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MEMORANDUM

To: CMAP Board

Date: March 31, 2010

From: Amy Talbot, Associate Planner

Re: *GO TO 2040* Policy Briefing: Sustainable Local Food Systems

From fall 2009 to spring 2010, CMAP staff will brief the Board on key policy areas that are recommended to be among the priorities of *GO TO 2040*. At the April meeting, one of the key policy issues discussed will be **sustainable local food systems**. It is expected that the *GO TO 2040* plan will recommend strategies for a sustainable local food system and equitable access to healthy foods throughout our region.

Summary

Food – like air, water, and shelter – is a basic human need. We need the energy and nutrients provided by food to perform the most simple of functions like breathing, walking, and talking. However, all calories are not created equal. Several studies have documented that what we eat and the nutrients we ingest greatly impact overall personal health. In addition to meeting a basic need and affecting personal health, food and the act of eating have also become part of our culture and are seamlessly integrated into our everyday life. In fact, we often schedule our day around it. What time is dinner? Major holidays and social gatherings are often food-centric, and significant business sectors have been created with the sole purpose of cooking and distributing food. In the U.S., most of us have come to expect that food will always be available. Three times a day, we decide *what* to eat, often without consideration of *how* that food was produced or *where* it comes from. These everyday decisions have consequences whether or not we are aware of them, and they directly shape the food industry that feeds us. Today, there is growing concern about the environmental impacts, safety, and quality of our current food system, which is gaining much attention from policy makers and planners alike.

Likewise gaining widespread attention are the disparity in how residents access fresh, healthy, and affordable foods and the health implications such as obesity, diabetes, and general food insecurity that result from “food deserts” – communities that do not have stores with fresh, nutritious food. At first glance, how residents and institutions in our region get their food may

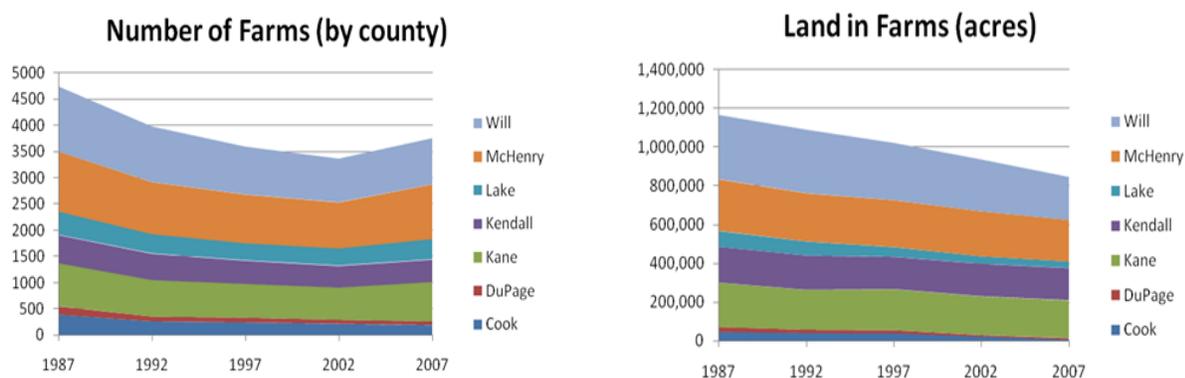
seem like an issue best left up to individual lifestyle choices and private business decisions. But food systems are already highly influenced by public policy, and they relate to many of the issues covered in *GO TO 2040* – most directly, food influences economy, environment, public health, equity, and overall quality of life.

This memo addresses two separate but related issues: (1) production of food in the region, and (2) people's ability to access affordable, fresh food. Issues of local production and access are not mutually exclusive, but are often addressed by different policy solutions. For example, people need access to fresh, affordable food no matter where it is produced. Some particularly effective policies, such as urban agriculture projects in communities that lack access to grocery stores, can address both food production and access. Recommendations in this memo address both sides of the local food issue, covering ways to support local food production, as well as ways to address access to food fresh, nutritious and affordable food. Within *GO TO 2040*, local foods are defined as products available for direct human consumption that are grown, processed, packaged and distributed within the CMAP region and adjacent regions.

Background: local food production

The region has served as a focal point for the production, processing, and export of food for many decades. Illinois ranks sixth in the nation in the total value of agricultural products sold. But most of what Illinois grows doesn't directly feed humans, partly as a result of federal policies that have subsidized high-volume crops like grains but not "specialty" crops like fruits and vegetables. Corn, soybeans, and forage crops like alfalfa are the bulk of crops grown in the region. Of the 3,748 farms in the region, only 7.5 percent (or 284 farms) produced food directly for human consumption in 2007.

The long-term trends of consolidation, specialization, and mechanization of agriculture are being countered by emerging interest and investment in alternative methods of farming and food distribution. The result has been an increase in organic farms, urban agriculture, food cooperatives, community supported agriculture, and farmers' markets. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of farms producing goods for human consumption increased from 243 to 284 across the region. Consistent with national trends, the number of small farms increased in 2007 (from 2002) regionally by 7 percent, with more diversity of both crops and farmers. This has occurred in a context of continued loss of agricultural land. Every county in the region has lost farmland over the past several decades, despite the efforts of many counties to preserve this important part of their heritage. The growing interest in local food could provide additional support for agricultural preservation efforts in the region.



Despite some promising trends, there are significant economic and policy impediments that keep the market for local food small. Differences in local regulations, past economic practices, historical farm subsidy programs, and infrastructure requirements all combine to limit growth in local food production and to drive up the price of locally produced food. CMAP does not anticipate that the region, even in conjunction with surrounding regions, will ever produce all of the food that it needs. The region will continue to participate in the global food system as some types of foods (for example, bananas) are impractical to produce in the Midwest. However, the production of food in the region can certainly be increased beyond its current levels.

Background: food access

Localizing food production is only one side of the story. Fresh, healthy food must also be accessible and affordable to all residents regardless of income. Many parts of the region are food deserts, meaning that these communities do not have stores that carry fresh, nutritious food or sufficient transportation options to reach food retailers. Most often, food deserts exist in low-income urbanized neighborhoods and in rural areas. Just over 11 percent of our region lives in a food desert that lacks access to fresh foods within a reasonable distance. Access to healthy food is linked to lowered risk for obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases.

Studies have also shown that strategies to increase accessibility to fresh food, combined with nutritional education, can provide enormous health benefits. Developing a local distribution network of foods -- including coordinating transportation around food retailers and encouraging alternative outlets for residents to purchase fresh foods -- should be a major policy direction for the region. Furthermore, every year nearly 700,000 people in the region rely on food banks and other anti-hunger programs for basic food needs, and hunger is an escalating problem. Programs and policies should link local food production programs with those that address food access issues, particularly for residents who live in hunger. For example, linking urban agriculture programs with food pantries could have multiple benefits, addressing workforce development, nutritional education, and hunger needs.

Importance of sustainable local food system planning

During CMAP's *GO TO 2040* "Invent the Future" public engagement campaign in 2009, issues surrounding local foods such as healthy food access and the environmental impacts of food choices were frequently discussed by residents. Beyond this, recent local food legislation and program development at both the national and state level reflect the public's interest in healthy and local foods. The 2008 Farm Bill includes \$1.3 billion dollars in new funding over a 10-year period for specialty crops (vegetables, fruits, etc.), as well as several programs that support local agriculture and expand the distribution of local, healthy food. At the state level, the 2009 Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act (Public Act 96-0579) set goals for purchase of local food by State and State-funded agencies, and the act also created the Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Council to address issues related to local food such as infrastructure, training and inter-agency coordination.

Other areas of the U.S. have already begun to address the importance of local food. In 2004, the Pennsylvania Food Financing Initiative began as a public, private and nonprofit collaboration with an initial state investment of \$30 million. The program leveraged \$190 million distributed through grants and loans to fund supermarket projects in underserved areas resulting in access to nutritious food for 400,000 people and creating or retaining 5,000 jobs. The proposed 2011 federal budget includes a \$400 million Food Financing Initiative, a program modeled after the Pennsylvania program that provides financing for local grocers. In cities such as Seattle, Detroit, Madison and Kansas City, local foods are supported by comprehensive plans and zoning regulations that permit various activities, such as urban gardens, composting, and removing barriers to operate farmer's markets.

Thriving local food systems provide many benefits:

- *Health:* More than 61 percent of people in the region are overweight or obese but not necessarily well-nourished. Numerous studies have documented the consequences of an inability to access high-quality produce, such as childhood obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-related diseases. Improving access to fresh food has been shown to promote healthy eating habits, especially if coupled with nutrition programs.
- *Food access and equity:* Access to high-quality, nutritious, and affordable food is not equitable throughout the region. Research has indicated that locating new grocery stores with fresh food in areas with existing low access results in increased consumption of fruits and vegetables by residents in the vicinity. This impact is especially strong for the lowest income families.
- *Economic:* Shifting a portion of our region's food dollars and resources to the production and purchase of local foods will strengthen our regional economy. Illinois residents spend \$48 billion dollars annually on food and the majority of our food is imported from outside our region and state. Purchasing locally grown food captures and retains those dollars for continued use within our region, supporting local businesses and local jobs.

Based on estimates for other regions, a 20-percent increase in current spending on local food production would generate approximately \$2.5 billion in economic activity.

- *Quality of life:* The growing demand for locally produced foods benefits community character, including the thriving culture that revolves around the production and consumption of local foods. A Saturday farmers' market is more than a retail outlet to buy food; it provides a social gathering spot for the community and allows people to meet the farmers that grow their food from throughout the region.
- *Agricultural and Land conservation:* High-quality farmlands in and around the region are threatened by development pressures. Local food production offers a viable use for preserving farmland. Additionally, the application of sustainable farming practices ensures that the land will maintain its high quality over time and provide stormwater management benefits as well.
- *Environment:* Typically, goods travel an average of 1,500 miles to their destination compared to locally produced goods that travel only an average of 56 miles. Reducing average food miles can decrease energy consumption associated with transportation, resulting in a decrease of greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants.
- *Hunger:* The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that, between 2005 and 2007, 9.5 percent of Illinois households experienced food insecurity (lack access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources). Hunger in our region is not due to a scarcity of food in the U.S. Instead, it is the result of a failure to adequately address poverty. Much of the time, hunger policy supports the distribution of food through a system of food banks and assistance programs that are hard to navigate, and there is relatively low participation in food assistance programs compared to demonstrated need. Furthermore, food banks depend on donated food without much regard for nutritional content and often lack an adequate supply of fresh food. These issues can be addressed by expanding the types of food retail outlets that accept benefits, such as farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and other grocery services. Furthermore, linking food banks and other food assistance programs (e.g., school lunch programs) with local farms can bolster production in the local food economy while assuring that all residents have ample access to nutritious food.

Direction for GO TO 2040

GO TO 2040 should support the continued development of sustainable local food systems in our region. The extent that existing regulations, price structures, and business practices limit the growth of local food production and distribution must be determined, so that modifications can be made to policies and practices to remove barriers. Once existing barriers have been removed and markets are allowed to function, the system should be self-sustaining. However, without policy intervention, the barriers to entry and expansion in the local food market will either delay or deny the expansion of these markets. The lack of access to grocery stores is evidence of

the difficulties faced by food distribution systems in the status quo. Action is necessary to solve such problems.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Link Federal Farm Programs to Local Food Production

Federal farm policies, such as through the Federal Farm Bill, should focus on creating the tools and resources necessary to promote viable local food systems. The federal government should provide the incentives necessary to assure that farming encourages resource conservation, minimizes the distance food travels and environmental degradation, and promotes techniques that assure food safety and the production of nutrition-rich healthy foods. Initiatives at the local level through university extensions and other agriculture workforce training programs should assure that local farmers are connected to available resources and that farmers get the education necessary to create viable economic models for local food production.

Recommendation #2: Inform Public Officials

Policy makers such as government officials, planners, and economists should be informed about the benefits of including a food component into local plans and planning decisions. In CMAP's role as a technical assistance provider, the agency could assist with the incorporation of local food into comprehensive plans. Incorporating local foods into comprehensive planning gives a municipality designated channels to guide and support local foods, whether through land use decisions, incorporating a farmer's market, or other appropriate avenues.

Recommendation #3: Data and Research

By better understanding food issues, CMAP can help promote awareness about food access by providing research and data. CMAP can also provide valuable best-practice research on new cost-effective models for food retailers in underserved communities and for alternative food delivery mechanisms.

Working across regions will also help CMAP to understand food infrastructure needs by analyzing production, transportation and distribution issues, and opportunities associated with creating a sustainable local food system. To make local food value chains more viable, identifying existing hubs and the potential for new hubs for distribution, storage, and purchase of local goods will be necessary to capture transportation efficiencies.

Through the Regional Indicators Project, CMAP should be the central repository for food systems data, and a variety of local food data should be collected, standardized, and analyzed to provide policy makers, farmers, businesses, and residents with the tools to make informed decisions.

Recommendation #4: Create a Regional Identity for Local Foods

The region should also support the development of an interregional local food identity. Branding local foods with a label and a message at grocery stores, restaurants, and other outlets will distinguish products in the marketplace and make it easier for consumers to buy locally.

Development of a local food shed program can be used as an economic development tool, as a public awareness campaign about the benefits of local foods, and as means to collect data through local participation.

Recommendation #5: Promote Land and Environmental Conservation Strategies

Communities and/or counties should create and expand farmland protection programs to retain current farmland. Programs could include incentives such as land easements and/or the purchase of development rights. Kane County has preserved 4,000 acres of farmland through their Farmland Protection Program, with numerous properties on a waiting list for future funding. McHenry and Kendall counties also have similar programs. Sustainable farming techniques can increase the quality of the soil, which is the base for growing local foods.

Encouraging innovations in local food practices will capture additional opportunities and efficiencies of available resources. Local governments should work toward simplifying and promoting the process of converting publicly-owned vacant or underutilized lots and rooftops into agricultural uses such as gardens or farms, which allow for small-scale local food efforts. Neighborhood-scale agriculture can provide high-quality open space, create a sense of community, provide local fresh food, capture value on otherwise underproductive land, and even provide job training on one site.

Recommendation #6: Link local food policies with anti-hunger strategies

Nutrition programs and services should be delivered collaboratively in a streamlined, seamless fashion, regardless of whether they are federal, state, municipal, or private in nature. Policy makers should develop strategies geared to linking nutrition assistance programs with local food production through school and other procurement processes such as afterschool, summer, and weekend nutrition sites. Furthermore, policy makers should support strategies that permit and encourage the use of public assistance (LINK benefits) at farmers' markets and other local food retail locations.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion and direction to staff.

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