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Experts: A Local, Sustainable Food System Is Worth Billions

Lake County and regional conservation leaders believe growing food here on small farms is good for the economy as well as the health of the people and land.

By [Claudia Lenart](#)

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Residents of Lake County and other suburbanites want local, sustainably grown food. Just one indicator of this trend is the growth in farmers markets — the number of farmers markets in Illinois tripled between 1999 and 2009, with most of the growth in the Chicago metropolitan area, according to *The Local Food System*, a brochure from the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Local Technical Assistance](#) program.

There is actually a \$10 billion unmet demand for locally-grown food in the state of Illinois, according to the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#). Meanwhile, \$46 billion (96 percent) of annual food expenditures are leaving the state of Illinois. Crops like asparagus and broccoli travel thousands of miles to our table.

"We can grow food right here and create a system instead of sending money to other countries and other states," said Bradley Leibov, executive director of the [Liberty Prairie Foundation](#), at a County Green session on Sustainable Agriculture May 17. [County Green](#) is an annual event held at the [College of Lake County](#).

Jason Navota, senior planner for the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), said Lake County has an opportunity to produce more food locally and to tap into the demand for sustainably-grown food. [CMAP](#) elevated local food to one of its 12 priorities in the [GO TO 2040](#) comprehensive regional plan.

While Lake County lost 18,000 acres of farmland to development between 1997 and 2007, the number of farms in Lake County has been on an upswing since 2001.

Today's farms are not the large tracts of monoculture of yesterday — soybeans and corn laden with chemicals. Today's farm is smaller, with a diverse mix of vegetables, grown in a more labor-intensive, yet sustainable, manner.

While today's farms are smaller, they are many times more profitable than conventional farms. A financial picture provided by Michael Sands of the [Liberty Prairie Foundation](#) showed that a Lake County corn and bean operation would yield an average return of just \$224 per acre. The average return for a 20-acre fresh produce operation would be \$7,000 to \$12,000 per acre.

Sustainable farming got a big boost in Lake County in the last decade thanks to the [Farm Business Development Center at Prairie Crossing in Grayslake](#), which gives new farmers the opportunity to lease land and gain organic farming experience.

Conservation leaders are poised to develop a sustainable food system in Lake County. [Conserve Lake](#)



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[County](#) (formerly Liberty Prairie Conservancy) — a countywide land trust and a leader in conservation — is working with the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) through its [Local Technical Assistance program](#) on the Lake County Sustainable Food Systems project.

[The Lake County Sustainable Food Systems Project](#) aims to explore countywide policy changes that support sustainable agriculture and bolster sustainable agriculture operations in the Liberty Prairie Reserve, making it a model sustainable food system for the county.

While the most visible aspects of a local food system are farms and farmers markets, there are many more elements. A sustainable, local food system is an economic network in which food production, processing, marketing, distribution, consumption and waste/resource recovery (composting) are tied to a geographic region, according to *The Local Food System*.

Leibov said 90 percent of consumers said they would buy local food if it was conveniently available.

“There is no doubt we’re experiencing a widespread reconnection to our food systems,” said Steve Barg, executive director of [Conserve Lake County](#). “What we are finding is that there is a broad-based interest in local food. There’s a triple bottom line; it benefits the economy with jobs, it benefits our health and it benefits our land.”