

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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Healthy Food, Happy People: Making Good Food Accessible and Affordable for Everybody:

Good food makes for good communities. In urban areas and rural towns around the country, local and regional food systems have become an increasingly important factor for the smart growth movement as communities plan for a healthy future where all residents have convenient access to nutritious and affordable food. Nationwide, more than 29 million people who live in low-income areas don't have a supermarket within a mile of their home, according to a 2012 USDA study. In California, more than one million residents don't have access to healthy food within a 20-minute drive from their home.

Neighborhoods with little or no access to healthy foods are known as "food deserts." Not surprisingly, a high percentage of food deserts are in low-income communities. Residents living in food deserts have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other chronic illnesses than people in neighborhoods where healthy food is readily accessible.

The USDA study also found that zip codes with low-income neighborhoods have 25% fewer chain supermarkets compared with middle-income zip codes. Communities of color are also more likely to have poor access to healthy food. Predominately African American zip codes have about half the number of chain supermarkets compared with predominantly white zip codes, and predominately Latino areas have only a third as many.

"Limited access to healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, is a major barrier to healthy eating. Low-income, underserved communities are at the highest risk for obesity because they often lack supermarkets, leaving convenience stores or fast-food chains as the main source of meals," the Local Government Commission's Cultivating Community Gardens free factsheet explains.

The problem isn't just an urban issue: 20% of rural counties are considered rural food deserts - counties where all residents live more than 10 miles from a supermarket (USDA, 2012).

Ensuring more equitable access to healthy food will require taking a deeper look at our local and regional food systems - all of the activities involved in the production, processing, transport and consumption of our food - and what actions help to develop or restrict its effectiveness.

Our communities and farmers in local food system development have identified some effective steps to solve these health challenges:

Local policies can facilitate urban food production in your community: Local governments can help support and advance the local food movement by reviewing and updating general plans and zoning codes with input from farmers and other stakeholders on what is - and isn't - working for local food producers. As a first step, some cities, such as San Francisco, are conducting citywide audits of vacant and underutilized land that could be used for farming purposes.

Just this month, Governor Brown signed new legislation allowing California cities to give tax breaks to landowners who lease their parcels to urban farmers for five years or more.

Cities can also support urban food production by passing ordinances that allow for front yard gardens and backyard chickens.

In 2007, the City of Sacramento adopted new front-yard landscaping code language that allows vegetable gardens in front yards, which enables homeowners to grow their own food in an edible landscape. In 2011, Sacramento added a backyard hen-keeping ordinance - motivated by the many environmental, economic and health benefits of "home-grown" eggs. A number of other communities from Petaluma to Los Angeles have similar ordinances that allow backyard chickens.

Local land-use decisions affect farmers and agriculture-related businesses: Local and regional governments can protect farmland and open space through land conservation plans. In 2008, the Kings County LAFCo reduced the amount of land that can be developed for homes and non-agricultural businesses within its "sphere of influence" by 18%. As a result, 11,000 acres of farmland was removed from urban growth consideration.

Ventura County and eight of its 10 cities have passed Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources (SOAR) ordinances that help achieve their shared regional goal of preventing development outside of certain designated areas. For the cities, these ordinances establish a "City Urban Restriction Boundary" (CURB) and require that development outside a municipality's CURB must be approved by the voters.

Collaboration between residents, businesses and public agencies can enhance food systems development, production and delivery: Collaborations and partnerships around food systems come in all shapes and sizes. Many cities and regions across the nation are forming food policy councils that bring diverse stakeholders to the table to ensure that challenges are addressed and successes recognized in the efforts to pro-

vide all residents with fresh, healthy, local food. These councils help build partnerships, analyze existing conditions of a community's or region's food system, strategize policy/program solutions for addressing gaps or other concerns in the food system, and educate the public about food-related issues.

In Tulare County, the Earlimart School District is improving their food system through a Wellness Committee that includes the superintendent and food services director, non-profit partners, teachers, and parent liaisons. The committee is identifying ways to better utilize District resources, such as joint use of school kitchens as teaching facilities, workforce development tools, and economic development engines. Earlimart - along with several neighboring school districts - is also part of a food cooperative that leverages purchasing power as an association to obtain lower prices on quality, local food. A new LGC fact sheet created with funding from The California Endowment has more details and is available here.

Some cities, such as Baltimore and Boston, have even established full-time food policy directors who oversee the implementation of all food-related policies and programs.

In Northern California, the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce is promoting the Farm-to-Fork initiative with leadership from Mayor Kevin Johnson to help strengthen the partnership between restaurants and farmers, and engage the whole community in celebrating healthy food and local farm-to-fork connections.

28,000 people attended the recent Farm-to-Fork festival in Sacramento, almost doubling organizers expectations!

Providing full-service grocery stores and healthy food retail in underserved communities: Many states are developing healthy food financing programs to provide lending and investment opportunities for grocery stores and healthy-food retail.

In California, one public-private loan fund - California FreshWorks Fund - has raised \$272 million to invest in grocery stores and other forms of healthy food retail and distribution that bring healthy foods to underserved communities. The California FreshWorks Fund provides a financing solution for grocery operators and others who are seeking capital to expand their fresh-food retail businesses in California neighborhoods.

The City of Baltimore has established the Bal-timarket, an online grocery store that serves low-income residents. Residents can place orders online and pick up their groceries weekly at a community site, such as their local library,

school or senior/disabled housing complex. The city's health department pays the delivery cost.

For cities just starting out on exploring what they can do around food system planning, take a look at The Roadmap for City Food Sector Innovation and Investment released earlier this year, which examines a partnership between San Francisco, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver funded through the Innovation Fund of the Urban Sustainability Directors Network. This strategy document offers cities guidance in developing local foods investment strategies that create jobs and strengthen local businesses while increasing access to healthy, local and sustainably grown foods. Specifically, it outlines how to define a local vision, map food assets and gaps, evaluate investment options, and develop policies that can help improve the success of local food businesses.

These kinds of efforts also have side effects for the economic health and well-being of the community. New grocery stores in low-income communities can serve as a cornerstone and gathering place in the community and spur economic revitalization by generating customer traffic to spur other businesses to open up in the same area.

A National Perspective: To learn more about what your community can do to strengthen its local and regional food systems, please join us at the 13th annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference in Denver, CO on February 13-15, 2014. In addition to 14 tours of local model projects and over 80 conference sessions that highlight innovative successes from across the country, a half-day workshop on Advancing Healthy, Equitable Food Systems proceeds the official kickoff of the conference.

This pre-conference workshop will explore local and regional food systems through the lens of smart growth, with an emphasis on improving the capability of local governments to engage in food system development through strategies that foster environmental and policy change.

"Representatives from community-based organizations, planners, local elected officials and businesses will share how they're forging partnerships and identifying resources to increase access to healthy, affordable food while creating economic opportunities and promoting responsible land use," said Kate Meis, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the national conference. "The workshop will not only inspire you through innovative models but offer practical guidance and resources to apply in your own community."