Why is Food Security and Local Production Essential to a Sustainable Community?

Agriculture may be the oldest human endeavor. Food, along with water, fiber and some form of shelter are the very basics of human needs. Until recently agriculture also was necessarily located near population centers. Now our markets are filled with food transported from around the world. The sustainability of this change can be questioned on several grounds:

- The carbon footprint of the national and international food production system is enormous.
- The wealth generated in local communities, which is spent locally, is being lost to large agricultural enterprises.
- Local jobs in the businesses that supply agriculture’s needs, in planting, harvesting, farm machinery services and processing are being lost.
- Freshness – and related health benefits - and taste are being sacrificed. All the while, the success of farmers’ markets and repeated studies by the Hartman Group demonstrate the consumers’ desire for locally produced fresh food.
- Food safety concerns related to the industrial food system are increasing.

How is this Essential Linked to other Sustainable Community Essentials?

Farm land is not simply waiting to be built upon when the market is ripe. The planting, care and harvesting of crops and the raising of livestock are job producing and family sustaining. Jobs are also created in related businesses that supply farmers with machinery, seeds, irrigation systems, local transportation infrastructure, fertilizer, etc. Jobs also result from the processing and sale of farm products. When these jobs are based on local production the money is usually spent locally. Profits tend to remain largely in the local community and are recycled via local purchases instead of transferring to a national or international conglomerate headquartered in other states or countries.

Many of these jobs are difficult. However, these jobs require skills that can be easily learned. In this way farming related jobs contribute to the equity goal of sustainability. Sustainable agriculture (typified by smaller more diverse and ecologically conscious farms selling into the local food market) keeps alive a culture that is core to our heritage. This is illustrated by active and growing agri-tourism which also contributes to the local economy.

The environmental goal of sustainability is clearly observed through retention of open space and CO2 sequestration capacity of the plants due mostly to diverse cropping and composting systems. In addition, the healthy nature and enhanced quality of locally produced food, reduced carbon footprint through fewer transportation miles, locally managed food safety, and enhancement of the quality of life for communities are outcomes of sustainable food system.

Public safety is guarded by the local production and consumption of farm products based on proximity of the farmer to the consumer and direct traceability, transparency and accountability. Public health is also promoted through consumption of fresh farm products. This is illustrated by the current movement to substitute local products for processed foods in school lunches.
SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY – Fayette County

Fayette County faces economic challenges that affect both employment and public health. Many of these challenges are especially poignant in the realm of agriculture. A great deal of farmland in the County is fallow and/or abandoned. The average age of farmers is rising. There is growing recognition of the need to be more responsive to the real need for farmers, agriculture, and job development, while working to preserve historic farmland. All the while, Fayette County has been recognized as a large center of beef production throughout the 21st century. In response to these and additional concerns, the Fay-Penn Economic Development Corp. convened a workshop to discuss a Fayette County Buy Fresh Buy Local® Chapter and illustrate how increased agriculture can lead to a healthier and more prosperous local economy.

The workshop was attended by 4 producers, 8 people in transition to becoming producers, and 13 members of the general public or other interested parties. Presenters included representatives from the Fay-Penn Economic Development Corp., Steps to a Healthier PA, Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture, the County Extension Office, Keystone Beef Cooperative, Student Conservation Association, and more.

Chief impediments identified include:

- Residents tend to not be informed of the benefits of organic food, locally-purchased food, or hormone free meats.
- Farm stand bandits, who buy from the “Strip,” strategically locating themselves to capture tourist money.
- High costs and lack of access to technology.
- Failed mobile farmers markets.
- Restaurants are so busy they can’t be bothered with considering changing their suppliers, cannot attend a full day workshop.
- Concern for the quantity of abandoned farmland and need for more action in this regard.

Opportunities identified:

- Transportation routes are opening up and more tourist dollars are coming in.
- Desire for a farmers market is growing.
- Local cable and newspapers are willing to run advertising campaigns.
- Restaurants want to start buying locally.

- Producers have been presented with a number of opportunities to improve their agricultural practices.
- The Steps to a Healthier PA group is working on farm stands at churches, the mobile farmers market, school gardens, and a WIC & Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program.

Results:

The attendees decided on the following four goals for 2009:

- Form a Buy Fresh Buy Local® Steering Committee
- Identify one location for a Farmers Market in Fayette County
- Mentoring program, new farmer training (Fay-Penn, in association with the Penn State Extension)
- Potluck Farmer Event / Networking Dinner
- Raise awareness and accelerate the trend of people committed to spending $10 locally each month, and requesting local foods when they are in Fayette County restaurants & grocery stores.

Case courtesy of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture
Actions for Implementation

- Value farms as farms; not per developer-defined higher and commercial use.
- Support the County Farmland Preservation Program by investing in the process of purchasing development rights from interested farmers.
- Encourage participation in the Commonwealth’s Clean and Green tax reduction program.
- Establish governmental incentives for redeveloping urban sites in combination with disincentives for green space development.
- Enact zoning and subdivision/land development ordinances that encourage development in the core and discourage it in greenfields.
- Provide opportunities and incentives for the establishment of small urban farms and gardens in the urban core.
- Provide housing for seasonal workers.
- Prohibit concentrated animal feeding operations.
- Enact Right-To-Farm regulations.
- Encourage and support the formation of Agricultural Security Areas.
- Encourage and support farmers’ and community efforts to reduce use of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, manipulated cultivars, etc.
- Assess whether a Transfer of Development Rights program is applicable to your municipality.

Resources for Communities

Buy Fresh Buy Local, Western Pennsylvania  
http://www.buylocalpa.org/southwest

Fay-Penn Economic Development Council  
http://www.faypenn.org/  
724/437-7913

Grow Pittsburgh  
www.growpittsburgh.org  
412/362-4769

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service  
http://www.attra.ncat.org/

Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA)  
www.pasafarming.org  
412/697-0411

Penn State Extension  
www.extension.psu.edu  
412/263-1000

Steps to a Healthier PA-Fayette County  
http://www.stepstohealthierfayettecounty.org/index.html  
724/439-1484

Student Conservation Association  
http://www.thesca.org/about/offices/pittsburgh  
412/325-1851

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education  
http://www.sare.org/
How Can This Essential be Measured?

Benchmarks include:

- Comprehensive plans and implementing ordinances such as zoning and subdivision development that protect open land including farms and all related industries to support it. The sustainable approach is to target development and redevelopment of existing cities and towns and conserve the open, green spaces—including farms—around them. Coordination of multi-municipal comprehensive plans permits municipalities who wish to remain rural to do so by negotiating with neighbors to accommodate growth.

- Right-To-Farm legislation that protects agriculture operations regardless of the time of day or night, or smells that may offend neighboring, new residential subdivisions.

- Agricultural zoning that limits subdivision of farms so that enough acres remain to support an economically viable agriculture enterprise.

- Opportunities for grocers purchasing and advertising locally grown and produced food.

- Adoption of state programs that protect farms such as Clean and Green.

- Local investment in Farmland Preservation Programs to secure, in perpetuity, the farmlands located adjacent to cities.

- Provisions for seasonal farm workers to live in group quarters.

- Roadside farm stands and farmers’ markets in the population centers.

- Educational programs throughout the community; these can include topics such as urban farming practices, benefits of local farming, healthy food shopping practices, etc.

- Programs to enhance transfer of current research and old knowledge from universities to urban farms.

- Transfer of knowledge from older and retiring farmers to a younger generation.

- Farm succession planning.

- Sale by farmers of carbon credits based on the ability of plants to sequester CO₂.

- Proportion of land in the municipality retained for active farming uses.

To view this and all 14 Sustainable Community Essentials Resource Sheets visit: www.sustainablecommunityessentials.org.
This website is interactive and allows comments and revisions to continuously improve the materials. Please share your expertise by visiting and becoming a content contributor.

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Updated: May 15, 2009