



Sustainability Update

Using Local Food to Sustain Communities

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Food. We all need it, but how many people look to it as a way to achieve goals outside of nutrition and alleviating hunger? Food systems that rely on fresh locally grown food can offer benefits including increased access to nutrition and farmland preservation. However, coupling this concept with economic development and planning goals will bring far more benefits to the community.

Through land use policies, economic development activities and farmland preservation efforts municipal governments can have a tremendous impact on retaining and enhancing local food systems. This article will discuss local food production; our next article will discuss supporting local food consumption in the form of such things as farm stands, farmers' markets and farm to school initiatives.

Important to sustainability, local food shrinks a municipality's carbon footprint by reducing the travel required to bring food to a community. Food systems account for 17 percent of national energy use.¹ Local food production can reduce this figure with its lower vehicle miles required for carrying food. However, it must be said that food miles contribute less to the required energy input than food choices regarding meat and dairy consumption, as well as cooking and food storage. For example, if every American went meat free for one meal a week it would be the equivalent of taking five million cars off the road.²

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It is an unfortunate phenomena that grocery stores are leaving urban areas for the suburbs where there is more land and, often, higher incomes. What this means is that many urban areas, particularly low income areas, do not have adequate food choices, including adequate access to fresh foods. In countless neighborhoods only convenience stores and small food stores are present. Where joined with low incomes and a lack of public transportation, this can result in food security concerns, defined as a lack of food availability and/or access to it. Local food production in these places can mitigate these food security concerns and fill a fresh food void.



Community Garden:
<http://paxarcana.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/community-garden-intro1.jpg>

A municipality can support local food production in a number of ways. Most obvious is supporting farmers in the community, but it is important to recognize that the place for food production is not only in the State's rural areas, but also the urban areas.

In rural areas where farms are large and are the predominant use of the property, municipalities should explore ways to support farmers by ensuring that agriculture can be practiced undisturbed and while minimizing impacts on residential neighbors. This can be done through enacting strong right-to-farm ordinances and requiring buffers to agricultural lands that reduce the impacts of farming, such as smell or noise, on neighboring lands. Supporting existing farmers is the first step toward supporting local food production.

Some places in this country are choosing to include food systems in comprehensive planning efforts. For example, the City of Madison, Wisconsin has included policies and objectives in the Natural and Agricultural Resources element of its 2006 Comprehensive Plan that address local food, such as protecting existing and establishing new community gardens, promoting the sale of foods grown within the County and creating a database of agricultural operations in the City. New Jersey municipalities, rural, suburban and urban, should consider incorporating local food production goals and objectives into master plan elements, such as the Goals and Objectives Plan, Land Use Plan, Community Facilities Plan and/or the Farmland Preservation Plan Elements.

All municipalities should consider permitting agriculture by right in all zoning districts. While it may not be appropriate for large farm animals, such as cows and pigs, to be kept on a modest sized neighborhood lot, fruit and vegetable gardens can easily be accommodated in a neighborhood with a few reasonable conditions. Municipal regulation of agriculture is generally geared toward larger farms on several acres or more where there are typically farm machines and/or significant concentrations of animals. However, it is time for municipalities to

consider the community benefits of local food production and supporting the growing movement of "urban homesteading", or victory gardens, where people take food production into their own hands and convert their lawns to fruit and vegetable gardens. This should include not only allowing agriculture by right (with reasonable conditions) but also allowing gardens in front and side yards. The potential benefits of this movement may include, aside from increased food production, reduced stormwater runoff, a more interesting landscape and fewer chemical inputs if people choose organic agriculture. Don't forget that this can include not only gardens at the ground level, but roof-top gardens too!



Vegetable Basket:
www.astraea.net/holonics/images/retreatimages/vegbasket.jpg

Municipalities can also establish or support a locally established community garden. A municipality that is doing great things for local food production is the City of Newark. This program is unique because it also achieves planning goals. The City of Newark has started the Super Neighborhood Community Covenant Initiative which is intended to "identify and plan priorities to address the needs and concerns of the community". One such Super Neighborhood, Weequahic Park, has partnered with a few private organizations to create urban farms on

city-owned vacant lots. The organization reclaims these vacant lots and develops organic farms on them. This organization eliminates the neighborhood blight from the vacant lots and adds value to all area lots through the community gardening initiative. Residents can purchase the fresh produce from farm stands.

Another New Jersey municipality that offers access to local food at a variety of scales is Lawrence Township, Mercer County. This initiative starts in the Mayor's office, where Pam Mount's family farms 200 acres in north Lawrence and runs Terhune Orchards, a well established farm market. In addition to hosting a number of farm markets, the Township also offers a community garden where for only \$20, a resident can farm a 20' x 20' plot. The farmer's are responsible for their plot but the Township provides some support services on site, such as water, and administers the program. It is so successful in Lawrence that this season, the 130 plots sold out in just two weeks.

With summer in full swing, now is the time to start thinking about how local food production can best be supported in your town and how it can be used to achieve other goals – such as converting vacant lots to community gardens or by bringing preserved farmland back into production with community gardens. Also, for those municipalities registered or considering registration with the Sustainable Jersey program, local food production initiatives can earn a municipality up to 30 points.

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¹ Pimentel, David and Giampietro, Mario. Food, Land, Population and the U.S. Economy. Accessed April 21, 2009 from <http://dieoff.org/page40.htm>

² Environmental Defense Fund. Fighting Global Warming with Food, Low-carbon Choices for Dinner. Accessed April 13, 2009 from www.edf.org/article.cfm?contentid=6604