WHAT ARE FOOD SYSTEM ISSUES?

The Pennsylvania countryside is dotted with picturesque farm buildings and fields. They’re so plentiful here that we hardly notice them—until we drive by and see a row of identical new houses standing in their place. Few of us realize the extent of this development and change, but more than four million acres of farmland have disappeared in Pennsylvania since the 1950s, in large part due to sprawl.

Also, despite the fact that U.S. supermarket shelves are well stocked, chronic hunger is on the rise in Pennsylvania. Food banks in southcentral Pennsylvania reflect a nationwide trend: they are having to reduce the size of portions to supply more families with food.

Both of these food system issues are concerns of local and county governments. Stronger community food systems can help to keep family farmers in business, ensure that all community members have equal access to quality food, create food sector jobs, and keep food dollars in the community. Engaging local governments in food system planning helps them take a comprehensive approach to ensuring a community’s quality of life.

This guide is based on a research project conducted to assess the involvement of county and municipal Pennsylvania planners in food system activities. These activities include farmland preservation, setting aside public land for community gardens, facilitating access to food outlets, siting supermarkets in underserved areas, and studying the impact of the food system on the local economy.

WORKING WITH PLANNERS

Planners are the people who help guide the development of a community. They work with other government agencies and local citizens to decide what land can be used for what purpose. They help decide where new roads will be built and what land will be used for housing, commercial interests, and open space. Planners are expected to take a comprehensive view of a community’s development. They are concerned with creating quality settlements in which people live and work.

Planners traditionally have not included the food system in their responsibilities. Yet planners should be concerned with food system issues because:

- Planners are responsible for planning for the future of a community, and the food system is an integral part of any community.
- Planners are concerned with other aspects of liveable environments such as housing, green space, and infrastructure, and therefore, also could address food system issues.
- Planners can facilitate change through the policy recommendations they make to elected officials.

MOBILIZING COMMUNITY EFFORTS TO MAKE CHANGES IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

The study on which this guide is based involved professional planners from nine counties in southeastern Pennsylvania and nine in the southwestern part of the state. In all, 33 planners were interviewed—16 were county planners and 17 were municipal planners (Abel, 2000).

The planners were asked to rate their agency’s overall involvement in food
Among the 33 planners, 70% rated their involvement as minimal, 18% as moderate, and 12% as significant. In addition, most (82%) of the planners said that citizen pressure would have a significant or moderate influence on increasing their agency’s involvement in food system issues. Planners are, therefore, receptive to requests and initiatives from citizens. Cooperative Extension is uniquely positioned to help citizens address the local food system through the planning process.

**FORMING CITIZEN COALITIONS**

Extension educators can help form and support citizen coalitions aimed at studying and strengthening the local food system. These coalitions can approach planners with requests to focus attention on specific community food issues such as improving the profitability of local farmers, assuring supermarket access for low-income populations, permitting neighborhood groups to use vacant lots for community gardens, or protecting a specific area of agricultural or forest land.

Specific activities that extension educators can undertake to help establish citizen coalitions include:

- Organizing forums to educate people about the local food system and establish networks among diverse individuals and groups
- Sharing information on the different organizational structures that a citizens’ coalition could adopt (nonprofit, government-affiliated organization, food policy council)
- Helping the coalition draft bylaws
- Advising community members on how to write a vision statement for their community’s food system
- Helping to write objectives for achieving that vision
- Providing information on how food system decisions are made, enforced, and changed
- Suggesting strategies to realize food system objectives
- Proposing methods to evaluate the work of the coalition
- Offering suggestions on disseminating the work of the coalition to the larger community
- Suggesting how best to approach planners and elected officials

Penn State Cooperative Extension in Allegheny County provides an example of how extension educators have helped to establish such citizen coalitions. The Allegheny County Cooperative Extension is a founding member of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food System Council (SPFSC).

One of the goals of the council is to facilitate food system planning in the region. The SPFSC organized a forum in 1999 to discuss the choices and challenges for preserving farmland in the region. Planners participated in this forum. The SPFSC also is working with the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) on an initiative to establish a regional year-round farmers’ market.

The model that the SPFSC used in organizing its community forum is a useful tool for groups that want to formulate a vision or action plan for their community food system. *Edible Connections: Changing the way we talk about food, farm, and community* (see Resources) is a model through which growers, food retailers, consumers, extension educators, the media, and other citizens can come together to explore how food connects them as consumers and professionals. This model also helps citizens identify and explore the most pressing food system issues in their communities.

One group in Philadelphia used the Edible Connections model to discuss ways to enhance food security in their neighborhoods; that is, assuring that all people have equal access to quality food. Another group used Edible Connections to teach children about how their food is grown and from where it comes.

**WORKING WITH YOUTH**

Several curricula contain activities to teach young people more about food system policies and planning. The Food, Land, and People (FLP) curriculum (see Resources), for example, includes the “Cows or Condos” activity, in which students use a problem-solving model to understand the complex issues around the urbanization of farmland. The students then get the chance to analyze similar situations.
in their communities and suggest possible solutions. A number of 4-H youth agents in Pennsylvania conduct training sessions at which the FLP curriculum is provided free of charge to participants.

In *Food Systems: Youth making a difference* (see Resources), students learn how to develop a vision for their food system and create a plan of action to change a policy. In *The Food System: Building youth awareness through involvement* (see Resources), students can learn about food production and processing, the global movement of food, access to food, the disposal of food products, and how to sustain the local food supply. They also can learn about the complexities of food system planning through activities like “Trade-offs: The land use puzzler.”

**TARGETING THE MEDIA**

Most people get their information about the food system through the media. Encouraging local newspapers and radio and television stations to report on food system issues is a good way to get these issues on a community’s agenda. In the study of Pennsylvania planners, respondents indicated that if food system issues were covered more extensively in the media, a planning agency would be more likely to consider such issues when planning for the future of a community.

*Edible Connections*, the food communications model discussed earlier, focuses on including the media in community forums. Media involvement can help publicize the issues that citizens feel to be of greatest concern to them as well as the activities planned to address those issues. In its forum, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food System Council’s inclusion of the media resulted in several newspaper articles and a radio interview with a farmland preservation activist. In Clearfield, PA, six articles were published about the forums and children’s programs organized there. At one forum, a reporter from the local paper gave a presentation about the importance of media coverage of food-related issues.

**RESOURCES**

This guide is one in a series of three publications on planning for the local food system. The other two are directed to planners and community organizations, respectively. For more information, refer to the resources listed below.


*Community Food Security Resource Kit.* (2000). USDA’s Community Food Security Initiative. Community Food Security contact: Elizabeth Tuckermanty, 2340 Waterfront Centre, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250; etuckermanty@reesusda.gov. This publication contains information about the many different government programs that support nutrition, economic and job security, food recovery and distribution, food production and marketing, food issues education and awareness, local infrastructure (e.g., community food projects), and research and monitoring.


*Fertile Ground: Planning for the Madison/Dane County food system.* (1997). Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Available for $10 from Dr. Jerry Kaufman, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 925 Bascom Mall/Old Music Hall, Madison, WI 53706.


The Food System: Building youth awareness through involvement. Alison Harmon, Rance Harmon, and Audrey Maretzki. Available for $15 from the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Publication Distribution Center, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802.


Seeds of Change. (1993). Linda Ashman, et al., UCLA Urban Planning Department. Available for $30 + $3 postage from the Community Food Security Coalition, P.O. Box 209, Venice, CA 90294; http://www.foodsecurity.org. Perhaps the most thorough documentation of an urban community’s food system, this publication includes sections on the supermarket industry, hunger, nutrition, urban agriculture, and farmers’ markets.

Written by Jennifer Abel and Joan Thomson

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