



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Community Food Strategies: Food System Network Building in NC

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As I have written about before, I see local food organizing as a

powerful community building enterprise. Because everyone eats, local food efforts literally can have an impact on entire communities. And because local food organizing touches upon all aspects of community capital (social, environmental, financial, and so on), focusing community development energies on local food seems like an effective strategy to achieve at least some broader community development goals. Perhaps no state in the U.S. has a better infrastructure for local food organizing than North Carolina. In this brief post, I'd like to draw attention to the supportive infrastructure that is helping make NC a national leader in local food efforts.

There are many great organizations with expertise and on-the-ground capacity-building assistance when it comes to local food organizing. The Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) is part of the state's cooperative extension system, housed institutionally at NC State University. CEFS is "one of the nation's most important centers for research, extension, and education in sustainable agriculture and community-based food systems. It is recognized as a national and international leader in the local foods movement, and is celebrated for its work in building consensus around policies, programs and actions that facilitate a vibrant local food economy."

The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) is "a farmer-driven, membership-based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that helps people in the Carolinas grow and eat local, organic foods by advocating for fair farm and food policies, building the systems family farms need to thrive, and educating communities about local, organic agriculture." CFSA's mission is to "help people in the Carolinas grow and eat local, organic food by **advocating** for fair farm and food policies, **building** the systems that organic family farms need to thrive, and **educating** communities about local, organic farming."

Other organizations doing important capacity-building work around local food include the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), Carolina Common Enterprise, Feast Down East, and the relatively new statewide Local Food Council of North Carolina (LFCNC). There are other organizations doing great local food capacity building too. I mention these only to illustrate the rich network of organizations that are assisting communities in developing their local food



systems and also providing support for the over 30 local food councils already organized across the state.

Perhaps the most important manifestation of local food capacity building in NC though is the Community Food Strategies project. It is a “multi-organizational team of food systems experts” comprised of representatives from several of the above organizations, “that provides leadership and technical support to communities interested in food council development across North Carolina.” Community Food Strategies (CFS) brings together in one place a “diverse skill set that includes robust community engagement, strategic planning, organizational development, adult education, academic research, systems thinking, dynamic facilitation experience, and community food systems strategy.” Working collaboratively, the CFS team is providing important technical and facilitative support to burgeoning food councils/networks across the state and also are actively engaged in regional and statewide network building. They have been hosting regional gatherings of local food council representatives that focus on mutual learning, regional network building, and identification of regional issues and priorities. They also are actively working with the LFCNC to help connect what is happening locally/regionally with statewide initiatives.

The Community Food Strategies website is an incredible resource for people that are involved in community organizing around local food issues. There is excellent information on developing local food councils specifically and is just a great resource for information on the local food scene in North Carolina generally. There is also information about receiving technical assistance from the CFS team.

The local food movement is much more than a fad and much more than getting fresh arugula at your local farmer's market. It is bringing together various parts of the food system to work together to create more sustainable and resilient food systems, and by extension, more sustainable and resilient communities. Local food organizing is addressing food insecurity, farmland preservation, access to healthy food, economic development, and building social capital—all at the same time. It is all about community development! Community Food Strategies is an incredible resource providing support for this movement.