



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Local Food Policy Councils as Community Development Strategy

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Source: www.cmap.illinois.gov

One might say that the local foods movement or “locavorism” is all the rage. We’ve done several posts here on the CED Blog about local food systems as they relate to community economic development. I posted a while ago about the local foods movement as community economic development. Sybil Tate wrote a post about efforts in Cabarrus County to promote local food. And Maureen Berner discussed the new Western North Carolina Food Policy Council as a way to develop “synergy and connections” regionally around sustainable local food systems. This post explores local food policy councils in a bit more detail and points to resources on the topic. These forums for discussion and collaboration may be the single most important step that can be taken by local governments (or other sponsoring entities) to really make progress in developing a sustainable local (or regional) food system.

Locavorism describes the movement to develop sustainable local food systems. It is the idea that communities and regions become more self-sustaining in terms of food, with residents getting more and more of the food they consume from local sources. An article accompanying the 2013 “Locavore Index of States” reminds us of the “why?” of the locavore movement:

- Local food travels much less distance to market than typical fresh or processed grocery store foods, therefore using less fuel and generating fewer greenhouse gases.
- Because of the shorter distribution chains for local foods, less food is wasted in distribution, warehousing and merchandising.
- Local food is fresher and healthier, spending less time in transit from farm to plate, and therefore losing fewer nutrients and incurring less spoilage.
- Local food encourages diversification of local agriculture, which reduces the reliance on monoculture — single crops grown over a wide area to the detriment of soils.
- Local food encourages the consumption of organic foods and reduces reliance on artificial fertilizers and pesticides.
- Local foods build local economies by circulating food dollars locally and creating local jobs by supporting family farms and local food processing and distribution systems
- Local foods create more vibrant communities by connecting people with the farmers and food producers who bring them healthy local foods. As customers of CSAs and farmers markets have discovered, they are great places to meet and connect with friends as well as farmers!
- Local foods promote agritourism — farmers markets and opportunities to visit farms and local food producers help draw tourists to a region. (From www.strollingoftheheifers.com/locavore-index-2013)



As the graphic (above) accompanying this post demonstrates, the notion of a sustainable food system is very complex, with many interrelated parts. It involves producers, consumers, processors, distributors, and so on. And it involves more than just “slow food” enthusiasts with time and money to enjoy local culinary delights and small-scale, niche farmers. It also involves low-income people who are food insecure. It involves large institutions, such as schools, that distribute a lot of food on a daily basis. It involves businesses such as restaurants and grocery stores. And it certainly involves local governments who can provide greater access to land and other forms of food system infrastructure, and can also wield a great deal of influence through local policies and incentive structures.

Complex systems like local food economies are great examples of what John Bryson and Barbara Crosby describe as a “grand challenge” or issue where “no one is in charge.” Such situations require purposive efforts to coordinate work as well as develop boundary-crossing partnerships that enable the system to work in an integrated, strategic manner. The ideal of a strong, sustainable local food system that works for all is impossible to achieve without that kind of integrative, coordinating work that we call collaboration. And as we know, collaboration doesn’t just happen.

This is why the development of local food policy councils (LFPCs) is such an important innovation. In North Carolina just a couple of years ago, you could count the number of LFPCs on one hand. Now there are over a dozen, with many more counties looking to develop one soon. What is a LFPC? It is a volunteer group made up of representatives from the different parts of the local foods system. It is a forum where these disparate stakeholders can come together and look at the local food system more holistically. They can look at the forest and not just their individual tree or section of the forest, if you will. They recommend policies, develop projects, and develop priorities for their communities and regions. They also help create key linkages, for example, between producers and consumers. They identify gaps in the system and seek to bridge those gaps. LFPCs are a form of collaborative governance. They are boundary organizations that help facilitate boundary-crossing work in a community or region. For more details, see the report on Food Policy Councils published (online) by the American Planning Association.

The Center for Environmental Farmings Systems produced an excellent report titled “From Farm to Fork: A Guide to Building North Carolina’s Sustainable Local Food Economy” (2010). In it are many great recommendations for how North Carolina can, as the title states, build sustainable local food economies. What LFPCs—like the Western NC Food Policy Council—do is provide a forum for conversations around those strategies to happen. No one entity in a community or region can make those strategies happen; rather, concerted effort is needed and a LFPC is an ideal arrangement from which to conduct that concerted action.

The newly-formed Asheville-Buncombe Food Policy Council is notable in many respects. They organized around six clusters that engage different stakeholders around different parts action-areas such as access, land-use, and food security. Representatives from the different clusters (sub-groups) meet together as the LFPC and develop strategies and coordinate efforts. In their first year they have already developed a food action plan that establishes a vision and goals for the region that is a great example of the integrative potential of LFPCs. This new endeavor, as well as the examples of Cabarrus County and the Western NC Food Policy Council are good places to start in exploring what North Carolina communities are doing with respect to LFPCs. The Center for Environmental Farmings Systems (CEFS) is another terrific resource. This fall (September 2013) we (at the SOG) will be conducting a webinar on local food systems with our colleagues at CEFS. Local foods may be a hot topic but I don’t think it is a fad. Awareness about the importance of local food systems will continue to increase and communities that pay attention and make strategic investments in local foods (like sponsoring LFPCs) will reap the benefits in the near and long-term.