



MORE REGIONAL FOOD PRODUCTION
COULD CREATE
5,400 JOBS

What the Food System Needs Now Is More Infrastructure

By [Adrien Schless-Meier](#) on [December 11, 2012](#)

While the rejection of Prop 37 in California has been held by some as proof of the food movement's immaturity, a lack of rhetorical and ideological cohesion is not necessarily the food movement's biggest problem. Grassroots efforts across the country have successfully bolstered independent sections of the food system, from small farm incubators to mobile farm stands, but there's one piece that still remains glaringly absent: infrastructure. Without well-developed and well-financed networks and institutions to build upon, advocates for strong local and regional food systems find it difficult to connect from one end of the supply chain to the other.

That's where local governments can come in. Small business owners, farmers, distributors, restaurateurs, and eaters develop innovative strategies to strengthen their respective segments of the local food chain, and municipalities can support this process by creating links down the line and increasing opportunities for food system purveyors to work together.

The [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) (CMAP) has developed a [comprehensive regional plan](#) that includes [resources and tools](#) for local governments to support local food. Hot on the heels of the plan's adoption, CMAP is eager to [make the case](#) that a strong local food system benefits all residents in the seven-county area, particularly from an economic perspective. They are currently in the process of helping governments develop food system-friendly codes and ordinances in order to enable more momentum in the public sector.

CMAP's work with local governments extends well beyond changes to county code. In 2010, the agency received a \$4.25 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing

and Urban Development, which allowed CMAP to launch its [Local Technical Assistance](#) program. The program pairs government agencies with professional planners who help guide the implementation of the regional plan, free of charge.

Jason Navota, one of CMAP's principal planners, explains how the LTA program asks municipalities to consider, "What might stand in the way of a robust local food system?" From there, LTA program staff can help identify, then overcome, the unique roadblocks different areas face. For example, in [Lake County](#), planners first attempted to find regulatory barriers that might prevent food system innovation like urban agriculture or community gardening from taking root. Surprisingly, Navota notes, "regulations aren't much of a barrier," underscoring that significant difficulties arise elsewhere.

"The largest barrier is access to land—not just land in general, but land that has the right characteristics and infrastructure for local food operation," Navota emphasizes. Without running water, on-site electricity, and in some cases on-site housing, growers often run a slim chance of harvesting a reliable crop on private lands. In well-developed Lake County, Navota adds, "land prices are prohibitively high," a further roadblock to supporting urban food production. Confronted with this reality, CMAP's planners worked with Lake County to identify public lands with the potential for food production, a solution that could provide tenant farmers with the opportunity to grow produce without breaking the bank.

Partnerships like the one in Lake County aim to target the root issue underlying myriad problems in the food system, from access to markets to institutional purchasing practices. "The infrastructure system for getting [local food products] to those who want them is not strong enough," Navota stresses. Even with growing support for and interest in local foods, ideological commitment alone cannot pave the road from farm to plate. Because local governments have the capacity to support the development of food system infrastructure, such as food hubs, storage facilities, farm incubators, or farmers markets, through long-term planning and policy efforts, it's crucial that they get on board.

Perhaps one silver lining of the recession is that it might make some local governments more amenable to smart, innovative food system planning by forcing them to take a step back and evaluate their previous efforts. Local development means increased revenues, something that municipalities across the country are always vying for, particularly in tough economic times, and champions of local food have often underscored its potential to funnel resources back into local communities. "When you go to a county board and you talk to them about the billion dollars of potential that exist in our region if we just decided to grow our own food and use our own businesses to process, distribute, and sell that food," Navota explains, "you see their eyes light up."

He underscores that while counties and other local governments are starting to see the potential of investing in local food, the planning process demands and depends on long-range thinking that can be difficult to pitch. "I don't want to oversell the potential [of local food] to recover local government budgets, because the potential is fairly modest but it is very real." Given that land already exists in places like Lake County, and farmland in particular, "it's to [counties'] advantage to use it to generate additional economic activity."

As it continues to develop, the food movement is unlikely to suffer from a lack of a good ideas or persistent effort on the part of its supporters to develop grassroots solutions to community problems. What the movement needs now is connections, both between the many issues it seeks to encompass and between individuals and organizations placed at different points on the food chain. Developing a comprehensive, consistent infrastructure requires long-term, innovative planning from those who have the power and skills to implement it. As CMAP shows, that means lining up the authority and resources of local governments with the skills and expertise of planning experts so that the movement can come of age.