

**Regional Planning and Local Food Systems**  
**June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Forum Summary**  
**Northeast Ohio Area-wide Coordinating Agency**

**OVERVIEW:** Local food systems are inherently regional. If you go to a farmers' market or eat at a farm to table restaurant, you are participating in a regional event. And if it's a farmers' market in Cleveland, there's a good chance that urban farmers or urban-based food entrepreneurs will be selling along-side rural agricultural producers. As a more rural example, Oberlin has had a long-time effort to support local food purchasing. The \$1.3 million spent annually on locally produced foods by Oberlin includes about 78 unique vendors spread over 14 counties. Wayne County and Portage County, more rural counties, each capture about 15-20% of Oberlin's spending. Meanwhile, Cuyahoga County, as an urban county, captures about 9% of Oberlin's spending, mostly through local processors. This forum, held in the public meeting room of the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) provided an opportunity to gather the perspectives on efforts to link local food systems with municipal and regional planning, drawing on examples from both the greater Columbus and greater Cleveland areas. **Brian Williams**, Agriculture Specialist with the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) opened up the event with a presentation on their efforts to link local food efforts with their metropolitan planning agency in Central Ohio. His remarks were followed by four different speakers active with various local food efforts in Northeast Ohio, including: **Bob Brown**, former Planning Director for the City of Cleveland who facilitated urban agriculture zoning efforts for the city; **Elsa Higby** with Grow Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative who works to connect rural and urban communities in Youngstown; **Courtney Johnston** a farmer and co-founder of the Ashtabula Food Council; and **Brian Gwin**, a former economic development specialist from Wayne County and specialist with the Ohio Agriculture Research and Development Center. This report summarizes key topics that emerged from the discussion.

**PRESENTATION**

**“Local Food and Economic Development- The Role of Planning Agencies”**  
**Presented by Brian Williams, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC)**

**Key Definitions:** To set the framework, Brian began his presentation discussing their efforts to establish a regional food council in central Ohio, clarifying some key terms. **Planning** implies the coordination needed to bring together all of the pieces of a food system. Government policy is just one aspect of that. Referring to a regional effort as a **“food council”** as opposed to a **“food policy council”** implies that it looks beyond policy,

considering the development of the food system as a whole. “**Local food planning**” involves bringing the right mix of people to the table, making sure that there is broad representation from the entire food system, including a mix of urban concerns (nutrition, food access, community gardens, jobs) and rural interest (production, supply chain, land-use). The “**local food system**” is a systemic description that includes the production, aggregation, distribution, marketing, and consumption of food. The local food system does not need to be centrally controlled, but can include the cultivation of linkages between all of the components. The “**regional**” component of a local food system basically identifies a shared economic geography, but boundaries should remain flexible. For Northeast Ohio, this includes the area from Ashtabula to Lorain counties and south to Wayne and Stark counties, an area that covers 12-16 counties depending upon which maps you look at. However, these boundaries should be fluid and not seen as excluding other adjoining counties.

Regional Food Councils: A part of this forum and current initiative is to look at the formation of a regional food council for Northeast Ohio. A council should not be seen as a rigid or formal structure, but rather an aggregation of key people involved with or representing different aspects of the food system. It helps to involve leaders that have influence of represent key networks. In central Ohio, bringing in Tony Logan with the USDA’s Rural Development office in Ohio and Mark Barbash with the finance fund to co-chair the effort helped to bring some key players to the table. Part of the function of a regional food council can be to bring together more local or county-based food councils for learning. But the council as a whole can help groups speak with a common voice and find solutions to shared challenges. Food councils can also be helpful for coordinating projects in the broader region, such as reviving heritage canning industries or organizing food hubs. A key function of a regional food council is to foster this cross-regional collaboration, enabling groups to build on what each other are doing rather than regarding each other suspiciously as competitors. How do you think like a region? Focus on helping groups form niches in the regional food system, collaborate with neighbors who might have other and possibly complementary specializations, and build on existing food businesses already serving the region.

Who’s at the Table? A food council will ideally include a broad coverage of local, county, and regional interests. Ideally, a food council will include farmers, food businesses, public health, economic development, institutional buyers, local government, OSU extension, community colleges/vocational tech, food banks, financial institutions, and restaurants/retailers. Every group should also seek to have a “wet blanket” or an individual who’s role is to bring up the questions that people do not want to hear, but, nonetheless, need to answer. They bring a skeptical approach that can be helpful to developing a more thought out plan. A key presence to have at the table is an entity that has **convening power**.

Planning agencies are one such partner that can play an important convening role. They might not be expected to run a food council or create one, but their super-power is in the ability to hold meetings, bringing people to the table that might not always find themselves at the table.

Economic Development: Economic development also provides a key motivation for convening. Regional or local food systems help to keep food dollars circulating between local communities. Economic development partners can be helpful for creating new markets or options for farmers, adding value through job creation, and building capacity for the consistency of supply required by schools, hospitals, colleges, or grocers. Community colleges and vocational schools play an essential role in economic development. They will be the places that can train the next generation of farmers, butchers, or food processors who also provide support for business planning. Overall, Ohioans spend about \$50 billion per year on food, a reflection of Ohio's distribution of urban centers (Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo) in combination with productive farmland. Despite this, it is estimated that less than 5% of spending is local, meaning that Ohio may be sending \$47.5 billion food dollars out of the state every year- money that could be helping to create jobs, keep farmers on their land, cultivate new enterprises, or improve the access to healthy foods in urban food deserts. As one example, 90% of cows are processed in states surrounding Ohio and milk is often processed out of state and brought into Ohio. These are activities that could better occur within the state, retaining economic opportunities here.

Key Challenges: The key challenges that limit the growth of local food systems include: ensuring that farmers grow more to meet existing demand, increasing the capacity of existing processing and distribution businesses to meet local needs, creating food hub to more effectively market locally grown foods, and finding financing and capital. The overall goal and ultimate challenge is to build a system that keeps food dollars at home, increases profitable opportunities for farmers, creates jobs in the food sector, and guarantees access to healthy food for ALL people. Food hubs are becoming a key focal point for the growth of local food systems. However, there's a risk with food hubs becoming more of a buzz word and the new shiny object that communities are seeking to have. A food hub itself is not enough to grow the local food economy. There is a need for multiple food hubs- a network and linkages based on regional specializations. The food hub is to the local food farmer what the grain elevator is to corn and soybean farmers. The farmers can focus more on growing and the food hub helps to cultivate the marketing channels, facilitating aggregation, processing and packaging, distribution logistics, and marketing.

Central Ohio Regional Food Council: The Central Ohio food council initially started as a forum for sharing information, but later grew into more action-oriented task forces that identified and examined specific supply chain gaps and barriers, encouraging new business

models, enlisting business support where policy changes are needed, and helping funders bring capital to the table. Some key task forces include the ***meat industry task force*** (looking for bottlenecks in region's meat processing capacity, they determined a lack of cold storage and brought key players up and down the food chain to think about solutions), a ***distribution and logistics task force*** (developing virtual food hubs to link key businesses, developing tools for logistics, and assessing ways to utilize existing businesses, trucks, and infrastructure already available in the region), and a food waste task force (working with restaurants/institutions that want to compost waste, addressing challenges facing those that want to compost, bringing together key players with EPA, haulers, and solid waste authorities to develop a comprehensive solution). Some of the resources that the central Ohio regional food council is developing, include working with the Ohio Association of Regional Councils which has links with community leaders, serves multiple counties, and has local expertise and staffing capacity that can be helpful. The National Good Food Network recently completed a food hub study that shows that regional councils or COGS can be leaders for food system planning, helping to coordinate and lead "good food financial planning" initiatives. For food system financing, they are working on building relationships with financiers, bankers, foundations, and other lenders and then working with other stakeholders to promote efforts to create loan-ready projects.

Northeast Ohio Challenges: Northeast Ohio communities share some common themes around land-use and urban sprawl, but remain largely fragmented politically and geographically. Northeast Ohio has four population centers and several regional planning agencies (NOACA, NEFCO, Eastgate), but efforts need to be made to better connect these assets. Food and agriculture development also emerged as a key area of focus for the Vibrant NEO (Northeast Ohio) 2040, which are fundamental to the economic development and land-use priorities of the plan. Overall, the key is to think systemically, find ways to collaborate around the region, and determine how food and agriculture projects fit in with the broader land-use and economic development directions identified in the Vibrant NEO plan.

## **NORTHEAST OHIO REGIONAL FOOD PLANNING FORUM PANEL RESPONSES:**

Following Brian William's presentation, four panelists offered their perspectives from their own unique vantage-points in the Northeast Ohio food system:

Urban Land-Use Perspectives of Bob Brown, Former Planning Director for City of Cleveland: For the City of Cleveland, urban agriculture became a desirable land-use in response to a vacant lot challenge. Vacant lots can be liabilities for communities and are costly for cities to maintain. The city worked with the Cuyahoga County Chapter of OSU

Extension to encourage more urban farming, including changes in land-use zoning for the city to support agriculture as a principal use of a residential lot. This means that parcels can be zoned for urban agriculture, including a level of protection for community gardens, market gardens, or urban farms. Historically, city zoning restricted agriculture. For example, a chicken coop had to be at least 500 feet from an adjacent residency which, given urban densities, made it impossible to keep chickens. The city changed the zoning from 500 to 5 feet from adjacent lot lines. City planners developed regulations, but city council had to adopt them and it relied on a handful of city council champions to get the legislation through. The city councilors representing wards with higher vacant land inventories were generally more supportive, while those in more suburban-style developments without a lot of vacant lots were more concerned about noise, insects, and odor. Education needed to happen to reduce concerns about chickens, including listening to constituents and addressing concerns. For example, a bee expert was brought in from OSU to address bee-sting allergy concerns expressed by some constituents. There was also the need to insure that urban farms remain sanitary and clean. Since the building code department lacked the capacity to enforce sanitary issue, the health department was enlisted to develop enforcement processes for odor or noise issues.

Local Food Systems and Mid-Size Cities Perspectives of Elsa Higby, Grow Youngstown: Elsa operates Grow Youngstown as a local food initiative that includes a Community-Supported Agriculture service for Youngstown and Warren as well as promotion of urban agriculture. Elsa also participated as a co-founder of the Mahoning Valley Food Coalition. Food policy efforts began by developing and passing food charters with a statement of values for Youngstown and Warren, which made it easier to get later zoning changes and land-use overlays to allow for urban agriculture. Regulations included issues like farm stands for sale of produce to composting. Getting chickens approved is still facing some difficulties. The food coalition played a role in organizing partnering organizations to successfully obtain a grant for the Local Food/Local Places program. This was helpful for creating a platform for bringing together regional stakeholders, although they are still trying to get more economic or political heavy weights to join the effort. Grow Youngstown is a social enterprise focused on direct local food projects, including using urban agriculture as a tool for vacant land re-use and entrepreneurial farming. Grow Youngstown also works with rural farmers in the Mahoning Valley area with a “hyper-local” focus of 30 miles. Most of the farmers that sell to their Community Supported Agriculture program are small and/or beginning farmers. Grow Youngstown helps the farmers develop markets or sell to Grow Youngstown. Farmers are doing well with new markets, but often do not have time for participating in meetings, so finding ways to keep their voice at the table is key.

Rural Perspectives on Local Food Systems with Courtney Johnston from the Ashtabula Food Council: Unlike other, more urban counties which have mostly non-profit and

governmental organization representatives, about 50-60% of the membership for the Ashtabula Food Council includes farmers. Ashtabula County is a more rural-based county. Instead of more top-down economic development approaches, their focus is on a community-level, bottom-up approach. A community education initiative focused on farm tours and a film series as ways to keep growers talking. They plan to organize a growers summit once everyone is finished with their growing season. Much of the interest among growers is to have a more neutral forum outside of common political divisions where they can link and connect. The group began meeting at the beginning of 2015 and voted on a variety of initiatives to prioritize next steps for their work. They started a producers farmers market in Geneva with the goal of evolving that into a central pick-up spot for out-of-county buyers. They started a food hub planning group that was looking at the potential for better connecting farmers in the area to markets, mostly outside of the county. The group is looking into an on-line ordering space with the eventual possibility of developing a physical facility. Overall, Ashtabula has an abundance of cheap and available land without the development pressures faced by other counties and a more mixed base of agriculture that is not as dominated by corn and soybean production. Some of the other projects that are of interest are encouraging more young farmers, coordinating distribution among farmers, and transferring WIC and SNAP benefit programs developed in other counties into Ashtabula County, where a more regional system can make resources available for the high percentage of rural residents that face poverty and food access challenges.

Agriculture as Economic Development perspectives with Brian Gwin, Ohio Agriculture Research and Development Center: Brian Gwin gained a lot of perspectives on how to link agriculture and economic development through his role for 7 years with the Wayne County Economic Development Council. Wayne County, also a largely rural county, sees itself as the lifeblood of Northeast Ohio for food and agriculture infrastructure. They serve a large region that includes western Pennsylvania. To facilitate economic development, they organized the Ag Success Team which included a mix of area stakeholders including the farm bureau, the Small Farm Institute, the Countryside Conservancy, soil and water districts, extension, and others. The group gets together monthly and focuses on ag-bio science efforts, not just food. The group works to synchronize around common goals, with land-use being the number one challenge facing the county. Urban sprawl and the conversion of farmsteads into smaller parcels undermines the capacity for agricultural operations to cluster around supporting infrastructure. Their response focused on working with townships to support farmland programs or comprehensive planning processes as well as developing incentive programs to entice agri-business to expand (i.e. Food processing, supporting food businesses, enterprise zones, dairy plants, potting soil businesses, multi-species slaughter plants, winery development, small farm equipment, livestock promotions, anaerobic digesters, and agri-tourism all received assistance). An

estimated 200 job creation commitments were secured through a \$115 million in investments. The location of the Ohio Agriculture Research and Development Center is a significant asset for Wayne County, including researchers and educators and the BuyHio research park. Despite its being a largely rural county, there is still a need to create “agricultural security areas” and enterprise zones that preserve agricultural operations and support their expansion. There are also continuing conflicts with livestock operations in growing rural residential areas and the effects of gas pipelines on agricultural producers.

### **POINTS OF DISCUSSION:**

#### **Are farmers able to scale-up based on new local markets?**

Capital remains the biggest challenge facing farmers who desire to scale-up. Local Roots in Wooster struggles to increase product availability without available capital to farmers to invest in new capacities. Grow Youngstown uses their share purchasing to create capital for farmers to increase their capacity during the growing season. One farmer put a lettuce processing and cleaning facility off of their shed to increase their capacity. In Ashtabula County, chefs create spreadsheets for growers to see what the potential demand might be for restaurants. The biggest challenge in Ashtabula County remains efficient distribution. About 60% of the population is in a small area north of Interstate 90. Farmers are scattered across the county and out-of-county buyers need a central place for pick-up.

#### **Can large institutions purchase some percentage of local?**

The participation of larger institutions presents an opportunity. However, there is a need for large volumes of food that is chopped, sorted, cleaned, and packaged consistently each week. Farmers have to shift to provide a high volume/lower price market. In Ashtabula County alone, there are multi-million dollar clients (University Hospitals, Lake Erie Correctional Institute, School Districts). Price remains a challenge, as free and reduced lunches are a large part of Ashtabula County’s school meal programs.

#### **How can farm to school take hold?**

Institutional buyers like schools are a large part of the regional food process and there is large demand at these institutions. However, much of the local food capacity at this point is on the “boutique” side of things, including direct sales to customers through farmers’ markets or CSA’s or farm-to-table arrangements with white-table restaurants. There is a need for new business models for aggregators or cooperatives, an emerging area of opportunity. Two items are important to increasing farm-to-school sales. First, it is important start with something that can be done now. Establishing a track record builds confidence and helps to pave the way for the next item. Second, there is a need for

supporting facilities, with cold storage and limited processing being the priority (capacity to slice, dice, mince, or chop). From a rural perspective, tiny steps need to be taken to ratchet up slowly given existing county resources, which are limited in comparison to urban centers.

### **How does land-use policy play into local food systems effort?**

The Vibrant NEO 2040 plan laid out different growth and land-use scenarios. The status quo will lead to a significant amount of land for residential development. Scenarios involving greater infill development will reduce the square miles devoted to residential development. Agricultural preservation should be viewed as an urban infill tool. Reducing available land on the periphery for development can help to motivate increased urban infill development. Another emerging dimension of land-use that is increasing in importance is the water quality of Lake Erie. The “farm-to-faucet” initiative is looking at the water quality impacts of agriculture. 60% of the Lake Erie basin in Ohio is devoted to agricultural production.

### **How can the process be inclusive of farmer input?**

A key question for a larger regional council is how planners and business people can adjust timing of projects to gather farmer input. There is a need to increased farmer representation. If it’s not possible to get farmers directly to attend, then the involvement of farmer-based associations is important, including the Farmers Union, Farm Bureau, OEFFA, soil/water districts, and extension. There is also a need to get around the divisiveness and partisanship of some farmers association and focus on things from an economic perspective.

## **AREAS OF FOCUS FOR REGIONAL FOOD COUNCIL:**

Out of the presentation and discussions, four potential areas of focus emerged for future regional food council work:

- ***Process design for grower input:*** it is key to design the process to maximize the input and participation of farmers. Hosting meetings or an annual food Congress during the off-season could help to increase farmer involvement. Also, finding associations or representatives of farmers to participate can also help to keep farmers voices at the table.
- ***Beginning/Young/Transitional Farmers:*** There is a need to focus on increasing the supply capacity of locally grown and distributed foods. However, this will also require new programs and supports for beginning and young farmers or transitional farmers (farmers moving from commodity food production to



diversified production for local markets). Community colleges and vocational schools can serve an important role in training new generation farmers.

- **Food Hub Network:** It is clear that a major bottleneck to the growth of local food systems is the existence of facilities that can help to connect farmers with larger-volume buyers, such as schools or institutions. Looking at investing resources in cold storage, centralized aggregation, and limited processing (slicing, packaging, etc.) will be pre-requisites for taking advantage of emerging institutional markets.
- **Connecting Urban Infill/Rural Preservation Efforts:** Land preservation will remain a significant challenge for Northeast Ohio's agriculture. Status quo development patterns will only lead to an increase in sprawling land-use, vacancy in traditional urban cores, and fragmentation of farmland. Connecting urban infill and the revitalization of Northeast Ohio's traditional urban cores needs to occur in tandem with efforts to preserve farmland and encourage greater clustering of agricultural operations around processing, aggregation, or distribution facilities.