

Community Food Systems:

Strengthening Community Health & Economy

Urban planners have historically focused on air, water, shelter and food. In the 19th century, as cities expanded, light and air gained prominence in an effort to combat public health concerns and disease. In the early 20th century, the garden city movement addressed the role of food in relation to planning. This relationship was lost for decades, but now food is moving to the fore once again - regionally, nationally and globally. Public health and welfare concerns are evident when issues such as ‘food deserts’, healthy eating options and rising obesity rates are addressed by planning organizations. Communities seeking to transform their food systems to promote access to affordable and nutritious food for everyone can do so through planning tools (e.g. zoning and community planning) and grassroots initiatives.

What is a Community Food System?

A food system is the “chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution and access, consumption and waste management, as well as all the associated supporting and regulatory institutions and activities.”²¹ A community food system attaches the concept of a food system to a particular place or location. Components of a community food system can include farming and community gardening, local food processing and distribution to local grocery stores, restaurants and institutions. Nutrition programs such as school meals, food stamps and food banks can also be an integral part of a community food system.

A community food system doesn’t seek to replace the conventional food system. Instead, it seeks to capitalize on the particular strengths of the community and re-build a local infrastructure to support equitable and affordable distribution and access.



Courtesy of www.safarmersmarket.com

Defining ‘Local’

‘Local’ is a relative term that can be defined in terms of miles (‘The 100-mile Diet’), geographic region (Virginia Grown) or time (e.g. 2-hour drive). In Charlottesville, for example, the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) defines ‘local’ as a 50-mile radius around its service area and moving outward in concentric rings at 50-mile intervals. For its initiative to incorporate local food into the meals it serves, JABA seeks to utilize nearby local food producers before moving to producers located further away (Berger).



In addition to defining ‘local’, community food systems seek to increase understanding and appreciation for seasonal foods as well

as extending the seasons through storage and production of value-added products (such as applesauce from local apples).

Benefits of a Community Food System

Healthy food systems are linked to healthy communities and economies, healthy citizens and a healthy environment. Community food system initiatives generate farm business reforms and assist market development and the demand for local food can mean thousands more jobs in farming, marketing and distribution. The production and availability of local food is key to public health efforts to reduce obesity and diabetes. The availability of fresh fruits and vegetables is critical for health and nutrition of at-risk populations, such as youth, seniors, and food bank clients, who typically have less access to these foods. Furthermore, the availability of local food is fast becoming a metric for “quality of life” in communities nationwide. Food security and healthy lands and waters are inextricably linked because working landscapes are conserved landscapes.



Photo Courtesy of www.lanefood.org

Healthy Communities & Economies

Community food systems improve local food security because local food production increases continued availability of food when weather or other factors might keep non-local foods from reaching the marketplace. Stronger community links may be formed as citizens gain understanding of community food needs as well as the quantities and types of food and products that local farmers can supply.

A community food system creates jobs in many sectors including agriculture, transportation, distribution, value-added food production, marketing and retail. Local food growers typically supply a small percentage of food items in a local food system compared to industrial food producers. As such, a greater number of growers are needed for a community to achieve a measure of self-reliance. Also, local growers can offer more flexible response to specific needs of local consumers, restaurants and institutions when it’s more than crops.

Virginia Cooperative Extension identifies the Foundation & Benefits of a Community Food System

- Healthy, Vibrant Communities
- Rural & Urban Quality of Life
- Food & Value-Added Entrepreneurship
- Sustainable Farms & Landscapes
- Market & Distribution Infrastructure
- More Farm-to-Table Options
- Job Creation & Retention
- Asset-Based Economic & Social Development

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According to Virginia Cooperative Extension, if households in the five-county Thomas Jefferson Region spent \$10 per week of their total food budget on fresh, local food, over \$50 million would be generated annually for the regional economy (Benson). This type of economic sustainability is an important component in measuring the viability of a community food system.

Healthy Citizens

Proximity between farmers and consumers decreases storage and transportation needs, and increases availability of fresh and, therefore, tastier and healthier food.

Availability of local food is critical to addressing public health concerns such as rising obesity and diabetes rates, especially in children. Additionally, availability of fresh fruits and vegetable is important for the health and nutrition of at-risk groups like young children and senior citizens.

Healthy Environment

The role of transportation is debated in terms of its environmental impact (specifically its carbon footprint) in a local, versus industrial, food system. In a local food system, each food item travels less distance, but smaller quantities are moved at once, making more short trips necessary. In an industrial food system, economies of scale come into play, so when huge amounts of food are transported over greater distances, the average miles traveled per food item is reduced. However, on average, food travels 1500 miles from farm to fork, which some experts suggest is not a sustainable model over the long term (Pirog).

Community Food System Activities

Community food systems can include a variety of activities that support the local community in several ways. Initiatives such as CSAs, Farm-to-School programs and emergency food outlets target specific populations, whereas Farmers' Markets and Community Gardens can be accessed by the public generally. This variety of activities contributes to the overall health of a community by establishing or improving a community food system.

- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – Intended to reduce the farmers' risk by having consumers buy "shares" in the farm in exchange for a weekly delivery of food. There are 84 CSAs in Virginia registered on LocalHarvest.org, a national web based database of local food resources.
- Community Gardens – Shared gardening spaces in urban and suburban areas.
- Emergency Food Outlets – Local food distribution sites such as food banks and soup kitchens.
- Farm-to-School – Programs that connect schools with local farms in an effort to improve the meals served in school cafeterias, improve student nutrition and provide health and nutrition education.
- Farmers' Markets – A group of farmers sell their products once or twice a week at a designated public place like a park

Virginia Cooperative Extension found that over \$555 million would be generated annually in Virginia if households spent \$10 per week of their food budget on local food.

The local dollars generated, by region, would be (in millions):

Rappahannock-Rapidan Region - \$32.9

Thomas Jefferson Region - \$50.7

George Washington Region - \$57.2

Northern Virginia Region - \$414.5

or parking lot. Farmers' Markets provide opportunities to meet local farmers and purchase fresh, local food.

- Nutrition Education – Programs through school, cooperative extension or other institutions that promote healthy lifestyle choices such as increased physical activity and healthy food choices.
- Food Policy Councils (FPC) – These councils "convene citizens and government officials for the purpose of providing a comprehensive examination of a state or local food system. This unique, non-partisan form of civic engagement brings together a diverse array of food system stakeholders to develop food and agriculture policy recommendations" (State & Local Food Policy Councils). To date, Food Policy Councils (FPC) at various levels of development are found in over thirty states across the country. FPCs can be created through state or local governments or through grassroots efforts. In Virginia, the first food policy council working group was established in October 2005 on the Eastern Shore. In 2008, the Richmond Food Security Task Force was established. At the state level, a Food Security Summit in May 2007 led to the formation of a working group that led to the formation of the Virginia Food Systems Council in 2009.

Local Food Systems in Virginia

Communities across the Commonwealth concerned about their local economy, farmland preservation and the health of their residents are increasingly beginning initiatives to support community food systems.

The first "Buy Fresh Buy Local" guide in Virginia was initiated by the Piedmont Environmental Council in 2006 for the five county Thomas Jefferson Area Planning District. The guides are intended to connect consumers with local producers. There are currently seven active Buy Fresh, Buy Local chapters in Virginia: Charlottesville Area, Hampton Roads Area, Loudoun County, Northern Piedmont, Northern Shenandoah Valley, Richmond Area, and Shenandoah Valley. These guides provide lists



Courtesy of www.realcentralva.com

of farmers markets, grocers, CSAs, orchards, specialty foods and restaurants that produce or sell fresh, local food. Additionally, a list of reasons to buy local produce informs readers about the nutritional, environmental and social benefits of buying fresh, local food.

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Charlottesville. In Charlottesville, generally, demand exceeds supply of fresh, local food. While more information is needed to determine the precise drivers of why this is the case, it appears the area lacks an efficient distribution infrastructure. A second reason buyers may not be able to access local foods in the volumes they would like, appears to be a communication gap between farmers and buyers. Farmers must have a higher degree of predictability and regularity in demand and pricing to make optimal planting and harvesting decisions. These challenges, while significant, are not impossible to overcome.

The Local Food Hub, a non-profit organization in Central Virginia, was started in spring 2009 in an effort to help address these distribution challenges. Their mission is to “strengthen and secure the future of a healthy regional food supply by providing small, local farmers with concrete services that support and advance their economic vitality and

promote stewardship of the land” (*chofoodhub.blogspot.com*). The Local Food Hub distributes local products to restaurants, grocery stores, senior facilities, and schools. They also have an educational farm in Louisa County for hosting farm workshops for youth, community members, and local farmers. They work to make farming profitable and ensure all citizens have access to local, whole, healthy foods.

Blacksburg. As one of the state land-grant universities in Virginia, Virginia Tech works with Virginia Cooperative Extension to disseminate information about the benefits of local food as well as local food initiatives.

The Catawba Sustainability Center is a land-based enterprise center with a Landcare Incubator that works with individuals and businesses that care for the land. The Landcare Incubator develops skills through training, technical advice, certification and protocol support and access to assistance programs; all in a low risk environment. It also identifies current and emerging regional economic systems, and pursues opportunities to network and build partnerships that achieve economies of scale, enhance market opportunities and retain value with producers. Finally, the Landcare Incubator seeks support and opportunities to facilitate cooperative business partnerships; provide infrastructure for value-added processing; and create links, networks and hubs for producers and consumers.

Lynchburg. The local food system in Lynchburg is centered around a community garden called ‘Lynchburg Grows’ which provides work for the mentally challenged. The system also includes a community market, which is located at a parking ramp that has been enclosed due to popular demand of the market. The market is open for year round sales on Saturdays and Wednesdays, with local farmers offering local produce, meat and cheese. Space is also provided for local artisans to sell their wares. During the summer, outdoor stalls extend the numbers of local artisans and food suppliers that can participate in the market.

Harrisonburg. One of the many highlights of the local food system in Harrisonburg is ‘Our Community Place’, which was started by the collective owners of the The Little Grill. ‘Our Community Place’ is a community center and homeless shelter that grows its own food. Another highlight is the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction, which features fresh produce and local products from farmers throughout the Shenandoah Valley. Produce auctions are held weekly during the first part of the season (May through Mid-July) and twice weekly during the second half of the season (Mid-July through Mid-September).

Williamsburg. The Williamsburg Farmers Market was voted America’s Favorite Mid-Size Farmers Market in the 2009 American Farmland Trust Contest. The yearround market located in historic Merchant Square, features produce and craft vendors as well as regular cooking workshops, live music, and other educational exhibits.

Virginia Food System Council:

Collaborating to Strengthen Virginia’s Food System
from Farm to Table

The Virginia Food System Council was formally incorporated in 2009. The Council’s mission is “to advance a nutrient-rich and safe food system for Virginians at all income levels, with an emphasis on access to local food, successful linkages between food producers and consumers, and a healthy, viable future for Virginia’s farmers and farmland.”

“The Council is bringing together a broad range of parties from both private and public sector interested in food related issues that haven’t been at the same table before,” explains Katherine Smith of the Virginia Association of Biological Farming. “The Council will identify where the gaps and needs are and collaborate to bring all segments of the food system together in synergy.” There are currently twenty five organizations represented on the council including Virginia Cooperative Extension, farmers and producers, schools, and non-profit organizations.

Goals of the Virginia Food System Council:

1. To educate and communicate to the public, the food system stakeholders, and to key decision-makers, a sustainable food system’s impact on health, economic development, natural resources, and social well-being
2. To examine how food is produced, distributed, and consumed throughout Virginia’s localities and regions in order to expedite connections and identify barriers to improvement.
3. To make policy recommendations and implement strategies to improve the availability and accessibility of safe, nutrient-rich foods to Virginians in all areas.

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Resources

Virginia Food System Websites:

American Farmland Trust - www.farmland.org
 Buy Local Virginia - www.buylocalvirginia.org/bfbl/index.php
 Localcultural www.localcultural.com/content/view/333/153/
 Lynchburg Grows - www.lynchburggrows.org/
 Harrisonburg - www.buylocalshenvalley.org
 Eastern Shore - www.eslocalfoodproject.org
 Richmond - www.eslocalfoodproject.org
 Save Our Food (Virginia Farm Bureau) - www.saveourfood.org
 Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services -
www.vdacs.virginia.gov/news/buylocal.shtml

Food Policy Council Websites:

Chicago Food Policy Council www.chicagofoodpolicy.org/
 Connecticut Food Policy Council www.foodpc.state.ct.us/
 Iowa Food Policy Council www.iowafoodpolicy.org/
 North American Food Policy Council www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/
 Portland Food Policy Council www.portlandonline.com/OSD/index.cfm?c=42290
 State and Local Food Policy Councils www.statefoodpolicy.org/
 World Hunger Year (Food Security Learning Center) www.worldhungeryear.org

Community Food Systems Websites:

Discovering the Food System (Cornell University) foodsys.cce.cornell.edu/primer.html
 Food Routes www.foodroutes.org/
 Sustainable Table www.sustainabletable.org/issues/buylocal/
 Understanding your Local Food System (SLA Learning Center, Chicago) <http://www.cslearningcenter.org/what/faq>

Food Security and Food Policy Websites:

Community Food Security Coalition www.foodsecurity.org
 Farm and Food Policy Project - www.farmandfoodproject.org/
 The Food Project (MA) www.thefoodproject.org
 World Hunger Year (Food Security Learning Center) www.worldhungeryear.org

Books, Articles and Documents:

Cruze, Sidney. The path to locally sustainable food system. Indy Week.com. 20 June 2007. www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A155879
 Halweil, Brian. Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2004
 Kwok, Roberta. Is local food really miles better? Salon.com. 24 June 2008. www.salon.com/mwt/food/eat_drink/2008/06/24/food_miles/
 Local Food Systems in a Global Environment (UC Davis research project) www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/cdpp/foodsystems/
 Raja, Samina, Born, Branden and Russell, Jessica. A Planners Guide to Community and Regional Food Planning:

Three sections within the **2008 Farm Bill** contain provisions that affect local food systems:

Nutrition provisions include Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - food stamps), food distribution programs, fruit and vegetable promotional programs, farmers' market and community food promotion, community food security and emergency food grants, school meals and nutrition monitoring. The 2008 Farm Bill expanded eligibility for SNAP through increased benefits and adjustments for inflation; increased funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program; and created initiatives for community food security, promoting locally produced foods and healthy eating patterns.

Rural Development provisions include funding for planning, coordination and implementation of rural community and economic development programs. Overall, the 2008 Farm Bill emphasizes value-added agricultural activities, including renewable energy and locally and regionally produced agricultural products.

Horticulture and Organic Agriculture provisions include reauthorization of block grants for states to enhance specialty crop competitiveness, funding for farmers' markets and increased funding to help producers and handlers with organic certification costs. Specialty crops are defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, nursery crops, and flowers.

Transforming Food Environments, Facilitating Healthy Eating. APA Planning Advisory Service Report No. 554. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Rose, Nick, et. al. Go Local, Virginia. May 2006. www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/foods/348-127/348-127.html. Retrieved 10 December 2008.

Organizations:

Berger, Judy. Jefferson Area Board for Aging. Personal interview. August 2008
 Benson, Matt and Bendfeldt, Eric. Virginia Cooperative Extension. Total annual community food dollars directly generated & reinvested in Virginia area agriculture & local independent businesses because of a decision to buy local food & farm products. Undated report is based on 2000 U.S. Census data. www.ext.vt.edu
 Pirog, R. and Benjamin, A. "Checking the food odometer: Comparing food miles for local versus conventional produce sales to Iowa institutions". Leopold Center. 2003.

Footnotes:

1 Born, Brandon, et al. (2005) "Food Systems Planning White Paper." Prepared by American Planning Association Food System Planning Committee.