of Health, Agriculture, agency and university division directors, non-profit organization directors, directors of commodity programs, large scale agriculture organization, etc. Get their input and guidance. Make sure they understand that this is about them and the importance of their work and that their voice and information needs to be "at the table". **Continually reinforce that this Policy Council is about finding common ground on issues that will be "win-win" solutions.** Councils won't always agree on issues and may not choose to adopt them as policies they will support, but the education and exchange that happens at the table is invaluable and adds to **building trust and confidence among the participants.** Most often, the person who serves on the Council is a representative of the organization or agency who has the most understanding and interest. It will usually be a staff or Board member. They need to be well connected to the director of their agency, organization, or executive branch.
- 4) **Host a Workshop:** As you are working with various groups, always be seeking the opportunity to find a way to reach a broader audience. Providing a workshop at a well known regional or statewide conference is a great way to find out about people's interests. Your speakers or "panel" should be community people who are well informed and understand the importance of policy and how it affects their work, programs, etc., and can communicate their message well. It is wise to have an "outside" professional participate who has developed his/her Council in another state or region and has experience with the subject. This person can help to facilitate and guide the presenters and the group discussion. **Make sure to leave time for questions, discussion and "next steps". Get a sign up sheet and ask people to sign on if they are interested in committing to explore the development of a policy council.**
- 5) **Follow Up and Begin the Work:** Follow up with everyone shortly after the workshop and set a meeting date to continue the work. Continually invite those who are interested to your meetings. Likely, you will end up with a committee of six to eight people who are interested, curious and want to help to take the next steps. In New Mexico this committee worked for about six months, meeting monthly; **sharing information and knowledge from their own interests, working on initial purposes and goals, and preparing for a statewide forum.** This was a very important part of getting started and has always been part of meetings and committees. **The more people share, the more they (we) learn:**
 - a. **about each other and how our work is interrelated;**
 - b. **how what we do affects one another and beyond;**
 - c. **how if we work together we have a greater chance of creating change; and,**
 - d. **how if we work together we can better inform government and the public about changes that are necessary to better our food and agriculture systems.**

Make sure you continually keep meetings open to whoever wants to participate. This is challenging because sometimes different people show up at each meeting, but it gives the core group an opportunity to reinforce why this Policy Council can be important, continue to share information, etc.

- 6) **Preparing for a Statewide Forum:** A statewide forum is conducted to bring a broader group of stakeholders together, educate them about the importance of a Food and Agriculture Policy Council and various ways to build the Council, and provide a structure by which the group can develop priorities for the Council. As many groups from a broad base of interests should be invited, agencies, organizations, and businesses involved in agriculture, environment, health, education, hunger programs, etc. A facilitator who will guide the forum process should be brought into the process early on to help develop the program so it optimizes the outcomes.
- 7) In New Mexico, we used an **“open space” model** which requires everyone’s participation as well as team work. It’s a good way to get people further interested and invested in the future work of the Council. The premise of the forum is to find priorities we can all work on together and that the outcomes will be “win-wins”. More than 60 individuals representing agencies, organizations, and programs came to the meeting. From this day long process, six priorities were chosen and people joined committees to follow up on the priorities.
- 8) **Continued Work:** The New Mexico Forum was the basis on the beginning of its Council and its work. People were so engaged that the Council has met monthly ever since. Committees have taken on the responsibilities of focusing on the priorities and developing strategies to accomplish them. Most of these committees have people who represent agencies, organizations and businesses that have either never worked together or have found working together to be difficult because of a lack of understanding, lack of trust, etc. Working together on “win-win” priorities helps to encourage people to set aside their differences and work on things that will serve everyone.

The Committees are the core of the Council. This is where the majority of the work gets done. Committee members educate one another about issues that involve their programs, partnerships and related policies. At this point the committees can either support an existing policy or develop one that will help to improve the situation set forth. This can be tedious work, but is work the time and effort.

- 9) **The Council:** In New Mexico, three of the Council’s priorities, besides working on issues within the Committees, were to:

- a) **develop legislation** that educated legislators about the Council and its role with government and to further strengthen the links between government and the public (requesting their commitment to participate in the Council) ref: New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council House Joint Memorial #45 and Senate Joint Memorial. This legislation was passed and signed by the Governor in 2003;

b) create a governing structure that’s strength, momentum and policy initiatives come from the broad group of stakeholders (those 60+ organizations, agencies, etc.) called the **“Council”**. Their initiatives are taken to the **Committee** level where the majority of the work is done; educating one another about the importance of the initiative brought forth and creating a process by which it will be carried forward and supported. Anyone who brings an issue forth is required to participate in the process. A **“Policy Committee”**, whose membership changes annually, will review and approve the policies the Council will advocate for. These policies will then be given to the **“Council Board”**. The Council Board acts like a Board of Directors whose responsibilities are to be the public voice of the Council, provide resources (financial, staff, research, etc.) to the Council, provide leadership and guidance, as well as making sure the Council works in “good faith” and follows a set of guiding principals set forth by the overall Council. New Mexico considers this structure a “hybrid” model compared to many States whose councils are governed by a conventional model with the Board of Directors having the majority of the power to make decisions. Every State will choose an organizational structure that best suits their needs and ability to influence policy over time. In New Mexico, this is work in progress and will be posted on the State Policy Council website when completed.

This “hybrid” approach to the Council’s structure and governance includes:

Council: All interested parties who are willing to participate;

Committees: Diverse groups within the Council working together on specific policy and program. The Committees provide policy recommendations and priorities to the Council Board;

The Council Board: Responsible for advocating for policy priorities, providing guidance, resources, governance, and public advocacy for the Council.

Standing Committees: Policy, Finance...; and,

Development of Guiding Principles, Process and Procedures, and Internal Governing Polices.

c) The third Policy Council priority was to **further educate participants** by providing “field trips”, such as a two day trip to visit the New Mexico State University and Department of Agriculture to learn more about what is offered in the state and to further develop working relationships and partnerships.

Ongoing information about the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council will be provided on the State Food Policy Council website. For further information please contact Farm to Table and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council.

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08/03