

FOOD SYSTEM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June, 2009



Photo of courtesy of the Angelic Organics Learning Center

The Food Systems report was developed by the **Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council** and **City of Chicago Department of Zoning and Planning** in collaboration with an advisory committee. The report is commissioned by The Chicago Community Trust to support the 2040 comprehensive regional planning effort led by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Food Systems

INTRODUCTION

The Chicago area has served as a focal point for the production, processing, trading, and consumption of food- as well as home to hundreds of communities with diverse food cultures supporting vibrant food markets and restaurants.

But population growth, climate change, development pressures, global trends, economic realities and concerns about the environment, equity, and food safety will all have an impact on Illinois' ability to continue to meet its own food needs and send farm products to the rest of the world.

The Chicago area should create a “sustainable” food system – one that meets the needs of people today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It should be sustainable economically, environmentally, socially and culturally.

To do this will require, among other things:

- Continuing and improving the existing commodity production and distribution systems while diversifying the overall system to include more local specialty crop and livestock production, including organics.
- Improving equity of access to food, especially fresh produce.
- Improving upon agricultural practices that rebuild the soil, sequester carbon, and protect our region's land and water resources.
- Creating new alliances to enhance protection of land and water and increase the profitability of all kinds of farms.
- Encouraging local institutions to purchase food from local producers and processors and build local economies
- Reintegrating food production, processing, and distribution as vital aspects of municipal economies
- Educating everyone from consumers to policymakers, about the issues involved.

The current domestic food system is part of a complex global supply chain. What people in the region eat comes from every continent except Antarctica, with chocolate from the Ivory Coast and apples from New Zealand. Conversely, sometimes raw ingredients raised and harvested near Chicago travel long distances to be processed elsewhere, only to return to Chicago to be eaten in a vastly different form.

As a result, global issues such as climate change, unstable prices and supply of oil, the limited amount of arable land, population growth, pollution, loss of biodiversity and changing markets all affect what the Chicago region consumes and produces.

The shift away from local food production to a global system has taken root slowly over the course of the past century, aided by government policies and technology investment designed to build economies of scale and efficiency in agriculture. Now, fewer farms produce greater amounts of food: while the number of farms declined from 6.8 million in 1935 to 2.10 million in 2005, U.S. farm output in 2006 was 152% above its level in 1948.

Illinois is an agricultural powerhouse, ranking sixth in the nation in the total value of agricultural products sold. But interesting, most of what Illinois grows doesn't directly feed humans, partly as a result of federal policies that subsidized high-volume crops like grains but not "specialty" crops like fruits and vegetables. Corn, soybeans and forage crops like alfalfa constitute the bulk of crops grown in the region. Only a tiny amount (0.007 percent) of cropland was harvested for vegetables in 2007. Of the 3,386 farms in the area, only 7% (or 244 farms) produced food directly for human consumption in 2002.

Countering the long-term trends of consolidation, specialization and mechanization has been the growing interest and investment in alternative methods of both farming and food distribution -- from "local food," organic farms and urban agriculture to food cooperatives, community supported agriculture and farmers' markets. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of farms growing produce directly for human consumption grew in all but one county in the region. For the first time in a long time, the number of small farmers increased in 2007, regionally, nationally and statewide, with more diversity of both crops and farmers. And the number of certified-organic farms in the region increased six-fold in recent years, from 7 to 45.

Many reasons propel these counter-trends, from concern about the carbon footprint from shipping food around the globe to worries about pesticides and other chemicals to a desire to feel more connected to the food we eat.

Among other trends that will affect the area's food system going forward:

- High-quality farmlands in and around the Chicago region are considered particularly threatened by suburban development pressures. Already, Cook County lost 80.6% of its harvested cropland between 1997 and 2007.
- The region's population will increase by 25% and its composition will change by 2040, with the number of whites falling from 57% to 40% as the number of Hispanics rises from 17% to 29%, and the number of school-age residents shrinking while the number of older residents (65-84) doubles. As the population changes, so will patterns of food consumption.
- Americans are consuming more of their calories from restaurants and carry-outs and more processed foods, sugars, fats, and meat, raising health concerns. But they are also consuming more fruits and vegetables and buying more organic products.
- Given the quality of Illinois soil, erosion is a serious issue; an estimated 1.5 bushels of soil are lost for every bushel of corn produced. However, Illinois' leadership in conservation tillage is producing results.

- Access to high-quality, nutritious, and affordable food is not equitable throughout the region. Many communities have no large groceries or supermarkets nearby.
- More than 61% of people in the region are overweight or obese, but not necessarily well nourished. Many suffer from diet-related disease likes diabetes and ailments related to an unbalanced diet lacking in fresh produce and whole grains.

VISION

In 2040, we will have a regional food system that nourishes our people and the land. The food system will:

- Achieve economic vitality by balancing profitability with diversification in all sectors;
- Preserve farmland and enhance water, air, and soil quality in closed loop systems;
- Contribute to social justice through equal access to affordable, nutritious food;
- Support vibrant local food cultures based on seasonality and availability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This vision can be achieved if the following recommendations are implemented:

INFRASTRUCTURE

1. Include food and food waste issues in local land use, infrastructure, and comprehensive plans.
2. Make programs and services available to assist diverse local food and food waste businesses.
3. Ensure that locally-, Illinois- and regionally-grown food is bought, marketed, and used by local institutions and businesses and associated food waste is eliminated and sustainably handled.
4. Have regional organizations identify regional food priorities for state and federal funding, using local plans.
5. Encourage regional trade and business organizations to provide programs and services for local food enterprises.
6. Develop, promote and enact state-wide incentives, funding, and regulations to support farmland preservation, sustainable agriculture, marketing and procuring Illinois-grown food, and a variety of food delivery and food waste systems.
7. Promote enactment of national policies that provide incentives, funding, and regulations that support farmland preservation, sustainable agriculture, marketing and procuring Illinois-grown food, and a variety of food delivery and food waste systems.

FOOD EDUCATION

8. Make “local food” education programs, events, and networks available for general and targeted audiences.
9. Promote healthy eating and fitness with local campaigns.
10. Make the benefits of “local food” evident to local government officials, planners, economists and other policy makers so they can prioritize this system in their respective fields.
11. Include food studies and activities at local academic institutions, at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels.
12. Make available local lifelong learning programs and activities on cooking skills, fitness, and nutrition.
13. Ensure that regional entities offer professional programs on regional food issues, collaborate and coordinate with regional entities from nearby states, and promote local and regional food.
14. Promote and enact statewide incentives, funding, and regulations that support local and regional food education priorities and programs that promote “local food.”
15. Promote federal incentives, funding, and regulations that support local, regional, and state food education priorities.

FOOD DATA & INDICATORS

16. Collect local information on how and where local produce is sold, distributed, and processed including alternative delivery systems.
17. Collect local information on land currently used for agriculture and land zoned for agricultural zones.
18. Collect local information on sustainable agricultural practices and food waste reduction and processing.
19. Empower regional agencies to develop uniform data collection tools, with input from local governments; to collect, standardize, and analyze local data; and then disseminate data to other local, regional, state, and federal organizations.
20. Enact statewide incentives, funding, and regulations to support collection, analysis and dissemination of state-level information to other local, regional, and state organizations.
21. Promote national incentives, funding, and regulations to support and respond to information collection and analysis issues and share information with other national and international organizations.

Food Systems

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