

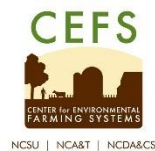
Harvesting Regional Potential: Research and Recommendations for a Regional Food Council in the Piedmont Triad Community

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Executive Summary

A food policy council (FPC) consists of a group of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system. There are generally five accepted sectors of the food system that include production, consumption, processing, and distribution and waste recycling. Food Policy Councils seek to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems. They do so through the development of local economic development and helping to guide local food systems onto a more environmentally sustainable and socially just avenue. As a result, the work of food policy councils consists of food system research and the development of policy recommendations. Research indicates that insufficient economic development capacity is often more prevalent in rural and small communities and that often, the more rural the area, the wider capacity gap in terms of financial resources, expertise, and professionalism.

Many regions have been successful in creating regional food policy councils; Burlington Food Council, Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council, the Chicago Food System Collaborative and Sacramento Region Food System collaborative are all exemplary examples of regional food policy councils that develop integrated policy and recommendations that promote health, sustain and strengthen the local and regional food system, and engage and partner with agriculture, business, communities and governments in their region. The case studies listed above have all been prosperous in breaking down the potential challenges and sustainability concerns when creating a regional food policy council such as:

- Logistical challenges and regional identification
- Dependence on one strong personality, organization or political figure
- Lack of funding and staffing
- “Single-issue” focus

Based upon the academic research, case studies, and interviews we conducted we make the following recommendations for the successful creation of a regional food policy council.

- Engage members across different sectors of the food system and from different backgrounds and draw from a diverse but organized base
 - Establish priorities and agree on some kind of a strategic plan from the outset. If possible, utilize comprehensive assessment tool to better understand nature of assets and challenges
 - Establish clear structures for decision-making, communication and evaluation from the beginning
 - Define the goals of the food policy council at a regional level
 - Clearly define organizational structure, outlining roles and responsibilities
 - Establishing clear metrics for evaluation

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Introduction

The Great Recession highlighted both the resiliency of the American people and the sectors that are most vulnerable to economic downturns. The financial crisis brought urgency to concerns over rising hunger, limited food access, increases in public health costs, unemployment and underemployment and the need for innovative approaches to community and economic development. Taking into account the globalization of food systems and the market for goods, activist and local officials are developing food policy councils to address the effects all of these factors have had on farming and food systems.

In this report, we seek to answer some of the basic questions surrounding the justification and the primary roles of a regional food council in the Piedmont Triad region: What is a regional food policy council? What would its role be? How do local food representatives and existing councils feel about its development? What are the potential benefits and challenges of a regional food policy council? What are the potential social, economic, and environmental outcomes for the Piedmont Triad region?

Through this research, we have found that most food councils are developed as a result of a community food assessment. Though we do not believe this report to be fully comparable to such an assessment, we believe - and have strived to present the case from the initiating perspective - that the realization of such an in-depth assessment in our region would indicate the true depth and justification for a regional food council for the Piedmont Triad food system.

The economic benefits of a local food economy extend into the greater community on a much larger scale than imported food sources. In an effort to bolster economic impacts throughout the region's food system, a regional food council has the potential to offer



research and recommendations that impact farms and community businesses through revenue and employment.

To assess this potential a group of four UNCG Masters of Public Affairs (MPA) students have prepared this report for the Piedmont Triad Regional Council (PTRC) and The Center for

Environmental Farming Systems (CFEFS) regarding the potential development of a regional food council for the Piedmont Triad region This report, entitled "Harvesting Regional

Potential: Research and Recommendations for a Regional Food Council in the Piedmont Triad Community” consists of a literature review on food systems, rural capacities, and sustainable agricultural practices, paired with a variety of case studies from around the country on similar regional and statewide food council initiatives.

Following a series of interviews with several city and county level food councils in the Piedmont area, this project hopes to provide a series of best-practice and policy recommendations for the potential development of a sustainable regional food council facilitated through the Piedmont Together initiative

This report will provide an overview and justification for what food councils are and the actions they take. Supporting our arguments is an extensive literature review which focuses on developing rural capacities and networks, asset-based development practices, food systems and food sustainability. Our research and recommendations have also taken into account trends in the areas of agriculture, food insecurity and hunger, mounting health concerns, urban farming trends, and food policy.

Combining that information with information gathered from multiple interviews with regional stakeholders and existing local food councils, we provide an overview of some common first steps for the development of the regional food council, potential opportunities and challenges, and possible limitations as defined through the interview process. The report then addresses a sustainable development approach for the regional food council in the hopes of providing the first step on the pathway to developing the Piedmont Triad regional food council.

The Need for Comprehensive Action

Kenneth Dahlberg wrote that a comprehensive food policy should include:

“...production issues (farmland preservation, farmers markets, household & community gardens), to processing issues (local vs external), to distribution issues (transportation, warehousing) to access issues (inner-city grocery stores, co-ops, school breakfast & lunches, food stamps, the WIC program, etc.), to issues (food safety and handling, restaurants, street vendors), to food recycling (gleaning, food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens) to waste stream issues (composting, garbage fed to pigs, etc.)”
(Harper 2009).

Underserved rural, inner-city, communities of color and immigrants have long suffered our food system’s failures and have been disproportionately affected by a diet-related disease

and hunger (Winne 2009). Food deserts are predominately found to affect African American and Hispanic communities. Consequently, as the food system concentrates profits in “fewer and fewer hands, its negative effects fall to the most economically marginalized communities in the country” (Harper 2009).

From a community and economic development standpoint, we have compiled this report in an effort to support the work of the Piedmont Triad Regional Council Economic Development Initiative called Piedmont Together as well as the Center for Environmental Farming Systems. Our report hopes to provide the justification for the formation of a regional food council as a continuation of the goals and recommendations of the region-wide Piedmont Together Economic Development Plan.

Food Policy Council Defined

A food policy council (FPC) consists of a group of representatives and stakeholders from many sectors of the food system. There are generally five accepted sectors of the food system that include production, consumption, processing, and distribution and waste recycling - it is recommended that a representative from all five sectors be represented on the food policy council. However, food policy councils should also welcome representatives such as anti-hunger and food justice advocates, educators, non-profit organizations, concerned citizens, government officials, farmers, grocers, chefs, workers, food processors and food distributors. Food Policy Councils foster an environment for discussion and strategy development among these various interests and create an arena for studying the food system as a whole (Harper 2009).

Food Policy Councils seek to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems. They do so through the development of local economic development and helping to guide local food systems onto a more environmentally sustainable and socially just avenue. As a result, the work of food policy councils consists of food system research and the development of policy recommendations. Food policy includes any policy on the federal, state, regional, and local level that may have an effect on the interests of the actors involved in the food value chain (Harper 2009). The most overarching food policy is the Farm Bill which is renewed every five years by Congress. State and local governments also make a contribution to food policy by deciding the sources of food for schools, prisons, hospitals, and government institutions; zoning and land use development; and investments in transportation and infrastructure that can either support or hinder the distribution systems of a local food system. Increasingly food policy is becoming multidisciplinary by addressing social, political, economic and environmental factors - which is the cause for an innovative approach to recommending and formulating food policies.



Literature Review

Nationally, there has been an increase in awareness on the origin of food, its impact on health and impact on the environment including pollution, deforestation, energy demands and greenhouse emissions associated with industrial food production. The rise in health concerns like obesity and the financial and environmental costs of producing and transporting food has led cities to reconsider local policies that maintain affordable, accessible and healthy food opportunities. Thus, the demand for local and fresh produce is on the rise and municipal governments are implementing policies and programs to allow residents to grow, sell, buy and eat locally produced and sustainable foods.

The definition of local food is complex, varying with purpose, geography, and data availability (Martinez et al., 2010). For some consumers, “localness” may not be based on distance, but rather on local ownership of the farm (Adams and Adams, 2011). For others, local food is associated with natural, organic, and other specialty foods marketed through DTC outlets, grocers and restaurants, and foodservice providers in institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals (USDA 2015).



“Local and regional food systems” refers to place-specific clusters of agricultural producers of all kinds—farmers, ranchers, fishers—along with consumers and institutions engaged in producing, processing, distributing, and selling foods” (USDA 2015). A food

system is the path that food travels from the field it's grown, to the fork used to eat it. No matter its size, a food system encompasses five sectors: "how and where food is grown, the processing of food, the distribution of food, food consumption, and what happens to the waste created by the other four processes" (Burgan 2012). Food systems can be assessed from the global level all the way down to the household level. In order to promote healthy food access, improve the health of citizens, the environment, and the local economy in the food system, comprehensive plans for sustainable food systems can be used.

Sustainable food system models are not 'one-size-fit-all'; so what works for one state or region, may not be successful in another.



However, many states have been successful in

implementing comprehensive or integrated sustainability plans for food systems that have mutually benefited public health, the local economy, and the environment. "Through a combination of community gardens, urban agriculture, farmers' markets and affordable, accessible grocery stores, cities and towns are finding innovative solutions" (Kiser 2011, 1). Sustainable food systems promote access to healthy food, help minimize the environmental impact of food production and distribution, preserve biodiversity and help educate and involve the community in process of local food production. Although there are various dimensions of a sustainable food system, including the environmental, social and economic dimension, they are all aimed to improve the lifestyles of citizens. However, there is a need for capacity in the community to drive these plans.

As defined in *The Forgotten Regional Organizations: Creating Capacity for Economic Development*, capacity can be a collection of resources or a measure of organizational potential; but it can also be defined as the ability to anticipate and influence change, to make intelligent policy decisions, to develop and implement programs and to attract and absorb resources, or to evaluate current activities and plan for the future. "Staffing and spending factors, leadership and vision, management and planning, fiscal planning and practice and operational support, as well as the ability to attract resources and to absorb and manage grant funds all represent facets of capacity" (Hall, 111).

Research indicates that insufficient economic development capacity is often more prevalent in rural and small communities and that often, the more rural the area, the wider capacity gap in terms of financial resources, expertise, and professionalism. The author notes that small to medium sized cities often lack critical resources to allocate to sophisticated problem analysis or strategic planning activities (Hall, 111) “Nowhere is the issue of insufficient development capacity more prevalent than in rural and other small communities. These “newcomers to American federalism” usually lack the political will and skill of larger governments and are less well-off according to the usual standards of organizational and managerial capacity, and seldom possess the skill to implement the kinds of development projects demanded in the larger economic environment (McGuire, 426).

Another noteworthy finding from this study addresses the community’s proximity to an urban area or designation as an economic corridor. Communities located in a growth corridor possess, on average, fewer community capacity measures than non-corridor communities. Likewise, the closer the community fell in location to an urban center, the lower the level of community capacity. The research indicates that the corridor communities “whose growth prospects are dependent on the nearby metropolitan areas, may require a strategic development process that is focused on the region as well as the locality.” The authors add that “short-term economic survival, issues of scale and development opportunities for corridor communities are very different from those of other communities” (McGuire, 426).

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a strategy for sustainable community-driven development. Many Regional Food Policy Councils implement asset-based community development to begin the creation of a regional policies and programs such as farmers markets. ABCD builds on assets that are already found in the community and mobilizes individuals, community partners, and institutions to come together and build on their assets rather than focusing on the needs of the community. ABCD highlights the successes within a community’s history and capitalizes on them. This type of community-driven development approach focuses on empowering and engaging residents of the community to participate in the development of a community action plan. ABCD focuses on community engagement and community driven approach to development.

Five Key Assets in ABCD Communities can no longer be thought of as complex masses of needs and problems, but rather diverse and potent webs of gifts and assets. Each community has a unique set of skills and capacities to channel for community development. ABCD categorizes asset inventories into five groups:

- **Individuals:** At the center of ABCD are residents of the community that have gifts and skills. Everyone has assets and gifts. Individual gifts and assets need to be recognized and identified. In community development you cannot do anything with people’s needs, only their assets. Deficits or needs are only useful to institutions.

- **Associations:** Small informal groups of people, such as clubs, working with a common interest as volunteers are called associations in ABCD and are critical to community mobilization. They don't control anything; they are just coming together around a common interest by their individual choice.
- **Institutions:** Paid groups of people who generally are professionals who are structurally organized are called institutions. They include government agencies and private business, as well as schools, etc. They can all be valuable resources. The assets of these institutions help the community capture valuable resources and establish a sense of civic responsibility.
- **Physical Assets:** Physical assets such as land, buildings, space, and funds are other assets that can be used. (ABCD Institute, 2010).

Challenges & Sustainability Concerns

Over the course of our interviews and research, common themes emerged as challenges for food policy councils at both the local and regional level. One of the most common issues was identified through this research as the lack of sustainability of local food councils. Academic research supports some of the concerns brought up in the interviews and suggests factors that may cause a food council to dissolve.

- ***Logistical challenges and regional identification:*** At a basic level, Food Policy Councils need a place to meet; people to consistently come to meetings and a network of concerned and engaged individuals and organizations. The logistics associated with convening diverse partners that adequately represent this 12 county region, spanning 5,963 square miles, will within itself present challenges. One of the existing councils noted their county had experienced challenges assembling farmers and other “non-professional” community stakeholders when meetings were held outside the immediate area.

A region is an area of land that has common features. A region can be defined by natural or artificial features, language, government, wildlife, climate, or religion. Our interviews with local stakeholders found that the issues of regional definition and county identification also present challenges. While the NC Association of Regional Councils of Government outline the Piedmont Triad Region as the 12 counties “lying between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains” and centered around the “three largest cities in the region: Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point,” other associations group counties according to different criteria and guidelines.

For example, Region G counties, as grouped by the NC Association of Local Health Directors, would fall into 3 different regions. This is important in that, funding for

regional collaborations may be distributed in a manner that is inconsistent to those regions as defined by the Council of Government. For example between 2001 and 2014 the Centers for Disease Control invested a large amount of money through the Community Transformation Grant in regions to pursue “food council types of work.” However, that money was filtered to public health districts which did not align with the Council of Government districts. Each district chose to spend their money in a different way so it would have been very challenging to use that money in a way that would have benefited our entire 12 county region.

Additionally, we found over the course of the interviews that the local counties also identify important relationships and collaborations with counties that fall outside of the regional area. As defined by the Council of Government, Montgomery County, for example, has forged a regionalized food policy council with Stanley and Anson counties, both of which fall outside of region G. As another example, Caswell County indicated that many of their local farmers are selling their products outside of the confines of Region G, in areas such as Chapel Hill as well as Danville, VA.

- ***Dependence on one strong personality, organization or political figure:*** Sometimes Food Policy Councils are heavily dependent on one charismatic personality, or one strong organization. If that person leaves the organization or their involvement decreases it might be difficult or impossible for the food council to continue its work. Distributing the workload, bringing more people to the table to work toward common goals. Two of the interviewees revealed that food policy councils within their county had dissolved or had arrived “at a standstill” as a result of loss in leadership.

Interviews indicated that the initiatives often started with a handful of dedicated people that possessed the passion for issue and an ability to pull and assemble others to work toward a collective goal. However, often when those dedicated individuals leave the group it is difficult to sustain momentum. In Rockingham County, the food policy council after leadership retired “there was no clear leadership and infrastructure dissolved.”

- ***Lack of funding and staffing:*** Staffing and funding are ever-present challenges. As we have mentioned, food councils that are part of government rely on staff time from government staff. However, this is usually on a part-time basis and is subject to city/county/state budgets. All-volunteer organizations depend on the energy of unpaid volunteers, and non-profit councils depend on grants and other funding supports which can vary from year to year.

Several interviews indicated that funding and staffing were major concerns even in sustaining local food policy councils. One leader indicated that their council was initiated under funding through the Community Transformation Grant. However, when grant funding ended, oversight for the council was rolled under an existing and overextended staff.

- **“Single-issue” focus:** Some council’s set out with narrow policy goals, and after these goals are achieved or denied they lack focus and fail to agree on next steps. Of the interviewees only one indicated that their local food council was initiated after the completion of a comprehensive food system assessment. Without a clear indication of where the challenges and opportunities lie, at the local or regional level, it is challenging to determine the most effective course of action. As such, councils tend to focus heavily on specific programs and short-term initiatives and focus less on long-term strategies and food-system change.

Planting the Seed: Strategies for the Development of a Regional Food Council

As with most regional efforts, a steering committee committed to the development of a regional food council should be assembled and a complete and comprehensive analysis of the regional food system should be undertaken. However, it is arguably more important that a food council direct efforts to building momentum through community buy-in and political legitimacy. These two efforts can work together; conducting a community food



(Dahlberg 2009).

assessment is how most food councils are initiated in the first place. These assessments work to identify gaps, assets, and opportunities in the food system. It is important that a food system assessment analyzes all five sectors of the food system: production, distribution, processing, consumption, and food waste recovery

At the intermediary level,

- 1) Food Councils need a place to meet, people to consistently come to meetings;
- 2) And a network of concerned and engaged individuals and organizations.
- 3) The council also needs leadership - including even the most basic tasks of setting meeting agendas, facilitating meetings and taking meeting notes.
- 4) It is also increasingly important that the food council have government support.

This can take many forms such as including local officials on the council, or having municipalities adopt legislation that solidifies their support of the efforts and recommendations of the food council. Developing a regional food council through the PTRC network presents an obvious advantage towards these first few steps towards development.

Through a case study analysis and research common themes have developed that suggest initial strategies for developing a regional food council. First, the initiators should engage members across different sectors of the food system and from different social and economic backgrounds. Second, they should establish priorities and agree on a strategic plan. Third, it is suggested that council members include elements of self-education and public education, and fourth that internal leadership should be diversified.

Trends in agriculture and food systems

The globalization of food has completely transformed the way in which we grow, harvest, and trade crops. More increasingly, food is coming from more distant sources, resulting in loss of older regional food networks such as meat markets and farmers markets. For the first time, the value of food imported into the US has exceeded the value of food exported from the US. Globalization poses serious threats to American farmers, such as Washington state apple growers competing with Chinese apples. As people know less and less of where



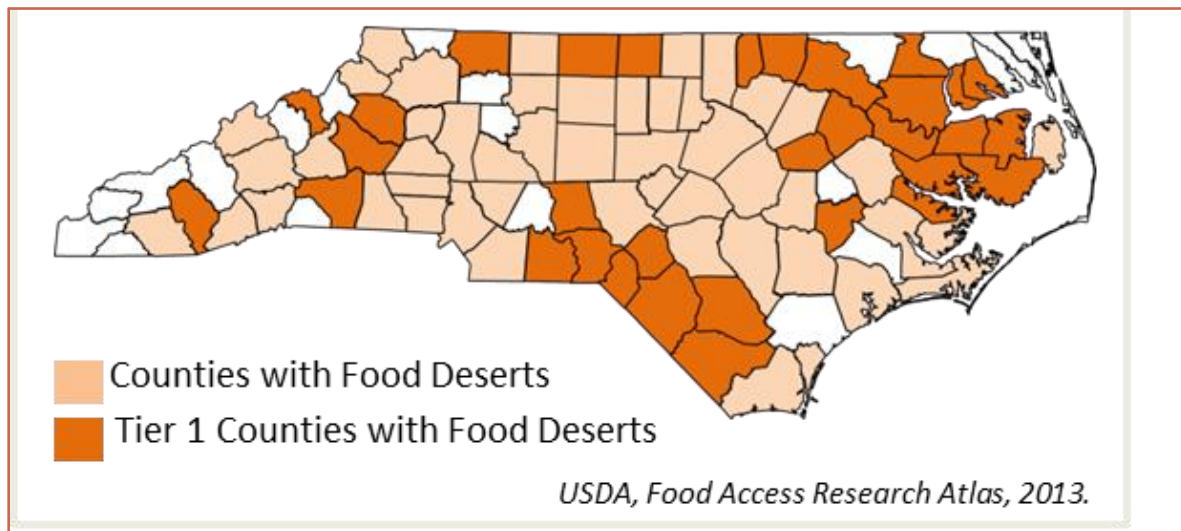
their food comes from and how it gets to them, preservation of land and the natural and built resources upon which local agriculture depends becomes more difficult. Federal farm policy has posed significant issues for farmers as well. Since the 1950s has distorted food pricing and subsidies, with implications for farmers, rural and urban communities, and the health of consumers. For example, heavily

subsidized corn production has resulted in the widespread use of high-fructose corn syrup in processed foods and beverages leading to an increased rate of obesity in America (Born et. al.)

Increasing rates of obesity in the nation and resulting diet-related illnesses and costs are a significant concern. Over 60 percent of Americans are either overweight or obese, the effects of obesity are not equal across race and class lines or even states and localities, thereby presenting inequalities. Land use and transportation policies have been implicated in the rise of obesity. Reduced physical activity is related to spatial patterns of food system as major food outlets are located further away from neighborhoods and opportunities to regularly walk to grocery stores for smaller purchases are replaced by less frequent, stock-up trips requiring automobiles (Born et. al.).

Food insecurity is the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In 2003-04, requests for emergency food assistance increased by about 14 percent in the 27 major U.S. cities. □ Fifty-six percent of those requesting assistance represented families with children; 34 percent of adults requesting assistance were employed. Furthermore, racial and ethnic minorities carry a disproportionate burden of food insecurity and hunger. □ Research suggests there is lower access to food outlets in African American communities than any other racial group. Recent legislation recently passed by Congress threatens to further increase food insecurity as popular and effective nutrition programs such as food stamps and other programs benefiting impoverished families (such as childcare) have been cut (Born et. al.). Food deserts are can be described as geographic areas where residents' access to affordable, healthy food options (especially fresh fruits and vegetables) is restricted or nonexistent due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient travelling distance. In the figure below you can see there are food deserts in nearly every North Carolina County, specifically in the Piedmont Triad region there is an excessive need for an introduction of a regional food policy council to address these inequities.

Figure 1: Food Deserts in North Carolina



Case Studies

Burlington Food Council

Vermont is one of the leading States in the Nation for agriculture and sustainable



agricultural development in large part due to the development of its food systems cluster. It may be the second smallest state in population but it is the first in proportion of its population living in rural farming communities (Rosenfeld 2010). This makes Vermont and the Burlington, VT Food Council a hard example to ignore when considering the development of a regional food council in the Piedmont Triad community. Just like every other state, Vermont is competing for those clean, high-tech industries; however, the

backbone of the state's economy remains rooted in its history and tradition of farming and food system development. Vermont has remained committed to the support and development of small family farms; which has allowed the state to become the leader in local, organic, and tastier foods addressing public health concerns but also stimulating local economies (Rosenfeld 2010).

The Burlington Food Council was formed in 2003 in response to a USDA Community Food Project grant called "Growing Farms, Growing Minds" that sought to encourage "healthier food choices, build capacity within the Burlington community and to meet healthy food needs, engage the community and diverse groups in these efforts and partner with the Burlington School District Food Service to improve school meals" ("History" 2009). The USDA project stemmed from the Burlington Legacy Project and was led by a group of volunteers, and nonprofit leaders. A result of their efforts, the Burlington Food Council was formed as a public group that hoped to provide a "connective tissue between disparate nonprofit organizations, volunteers and government agencies working toward these broad, common goals: to build food knowledge and experience, to build food appreciation and access, and to build local food systems" ("History" 2009).

Newly formed, the Burlington Food Council sought to complete a community food assessment in order to better understand the assets and resources in the area to help guide project priorities and policy recommendations. Today the mission of the Burlington Food Council is to provide an open community which seeks to create and “nurture a healthy, equitable and sustainable food system” (“Mission” 2009). The Council’s structure consists of a strategic planning committee of 8 members who meet to work on grant applications, organize events and shape the Council’s direction. The administration of the food council is currently provided by a volunteer coordinator who is selected on a rotating basis. Some of the most noteworthy projects of the Burlington Food Council include the Burlington School Food Project, Mobile Vegetable Farm Stands, The City’s Climate Action Plan, and a plan to incorporate fruit trees in the city landscape.



The work of regional food initiatives in the state of Vermont has provided results that speak for themselves. Vermont is the leader in its concentration of local farms, CSA’s and “farmers’ markets per capita compared to the national concentration and organic farms” (Rosenfeld 2010). The investment of time and resources into the development of the Burlington Food Council which has provided Vermont farmers with a competitive advantage. The ability of these types of organizations to build local capacities through events, research, policy recommendations has fostered the sustainable development of Vermont’s food system. Consequently, the economy in the state has been able to develop around the robust agriculture industry allowing for the intersection and convergence of multiple sectors - thus creating a food systems cluster. Agriculture now plays a part in “the state’s art and culture, tourism, renewable energy, design, apparel, wellness and retirement sectors” (Rosenfeld 2010).

Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council

The Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) is a regional council located in central Washington. It is comprised of Puget Sound counties including: King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap, cities and towns, ports, tribes, transit agencies. The mission of PCRC is to work with the state develop policies and make decisions about



regional issues to ensure a thriving central Puget Sound now and into the future through planning for regional transportation, growth management and economic development. PSRC has created committees, council, and tasks forces to develop and implement policies that will improve the quality of life for Puget Sound residents (Born et. al).

The Regional Food Policy Council was established in September 2010 at the Puget Sound Regional Council to bring together community, government, business and agricultural interests to work on integrated and sustainable policy recommendations to strengthen the regional food system. The Regional Food Policy Council develops integrated policy and action recommendations that promote health, sustain and strengthen the local and regional food system, and engage and partner with agriculture, business, communities and governments in the four-county region. The Regional Food Policy goals are to:

- ***Support Economic Development:*** The region has many businesses and jobs that depend on the vitality of the local food economy. Through collaboration, the Regional Food Policy Council hopes to make a positive impact on the economic stability of our regional agricultural system.
- ***Protecting Agricultural Land:*** The agricultural lands within the region are among the most productive in the state, and the loss of good quality farmland has implications for air quality, water quality and quantity, and the region's self-sufficiency. Threats to the continued productivity of farmlands include urban development, incompatible adjacent land uses, and the loss of supporting services for farming.
- ***Working Together:*** The Regional Food Policy Council and other food policy efforts are playing a role in organizing for an effective and robust food system.

The Regional Food Policy Council of Puget Sound has been extremely successful in farmland preservation with 462 acres of farmland preserved in King County in 2015, and 503 acres of farmland has been enhanced or brought into production through projects and acquisition. There has been a 236% increase in sales of produce at the Puget Sound Food Hub as well as increased participation in subsidized food subscription programs and now 19 out of the 40 farmers markets in the region offer incentive programs for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients.

Chicago Food System Collaborative



The Chicago Food System Collaborative was formed in the fall of 2002 as a consortium of three community-based organizations, one faith-based organization and four academic institutions with the shared goal of addressing the issue of access to healthy food in low-income communities. With funding from the W.K.

Kellogg Foundation, this effort was spearheaded by a community activist with expertise in community development and the director of PRAG (Policy Research Action Group) who also had experience as a community planner and policy analyst. PRAG is a research group that was affiliated with one of the local academic institutions and for many years, the group had focused heavily on building academic and community interdisciplinary partnerships for the purposes of developing community-based research and developing corresponding action projects (Suarez-Balcazar 2006).

Although the CFSC was successful in identifying and implementing several initiatives to address the issue of food access in minority communities, there were several challenges many of which are common of interdisciplinary approaches such as this. The first challenge was a matter of logistics in that the leaders found that it was often difficult to schedule meetings that worked within the different and demanding schedules of the various partners. Given the size of the partnership, the co-directors also noted that it was at times a challenge to keep all team members updated on details of each of the project initiatives. Subsequently, monthly meetings often took longer than the allotted meeting time because

partners wanted an opportunity to fully discuss updates and share lessons-learned within their various projects.

The diverse perceptions and practices across the various interdisciplinary approaches allow for a more comprehensive study although such differences can also, at times also complicate and slow the process. For example, the residents' survey in the evaluation of the farmers' market was intended to answer the research question of what residents thought about the farmer's market and access to healthy foods in the market compared to the community in general. By adding different members' views and other frameworks, such as residents' perceived nutrition and health status, the instrument became longer than anticipated to the degree that residents had to be incentivized to participate. Because the study took place over a three-year period, there was also a large degree of turnover in student participants, teachers working within the local school district and those individuals that served as the community representatives. The transition and coordination of new team members to the initiative slowed program progress and evaluation efforts. The co-directors also stressed the importance of stress throughout an interdisciplinary collaboration stating that trust was made possible by the fact that the members respected each other's framework and views, and that the team's flexibility allowed for individuals responsible for a project component to take the ultimate decision about what procedure, protocol or strategy should be used. At the CFSC trust in the project leaders was also a critical component as the co-directors often had to make decisions based on group discussion and the opinion of the majority; "We never actually voted on a decision, however, but reaching consensus was important. This may mean that not all points of view are embraced or followed as suggested. Therefore, although it is critical to build a milieu in which feedback is provided and different points of view and perspectives are shared, it is ultimately up to the partners of each project component to decide the course of action as it refers to conceptual, methodological and practical decisions." (121)



Sacramento Region Food System Collaborative

Sacramento Region Food System Collaborative (SRFSC) was initiated in 2015 with its immediate stakeholder, Vision Valley, who helped facilitate quarterly meetings, develop monthly newsletter and most importantly, network with other stakeholders, in the Northern California area (SRSF 2015). It is comprised the counties of Sacramento, El Dorado, Placer, Sutter, Yolo and Yuba. The mission is to increase access to healthy foods in underserved communities and food security, increase associated educational opportunities, encourage rural economic development and grow the regional economy.



Before launching the Sacramento Regional Food System, an Action Plan was prepared through a collaborative effort between the Foundation of Sacramento Region Community, Valley Vision, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) and many other regional partners. This plan was to provide a roadmap for local and regional action, identify food system issues under a single policy

framework, identify food system gaps and assets and prioritize actions and operations at community and regional scales (Krock 2015). The regional food system has benefited from this action plan because it gained a better understanding of the current environment, barriers and was able to coordinate and bring together different organizations and stakeholders.

Although the Sacramento Region Food System is fairly new, it has been successful in strengthening networks, launching monthly meetings, working with local governments and educating officials and the public about their program. Additionally, since they identified gaps and assets before with their action plan, they have been able to come up with different strategies and recommended actions as implementation steps to achieve their goals. The food system has also interviewed different stakeholders in their regions to gain a better understanding of the concerns about food access and food security. With the community, it has been able to come up with Food Charter which clearly states the values and beliefs of the community nutrition, food and food systems (Krock 2012). Furthermore, with it has been able to expand its Farm to Fork program which helps farms, restaurants, organizations and community members to contribute to local agriculture and culinary.

Although the Sacramento Region Food System has not been able to yet, it does plan to increase access WIC and Food Stamps (EBT) to farmers' markets, increase the number of local farmers' markets, help increase networks between farmers and local stores and school as well as establish greater collaboration between the medical community and food banks and pantries (Krock et al. 2009).

Key Recommendations

Based upon the research and interviews we present the following recommendations for the creation of a regional food policy council in the Piedmont Triad Region:

- 1) Engage members across different sectors of the food system and from different backgrounds and draw from a diverse but organized base.
- 2) Establish proprieties and agree on some kind of a strategic plan from the outset. If possible, utilize comprehensive assessment tool to better understand nature of assets and challenges.
- 3) Establish clear structures for decision-making, communication and evaluation from the beginning
- 4) Define the goals of the food policy council at a regional level.
- 5) Clearly define organizational structure, outlining roles and responsibilities.
- 6) Establishing clear metrics for evaluation.

Harvesting Regional Potentials

A regional food council for the Piedmont Triad region represents a number of potential projects and research opportunities. From our research and interviews, we found similarities in the suggestions of the literature and the concerns of those involved in the piedmont food system.

1. ***Potential to address public health through food access, hunger and food insecurity, and quality of food.*** Many food policy councils have used food access as their launching priority, but as the research suggests access, food insecurity, and diet-related disease are often inextricable and frequently addressed in tandem. These issues can be addressed by advocating policies that allow food stamps to be accepted at farmers markets, re-routing transit to improve access to fresh and healthy foods, corner store conversions, gleaning campaigns for food banks, healthier school food, school breakfast programs and other important services which can all benefit from council input. One of the first major successes of the council was the development of the Burlington School district food action plan. Through a series of public meetings and capacity building, the council developed a school food committee, school gardens, and a wellness plan. The council was also the inaugural home to the Burlington School Food Project which spun off from the council in 2008 as it grew to become one of the model Farm2School programs in the nation.

2. **Potential to affect national and state-level policy debates:** According to Ling et al. (2007), there are four stages in which community planning for sustainable food network can take place. The initial stages are about identifying the processes, possible stakeholders, governmental officials who will be involved in creating an environment of inclusivity and support (Ling et al. 2007, 2).
3. **Potential to bring local food policy into the mainstream:** By bringing together groups from all five sectors of the food system food policy councils raise awareness of food system issues and provide a platform for citizens to get involved. The most successful councils provide education programs: teaching citizens and officials about food security, sustainable food systems and food policy overall.
4. **Potential to address poverty and inequality:** Sustainable food systems are food systems that deliver food and nutrition security for all and aim to sustain the environment, economy and social well-being of a community at every stage from the production, processing, distribution to consumption so food security is not compromised for future generations. Sustainable food systems focus on providing healthy food at affordable prices, ensure all residents have access to a grocery store, minimize environmental impact of food production and distribution as well as provide social equity (Kiser 2011, 1).
5. **Potential to boost local economies:** A regional food council for the Piedmont Triad has a huge potential to increase support for local agriculture and to help foster new local markets. The regional council could help expand broadened support for local food processing, urban agriculture and community-owned retail and other locally-owned businesses. Data from the WorldWatch study indicates that supporting local food can provide a serious boost to local economies. For example, the study found that “if the greater Seattle area were to get just 20% of its food locally, it would inject an extra \$1 billion a year into the city’s economy” (DeWeerd 2011).
6. **Potential to develop resilience in regionalism:** The Piedmont Together partnership across the region is a testament to the ability of local officials to come together under a common goal. Through this regionalist approach, Piedmont Together has built resilience into the fabric of the region as a whole. Applying a regionalist approach to food systems will help protect the local food economy from issues such as natural disasters, climate change, declines in industry, and changes in workforce. This would have significant economic impacts regionally and locally in developing a more resilient and sustainable food system.

7. **Potential to foster entrepreneurship in the food system:** The opportunity for actionable results from a regional food council would help foster the legitimacy for the benefit of a regional food council. Provided for a greater local capacity in the regional food system would encourage and enhance entrepreneurial activity within the food system. This could be encouraged through programming directed by the regional food council with the input and potential funding opportunities from grants and other partners within the region.
8. **Potential to influence the local food system through planning:** Planners have the skills and capacity needed to help communities address long-term food system goals. The American Planning Association acknowledges that “the analysis of the land use and spatial dimensions of communities, externalities and hidden costs of potential policy decisions, interdisciplinary perspectives on community systems like the food system, and ways to link new goals like community food systems into sustainable and healthy community goals” (APA 2007).

Conclusion

From the research collected through this project, we recommend the development of a regional food council under the Piedmont Together economic development umbrella. Utilizing the recommendations and layout of the challenges and opportunities included in this report it is apparent to us that a regional council can have significant social, political, economic and environmental impacts. Undertaking this unique opportunity would present the environment to build cooperative and collaborative partnerships across the region.

The development of a regional food council would allow for the strategic utilization of regional assets and significant capacity building across the sectors in the food system. This committed effort to improve our communities through coordination and cooperation will help develop trust and openness across the food system allowing for greater potentials for economic growth and innovation while simultaneously working towards a more inclusive and health oriented region overall.

A regional food council in the Piedmont Triad will further support the long term strategic goals of the Piedmont Triad Regional Development Corporation in accordance with support from local actors, state administrators, universities, and nonprofit groups. Together we have the opportunity to support the local and state economy while also providing access to fresh local foods for underserved populations.

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