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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Why Local Governments Should be Thinking About Local Food Systems

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Last month I hosted a webinar here at the School of Government, in partnership with the

Center for Environmental Farming Systems (or CEFS for short), on the topic of local foods and local government. I was fortunate enough to have with me a who's who of local foods experts to talk about different aspects of the local foods movement as a way of introducing the topic to local government officials, and perhaps more importantly, serve as a springboard for local conversations between local officials and local food system stakeholders as to how local government can be a catalyst in growing and nurturing vibrant local/regional food systems.

The dream team of local food experts sharing their insights in the webinar consisted of:

- Nancy Creamer, Professor and Director of Center for Environmental Farming Systems, N.C. State University;
- Christy Shi, Program Coordinator Center for Environmental Farming Systems, N.C. State University;
- Alice Ammerman, Professor, Gillings School of Global Public Health Director, Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;
- Charlie Jackson, Executive Director, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project;
- John Day, Program Coordinator Center for Environmental Farming Systems, N.C. State University and former Cabarrus County Manager.

Christy Shi kicked off the presentation with an explanation of what a local food system is and how it involves producing, delivering, processing, marketing, purchasing, consuming, and disposing. When one considers the scope of the whole system it becomes clear that it is an issue that touches everyone in the community and has a far-reaching impact beyond simply consuming locally-produced food.

Alice Ammerman discussed the role of food and community health. Increasing access to local food can be a big part of a strategy to improve community well-being and Ammerman noted many opportunities for local governments to be a catalyst in this way by taking advantage of federal food programs and encouraging entrepreneurialism around local food. Nancy Creamer followed with a short discussion of the economic impacts of local food, noting the multiplier effect that one must take into account when money stays local (goes to local food producers), that then gets reinvested in the community. While local food is not a strategy for importing large numbers of jobs, it still has positive local economic impacts.

Charlie Jackson is one of the founding farmers of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (known as ASAP). ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. During the webinar Jackson discussed how cultivating strong and sustainable local food systems is a great example of asset-based community development. He provided examples of how communities can provide a supportive environment for local food entrepreneurs, leveraging the broader movement that is sweeping the



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country to achieve community development outcomes. He spoke about the important of building local and regional capacity for food system development. To get to where we need to be in terms of realizing the community development potential of local food, communities need to assess their situation, be smart, develop the assets they have, make the right fit for their situation, and be proactive, yet at the same time, patient.

After these excellent introductions to local food systems and their impacts on health, economic, and community development, I briefly discussed the idea of local governments acting as a “catalyst.” The definition of a catalyst (from chemistry) is a substance usually used in small amounts relative to reactants, that modifies and increases the rate of a reaction without being consumed in the process. I think that is an apt descriptor for what local governments can do with regards to cultivating vibrant local food systems in their communities and regions. The actions they can take can be relatively small, but can serve to build capacity and create the supportive environment necessary for local food entrepreneurs to flourish. These small actions can include providing a regulatory environment friendly to local producers, encouraging in various ways entrepreneurialism around local food, making local foods part of the community’s marketing strategy, and also acting in a convening role.

John Day provided a great example of a county government acting as a catalyst in his discussion of what has been done over the last few years in Cabarrus County. Some of that story was share in a previous blog post by Sybil Tate. What really stands out is that the county took a holistic or systemic view of local foods as a foundation for a resilient local economy. They convened and staffed a local foods policy council which is an excellent mechanism for boundary-crossing thinking and acting on this issue. The convening and organizing assistance of the county has resulted in specific initiatives like the creation of an incubator farm and a meat processing facility. Cabarrus County is an excellent example of how a local government can play a catalytic role in enhancing the local food system as a community development strategy.

The webinar was a good introduction to an important topic for local governments and community developers to consider. The webinar can be accessed on the School of Government website here and can serve as a nice conversation starter for a group of local or regional stakeholders including local government officials. A follow-up webinar on organizing local food policy councils will be presenting in the Spring of 2014. And several excellent questions that were asked during the webinar will become topics of future blog posts here on the CED blog.

The local foods movement is not a fad, but rather, a great example of assets-based community development that touches on all seven forms of community capital. Local governments and other community development agencies can and should look to local foods as a systems-based strategy for developing the community.