Local Food System Develops Resiliency in Charlottesville

Institutions across the City of Charlottesville and surrounding Albemarle County, including the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA), the University of Virginia (UVa), public schools, hospitals and restaurants are working to source a higher proportion of their food needs locally.

These organisations recognise that they can serve an important, catalytic role in moving the region toward a sustainable, resilient food system, thereby strengthening the local and regional economy, and enhancing the health of their respective constituencies, whether students or senior citizens. Their motivations are the same ones driving the national local food movement: fuel price increases and volatility; threat of food supply interruption when relying on sources that are hundreds or thousands of miles away; health concerns regarding industrialised farm output containing pesticides and preservatives; and desire for better-tasting, more nutritious food. Building a viable infrastructure of farm supply and efficient distribution to meet the growing demand for local products also contributes to preserving local farms and job creation. The Piedmont Environmental Council as well as local philanthropic organisations have provided vision, leadership and resources to generate the growing awareness of the benefits of buying food locally.

UVa students and faculty have conducted numerous studies on local food systems, while simultaneously incorporating local food sourcing into their operations. These initiatives and projects have gradually moved the institution in the direction of greater local self-sufficiency. Much of the progressive food agenda has been driven by active student organisations focused on sustainability. Accomplishments include the adoption of a Dining Services Policy favouring the sourcing of local foods from distributors, with a small allowable percentage of increase in cost. Local harvest theme meals have been enormously popular. UVa’s Fine Arts Café sources much of its food from local farmers. Students have organised several farmers’ markets in the plaza outside the student centre. Students and faculty in the Architecture School’s Planning department host a 100-mile Thanksgiving dinner each fall, highlighting dishes with local ingredients, including turkeys from Polyface farm. There has also been much interest in, and work done to minimise food waste.

Another important project at the university has been the development of a vegetable garden. A group of students organised, designed and actively pushed for the creation of the on-Grounds garden. After protracted discussions and a search for a site, the garden opened in spring, 2009. The food grown will likely make its way to local food banks, and may be featured in UVa dining halls.

Food and food production topics have been incorporated into the curriculum in significant ways. A community food systems class is taught in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning each year, and student projects help to stimulate local food initiatives. For example, a community food group was formed called “EAT Local”. Much community discussion and re-thinking of the local food system has occurred in response to the students’ work. A recent course focused on developing benchmarks for evaluating progress in moving the region toward local food sourcing. Local food has become an important subject in other Planning classes, including a Sustainable Communities course. Students helped develop an “Edible Charlottesville” map, a beginning tabulation of the existing and potential food growing sites in the city. UVa Architecture faculty is increasingly interested in local food systems as well. In Spring, 2009, several studio classes centred on designing for food production.

Increasingly we understand local and regional food production, processing and distribution to be an essential form of community infrastructure, and important elements in any healthy community. Food is now seen as a key dimension in place-making, the strengthening of bonds between residents and the landscapes that sustain them. Local food production is also about deepening roots, and enabling food heritage to connect different generations in a community. Research on the challenges and opportunities of local food sourcing lends itself to multi-disciplinary collaboration. UVa’s Darden School of Business and an Architecture School team worked together on the Jefferson Area Board for Aging Community Food System Project, whose research was funded by the UVa Institute on Aging and JABA.

JABA operates residential facilities and meal provision services for senior members of the Charlottesville community. It serves 3500 meals a week to its clients, and may see that number triple by 2010. Sixty per cent of JABA’s “food” clients have incomes below US$15,000/year. JABA sought innovative ideas to help meet its goal of providing fresh, nutritious meals that improve the health and quality of life not only of its clients, but also of the larger community. The student researchers analysed JABA’s local food procurement patterns and processes and made recommendations for expanding local food purchasing by implementing new
procurement strategies and working more closely with local farmers.

The students examined local supply and demand dynamics for vegetables and fruit, and studied best practices from other U.S. communities active in local food access for seniors. The researchers also mapped out the existing local “foodshed” in the Charlottesville area, including retailers, farmers’ markets and restaurants. They interviewed farmers to determine what pricing, scheduling, and resources would be necessary for them to increase supply to local institutions such as hospitals, senior care centres, schools and restaurants. The research also looked at the benefits of local food freezing and processing, and explored extensions to the growing season through greenhouses. Key findings of the report were that reducing price variability through better management of demand, creating additional distribution infrastructure to get foods from the farm to the table, and advance contracting with farmers are all necessary to build a more robust local food system for JABA and other area institutions. Important financial dimensions were highlighted, such as payment practices, as most institutions pay in 30 days, whereas local farmers need to be paid within two weeks.

The research has not only contributed to JABA’s efforts on behalf of its clientele, but has also focused greater attention on the benefits of local food for community members of all ages. It has encouraged activity that is designed to build a stronger local food production and distribution network for the Charlottesville area. The project has served as a platform for developing a farmers’ market food distribution process for those living in public housing, which includes gleaning surplus product, using food stamps at the market, and creating a local currency to enable low-income persons of all ages to purchase the vegetables and fruit.

Great opportunities exist for local food businesses to create innovative distribution networks and customer relationships. Since completion of the JABA research study, two Charlottesville entrepreneurs have founded the Local Food Hub, a non-profit organisation designed to support local food producers. They will offer large-volume wholesale purchasing, delivery and consolidation of product, as well as liability insurance. This will simplify the purchasing process for buyers and sellers, and address some of the issues identified in the study.

This year the Darden School of Business also hosted the inaugural meeting of the Virginia Food System Council, a group of over twenty representatives from different parts of Virginia’s food system, including production, distribution and consumption. Darden itself is increasing the amount of local food it purchases, supporting its goal to be a zero waste, carbon neutral enterprise by 2020. The School will continue to make available research opportunities for students interested in food entrepreneurship and local food systems.

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