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Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning

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Adopted by the Legislative and Policy Committee, April 13, 2007
Adopted by the Chapter Delegate Assembly, April 14, 2007
Adopted by the Board of Directors, April 15, 2007
Final Policy Guide, May 11, 2007

INTRODUCTION

Food is a sustaining and enduring necessity. Yet among the basic essentials for life — air, water, shelter, and food — only food has been absent over the years as a focus of serious professional planning interest. This is a puzzling omission because, as a discipline, planning marks its distinctiveness by being comprehensive in scope and attentive to the temporal dimensions and spatial interconnections among important facets of community life.

Several reasons explain why planners have paid less attention to food issues when compared with long-standing planning topics such as economic development, transportation, the environment, and housing. Among these reasons are:

1. a view that the food system — representing the flow of products from production, through processing, distribution, consumption, and the management of wastes, and associated processes — only indirectly touches on the built environment, a principal focus of planning's interest;
2. a sense that the food system isn't broken, so why fix it; and,
3. a perception that the food system meets neither of two important conditions under which planners act — i.e., dealing with public goods like air and water; and planning for services and facilities in which the private sector is unwilling to invest, such as public transit, sewers, highways, and parks.

Yet, over the last few years, interest in food system issues is clearly on the rise in the planning community. In 2005 at the APA National Planning Conference in San Francisco, a special track of sessions on food planning subjects was held for the first time in APA's history. An unexpectedly high number of 80 planners responded to the call for papers for this track. In 2006, a follow-up track of sessions took place at the San Antonio APA conference. Special journal issues devoted entirely to food planning have included the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (Summer 2004) and *Progressive Planning* (Winter 2004). Courses on community food planning are being offered for the first time by several graduate planning programs. Another sign of progress was a white paper on food planning prepared in late 2005 and presented to the Delegates Assembly at the 2006 APA conference. Approved subsequently by the APA Legislative and Policy Committee, the white paper became the impetus for preparing this Policy Guide, which provides a vision and suggests ways for planners to become engaged in community and regional food planning.

The following are a few converging factors that explain the heightened awareness among planners that the food system is indeed significant:

- Recognition that food system activities take up a significant amount of urban and regional land
- Awareness that planners can play a role to help reduce the rising incidence of hunger on the one hand, and obesity on the other
- Understanding that the food system represents an important part of community and regional economies
- Awareness that the food Americans eat takes a considerable amount of fossil fuel energy to produce, process, transport, and dispose of
- Understanding that farmland in metropolitan areas, and therefore the capacity to produce food for local and regional markets, is being lost at a strong pace
- Understanding that pollution of ground and surface water, caused by the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture adversely affects drinking water supplies
- Awareness that access to healthy foods in low-income areas is an increasing problem for which urban agriculture can offer an important solution
- Recognition that many benefits emerge from stronger community and regional food systems

Current planning activities already affect the food system and its links with communities and regions. For

example, land use planners may use growth management strategies to preserve farm and ranch land, or recommend commercial districts where restaurants and grocery stores are located, or suggest policies to encourage community gardens and other ways of growing food in communities. Economic development planners may support the revitalization of main streets with traditional mom-and-pop grocery stores, or devise strategies to attract food processing plants to industrial zones. Transportation planners may create transit routes connecting low-income neighborhoods with supermarkets, and environmental planners may provide guidance to farmers to avoid adverse impacts on lakes and rivers. This policy guide seeks to strengthen connections between traditional planning and the emerging field of community and regional food planning. As such, two overarching goals are offered for planners:

1. Help build stronger, sustainable, and more self-reliant community and regional food systems, and,
2. Suggest ways the industrial food system may interact with communities and regions to enhance benefits such as economic vitality, public health, ecological sustainability, social equity, and cultural diversity.

This Policy Guide on community and regional food planning presents seven general policies, each divided into several specific policies. For each specific policy, a number of roles planners can play are suggested. The seven general policies are:

1. Support comprehensive food planning process at the community and regional levels;
2. Support strengthening the local and regional economy by promoting local and regional food systems;
3. Support food systems that improve the health of the region's residents;
4. Support food systems that are ecologically sustainable;
5. Support food systems that are equitable and just;
6. Support food systems that preserve and sustain diverse traditional food cultures of Native American and other ethnic minority communities;
7. Support the development of state and federal legislation to facilitate community and regional food planning discussed in general policies #1 through #6.

FINDINGS

How planning operates to balance the need for an efficient food system with the goals of economic vitality, public health, ecological sustainability, social equity, and cultural diversity will present a formidable challenge to planners who engage in community and regional food planning, and in planning for various community sectors such as transportation, economic development and the environment. This section covers salient facts and trends about how the food system impacts localities and regions and provides some examples of progress being made by planners.

1. General Effects of the Food System on Local and Regional Areas

Today's industrial food system is a product of significant scientific and institutional advances over the previous centuries, and generally provides an abundant and safe supply of food to most people in the country. It has paralleled developments in mass production and economies of scale in other industries and is characterized by the use of significant amounts of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and new shipping technologies. It contributes nearly $1 trillion to the national economy — or more than 13 percent of the GNP — and employs 17 percent of the labor force (American Farmland Trust, 2003). Food sector jobs represent close to 15 percent of the total workforce of many communities, while retail sales from food outlets such as grocery stores and eating and drinking places can be as much as a fifth of a community's total retail sales (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999).

However, the food system is not without problems for communities and regions. A clear trend in all parts of the food system is greater concentration of ownership, which means that decisions affecting communities are increasingly made by absentee business owners. For example, in 2000, the top five food retailers accounted for 43 percent of sales, up from 24 percent in 1997 (Hendrickson et al., 2001). Mergers of chain supermarkets often result in the closure of stores, thereby reducing residents' access to healthy food, and lowered tax base and employment. Another trend, vertical integration, leads to increased consolidation of different activities such as food production, processing, and distribution under the control of single entities.

Today's food system has also contributed to the increased incidence of obesity and diet-related disease; loss and erosion of diverse culinary traditions represented by First Nations and immigrant cultures; and ecological crises including extinction of species, declining aquifers, and deforestation. Government policies sometimes exacerbate these trends due to the increasing political influence of food industry giants.

While there is little doubt that the industrial food system will remain dominant, more communities and regions

are acting to resolve some of these problems by developing alternative, local, and sustainable food systems. This Policy Guide offers suggestions for planners to engage in planning that both strengthens community and regional food systems and encourages the industrial food system to provide multiple benefits to local areas.

Specific trends related to the food system's impacts on localities and regions, and examples of positive actions are described below.

- ***Loss of Farmland.*** Although agriculture is America's dominant land use, with nearly 1 billion acres of land in agricultural use, farmland in metropolitan areas is disappearing at a rapid pace. "Urban-influenced" counties account for more than half (56 percent) the total U.S. farm production, 63 percent of dairy production, and 86 percent of fruit and vegetable production; yet these counties have annual population growth rates more than twice the national average. This rapid growth threatens our capacity to obtain fresh and local food. (American Farmland Trust, 2002).
- ***Aging of Farmers.*** One fourth of U.S. farmers and half of farm landlords are at least 65 years old; by comparison, about 3 percent of the U.S. labor force falls in this age group (Gale, 2002). Farmers and landlords aged 65 and over own a combined one-third of farm assets. The aging of farmers reflects the weakening of "family farm" institutions, including intergenerational transfer of farm assets. Consequences with implications for planning include the speeding up of the conversion of agricultural land and the consolidation of agricultural land into larger operations.
- ***Protecting Agriculture.*** Across the country communities are preparing plans to protect agriculture. A countywide plan in Marin County, California, identifies several policies to overcome challenges facing local agriculture and farmers. These include policies to protect agricultural land from sprawl, protect productive agricultural soils, support sustainable water supplies, and enhance agricultural viability.
- ***Farm Bill and Local Areas.*** All Titles of the Farm Bill, including nutrition programs, commodity programs, trade, conservation, and rural development, have implications for urban and rural communities and therefore for local planning. For example, as Dallas County, Iowa, urbanizes, its county soil and water conservation district and the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the USDA now work with developers to employ land conservation measures and keep soil on construction sites (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, no date).

2. Food System Links with the Economy

- ***Globalization of the Food System.*** Increasingly, food comes from more distant sources, with serious consequences such as the loss of older local food system infrastructure, and threats to the survival of many U.S. farms. Although the U.S. rightfully prides itself as the breadbasket of the world, in 2006 for the first time, the value of food imported into the U.S. exceeded the value of food exported from the U.S. (USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, 2006). Globalization also leads to greater consumer ignorance about the sources of food. As people know less and less of where their food comes from, how it is produced and with what impacts on communities and the environment, preservation of land and the natural and built resources upon which local agriculture depends becomes more difficult.
- ***Rural Decline.*** Farms between 50-500 acres and 500-1,000 acres, the largest share of "working farms" and those that fall between local and commodity markets, decreased by about 7 and 11 percent respectively between 1997 and 2002, while those over 2,000 acres have gone up nearly 5 percent. This loss of "the middle" in farming threatens rural communities by making them more economically insecure and changes land stewardship practices handed down over generations. (Kirschenmann et al., no date).
- ***Economic Impacts of Local Purchasing.*** Robert Waldrop, a 2006 candidate for mayor of Oklahoma City, highlights the under-appreciated economic development possibilities of buying food directly from area farmers. Using USDA data and analyses, he identifies $2.1 billion in economic activity in Central Oklahoma if Oklahoma County residents bought their eggs, poultry, meat, vegetables, flour, and milk and dairy products directly from farmers in the region.
- ***A Local Food Purchasing Policy.*** In 2006, the Woodbury County (Iowa) Board of Supervisors adopted a "Local Food Purchase Policy," mandating the purchase of locally grown organic food for department events at which food is served. This action has the potential of providing $281,000 in annual food purchases to a local farmer-owned cooperative.

3. Food System Links with Health

- ***Farm Policy and Health.*** Federal farm policy since the 1950s has encouraged the overproduction (and therefore the driving down of prices) of a few commodities such as corn and soybeans, all with serious implications for farmers, rural and urban communities, and the health of consumers. Support for fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, has been low (Nestle, 2002). Low commodity prices have led to the heavy use by the food industry of products such as high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils, which are linked with obesity and related illnesses. Processed grocery foods, frozen foods and baked goods represented over 40 percent of supermarket sales in 2000, while produce claimed only 9 percent

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Policy Guide on Solid and Hazardous Waste Management (2002)

Policy Guide on Water Resources Management (2002)

Policy Guide on Smart Growth (2002)

Policy Guide on Planning for Sustainability (2000)

Policy Guide on Agricultural Land Preservation (1999)

Policy Guide on Endangered Species and Habitat Protection (1999)

Policy Guide on Neighborhood Collaborative Planning (1998)

Policy Guide on Surface Transportation (1997)