



LOCAL FOOD ACTION PLAN

CITY OF COLUMBUS & FRANKLIN COUNTY, OHIO

Current Conditions and Vision Report

Summary

October 2015

Based on Working Committee feedback and Project Team review, the following is a summary of key findings of the draft Current Conditions and Vision Report.

Overview of the Local Food System in Franklin County and the City of Columbus

Efforts in local food system planning are partially compromised by unclear or varying definitions of terms including “local”, “consumer”, “processor”, “distributor”, “producer” and “farm”. The plan must strive to communicate operational definitions for these and other terms.

Of particular concern is the term “consumer” which implies an economic transaction. Individuals access food in a variety of ways including free food distributions, supplemental food resources and purchasing products. The term “consumer” may not adequately communicate the diversity of people who have provided input and who will be impacted by the plan.

Equity and the impact of a living wage on food prices for all sectors of the food system should be considered as the current reality is potentially one of non-intersecting goals in “local”, “health” and “hunger”.

Local Food Action Plan Vision Statement Development

DRAFT VISION STATEMENT

“The Columbus-Franklin County Local Food Action Plan envisions a food system that benefits our community, our economy and our environment in ways that are equitable and sustainable.”

Based on Working Committee feedback, the draft vision statement may need to clarify “community”, “equitable” and “food system”. “Community” does not necessarily indicate “people” or “residents” while “food system” may not be understandable to laymen. Possible alternatives to “equitable” include “fair” or “just”.

Other considerations for the vision statement include highlighting the aspect of “health” and the unique collaboration between a city health department and a county planning agency.

Finally, aspects of the community, economy and environment may not intersect so the Project Team must consider if these terms should remain in the vision statement or be reframed.

Current Conditions – Consumer Sector

There is demand for locally produced food, especially fruits and vegetables, and although most local food is purchased at farmers markets, supermarkets are the preferred point of purchase. Currently, the accessibility of food, in terms of physical proximity to food sources, as well as the affordability of food, varies greatly across the socio-economic spectrum.

Strategies to improve food access and measures of success will vary widely but must effectively consider all levels of food security including very low, low and marginally food secure individuals and families. Due to the need and desire for local healthy food, ongoing community conversations, in the form of food action committees, can define benchmarks for success in individual communities and neighborhoods.

Current Conditions - Producer Sector

Agriculture Census and economic data, in addition to surveys and stakeholder interviews, indicate an aging farmer population, decreasing farm numbers, unstable wages, lack of succession plans and a lack of diversity in farming.

- Between 2007 and 2012, the number of farms decreased while the value of total sales increased.
- Majority of farm operations and acreage in Central Ohio is located outside of Franklin County.
- The majority of farm operators are male and white with an average age of 57 years.
- Market value of fruits, vegetables, tree nuts and berries was \$687,000 as compared to a market value of \$26.4 million for grains, oilseeds, dry beans and dry peas.

The USDA definition of a farm and related statistics may not adequately reflect the current production capacity and diversity that non-traditional producers such as urban agriculture productions, social enterprise efforts and community gardens bring to the local food system.

Regulations, required certifications, competitive pricing, supermarket internal systems and uncertainty of purchasing serve to disconnect producers from commercial buyers and distributors and diminish opportunity for diverse crop production and farm operations. Survey results indicate that the majority of producers sell directly to consumers and prefer this as their primary method.

Commercial buyer perception of consumer preferences (e.g. the notion that consumers want uniformity in size and shape, and we are not demanding values in food productions) limits access to markets for local producers.

To increase production capacity and crop diversity, producers and distributors report a need for low-interest capital, subsidies and other type of support such as land trusts, incentives and training.

Stakeholder and Working Committee feedback, in addition to producer surveys, demonstrate producer interest in developing a locally-based marketing brand.

The value and availability of land in Franklin County and the City of Columbus is reported as a barrier to expanded agricultural production.

The rural-urban connection within the City of Columbus and Franklin County and between Franklin County and the surrounding counties should be more fully explored to understand the capacity for food production and crop diversity in our local food system.

Current Conditions - Processor/Distributor Sector

Central Ohio is rich in logistical expertise but it remains underutilized in connecting sectors of the local food system. Local processors do not often operate at a large enough scale to work with existing distributors, who in turn work with non-local producers to meet their business needs.

Regulations, availability of a trained workforce, access to capital for infrastructure and a disconnect from local producers all inhibit local processors from scaling up to meet the demands of local distributors and commercial buyers.

Similarly, distributors are unable to consistently meet the availability, price, quality, processing (e.g. peeled, diced, etc.) and certifications required by commercial buyers through local producers.

Processors report a need for business models and technical assistance to scale up and ultimately to facilitate development of sustainable, revenue generating operations and businesses.

Infrastructure is essential to facilitate the development and expansion of local processors.

- Cold storage facilities are needed to keep meat processors operating at full capacity.
- Specialized commercial kitchen space such as canning lines and high pressure pasteurization are needed to facilitate expansion for produce processing.

Disparate regulations and unclear responsibilities for enforcement related to food processing and distribution deter new business and expansion of existing processors and distributors into new markets.

Finally, the current conditions of processors needs to be further evaluated based upon the type of business they operate. For example, needs and opportunities of a meat processor will vary significantly from those of a fruit and vegetable processor.

Current Conditions - Commercial Buyers Sector

Existing market mechanisms (aggregation, processing, distribution) are insufficient to ensure the consistent availability, price, quality, and processing (e.g. peeled, diced, etc.) of local produce that commercial buyers require.

Working Committee feedback, stakeholder interviews and survey responses report that offering customers “local” options is important. The majority of commercial buyers responding to survey questions define local as food produced in Ohio. Stakeholder interviews and working committee feedback indicate that producers typically describe local on a smaller, regional scale rather than statewide.

The needs and capacity of commercial buyers to purchase local food needs to be further evaluated based upon the type of business they operate (e.g. the purchasing needs of small local restaurant will vary greatly from those of a school foodservice system serving 50,000+ students).

Current Conditions – Food-Related Waste Recovery and Diversion

Survey results and stakeholder interviews demonstrate a general willingness within each sector to participate in some type of food waste reduction practice.

Food waste consists of both edible wasted food and inedible food that ends up in the landfill. Specific strategies designed to reduce both types of food waste must be addressed.

Food donation is the primary method for preventing waste of edible food reported by stakeholders and survey respondents, but perceived liability and regulatory limits may be inhibiting more food donations. Community Plates offers a viable local option for food donation at no cost and liability.

Composting and animal feed are the primary methods reported for diverting inedible food waste from landfills.

Franklin County and the surrounding counties lack the infrastructure and services for large scale and centralized food waste diversion.