

SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS ROUNDTABLE

Developing Common Ground to Support Sustainable Local and Regional Food Systems
April 27-28, Washington, DC

EVENT SYNOPSIS

Building on heightened interest in systems and policies that promote sustainability, national organizations representing local and regional government stakeholders initiated a joint conversation on supporting local and regional food systems.

The American Planning Association (APA) and the CS Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University (MSU) convened staff and member representatives from 8 additional organizations for 1.5 days of roundtable discussion in Washington, DC in late April 2011. Participating organizations included:

American Planning Association
CS Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University
ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability
International City/County Management Association
Local Government Commission
National Association of Counties
National Association of Development Organizations
National Association of Regional Councils
National League of Cities
United States Conference of Mayors

This roundtable was intended to catalyze a collaborative process to influence food systems policy and practice at the local and regional government levels. There is a growing interest among local and regional government staff and elected/appointed officials in food systems and their impact on health and sustainability; however, limited involvement and coordination between these key policy stakeholders. In addition, while each of the invited organizations have engaged in research and developed resources around food systems for their members, these processes have generally run parallel to one another. Participants were highly motivated to learn more about each other's work.

PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

Mike Hamm, CS Mott Professor of Sustainable Agriculture at MSU, gave a brief presentation: "Framing the Food System: Why from Global to Regional?" which discussed issues of resource demand (food, water, land), economic conditions, and public health concerns. He described scenarios where increased support for local and regional food systems could yield economic benefits (i.e. job creation) in addition to improved public health behaviors (i.e. increased fruit and vegetable consumption).

Kimberley Hodgson, AICP, RD, Manager of APA's Planning and Community Health Research Center, presented the *Principles of a Healthy, Sustainable Food System*, a set of principles developed and endorsed by several public health organizations: the American Dietetic Association, American Nurses Association, American Public Health Association and APA. The aspirational principles define a shared vision for socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable food systems that promote the current and future health of individuals, communities and the natural and built environments. They cover characteristics of the food system including health promotion, sustainability, resiliency, diversity, fairness, economic balance and transparency. Ms. Hodgson described the process leading to the principles' development, including a convening that served as a model for this meeting, and invited participants' reactions to values presented.

Two planners attending as organizational member representatives, Alison Hastings of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (Philadelphia region) and Ann Simon of the Mid-Region Council of Governments (Albuquerque region), provided examples of their on-the-ground work in food systems assessment, organizing and development. Both regions have successfully engaged diverse bodies of stakeholders, motivated by disparate interests, in food system activities.

STRATEGIC THEMES IDENTIFIED

Much discussion centered on strategies local and regional governments could implement to strengthen one or more aspects of the food system, including example policy interventions, programs, projects and processes. Major themes of the proposed strategies include:

- Allowing for the production, processing and preparation of food in non-traditional settings (e.g. in urban areas, shared-use facilities, schools or mobile units);
- Increased awareness of environmental consequences of food-related energy use and waste;
- Expansion of economic development incentives to support agricultural workforce development and business ventures;
- Application of emerging technologies in identifying and addressing food system challenges (e.g. mapping food access, virtual aggregation/"food hubs", mobile farmers markets);
- Formation of strategic partnerships that leverage comparative strengths and build capacity (e.g. peer-to-peer mentoring of farmers, government synthesis/sharing of data with producers and NGOs, college/university agriculture training programs).

COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES

Organizations cited limitations on staff time and funding as challenges to ongoing collaboration, yet at the same time acknowledged that coordinated efforts leveraging unique organizational strengths make sense because of scarce resources. In that spirit, participants brainstormed potential opportunities to be pursued by one or more organizations following the initial convening, examples of which include:

- Outreach & communication: jointly develop a "reverse request for proposals" to strategically shape future investments in food system development;
- Training & education: convene inter-organization regional meetings around food systems planning and policy;
- Technical assistance & capacity building: coordinate peer-to-peer learning and technical assistance between organizations;
- Policy & research: develop inventory of best practices and policies supporting local and regional food systems, including applications of federal funds to food system development, as well as regulatory barriers encountered.

Following the DC event, an online collaboration site was established to immediately facilitate resource sharing and communication between organizations. Over the next several months, Kimberley Hodgson (APA) and Laura Goddeeris (MSU) will continue working with participants to develop and implement a pragmatic agenda for immediate and longer-term coordinated activities.

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