

OUTCOME 6.5: LOCAL FOODS

WORKING GROUP WHITE PAPER

Overview

Outcome 6.5: By 2050, the region has a sustainable system of local agriculture that provides food to the region. The system includes means to promote and protect agricultural land use.

The Local Foods Coordinating Council (LFCC) merged with the Growing Food Connections (GFC) Steering Committee in early 2017. Growing Food Connections, a USDA and American Planning Association (APA) supported program, provided two-years (2015-2017) of technical assistance to the community, building our capacity in food security and food systems planning. LFCC has representation from a wide variety of stakeholders committed to strengthening the local and regional food system and promoting agricultural land use. LFCC members include nonprofits, higher educational institutions, hospitals, health departments, clinics, community residents, the business community, rural and urban farmers, local government, and elected officials.

Accomplishments in the last two years:

LFCC helped sponsor a Local Foods for Local Tables Symposium with the USDA in 2015, and a second Local Foods for Local Tables Conference with Nebraska Extension and USDA in 2017. At the second conference, we surveyed attendees about their needs and concerns for the local food system. Responses included: reducing barriers in zoning, access to land, and access to water; creation of a centralized, authoritative food hub; creation of a local foods marketing/public relations campaign; increasing education about local food and healthy eating; financing and business development training for local food entrepreneurs; increasing local food production capacity; and increasing local food procurement by institutions and corporations. The conferences help raise awareness within the larger community about local food, agriculture, and food security. Feedback from attendees told us that both events also provide valuable information sharing and networking opportunities for local food producers, purchasers, entrepreneurs, and others interested in the food system and agriculture. Overall response to the events was overwhelmingly positive, and we plan to continue holding the conferences on a biannual basis.

In January of this year, LFCC offered definition recommendations to the Nebraska Legislature's Agriculture Committee for consideration in support of LB 808 and AM1601.

After discussing the intent of the proposed legislation with its author, Betsy Goodman, and Senator Harr's staff, we submitted suggestions that might better serve municipal land use and zoning codes with language LFCC's policy work group had identified as best practices. The recommendations included language for community gardens, urban agriculture, market gardens, and urban farms.

On April 23, 2018, Susan Whitfield, LFCC co-chair and chair of the GFC Steering committee, presented a session on equitable and inclusive engagement at the APA's National Conference in New Orleans. The session included a representative from Lawrence, KS, also a GFC 'Community of Opportunity', and explored how the two communities engage marginalized community members in the food-systems planning process.

Current Work Goals and Challenges

Current Work Goals

LFCC's policy workgroup identified best practices in urban agricultural land use and zoning. The group completed recommendations to share with Omaha City Council and neighborhood leaders and will gather feedback in the coming months.

Recommendations include provisions for urban farms; on-site sales of produce; rooftop gardens; indoor agriculture such as aquaponics; composting; temporary and permanent structures, including hoop-houses and greenhouses.

The proposed changes would allow greater flexibility within current land use regulations by expanding the permitted uses within existing zoning districts, as opposed to creating entirely new zoning districts. The changes will increase opportunities for urban agriculture to occur within the city as well as support and align with current work by the Solid Waste Work Group and other food system activities occurring within the region.

Our Goal: Successful adoption of the proposed recommendations by the City of Omaha in 2019, and tracking changes in urban agriculture and local food production.

Long-range workgroup goals:

- Draft similar recommendations to present to other municipalities within the Omaha-Council Bluffs region for adoption.
- Draft recommendations for adoption at the state level.
- Identify related regulations impacting food production and the food system.

- Champion access to water, a major barrier to urban agriculture.
- Champion adoption of the Community Food Production Act.

For the past year, members of LFCC have been working closely with United Way and others in the community to create a Community Food Plan. United Way received a USDA grant to create the plan, and LFCC served as Work Group 2 under that effort, helping to develop the section on local food production and distribution. The plan is expected to be released in late November.

As a result of the collaborative work, United Way, Nebraska Extension, Live Well Omaha, and MAPA have all expressed an interest in forming a food hub. The hub will act as a central point for local food collaboration, communication, information and data sharing, and the 'voice' of local foods within the region.

Our Goal: Continue development of the hub and continue leading the work on food production, distribution, and sustainable agriculture. This aligns with the objectives of the Natural Resources Local Foods and Solid Waste workgroups within Heartland 2050, and the community's shared goals of creating food security, preserving natural resources, diverting food waste, and creating employment opportunities.

On December 6, 2018, LFCC will conduct a Strategic Doing workshop to form new workgroups to address goals previously identified by LFCC and the Community Food Plan. These include:

- **Farmland Preservation**
Inventory available land for food production and potential farmland preservation. Explore policy options for farmland preservation including Land Trust models such as Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) and the potential to develop a similar program in Nebraska.
- **Food Economic Development**
Identify and establish partnerships to increase small business development and financing opportunities for local food entrepreneurs.
- **Food Waste**
Form a joint workgroup with the Solid Waste Working Group to address food waste reduction, education, reuse, and zero waste opportunities in residential and commercial settings.
- **Sustainable Agriculture**
Explore regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, and other best practices to mitigate pressure on natural resources and increase the regional food system's capacity to adapt in a changing climate.

Challenges

Data gathering, data availability, developing measurements, and tracking results are needed. It is our hope that we can develop those capacities through collaboration in the food hub mentioned previously. This information would serve the needs of others working in food systems locally and nationally. LFCC's challenge is increasing our outreach to, and participation from, other counties. We have connected with some stakeholders in Iowa, but lag in regional participation and identifying more partners from rural areas. For many LFCC members and potential members, meeting during the growing season is difficult. Suggested ideas include using technology to hold virtual meetings, holding meetings in other locations or times, including evenings. We would also like to make connections with state legislative champions. We plan to explore these ideas further and welcome assistance, introductions, and suggestions for including and reaching more people interested in local foods.