



Crossroads Resource Center

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Tools for Community Self-determination

The Potential for Urban Agriculture

by Ken Meter
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1. Urban Agriculture has great potential

- Forty-one percent of all U.S. agricultural commodities are sold from farms in metropolitan counties [Bureau of Economic Analysis].
- Surplus from farm production in 2007 was \$28.7 billion; of this \$15.7 billion (55%) was earned in metropolitan areas, and \$13 billion (45%) was earned in rural areas [Bureau of Economic Analysis].
- Victory Gardens during World War II produced 40% of all produce consumed by Americans after two seasons of gardening. This shows the potential for small-scale activity making a big difference [Department of Defense studies].
- Food is the second most important cost of living for U.S. households. On average, each household spends \$6,100 buying food each year [Bureau of Labor Statistics].
- Since all of us eat several times a day if able, food is highly visible in our lives — this means food is central to bringing people together. **Local food systems will be key to economic recovery**, especially in inner-city areas. Any genuine economic recovery will create new livelihoods for low-income people who build productive roles in the food economies of the future.
- Food is central to culture, ethnic heritages, to the potential for cross-cultural sharing, for learning about natural systems, and for building a sense of self-determination.
- The food system we have was designed assuming we would have cheap oil. This is changing rapidly — with both availability and price uncertain — so we will have to invent new systems. Urban areas will be the most challenged as fuel prices rise.
- We need to design food systems that are resilient, allowing us to respond effectively to uncertainty.
- Urban food production can reduce the physical and social distance from grower to consumer; this allows consumers to be more certain about sources of their food.
- The U.S. has never performed sustained planning for effective local food systems. Our energies have typically been focused on exports and cash commodities. This

local planning can most effectively be performed locally, yet federal dollars can invest in these local processes.

- The American Planning Association recently opened a planning track for food system planning. See <http://www.planning.org>.
- The food system we have was not built primarily by market mechanisms, but rather by public infrastructure. If we want local food systems, we will need to build infrastructure that supports the food systems we deserve.

2. How does an urban community construct a local food system?

You do not have to take the following steps in order, but you may find each step listed below builds upon previous steps.

(a) Select a geography:

- Neighborhood, community, city, metro area, region, or state?
- Larger geographic areas mean more consumer power and more options, smaller areas allow greater potential accountability between citizens and public leaders. Find the balance point.

(b) Form a “Community of Practice (CoP)” — an effective tool for building connection and resiliency.

- Rich Pirog, Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/> offers training.
- A CoP can build a community of learners who work more closely together.
- A CoP can build mutual respect and trust.
- A CoP can help exchange insights, resources, vision.
- This might form the backbone of — or take a formal structure as — a food policy council (Mark Winne, Community Food Security Coalition — <http://www.foodsecurity.org>).

(c) Assess the local food system

- **Asset mapping** — Carol Richardson Smith, National Catholic Rural Life Conference — <http://www.ncrlc.com/crl-magazine-articles/vol46no2/Kautza.pdf>.
- **Food System Assessment** — Kai Seidenburg, Community Food Security Coalition — <http://www.foodsecurity.org>; Will Allen, Growing Power — <http://www.growingpower.org>; Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center — kmeter@crcworks.org; <http://www.crcworks.org/ff.pdf>; <http://www.crcworks.org/locales.html>.
- **Local Economic Analysis** — Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center — <http://www.crcworks.org/econ.html>.
- **Survey local growers and food buyers** — Craig Chase, Iowa State University and Brenda Ranum, Northeast Iowa Farm and Food Coalition <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/winneshiek/news/Coalition.htm>.
- **Interview “wise practitioners”** to learn how people active in local food networks view their experience — Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center — kmeter@crcworks.org.
- **Build “Value Networks”** that **build upon existing businesses** and cluster new ones around them — Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center — kmeter@crcworks.org.

(d) Write a strategic plan

- Pirog, Rich, *et al* (2006). **“Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System: Suggestions for Community-Based Groups,”** Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Regional Food System Working Group, Iowa State University, August. Available at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing.htm>
- **Select priorities** that will leverage the greatest systems change.
- **Unify stakeholders** around a common analysis.
- **Agree on vision and goals.**
- **Agree on how to measure success** — Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center — kmeter@crcworks.org; www.crcworks.org/guide.pdf; www.crcworks.org/msi/indicators.pdf.

(e) Find resources

- **Reclaim underutilized resources** (e.g., people who don't own cars can help develop walkable stores, brownfields can be converted into working lands, underdeveloped land can be used for food production, waste heat serve as an input for a nearby business, composting can become a livelihood).
- **Barter for skills or services.**
- **Engage volunteers.**
- **Gain technical Skills.** Growing Power — www.growingpower.org, LEED neighborhood certification. See Smart Growth Network.
- **Community foundations or other foundations.**
- **Investors.** Local investors may be more responsive.
- **Regional food distributors** may play a key role. (e.g., Bon Appetit, Sodexo, Sysco).
- **School boards, colleges, hospitals,** or other institutions may seek local foods for serving lunch. National Farm to School Network — <http://www.farmtoschool.org>; Community Food Security Coalition — <http://www.foodsecurity.org>; Kaiser Permanente has focused on hospital purchases of local foods.
- **Local governments** (city/county bonding authority, health agencies, planning departments, economic development agencies, etc.) See American Planning Association — <http://www.planning.org/>
<http://www.crcworks.org/crcdocs/MDHWC2008.pdf>;
<http://www.crcworks.org/crcdocs/lfcedwd.pdf>;
<http://www.crcworks.org/cfscdd.html>.
- **State governments** (may invest in infrastructure, match local investments) Wisconsin has invested in school kitchens. Margaret Krome, Michael Fields Institute — mkrome@sbcglobal.net.
- **Federal government (pilot projects, Value-added Producer Grants, Community Food Programs, Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development, EPA)** <http://collinpeterson.house.gov/default.htm> — Look for links to presentations at Community-Based Food Systems workshop April 17, 2009, in Marshall, Minnesota, by: Keith Jones, Errol Bragg, David Gaffaney. EPA has brownfield restoration money — <http://www.epa.gov/brownfields>.
- **Federal Stimulus package** preventive health & USDA funds. See above and National Association for City and County Health Officials fact sheet — <http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/upload/public-health-provisions-conf.pdf>.

Resource lists are not exhaustive