

Local Foods Policy Council Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, June 27, 2012

Jennifer Putnam Room, Brookens Admin. Center

1776 E. Washington St, Urbana, IL

Members Present: Capel, Henning, Satterthwaite, Roach, Uken, Riddle, Kennedy, Hamelberg, and Farrell

Members Absent: None

Others Present: Todd Rusk, Associate Director of Energy and Sustainable Business Programs at the University of Illinois. Patti Petrie, Champaign County Board member.

Call to Order

Tod Satterthwaite, Committee Chair, called the meeting to order.

Additions and Corrections to the Agenda

There were no additions or corrections to the agenda.

Public Participation

There was no public participation.

Discussion of Local Foods Policy with Todd Rusk, Associate Director of Energy and Sustainable Business Programs at the University of Illinois

Todd Rusk introduced himself and gave a bit of his background. He explained that he had been working with Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity under contract helping to implement the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act. He also recommended becoming familiar with the Champaign County Public Health office if the council became interested in pursuing food processing or any work related to the Cottage Food laws. He mentioned the incubator kitchen in Sterling, Illinois and how they have struggled with the farmer's market, the kitchen, and the Public Health Department.

Rusk then began to discuss the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act and how it begins the process of defining what "local" means when discussing local foods. He also explained that the Act began the process of setting goals within the state regarding local foods and that it establishes a baseline and a tracking and reporting system. However, Rusk went on to discuss how restrictive the act may be within its definition most especially regarding processed foods of any sort. Rusk suggested that perhaps the council could explore a new definition for those foods and push for a state-wide action item. Rusk then began to talk about the Food Farms and Jobs

Council, an action group working within the Illinois Department of Agriculture. They are working on a labeling and certification program that could simplify procurement, etc. Rusk discussed the

Rusk then began to explain why local foods are important. According to him they are significant to lifestyle in that they promote sustainable living and nutrition; local foods are significant to economic development by creating and retaining wealth locally; local foods are significant to marketing and community relations; and finally local foods are significant to the compliance of requirements of the act.

Rusk then began to discuss the bottlenecks or barriers that exist for farmers in regards to local foods. First, Rusk identified climate as a barrier for farmers. He spoke of the short growing season, and ways that possible extending the growing season with hoop houses is one option, and he also mentioned that preserving and storing crops after sowing them is a part of that barrier. Second, Rusk discussed the shortage of producers for commercial markets. He spoke of the difficulty farmers have with growing the volume required for wholesale accounts. Rusk offered food hubs as a possible option for aggregation. Third, Rusk discussed market access as a barrier for farmers and how difficult it is for farmers to enter the supply chain of large retailers and organizations. Rusk commented on how there is not a shortage of demand in that regard. He also mentioned that there are also sustainability concerns for transportation. Rusk then discussed that farmers have very little food processing capability as a fourth barrier for farmers. He again mentioned the incubator kitchen in Sterling, IL. Rusk mentioned how a relationship with Public Health is significant especially in understanding of how the laws are being interpreted, observed, and enforced. The fifth barrier that Rusk mentioned was pricing. It is more profitable for farmers to provide food directly to consumers via farmers markets and so forth. Rusk commented that farmers can generally charge a higher price for food if there is not a retail markup to consider. Finally, Rusk cited the current incentives in the present agricultural industry for farmers to grow commodity crops rather than foods.

Farrell spoke about her involvement in the Flatlander incubator kitchen project in Champaign County. She said that the project had in fact commissioned a feasibility study through Rusk's office. She spoke of how they struggles to determine whether it should be a stand alone kitchen, a partnership, and what types of processing may occur. She talked of how the kitchen ended up not really being an option for the organization due to a number of reasons including food safety training, the cost of space rental, the lack of grant options, and insurance. Instead, Flatlander gave an amount of money to Common Ground Food Coop to help build the teaching kitchen that is part of the expansion project there.

Discussion of Local Food Producers Inventory

The discussion of the local foods producer inventory began with an assessment of the options that already exist. Farm Direct, Market Maker, Local Harvest, Food Works, and Buy Fresh, Buy Local were all mentioned as options for helping to create a relevant list in Champaign County. The council then also discussed the aims of such an inventory. Among the possibilities were asset mapping- who's growing, where there are small parcels available for food growth, where are there physical facilities for food processing. Uken wondered about examples of green houses on abandoned pavement. He spoke about Living Waters in Strawn,

Illinois and how their production is greenhouse focused. This led to a brief conversation about the possibility of USDA grants. It was determined that most success was derived from partnering with an already successful venture. It was also determined that perhaps the council should invite Colleen Callahan to a meeting to explain her role at the USDA.

Henning also brought up that price is a big factor for determining what he is able to consider buying in his role at the University of Illinois. He spoke of how as a buyer for a large organization that there is very little room for negotiating. This led to the question of what the committee should attempt to do. This pertains especially to the inventory of local producers. To be considered is the climate and how to network within the inventory for funding opportunities. It was determined that the inventory should begin by consisting of the name, address, contact information, and website of the producers and that should be followed up with a survey of the producers. The survey could perhaps consist of asking them what they are doing and what they want to do. It was also brought up that some resources already exist in relation to an inventory. Local Harvest, Farm Direct, and Market Maker were mentioned again, and Uken wondered what would be the difference with what we created. It was also mentioned as a concern by Kennedy that those types of inventories were not managed well, and often were not exhaustive or current. Petrie mentioned that perhaps creating an inventory and managing it could be a Capstone project for a university student in planning or something similar. Again it was wondered what the inventory would be used for, and whether it would be statewide and could it possibly be used to create farmers workshops.

The conversation then shifted back to barriers and solutions. Farrell mentioned that farmers need land and that without land it was all moot. Uken brought up the farmers need for labor and capital. Henning mentioned the possibility of students more actively working on farms. It was then wondered if perhaps the University of Illinois could be involved in the development of the inventory. The conversation then shifted to the goals for the committee regarding policy. The zoning board and LESA were mentioned by Petrie as significant areas of consideration. Kennedy then brought up the possibility of perhaps having the inventory be self-maintaining on the internet in a Wiki or crowd source site.

Report from Becky Roach on her discussion with Lisa Bralts, manager of the Market at the Square in Urbana

Roach said that she had spoken with Bralts and that she had echoed many of the same concerns that had already been discussed by the committee. She did, however, go on to emphasize that Bralts had concerns about the manner in which the Champaign County Health Department interpreted the law. It was brought up that the CCPHD was much stricter than other parts of the state most especially Chicago.

Announcements

a. Local Food Connections and Technical Summit, Aug. 20, 2012, Bloomington, IL

Petrie brought up the summit and encouraged members from the committee to attend. Uken agreed to distribute information to the committee and several members expressed interest in attending.

Riddle then announced that she would be relocating in the fall and thusly unable to fulfill the 2 years on the council. She agreed to stay on the council for as long as possible, and then wondered if another person from the Coop should take her seat as a replacement.

Henning then discussed the Permaculture Conference that he had recently attended at the University of Massachusetts. He discussed an example of an all-encompassing community garden that he had learned about while attending the conference. He said that it occurred to him that "If you build it, they will come," and he believes that would be true of an innovative project here in Champaign County as well. Henning enthusiastically said that he had learned that by changing the landscape, we could in turn change the world. It was then wondered if there was a possibility for the committee to look into the use of vacant lots for food production. Perhaps an inventory of vacant lots in the county could be created or requested. Uken mentioned that in Rantoul there are vacant lots that are now owned by the township. He mentioned that perhaps speaking with the 3 county board members from Rantoul would be a good place to start on that question.

Kennedy then mentioned a program called Zero Percent and that they may be relevant to what the committee is attempting to do. Riddle echoed Kennedy. Kennedy then explained that the program worked with local non-profits and with businesses with extra food. Kennedy explained that the goal is to eliminate food waste through technology. Riddle mentioned that perhaps the same technology could be utilized to create a sort of user friendly virtual food hub. Uken mentioned that it would be a nice solution, but was concerned that the volume of produce that farmers might have as waste would be too great. Riddle also mentioned that the web presence from a program like Zero Percent could contribute to one of our aims as listed in the resolution as well as a wonderful web presence for the farmers. Kennedy agreed to contact the gentleman who created the original program.

Kennedy then said that he would be late to the meetings due to childcare. It was decided that the meetings would begin at 5:45 going forward

Hamelberg said that she would be absent for the next meeting.

Other Business

Petrie suggested that the committee discuss the county's LESA. She recommended that the committee members read the county proposal. Uken mentioned that it differed from the Farm Bureau's proposal and he then agreed to send the current proposal as well as the Farm Bureau's proposal to the members of the committee. Petrie then suggested that the members also read an alternative proposal offered by a member of the community that recommend that the LESA create a sort of Agricultural Neighborhood. It was also recommended that the committee members google 'CMI Regional Planning Commission LESA' especially paying attention to Bulletin 811 regarding the scoring optimum crop productivity. The concerning factors

would be the scoring for acreage, Prime vs Best Prime Farmland, and the assessment of a whole property. It was decided to add LESA as an agenda item for the next meeting.

Satterthwaite also asked that any additional agenda items for the next meeting be sent to him as soon as possible.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 pm.