Growing Our Local Food System: Recommendations for Washtenaw County

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Nationwide, farmers have experienced a rising demand for locally grown foods. Consumers are beginning to realize what farmers have long known: eating farm-fresh food, carefully grown by members of their own communities, spreads tangible benefits for public health and local economies. Food fresh from the field travels fewer miles to reach dinner plates. Buying from local farmers builds food security, fosters social connections, and encourages genetically diverse, seasonal crop varieties.

LOCAL FOOD, LOCAL BENEFITS

Small farmers are more likely to employ low-impact and conservation-oriented agricultural practices than large industrial farms. Buying locally enhances vital links between urban and rural communities.

In addition, local food can also confer concrete public health benefits. Health researchers have demonstrated that getting involved with the act of growing food — by participating in a community garden, shopping at farm markets, or visiting nearby farms and gardens — can help reduce the risk for obesity and diabetes. Shorter supply chains also may help decrease the risk of foodborne pathogens (diseases).

MONEY MATTERS

Economists show that buying food from neighboring farms adds direct value to the local economy, promotes community job creation, and eliminates intermediate wholesale distributors. At the same time, small farmers face a host of economic challenges, including access to markets, loans, and start-up capital. Government subsidies may be available to industrial corn and soy farms, but not small fruit, vegetable, and livestock growers. Although small farms are very similar to small businesses, the entrepreneurial community offers few resources for agriculturalists.

LOCAL FOOD IN WASHTENAW COUNTY

The student team explored USDA farm census data to identify unique areas in Washtenaw County, and locations that fit the national and statewide trends. Washtenaw County has seen its share of these benefits and challenges. The county is home to more than 350,000 residents, many drawn to the region by the City of Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan’s main campus, and smaller towns like Ypsilanti, Chelsea, Dexter, and Saline.

Washtenaw County is also home to more than 1,200 active farms. According to 2012 USDA farm census data, about 80 percent of the county’s farms are classified as “small” (earning below $500,000 in annual sales). About 55 percent of the county’s farms occupy fewer than 50 acres, compared to the statewide average of 44 percent of farms that size.

Because so many of Washtenaw County’s farms are small, operators tend to earn lower net incomes and report greater annual losses than industrial-sized operations elsewhere in the state. Small farmers often seek the stability and consistency offered by forming partnerships with restaurants, grocery stores, or other wholesalers. But the retail market can be hard to break into, leaving small farmers to build their businesses through farmer’s markets and other direct-to-consumer avenues.
Fitting with broader national trends, Washtenaw’s average farmer is male, about 58 years old, and has two decades of agricultural experience. As these farmers begin to retire, a fresh crop of inexperienced agriculturalists will take their place, and face significant challenges. However, the county has about 35 percent more female-run farms, compared to the 14 percent in the state as a whole.

The Washtenaw Food Policy Council is addressing some of these challenges by forming effective partnerships between farmers and consumers. The Council formed in May 2012 with a mission to “increase and preserve access to safe, local and healthy food for all residents of Washtenaw County.” A team of Dow Sustainability Fellows partnered with the Council to investigate the status of Washtenaw County’s local food system and deliver recommendations for making the system healthier and more robust.

FARMERS AS ENTREPRENEURS

The study team conducted surveys and interviews to identify challenges facing newer farmers. They realized that small farmers essentially function like small business owners, but often lack the support and networks offered within the entrepreneurial community. Some common challenges for newer farmers include:

- **Access to resources**: Facing steep costs for land and equipment, farmers cite access to capital as a primary challenge. First-generation farmers also lack avenues for consistent, reliable sources of information and advice.

- **Limited training**: 75% of the study team’s respondents had no formal agricultural training. Farmers also struggle to make business decisions, such as moving toward more stable wholesale and direct-to-retail marketing.

- **Regulatory and wholesale barriers**: Farmers entering the wholesale market must juggle food safety requirements and certification programs designed to cater to larger-scale industrial farms. It’s hard for farmers to maintain meaningful relationships with restaurants and grocery stores whose buyers change frequently. Farmers must also keep track of different wholesale buyers’ scale and certification requirements.

- **Lack of consumer education**: In order to expand the base of consumers interested in local and organic foods, consumers must have a better understanding about limitations in crop availability, how to store and prepare unique Michigan crops, and why local food is worth the price premium.

BUILDING NETWORKS

Based on these challenges, the study team gave the Washtenaw County Food Policy Council three strategies for fostering connections among farmers, retailers, and consumers.

- **Farmer-to-farmer networks**: Simple email lists or more robust websites could help create trustworthy, useful information networks run by farmers, for farmers. The networks could help farmers share equipment, offer workshops, and promote marketing opportunities. An example can be found in the Vermont non-profit North Country Farming Network, established in 2005 to promote small-scale sustainable agriculture.

- **Farmer brain trust**: Similar to the farmer-to-farmer network, this directory would connect farmers to trusted people with specialized expertise in accounting, legal aid, grant writing, equipment maintenance, and other agricultural or business sectors. These experts could offer advice on a pro bono basis or could receive funding through grants or an annual participation fee from farmers. The network could also allow experts to host workshops and training programs.

- **Local foods liaison**: This person or team would bridge the gap between farmers and wholesalers, grocery stores, and distributors. The liaison could promote lesser-known crop varieties, keep buyers up-to-date on growing season and production volumes, and maintain working relationships with a variety of buyers.

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