



Agriculture Infrastructure Assessment

Growing the Local Food System

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Executive Summary

This report details the Non-thesis Professional Project of Kyle Merslich for the Masters of Bioregional Planning and Community Design program at the University of Idaho. Completion of the MS degree requires a professional project in which a client in the community is identified, a project beneficial to the community is developed and the graduate candidate completes said project.

This project was prepared for the Vice President of Economic Development at the University of Idaho Dr. Gene Merrell for the benefit of the regional community. A Regional Agriculture Infrastructure Assessment, this project identifies infrastructure associated with the regional food system (production of food to disposal of waste) in a 9 county region of North Central Idaho and South Eastern Washington. Analysis and collection of food systems data will develop a better understanding of the community food system and stands to benefit the region socially and economically through existing community food groups, students and faculty at the University of Idaho and Washington State University along with County and City officials and community members.

The project will examine and analyze the food system as it stands today. Mr. Merslich is also working with the community to develop a regional food coalition. A food coalition and/or council is a working group of stakeholders within the community that work to help grow the local food system, increase access to food within the community and work to represent and advance the community's best interest within the food system.

The completion of a Food Infrastructure Assessment will help to identify gaps and potential within the community food system. Engaging the community in addressing these gaps will provide assistance to new businesses, build community, increase the potential for import substitution, provide legitimacy for the food coalition and other community food groups as they engage the community.

The other benefits of this project which is funded by the University of Idaho Office of Economic Development is to act as a template for other communities throughout the state of Idaho as they work to engage community and grow the local food system. After speaking with University of Idaho extension faculty statewide, Mr. Merslich found that they (extension faculty) are in a similar

situation as the region around the University of Idaho; they lack information and analysis of their communities limiting the effectiveness of their impact. If they are able to replicate this effort in their communities, they will have more access to grants and funds and can better engage and work with their community.

This project can stand on its own and communicate to the community some of the gaps that exist in the food system. However without a Community Food Security Assessment it will not give a complete evaluation of the community food system. At a future date, this document will need to be combined with a completed Community Food Security Assessment to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the food system and the challenges that it may face.

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Growing the Local Food System

Introduction

Project Background

In late summer of 2012 I applied for and was hired as an AmeriCorps Community Food Systems Planning intern with the vice president of economic development Dr. Gene Merrell at the University of Idaho. Dr. Merrell and the University of Idaho see the growth in local food and small farms as a mechanism for economic development in both rural and urban settings across the state of Idaho. The work I was to undertake was a regional approach to food systems growth and development.



Radicchio

I was tasked with identifying community food groups, individuals, businesses and connecting them with existing projects that had the interest of numerous groups across the region so that groups working on similar projects could combine their efforts. I was also asked to identify sources of funding and facilitate a community based collaborative effort in building the regional food system.

If time, energy and capital are brought together in a collaborative effort regional food systems and economic development efforts have been successful in many other communities across the country. My job was to facilitate that process in this region.

Within the region, there are numerous groups involved in promoting the growth of the local food system. Local government, economic development councils along with Lewiston, Idaho based group Inland Northwest Food Hub (INFH) backed a food hub feasibility study for the region. In the Winter of 2012 the study's contracted consultant firm based out of Chicago, IL Manheim Solutions found that more data needed to be collected on the region, they recommended conducting a

community food assessment. They identified specifically a lack of understanding of the regional food systems infrastructure as a hurdle for growth in the sector.

Also, a previous study by University of Idaho Bioregional Planning Graduate student Kate Dolkas (Mankoff) identified the need for a comprehensive Community Food Assessment to better understand and inform the decision making process and direction in the growth of the regional food system over the course of the upcoming decade. Her research found that Community Food Assessments have an across the board positive impact on the growth and understanding of the food system.

Lastly, as a project manager of the survey portion of a Food Hub feasibility study in the Fall of 2012, attendee of countless community food meetings and interactions with extension faculty identified first hand a lack of understanding of the local food system, incomplete inventories of the local food system and a lack of cohesiveness between groups at both the universities (University of Idaho and Washington State University) and the surrounding communities. This all led to the need for a community food assessment and specifically an infrastructure assessment that could be used and referenced by the countless groups I have identified, students and faculty and others in the community.

Project Development

The community need for a food system assessment was apparent but this was not a project that I would be able to complete along with the other duties and responsibilities that I had during the 11 month AmeriCorps assignment period. It was clear that breaking the assessment into two parts (infrastructure and food security) would be the best approach moving forward. In discussion with Dr. Merrell we decided that an assessment of the food system's infrastructure would be the most efficient use of my time and most beneficial to the community as a whole at this point in time with numerous groups in the region engaged in food based economic development projects that were more closely associated with the infrastructure portion of the assessment.

Identifying data that would be collected for this project was based on research that I conducted in the Fall of 2012. This research consisted of



Mirepoix

reading countless community food assessments, interviewing communities that had already conducted assessments, examining United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), American Planning Association (APA) and university literature on the topic of food systems and infrastructure.

Some examples of this food infrastructure assessment deliverables will be:

- Evaluation of city and county zoning and comprehensive plans and their effects on the production and sale of food in their respective jurisdictions and analysis of continuity between jurisdictions.
- Develop an inventory of underutilized commercial kitchens in the region that can be used for small businesses looking for more capacity to grow their business.
- Inventory of points of sale, processing facilities, storage, food banks, distribution hubs for the development of an interactive map.
- Analysis of laws impacting processing, sale, production across state line.
- Evaluation of capitals and their impact on food production.
- Inventory of community groups, farmers, value added producers, community gardens, university programs, federal programs, farm to school programs and meals on wheels programs.

These are some of the components that will be included in the food system infrastructure assessment. The assessment will stand on its own as a single document but will easily be combined with a completed food security assessment at a future date. This will allow groups more concerned with economic development to move forward and will aid in the completion of a Food Security Assessment in the future via already collected data.

Project Objective

The University of Idaho Office of Research and Economic Development has a goal of supporting and promoting economic development throughout the state of



Garbanzo Beans

Idaho. As economic development is a collaborative effort, the office looks to include state agencies, local businesses, and the economic development communities throughout the state. This allows the university as the state of Idaho's land grant university to engage in service and outreach by "mobilizing resources, to advance innovation, help employers grow and prosper, revitalize communities, and create an educated workforce" according to their charter.

I was hired as an AmeriCorps intern under the University of Idaho Building Sustainable Communities Initiative as a Food Systems Planning Intern because the Office of Economic Development recognizes that the growth in local food across the state both in urban and rural areas can have wide reaching community and economic development impacts. My position gave me the opportunity to identify and work on projects within the regional food system that would be most impactful in the growth and development of the regional food system. While I have involved myself with numerous groups working in the food system, I have focused much of my time on the development of a regional food council that crosses state lines and spans 9 counties – the Palouse Clearwater Food Coalition.

A food coalition is a relatively new concept that communities began to embrace just over 30 years ago as a collaborative way to address issues within their food system. Whyhunger.org an organization fighting to battle food insecurity in cities across the country says of food policy councils that "as people lose access to land and the ability to grow or even shop for healthy food in their own neighborhoods, Food Coalitions (or Policy Councils) – either an official advisory body to local government or a grassroots advocacy network – have emerged as a means to insist that governments plan for food security as they do for other basic needs such as waste disposal and transportation."



Celeriac

Once a food coalition is formed, the first project that the organization typically undertakes is a Community Food Assessment. This is done for two reasons. First, it is important for a newly formed coalition to have done a proper assessment of the system it is trying to impact because it gives the group the legitimacy and data backed analysis of what gaps exist in the system and why. Secondly, and less importantly it is a first project that has major impact but is an achievable project for a new working group that may need to ease into a working relationship.

Within the regional food system, there are also a significant number of other groups working to improve the regional food system such as the League of Women Voters, university faculty and students, city and county planning departments, economic development organizations, and burgeoning small businesses. All of these groups along with the Palouse Clearwater Food Coalition stand to benefit from a Community Food Infrastructure Assessment.

Methods

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 3 regional Food Policy Councils across the Pacific Northwest. This was done primarily because I am involved in forming a regional policy council but also because a policy council typically has a larger reach into many sectors of the local food economy than local government and typically best understands the state of the local food system. Because it is customary for newly formed councils to preform a community assessment I felt it was important to find out how these assessments have impacted their communities and whether they had been worthwhile projects. I interviewed councils in 3 different regions, each in very different communities covering the spectrum of urban, suburban and exurban populations. This was done so I could understand the scope of how a community food assessment can impact communities across the food system I am working with.



Vintage Wine Tomatoes

In this process, interviewees were asked to give me a history of how and why the councils formed, projects and goals that had been developed and how the Community Food Assessments had impacted the community and the direction of the council. I was then free to ask questions throughout the interview about the various topics as they arose.

This was a very informative process. It was eye opening to see how a group whose primary goal was to address these problems that arose in the Community Food Assessment had in a relatively short amount of time positively impacted the communities in which they worked.



Green Zebra Tomatoes

Surveys

While food systems infrastructure is typically thought of as the physical infrastructure in the food system (processing facilities, supermarkets, etc.), law is also an important infrastructure component that is typically overlooked within the community food system. While State and Federal Law impact the production of food across a community, local planning ordinances, zoning and Comprehensive Plans have a more direct, place based, substantive impact on the needs of a community. In an effort to find out how local planning and zoning currently impact the production of food across the Palouse Clearwater Region. I surveyed the 12 planning departments in the 9 county region.

The survey asked planners about the interaction between food production, consumption and access to locally produced food. Questions focused on how clearly local ordinances allowed for production of food, raising of livestock, permitting of CSAs and Food Trucks and whether there had been any conflicts regarding local food that the planner had to deal with.

There were clear differences between cities and counties as the former don't address the production of food or the distribution (ex: CSA sales) as well as they could within city limits. Meanwhile, counties across the board do a better job of addressing food production but fail frequently to address specifics and as a result have potential for conflict in their zoning.



French Breakfast Radish

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted in an effort to better familiarize myself on the development of a Community Food Assessment and the resulting impacts on the community. Because there are no classes available at the University of Idaho that cover the subject material (local food and public policy) and as the topic is relatively new to the planning profession it was necessary for me as a student to better understand these community based connections the project would impact. I did this in a self-directed study in the Fall of 2012 under the supervision of my Major Professor Tammi Laninga PhD. I also in developing this project needed to familiarize myself with the most recent data and how the project contrasted with the focus of my degree and the training I received in the Bioregional Planning program at the University of Idaho.

Bioregionalism and Equitable Alternative Food Systems

The role of Bioregionalism is one that is not yet very common in food systems planning and the planning profession in general. But it provides a dynamic place based, systems approach to food systems planning that will better serve communities and facilitate the growth in local food. As a bioregional planning graduate student working in a very diverse region that spans 2 states, 9 counties and 12 planning jurisdictions it was clear that the standard jurisdictions based approach wasn't addressing the issue of local equitable food as well as bioregionalism would. In his book *Bioregional Planning: Resource Management Beyond the new Millennium* Brunkhorst says of the Bioregional approach "bioregions provide a pragmatic holistic management context based on both human culture and environmental attributes...(and) integrated planning policy development and implementation across traditional jurisdictional boundaries and narrowly focused programs". Robert Thayer in his book *Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice* addresses the importance of the local community based food system and its impact on the, health, well-being and quality of life in a bioregion. These authors reinforced the value of the bioregional approach to advancing the local food system.

Community Food Assessments

Community Food Assessments are being developed across the United States to advance the capacity of the food system at the community, regional and state levels. An assessment is a snapshot and analysis of the food system as it stands presently. It (Community Food Assessment) is a tool that is used to evaluate the current state of the food system and determine where and how resources and growth have the most potential to make a positive impact in the community.

This is a relatively new tool in the state of Idaho as no community or food shed in the state has preformed a formal Community Food Assessment. Many communities have looked at the state of hunger and food scarcity in their communities but have not taken the next step in doing a complete food assessment which impacts a greater number within the community and provides a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the community.

I reviewed countless Community Food Assessments to find out what



Japanese Eggplant

types of data were included and to what depth the assessment went in its analysis. I found a case study from the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies *Regional Food Systems Planning: A Case Study from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom* to be very informative and explain the great detail the impact that a Community Food Assessment can have on a food system specifically when the necessary stakeholders are involved and have 'signed on' in the process. The authors found specifically that "if done effectively, food systems planning processes can build a region's capacity and focus attention and resources on the critical leverage points in the system that yield the most desirable outcomes".

Finally I focused much of my research on the various methods used in completing a Community Food Assessment. The approaches varied across the board with some being more thorough than others. The Oregon Food Bank for example uses the Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together (FEAST) approach in many counties across the state. This model includes a lot of community involvement and unlike other templates focuses more so on food security and the development of a food systems strategic plan addressing the issues from the assessment. Meanwhile, the American Planning Association (APA) was a more comprehensive evaluation that included laws, rules and regulations in the assessment. The APA reinforces the need to understand and know how to change law that impacts the production of local food. Both templates had their strengths and weaknesses and I felt that a marriage of the two would be the best and most effective approach moving forward.



Pattypan Squash

Research Findings

Planner Surveys

Surveys were conducted with 7 planning departments in the region. The reason for surveying the planning department is that planning is an often forgotten component of food systems infrastructure that in reality can have a large impact on the production of and access to food. And identifying gaps, inconsistencies and shortcomings in local planning and zoning can help develop achievable action items for a policy council to advocate for tangible and effective change. The results and analysis of these surveys will be made available in the completed infrastructure assessment that will be presented to my client in July of 2013 and will subsequently be made available to the Palouse Clearwater Food Coalition.

The planners were asked 25 questions. They ranged from whether their ordinances allowed for certain types of agriculture (bee keeping, aquaculture, poultry, livestock, community gardens, etc.), whether CSA's could sell from their property, restrictions on hoop houses and if there had been any conflicts between local food and the community ordinances and comprehensive plan. In a region where agriculture reigns supreme and is the livelihood for a proportionally high level of residents, I was trying to find out whether local ordinances and plans reflected the goals and values of residents I had spoken with during my involvement in the community.

There are general differences in the results when looking at the role of planning in cities versus counties in the region. Cities across the board have a greater number of restrictions and conflicts currently in place that impact unnecessarily the production of and access to local food. This makes sense considering the consolidation of the food industry and the evolution and history of zoning practices in United States cities.

Of the two cities that were surveyed, Lewiston had considerably more gaps in local planning and ordinances. Their zoning code did not address raising fowl, beekeeping, aquaculture, on-site retail sales (farm stands), on-site food distribution (CSA), community gardens or farmers markets. Their comprehensive plan doesn't address in their land-use, economic development, community design or climate and environment sections the production of local food in any depth or at all in some cases.

The city of Moscow is currently undergoing an urban agriculture review of their ordinances. They realize that the city's zoning ordinances did little like Lewiston's to address the production of local food in the city limits. I believe they did not want to be represented based on their current ordinances but rather would like their upcoming amendments to speak for themselves.



Conservor Shallots

Meanwhile, the city of Pullman in Washington State addresses across the board the production of food in the city limits very well. All of Lewiston's shortcomings are addressed perfectly apart from aquaculture according to lead planner Pete Dickinson.

The situation in the counties also varied. It seems to be that there is a connection between resources (funding) and planning. Whitman, Latah and Nez Perce counties did a better job over all of

addressing local agriculture. But there were little things that could easily be addressed like Whitman county not addressing bee keeping. Nez Perce County as the seat of a potential new American Viticulture Area recently realized that they did not have ordinances that properly addressed the new wine industry that has begun to pop up around the county, the current restrictions didn't allow for wineries to operate in a manner that would make their profitable by allowing them to sell directly from their winery.

Clearwater County across the board did a poor job addressing agriculture within the county. While the other counties addressed the production of agriculture with considerable clarity, Clearwater wasn't able to do the same. They in their responses recognized that there were some key connections that needed to be made between food production and planning in their community and asked for any help that could be offered to better serve the community.

This makes perfect sense that in a rural county of 8,000 people like Clearwater there would be a lack of resources for the planning department and that problems would not arise as often as might in an urban setting.



Yellow and Red Belgian Endive

While this is true, this does not mean that the county should not strive to better address these potential problems before they arise; especially if there is community support for these relatively uncontroversial efforts.

Commercial Kitchens

While an inventory of underutilized commercial kitchens is only a small component of the overall infrastructure assessment, it exemplifies the importance of underutilized infrastructure as a development opportunity for small businesses.

I contacted the 5 health departments for their lists of all inspected kitchens in the 9 county region. Because the kitchens are inspected by the health department, they meet the health code requirements for producers of value added products enabling them to increase production and sell to the community. They are key pieces of infrastructure that can be used without great capital investment to help a small business get off the ground.

I identified over 40 businesses (primarily restaurants) that either close by 1 PM daily or are closed 2 or more days per week in the region. This allows a producers access to industrial grade equipment

that a home kitchen wouldn't otherwise be able to provide. Renting these facilities also provides restaurant owners access to rental money that will help keep their costs down and keep these valuable rural restaurants in business. Access to these facilities is also very important in the state of Idaho because the state unlike Washington doesn't have a cottage industry act allowing producers to produce value added products in their home kitchens.

This is one small example of the importance of identifying underutilized infrastructure in communities for the development of a local food system and associated small businesses.

Food Policy Councils

I interviewed three regional food policy councils across the Northwest. While some had a more urban constituency and others were more rural, the important component was that they represented a rural and urban mix, something that is incredibly important to a food system. This regional approach to food systems planning/development along with the proximity to the Palouse Clearwater region were the two most important factors in my decision to interview.

These interviews were conducted to find out how the completion of a community food assessment had impacted the council's work, preconceptions about the region and projects in their community. What was most interesting, was that across the board whether in migrant farm communities of Eastern Washington or in urban Seattle the community food assessments that each group did gave them legitimacy, allowed them to better educate the community, improve their service in the community and gave them more access to grant money.



Romanesco

Next Steps

This project is still incomplete. I will be working for my client at the University of Idaho Office of Economic Development until July 31st 2013.

This is the first step of many in developing a movement in the region. Similar to many other local food movements across the county, the first step is gaining access to the data and analysis that will allow the community to address its gaps and grow the local food system. This collaborative effort stands to benefit a diverse group of people across the local food system. Local food is still a small

upstart movement across the region and the only direction to from here is up. I hope this project will empower community members to have a greater impact on where their food comes from, how it is grown, what role they play in their community food system and ultimately enrich their quality of life.

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