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# Intersect

## Where Food Planning and Health

Welcome to the next big trend.

By Kimberley Hodgson

Like air, water, and shelter, food is essential for life. Food plays a central role in our health, customs, heritage, and culture. For planners, the corollary is that healthy communities also require healthy food systems. That is why they are now going beyond transportation, land use, and urban design when considering public health.

“Our food system is broken,” said David Wallinga, director of the Food and Health Program Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, in his opening remarks at the 2009 Food Systems and Public Health meeting in Warrenton, Virginia. The meeting convened a multidisciplinary

group of researchers and practitioners in public health, child obesity, economics, sustainable agriculture, food systems, and other fields.

As Wallinga noted, the inadequacies of our food system are more apparent than ever before. The most affordable, accessible, and overeaten foods are dense with calories but poor in nutrients. Four of the six leading causes of death in the U.S.—heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers—are diet-related chronic diseases. And waste from large-scale agriculture threatens the environmental quality of our watersheds.

Further, an increasing number of



Lorena Ramos



Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program

Opposite: This Hispanic store in Baltimore delivers staple foods, fresh produce, and meat to the surrounding neighborhood. Above: The farmers market in Renton, Washington, started with seed money from the city. A convenience store in the San Joaquin Valley is where one youngster says he buys candy because it's cheaper than healthy food.

foodborne illnesses can be traced to the irrigation of produce fields with water contaminated by concentrated animal feeding operations. The nonmedical use of antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals in animal husbandry may threaten the effectiveness of these drugs for humans and lead to new strains of foodborne pathogens. The tilling of soil, the production of livestock and associated waste, and the fossil fuels used in the production, processing, packaging, and transportation of food all contribute to greenhouse gas emissions (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) and poor air quality.

The general public is responding, partly because of the wide exposure given to Michael Pollan's book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, and documentaries such as *Super Size Me* and *King Corn*. People want to know how and where food is grown, how it is processed and distributed, where to buy it, what and how much of it to eat, and how it is disposed of.

As a result—despite the environmental and health challenges that the industrial food system presents—individuals, community groups, organizations, and local governments are reforming local and regional food systems across the country: one shovel, garden, fork, compost, or in this case, one plan or partnership, at a time.

#### Baltimore's partnerships

In 2006, during the first update to Baltimore's comprehensive master plan in 45 years, city planners discovered that residents were concerned about inadequate access to healthy, affordable food. "Access to neighborhood services is one goal that came out of the comprehensive planning process. Getting a grocery store was at the top of everyone's list," says Seema Iyer, cochair of the Baltimore Food Policy Task Force and chief of Research and Strategic Planning for the city's planning department.

In the late 1990s, 16 new grocery stores opened in Baltimore, a result of then Mayor Kurt Schmoke's grocery store initiative. The bumper crop of new stores was established in large part because local neighborhood development corporations showcased and marketed the city as a good place to do business. However, poor food quality remained a

problem in many of the city's low-income neighborhoods.

Some years later, Tara Penders, a former planner with the city who was working on the comprehensive plan update and had an interest in the connection between health and planning, discovered that Baltimore health department officials were becoming increasingly concerned about childhood obesity and how it was partly caused by lack of access to healthy food. The 2007 *Report of Baltimore City Council Task Force on Childhood Obesity* found that more than 40 percent of female high school students in Baltimore were overweight or at risk of becoming overweight versus 25 percent at the state and national levels.

Also in 2007, Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health released a study that validated residents' concerns. It showed that Baltimore residents living in predominantly black and low-income census tracts had poor access to healthy foods, paid 20 percent more for basic food items (such as milk) in corner stores than in supermarkets, and lacked convenient access to healthy foods such as whole wheat bread, skim milk, and fruits and vegetables.

"We realized we needed to tackle the food issue holistically," Seema Iyer says. "At some levels there appeared to be enough supermarkets, but we discovered deeper issues. For example, buses do not consider shopping centers as a destination. We also have a lot of corner stores that offer poor quality food. People buy whatever is there, which is not terribly healthy. It may be convenient, but it's not necessarily high quality. We want to sustain these corner stores, but figure out a way to improve the quality of foods sold."

Recognizing these converging factors, the city convened a series of meetings involving the Baltimore City Health Department, the Department of Planning, and Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, which ultimately led to the formation of the Baltimore Food Policy Task Force—one of the first food policy coalitions jointly led by a city's planning and health departments.

Cochaired by Iyer and Olivia Farrow, Baltimore's Acting Commissioner of Health and Director of Environmental Health, the task force is systematically

addressing these food access disparities and linking nutrition priorities to broader community priorities. The task force met for the first time in February.

"We are happy to get our foot in the door," Iyer says. "We are looking for collaboration where possible. We have a mayor [Sheila Dixon] who is pushing a healthy agenda. We have citizen awareness of sustainability. And we are going through a zoning code rewrite. All of these alignments allow us to push the envelope."

As a step in that direction, the Baltimore City Planning Commission in February adopted the Baltimore Sustainability Plan, which explicitly states the need to establish a food system that supports public health, quality of life, and environmental stewardship and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Other local groups have been involved in the food-and-health issue as well. "School policy is health policy. Housing policy is health policy. Land-use policy is health policy. Health policy is not isolated," says Leslie Bernard, director of special projects for Associated Black Charities, who worked closely with Baltimore communities to develop a 2008 action plan to halt the city's rise of childhood obesity rates—the Baltimore Blueprint for Healthy Outcomes in Children: Addressing Childhood Obesity. "We need to address [individual] behavior, but also the social, physical, and environmental context."

In other words, land-use, zoning, school, and transportation policy; crime and safety; grocery store and food outlet locations; and after-school and community programming all impact health.

#### King County's comprehensive plan

The comprehensive plan update adopted in King County, Washington, in October 2008 is one of very few plans in the U.S. that systematically and comprehensively addresses food system issues. King County, which borders Seattle, has a vibrant local agricultural economy but faces growth pressures. The 2008 update expands on the county's history of smart growth—walkable neighborhoods, open space and farmland preservation, transportation choice, and directed development—to address new and emerging issues like health, equity, environmental justice, and climate change.

Food, not typically a comprehensive planning topic for most communities, is stated to be as important to health and well-being as air and water. The document argues for a local and regional food system that is "ecologically and economically sustainable and that improves the health of the county's residents." Instead of creating a separate plan element to address food and health issues, the King County plan integrates those concepts throughout, specifically in the elements devoted to rural legacy and natural resource lands; urban communities; parks, open space, and cultural resources; and economic development.

A sustainable food system, according to the plan, means supporting small-scale and family-owned horticulture and livestock farming operations, and evaluating and reforming local policies (such as planning and zoning) to support and provide access to healthy foods.

Early in the comprehensive plan update process, King County created an internal advisory group, composed of representatives from all county departments. The health department, under the direction of Anne Bikle, former environmental public health planner for the region's health department (Public Health–Seattle and King County), scanned the country for examples of healthy language in county comprehensive plans and offered suggestions on how to integrate food systems into the plan. "She looked through all of them and started to draft ideas," says Erin MacDougall, a program manager for the same agency and a member of the Seattle–King County Acting Food Policy Council.

The council also helped to inform the comprehensive plan update process. Council members Branden Born, assistant professor in the Department of Urban Design and Planning at the University of Washington, and consultant Mary Embleton submitted a memorandum outlining the council's support for draft policies and suggesting new policies. Among the new policies they recommended were those covering the production, processing, distribution, sales and marketing, waste generation and disposal, and access to food; the water and labor needs and issues of the food system; and the impact of the system on climate change and sustainability.

## A New Direction at the USDA



U.S. Department of Agriculture

Kathleen Merrigan was deputy secretary of agriculture for only a month when she sat for an interview with Kimberley Hodgson, manager of APA's Planning and Community Health Research Center. Before signing on with the federal government, Merrigan taught at Tufts University and was director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment program at the university's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. She holds a doctorate in environmental planning from MIT.

The interview took place in Merrigan's new office on the National Mall in mid-May. What follows is an edited version of the conversation.

**Q** In light of your background, what specific steps do you suggest that planners take to improve the U.S. food system?

**A** Planners have a large role to play. [Here is the context.] I've just been given the challenge by the president and the secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, to lead USDA's local and regional food systems initiative, which we're calling Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food. There's a lot of enthusiasm for this initiative. There are a lot of people who are excited again about agriculture; food policy councils are starting up all over the country. That's great, but when I sit at my big desk here on the Mall, I am struck by the complexity of the challenge before me. Reinvigorating local food systems is a structural challenge of great magnitude.

So where do planners come in? The planning profession [encourages] people to grapple with those complexities, to see how the interconnected parts fit together. I hope that planners across the country embrace the public fervor for local food and help communities figure out what can be done. Given the unique needs and the various characteristics of a community, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. My job here in Washington is to figure out what barriers might be in place, some of them government-constructed barriers, and figure out how to tear them down.

**Q** In honor of Earth Day 2009, Vilsack declared the entire grounds at the USDA Jamie L. Whitten Building as the "People's Garden" and unveiled plans to create a sustainable landscape on the grounds. In what tangible ways will the USDA support urban agriculture for commercial and noncommercial purposes nationwide?

**A** The inauguration of the People's Garden was my first public appearance. Those who don't know the history of the Mall may be interested to learn that this great open space was originally USDA's research farm. When you look at old engravings of the U.S. Capitol, you will see cows grazing and such.

We thought it was a great opportunity to take the little bit of land we have left here at USDA headquarters and set up a demonstration garden for people to see fruits and vegetables being grown, to talk about healthy eating, to talk about organic agriculture. And we are going to expand what's there now to use the entire area for ecological landscaping.

We are [also] challenging all USDA facilities both in the U.S. and at our various overseas operations to come up with their own versions of the People's Garden.

That's just one thing, though. We are trying to bring kids back into agriculture because there is evidence that children do better in science and have greater ecological sensibilities because of gardening experiences—and they consume greater quantities of fruits and vegetables.

**Q** Do you think there is a role for urban agriculture in our urban centers?

**A** Absolutely. It's a great opportunity not only for healthy diets, but to strengthen communities. In some cases urban agriculture has helped fight crime, reconnect people through common activity, and bring families together.

**Q** How will the USDA support urban agriculture?

**A** I don't think we received a complete road map during my first month on the job, but we can engage people in the conversation about seasonal variety and supply, and we should understand more about markets. If I'm an urban consumer, is it better to drive 20 miles to pick up my share of produce at a CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] farm, or is it better to go to the Stop and Shop only two miles away?

Sometimes these issues are reduced to very simplistic equations like food miles. Food miles have been a great way to bring people to the conversation, but if we really want to do something about [sustainable food systems], we have to embrace the complexity. Again, complexity is the key to all of this.

**Q** President Obama has emphasized the need to improve the health care system. What new farm or food initiatives (and funding) may emerge as part of that focus?

**A** The president and Mrs. Obama are clearly very interested in healthy eating and very concerned about the childhood obesity epidemic. The first lady has her own garden on the lawn of the White House, which is prominently displayed for everyone to see. They even have a beehive.

The current stimulus legislation already includes a lot of new money for WIC [Women, Infants, and Children program] and SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps] benefits. We are trying to expand some of our electronic benefits opportunities in farmers markets for redemption of various kinds of government supported food aid. Will there be a lot of new money? I don't think so.

From where I sit as deputy secretary (and it's lovely to have this chair because I have the opportunity to think about reprogramming, reallocating, reprioritizing), I would be very uncomfortable going to Congress and asking for some big new money. I first have to convince myself that we've done everything we can with what we have. Just today, I sent out a memorandum to all USDA agencies to help me better understand the inventory of programs that are already facilitating local and regional food systems. And I'm establishing an interagency task force (that I'll chair) on the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative. What we want to do is think out of the box, be strategic, and think across all 26 of the USDA agencies.

**Q** Do you see any collaboration with DOT or HUD on some of the initiatives that come out of this task force?

**A** Potentially. One of the things I hope to do is try to improve the USDA's own internal food service across its agencies, because we should live what we preach and I don't think we're doing a particularly good job of that. This will take time, and it will be painful. It may involve contract renegotiations.

In fact, I don't yet know enough detail to know what cart I'm about to upset. But I would like the USDA to set the example for healthy eating in the federal workplace. I don't want to see fried chicken in [USDA-managed] cafeterias five days a week. It's going to be a complex reorganization. As I've discussed with the secretary, I would like it first to happen at USDA and for us to take our success story to other departments across the federal family.

**Q** Assuming you agree that the U.S. food system should be fair, healthy, and sustainable, what is your vision for getting there?

**A** I guess if I had to pick one word, it would be diversity. Diversity in terms of the kinds of foods. (Our genetic stock is becoming too uniform, and that makes me nervous. And it means that we are missing out on lovely, traditional heirloom crops.) Diversity of farm types and farm sizes. I want farms in all regions. (I've long been a champion of organic farmers, but I don't see the world going 100 percent organic. It's not the right fit for everyone.)

Diversity in the voices at the table when key agricultural decisions are made. That's what's so exciting about this resurgence of interest in agriculture. That's what's always drawn me to agriculture—trying to get some of the important voices amplified.

**Q** And last, what will you miss most about your position as director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment program at Tufts University's Friedman School?

My students.

Kimberley Hodgson

**MORE** WIC and SNAP are administered by the Food and Nutrition Service, a federal agency of the USDA. For more information, visit [www.fns.usda.gov/wic](http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic) and [www.fns.usda.gov/snap](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap).

While some of the suggestions from the health department and council were deleted or modified, many of the proposed food system elements were integrated into the plan. Before this plan was updated, the county addressed food solely through the lens of agricultural production. Now, for the first time in King County, people are acknowledging that "food is not just an agricultural issue, but an economic issue, a health issue," says MacDougall. "With each update, we can continue to ask questions and improve how the comprehensive plan touches upon food."

When it came to health issues, it was vital to have the political support of Ron Simms, former executive of King County, and Karen Wolf, manager of strategic planning and policy for King County's Office of Strategic Planning and Performance Management, MacDougall adds. "Being at the planning table, building trust between the health department and other decision makers was needed so that [the health department] can be seen as a collaborator and advisor and [help identify] decisions that impact health."

Gaps in the plan do exist. Few communities directly address the health impacts of industrial farming practices and the social and environmental justice issues related to farm labor and water access. "Certainly there are people who recognize that these are incredibly important issues, but other things are taking the forefront. It may be some time before these issues will be directly addressed," MacDougall says.

#### San Joaquin engages the community

The San Joaquin Valley, located in Central California, is one of the largest and richest agricultural regions in the world, but also one of the poorest. "Although the valley produces a multitude of nutritious foods, many families still struggle to put food on their tables. Dire health conditions and persistent poverty plague this vast region, despite the prosperity generated by the agriculture industry," says Genoveva Islas-Hooker, regional program coordinator for the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.

Child, adolescent, and adult obesity rates in the San Joaquin Valley (pop. 3.8 million) are the worst in the state. Many residents, including legal and illegal im-

migrants, work on large industrial farms, where they make little money, have no health insurance, and tend to purchase inexpensive but not very nutritious foods, explains Islas-Hooker.

In an effort to reduce the health and social disparities in the Valley, CCROPP—a collaboration of eight public health departments and eight community organizations—is developing community leadership tools and mobilizing the community. With CCROPP's help, several local communities in the Valley gave cameras to young teenagers and asked them to document their environment using Photovoice (a combination of images and narrative). One boy took a picture of a convenience store in his neighborhood and explained why it is cheaper to buy candy at the convenience store than it is to buy something healthy across the street at the grocery store. Other presentations were equally powerful.

The images and descriptions—some with translations provided by CCROPP—are great advocacy tools, especially for planning purposes. Keith Woodcock, community development director for the city of Delano, used the Photovoice images when gathering information for the county's comprehensive plan update. Those images were posted across the community in stores, banks, and other public places.

#### Marin County's sustainable system

Few communities directly address the impact of industrial agricultural practices on air and water quality, energy use, and public health. In November 2007, Marin County, California, adopted an innovative countywide plan that integrates the overarching theme of sustainability into its six mandatory elements and 13 additional elements.

"We spent almost a year holding workshops on the connections between sustainability, transportation, the economy, housing, and agriculture. At the time [education and outreach were] essential to gaining community support for the plan," says Alex Hinds, interim director for the Center for Sustainable Communities at Sonoma State University and former director of the Marin County Community Development Agency.

The "agriculture and food" element of the county plan addresses not only

the preservation of agricultural lands and resources, but many additional facets of the food system: agricultural viability, sustainable farming practices, and community food security. One area of focus is agricultural ecosystems, or agroecosystems, explained as the effort to "balance environmental soundness with social equity and economic viability" when considering working landscapes.

Several plan policies address the need to support local, organic, grass-fed, agricultural and other ecologically sound practices, such as dry farming, as ways to provide healthy food and increase food security. To implement such a policy, the plan recommends the review and revision of existing development code criteria and standards to ensure their consistency with the county's goals of "improved agricultural viability and preservation and restoration of the natural environment" and limiting uses "not compatible with sustainable agriculture."

"The plan reflects a broad consensus to celebrate and support local and ecologically sound agriculture. This is reflected by the notion that our local ranchers and farmers are analogous to rock stars. They feed us. Nutritious, local foods are the bedrock of our community," says Hinds.

#### What's to come?

These examples and others validate the need to support and encourage healthy, sustainable, local and regional food systems as essential elements of healthy communities. If the enthusiastic response to food-related sessions at this year's APA national conference in Minneapolis is a gauge, planners are getting the message. It seems likely that more and more innovations are on the way.

Kimberley Hodgson is the manager of APA's Planning and Community Health Research Center.

## RESOURCES

<p> FROM APA</p>	<p>APA's Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning is at <a href="http://www.planning.org/policy/guides">www.planning.org/policy/guides</a>. "Community and Regional Food Planning" (PAS Memo, September 2007), <a href="http://www.planning.org/pas/memo/2007/sep/index.htm">www.planning.org/pas/memo/2007/sep/index.htm</a>. "Zoning for Public Markets and Street Vendors" (Zoning Practice, February 2009): <a href="http://www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2009/pdf/feb.pdf">www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2009/pdf/feb.pdf</a>. A <i>Planners Guide to Community and Regional Food Planning</i> (PAS Report 554) is available at <a href="http://www.planningbooks.com">www.planningbooks.com</a>.</p>
<p>BOOKS</p>	<p><i>The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals</i>. Michael Pollan, Thorndike Press, 2006. <i>Closing the Food Gap</i>. Mark Winne, Beacon, 2008. <i>Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability</i>. Edited by C. Claire Hinrichs and Thomas A. Lyson, University of Nebraska Press, 2008. <i>Food Inc.: A Participant Guide: How Industrial Food is Making Us Sicker, Fatter, and Poorer—And What You Can Do About It</i>. Edited by Karl Weber, PublicAffairs, 2009.</p>
<p>DOCUMENTARIES</p>	<p><i>King Corn</i>, a 2004 film directed by Aaron Woolf (<a href="http://www.kingcorn.net">www.kingcorn.net</a>). <i>Food, Inc.</i>, a 2009 film by Robert Kenner (<a href="http://www.foodincmovie.com">www.foodincmovie.com</a>).</p>
<p>ONLINE</p>	<p>Baltimore Sustainability Plan: <a href="http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/planning/sustainability">www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/planning/sustainability</a>. Community Food Security Coalition: <a href="http://www.foodsecurity.org">www.foodsecurity.org</a>. King County, Washington, 2008 comprehensive plan update: <a href="http://www.kingcounty.gov/council/comprehensive_plan.aspx">www.kingcounty.gov/council/comprehensive_plan.aspx</a>. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy: <a href="http://www.iatp.org">www.iatp.org</a>. Leadership for Healthy Communities: <a href="http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org">www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org</a>. Marin County Countywide Plan 2007: <a href="http://www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/CD/main/fm/TOC.cfm">www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/CD/main/fm/TOC.cfm</a>. Planning for Healthy Places: <a href="http://www.healthyplanning.org">www.healthyplanning.org</a>.</p>
<p>LISTSERVS</p>	<p>Community Food Security Coalition Listserv: <a href="http://www.foodsecurity.org/list.html">www.foodsecurity.org/list.html</a>. Urban Planning &amp; Food Systems: <a href="https://mailman2.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/foodplanning">https://mailman2.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/foodplanning</a>.</p>