

Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan

April 2010



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Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission



THE COLUMBUS FOUNDATION

CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENT

Introduction

The Central Ohio Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group is a multi-county team convened by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) to promote the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food within the region. Our 12-county local food assessment and plan will promote efforts to:

- Ensure that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels at local markets, grocery stores, restaurants, schools and other institutions.
- Strengthen the region's economy, create local jobs in the food production, processing and distribution industries and coordinate energy-efficient distribution that provides a secure supply of many foods to people of the region.
- Preserve valuable farmland by making agriculture more profitable, and by showing planners and policymakers that farmland is important to local economies.
- Encourage policies that allow agriculture on vacant and underused land in cities and towns throughout the region, and promote the benefits and availability of local food.
- Coordinate regional local-food efforts with those of the statewide Food Policy Advisory Council that Gov. Strickland established in 2007 to promote local foods across Ohio.

The local-food assessment, conducted in the last six months of 2009, is essential to the creation of a regional food plan. It provides a snapshot of existing local-food-system components in central Ohio. There are many producers and marketers of local food; farmers markets; community gardens; businesses that process food; stores, restaurants and institutions that sell and serve local food; and groups that promote local food in central Ohio. By compiling this substantial listing and overview of those efforts, we can now begin to make connections among them and develop a credible plan to increase their size and scope.

This assessment serves two functions. First, it is a tool that enables the Working Group to: collect and analyze regional agriculture and food data; determine what local-food assets the region has; pinpoint where those assets are; connect those dots; and develop a plan. Second, it will be a resource for public policymakers and business leaders to learn about the value of local food to the regional populace and economy. Five task forces – Research, Health/Access, Agricultural Business, Land Use, and Public Awareness – were established to guide the assessment

The assessment has a wide range of other information: identification of underserved rural and urban “food deserts;” analysis of 2007 Census of Agriculture data for the 12-county region; and analysis of data that show the farm-to-market economic potential for local food in the region.

The listing of farms and local-food-related businesses was created from a variety of sources: Local Matters, a not-for-profit organization represented on the Working Group; the Ohio Department of Agriculture's (ODA) Ohio Proud program; the department's Meat Inspection and Dairy divisions; the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA), which certifies organic growers; Ohio State University (OSU) Extension offices in Knox and Licking counties, and the Extension South Center in Piketon; the Fairfield County Soil and Water Conservation District; Ohio Farm Bureau Federation; and MarketMaker, a Web-based food supply chain resource maintained by OSU Extension and other collaborators.

The Health/Access Task Force helped identify rural and urban "food deserts," working with local health departments and social service agencies and organizations in the region. Some information, particularly on rural food deserts, required assistance from the Healthy Food Access Task Force of the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council, which is compiling statewide information on rural food availability. Other food desert information came from Columbus Public Health and the Ohio Department of Health.

The Research Task Force worked with agricultural economists and sociologists at OSU to collect economic data that illustrate the importance of agriculture to the central Ohio economy and the potential growth of this sector from the creation of a regional food system. It also looked at such data as estimated total consumer food spending in the 12-county region and estimated percentage produced locally.

MORPC staff and consultants analyzed Census of Agriculture and other data to assess the impact of agriculture on the regional economy (market value of raw products), production trends on key commodities and farmland-loss data.

Section 1 – What do we mean by “local food?”

Interest in “local food” has grown in recent decades in tandem with the growth of the organic-food industry. Many individuals and organizations promote both “organic” and “local” food. However, the local-food movement does not focus exclusively on certified organic production. It includes farms with organic practices but not certification. It also includes a broader group of advocates who focus not only on how food is grown, but also on providing healthy food access for all, creating a safer system by knowing the sources of our food, and leaving a smaller carbon footprint by reducing food-distribution distances.

The growth in interest can be seen locally in the increased number of central Ohio farmers markets and the increased number of farms growing for local consumption. Locally, *Columbus Monthly* recently highlighted the growing interest with a cover story on farmers markets and local food in Franklin County. Nationally, the increased awareness can be seen in the success of bestselling books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and movies such as “Food Inc.” In addition, national organizations, such as American Farmland Trust, are promoting local food production as a way to make farms more profitable and preserve valuable farmland.

In August 2007, Governor Strickland created the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council to study local-food issues and recommend ways to increase access statewide to healthful local food and to boost the agricultural economy. That effort has coincided with the emergence of at least 12 local and regional food councils around the state.

Despite this growing and widespread interest, the definition of “local food” is difficult to pin down, and many people, businesses and organizations may define it differently. Some may limit it to the immediate jurisdictions, while other “locavores” may define it as food from within a 100-mile radius or within the state. Many grocery chains may define local as anything within 500 miles, or a day’s drive. Many people fail to distinguish among the terms “local,” “natural” and “organic.”

It’s worth noting that the “organic” label on a product does not mean it is locally produced. In practice, many large farms and national brands have reshaped the organic market in a way that is less local than it used to be.

Organic products must have at least 95 percent organic ingredients, excluding water and salt, and organic farms must be certified by a federally approved organization. Products must be free of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or genetically modified organisms, although some synthetic chemicals can be used if they are not harmful. Animals must be fed organic food, allowed access to the outdoors and be free of antibiotics. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also has a “100 Percent Organic” designation. OEFFA is Ohio’s largest organic certifying agency and uses stricter standards than USDA.

The Natural label, as regulated by USDA, is applied only to meat and poultry. When used on other products, the definition of “natural” varies. In meat, it means no chemical preservatives or artificial ingredients – but does not necessarily mean the animal is antibiotic-free, hormone-free or has had time outdoors. There also is a “Certified Naturally Grown” label with standard similar to but stricter than USDA organic certification. But the standards are privately created and not governed by USDA. Likewise, “naturally grown” does not necessarily mean local.

“Local food” does not have as clear a definition, and has no certification. But that can be an advantage as consumers can become acquainted with farmers and then make their own decisions about quality, local-orientation and farming practices.

In this assessment, we are focused primarily on food that is grown or raised in MORPC’s 12-county central Ohio region, processed and packaged in the region, distributed within the region, and sold and consumed within those 12 counties. Simply put, we are focused primarily on food that goes from seed to plate entirely within those counties.

We realize this boundary is elastic. While Columbus and Franklin County are a focal point and a marketing base for much of the food produced in the region, each of the 12 counties will have its own base, and many of those counties may reach into outlying counties in their definitions of “local.” The goal is to concentrate on the 12 central Ohio counties, while coordinating with other interested counties and the statewide Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council.

A local-food *system* is a cohesive way of producing food locally and making it readily available to all people in the region. The system includes not only producing food, but also aggregating, processing, storing, distributing, selling and consuming it. A local-food system need not be centrally controlled, but needs to include linkages among its many components. A resilient, sustainable local-food system improves the economy of the region as well as the health of its people. We are all part of the local-food system: We all eat.

It is important to stress that the definition of “local food” goes far beyond the seasonal farmers markets that many people identify with local food. Those markets are a vital, but tiny, part of a 12-county regional food system. One question the Working Group asked itself was: How do central Ohioans feed themselves on locally grown food in the middle of winter?

The answer is to process and distribute Ohio-grown food locally. To be clear, consumer purchases from individual farmers at summer markets are a small but important beginning. However, to feed Ohioans when produce is not in-season, a local-food infrastructure is needed to establish a regional *system*. A multi-faceted infrastructure should include:

- The small and large processing facilities that turn raw milk into ice cream, cheese and the milk on our tables.
- The plants that turn hogs, cattle, sheep and chickens into dinner, or that turn Ohio produce into canned or flash-frozen vegetables that Ohioans can cook in January.
- The auction barns that bring together enough fruits and vegetables from small farms to meet the needs of local grocery chains.
- The trucks and warehouses that carry food from farms and processing plants to the stores where central Ohioans buy them.
- The farmer co-ops, or other arrangements, that may emerge to aggregate a large enough supply of food products to meet the consumer demand.

Food “processing” refers to any step in changing a farm commodity into a food product for consumers. It can range from washing and bagging leafy greens to preparing and packaging a complete frozen dinner, or turning tomatoes and peppers into a canned sauce. It includes pasteurizing and bottling milk and making butter, cheese or ice cream; killing and butchering hogs, cattle, lambs, goats and poultry; flash freezing and packaging fresh produce; canning produce; sorting and bagging fresh fruit and vegetables; preparing and canning salsas and sauces; and more.

The local-food infrastructure also includes the companies that package and sell seeds to farmers, the financial institutions that lend to farmers and processors, and the workers who keep those businesses humming.

Some businesses, such as Bob Evans Farms and Lancaster Colony, maker of Marzetti dressings, are central Ohio companies, but may not be considered purveyors of local food because they have national or multi-state markets and are not necessarily focused on buying Ohio-grown ingredients. And national firms, such as Texas-based Frito-Lay, may

use Ohio-grown potatoes in their chips, but are not local companies that keep their profits in the community. It is good for the central Ohio economy when such companies use Ohio-grown products; nonetheless, that is beyond the definition of local food in this assessment.

This report is primarily concerned with Ohio-grown food that is packaged, sold and eaten in central Ohio. Why? Because an intentional, well-planned local-food system will:

- Strengthen the local economy.
- Create processing and distribution jobs.
- Keep food dollars re-circulating locally.
- Get fresh, healthful local food into the hands, and mouths, of urban and rural families who lack easy access to good food.
- Preserve productive central Ohio farmland by making local agriculture economically more viable.
- Reduce local dependence on long-distance transportation and petroleum, and thereby reduce the production of greenhouse gases.
- Be an important part of broader efforts to promote sustainability in the region by making our region more resilient in the face of future economic and resource shocks.

This is not a new idea. Until the 1950s and 1960s, Ohioans routinely ate locally produced food. Many communities across the state had greenhouses and truck farms that produced the tomatoes, peppers and other fruits and vegetables that people ate. Even small communities had their own local dairy and meat-processing plants. For example, just fifty years ago, Lancaster had three dairies and two fruit wholesalers.

The Columbus area, with about 60 percent of the current metropolitan population, had eight dairies in 1959. It also had 10 meat packers and 25 produce distributors – 16 of them based near the old Central Market. The Central Market, at Town and 3rd streets, was one of three public markets in Columbus, along with the East Market on Mt. Vernon Avenue and the North Market, on Spruce Street. There were plenty of local growers to help supply those markets. The 1959 Polk city directory listed 35 “market gardeners” in Columbus and its suburbs.

Columbus still has the North Market, but has lost the other markets. The more-localized marketing of food disappeared over the decades, the victim of energy costs in greenhouses, and consolidation and economies of scale in the processing industry. Cincinnati – America’s “Porkopolis” for a century or more – no longer slaughters any hogs. Meanwhile, consumers have grown accustomed to year-round access to all types of produce flown in from as far away as Chile or trucked from Mexico, Florida or California.

As a counter movement to this global food system, the organic movement began growing over the last two decades beyond what was perceived as blemished goods grown in low-yield fields. Production and quality improved, and a wider audience began to question the system of mass-market food. The slow but steady growth in organic foods has expanded to a more-mainstream local-foods movement – more mainstream in terms of people and interest, but not mainstream in market share.

Section 2 – The benefits of local food

The benefits of a local-food system are many, but the central Ohio effort has focused primarily on four: strengthening the local economy; ensuring that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels; reducing the miles needed to distribute and sell food; and preserving farmland by making agriculture more viable to area farmers. But there are plenty of other benefits. Local food:

- Can include greater varieties of flavorful produce to be grown, rather than a few varieties that are bred more for stability for shipping across the country.
- Can save on energy because it is produced, processed and distributed in a given region, rather than shipped across the country.
- Is more comforting to consumers because they know where it comes from and because it offers more connections with others in the community.
- Can be part of a resilient system that provides a reliable supply of food regardless of economic conditions or weather in other parts of the country.

Agriculture is one of Ohio's largest industries, and rebuilding our local and regional food systems could further increase the economic impact of farming, while providing a host of other benefits to central Ohio and the state.

The precise economic impact of local food is hard to calculate for many reasons. Government agencies do not track how much of Ohioans' food is locally produced, or the value of that food. Many agricultural products that are produced in Ohio are processed elsewhere, and there's no way to know how much of that is returned to Ohio for retail sale. There are many variables in the production of different types of food, so a farmer's net income may or may not increase if he switches from growing, say, commodity grains to local produce. But the greatest local economic impact can come from food that is produced, processed and distributed in a local or regional system.

Ohioans spend an estimated \$43 billion per year on food. This is based on a USDA national estimate of \$3,778 per person for home and restaurant consumption (it does not include school, university, hospital or other institution consumption), multiplied by Ohio's 11.4 million people. Neither the Ohio Department of Agriculture nor Ohio State University tracks what percentage of food Ohioans eat comes from Ohio, though both are now trying to gather such data.

Using the same USDA spending estimate, the 2 million people in the 12 counties of central Ohio spend \$7.5 billion per year on food. Farmers in the region, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, produced nearly \$1.1 billion in raw products in 2007, but about 70 percent of that was corn, soybeans and other grains, most of which are not directly consumed by people. Another 5 percent was nursery and floriculture products.

Census data show that central Ohio farmers in 2007 produced \$336 million in products that are more-directly consumed by humans – fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs and milk. That figure is about 4.5 percent of the total amount that people in the region spend

annually on food. But that percentage is actually greater than the share of consumer food dollars that stay in Ohio; much of what Ohioans spend on meat, for example, is passed on to companies in other states that process the meat. Thus, while we can't precisely quantify the amount of food in our 12-county region that is produced, processed and distributed locally, it is likely well under 4.5 percent of total food spending. The vast majority of our local spending on food is leaving the region.

Why do we produce so little of what we consume? A significant hurdle in building a regional food system is that central Ohio's small meat processing plants lack the capacity to handle large numbers of local livestock. The census showed a combined hog and cattle value of \$104.5 million in the region in 2007 – but most of that is sold to processors in Pennsylvania, Indiana and other states.

If central Ohio increased its capacity to process food grown by farmers in the region, and local-food purchases in the 12 counties increased to a modest 10 percent of the food dollars, that economic activity would total \$750 million – much of it in dollars that do not currently circulate in the regional economy. That does not include the local multiplier effect – the recirculation of those dollars on other goods and services in the local economy – or the job creation from food processing and distribution jobs or the tax dollars added to local coffers.

Total consumer spending on food would not necessarily change in the region, but the dollars that remain in central Ohio would increase significantly. In producing food for local markets, central Ohio farmers' gross receipts could increase (diversified vegetable production, according to OSU research, can yield up to \$100,000 per acre in sales) but new equipment and more-intensive farm management would have an impact on their net income. Nonetheless, that would move toward the goal of keeping more of the consumer spending in the hands of Ohio farmers and processors. The processing is the key because that's where many new jobs could be created.

The number of new jobs could be significant. Even without policies to create a regional-food system, food processing jobs are expected to increase steadily, according to Ohio Department of Job and Family Services data compiled by Goodwill Columbus. Population, according to MORPC estimates, will increase by 500,000 in the region by 2030. That growth will require more workers at existing businesses to meet the food needs of the area – and many of these will pay well over minimum wage, and will require training, but not a college education. For example, there is expected to be a net increase of 80 butcher/meat-cutter positions by 2016 in the Columbus Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.

The 2008-09 *Columbus Yellow Book* already lists over 100 businesses in the categories of Food & Beverage Consultants, Food Brokers, Food Processing & Manufacturing, Food Products, and Food Products Manufacturers & Distributors. These tend to be jobs that pay well above minimum wage, and do not include fast food or other wait-staff and food-service jobs.

The biggest increase would be in “team assembly” positions – food-related manufacturing jobs (such as T. Marzetti Food Company Products). That category is

projected to increase from a total of 9,850 jobs in the Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area to 10,620 in 2016. Another large projected net increase is 190 food-service managers by 2016.

| Other categories: Job pay, 2008 est. | net new jobs by 2016 | hourly |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| ○ Food scientist/technologist | 60 | \$36.48 |
| ○ Ag/Food science technician | 20 | 18.88 |
| ○ Crop/nursery/greenhouse laborers | 40 | 11.51 |
| ○ Bakers | 80 | 11.48 |
| ○ Meat/poultry/fish cutters | 50 | 10.95 |
| ○ Food batchmakers | 50 | 16.87 |

Source: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

The projected growth in these fields is tied to increased population, and is separate from any efforts to promote local foods. A coordinated network and marketing effort for local foods in central Ohio would increase the percentage of food that is produced, processed and distributed within the region, potentially adding significantly to the projected growth in these and other jobs.

Central Ohio already has at least 36 meat processors, all of them small and some of them seasonal or on-farm operations. A new processor, or expansion of existing ones, not only would create good jobs, but would lead to other economic activity. An Ohio State University study of Knox County projected that a meat processing plant of modest size – 20 employees – would have a \$26 million impact on the county with \$2.2 million in employee earnings, \$401,000 in sales taxes, and could lead to the creation of 92 jobs.

A regional food system also would have an effect on farm jobs. In the absence of local-food gains, state jobs data project a net decline of 540 farmers and ranchers in the Columbus metropolitan region by 2016. But that could change significantly if the trend toward local-food consumption – and the growth in the number of small farms in the region – continues.

There also is a likelihood of more jobs for farm workers. The grain and oilseed farming that dominates central Ohio farm acreage is capital-intensive, with one or two farmers working hundreds or thousands of acres with expensive machinery. Livestock production often requires more people. Vegetable production is even more labor-intensive, with workers needed for planting, cultivation and, especially, harvest. A significant increase in vegetable production by farms in the region will require additional workers.

Ideally, with job training and good planning, new farmworker jobs will be filled by central Ohioans in need of work, but we don't know what will happen. Employers will face pressures to keep costs down, and these are jobs that have traditionally been filled by migrant workers.

Statewide, according to research by the Social Responsibility Initiative at the Ohio State University, Ohio produces less than 1 percent of the 4.65 billion pounds of vegetables and 3.08 billion pounds of fruit that Ohioans eat annually. The study estimated that Ohio farmers could meet 26 percent of the state's vegetable needs and 5 percent of its fruit needs.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture notes that Ohio is extraordinarily diverse in the types of agriculture it can support: 200 different crops are grown in Ohio, and 50 percent of the agricultural land base is designated prime soils by the USDA. Ohio has the potential to supply a diverse diet locally.

It also is important to note that focusing on food is a good economic development strategy. Food spending is non-discretionary. People will continue to eat regardless of changing economic conditions. Investing in a relatively recession-proof industry can help buffer local and regional economies in difficult times – and do so with jobs that can't be outsourced.

While some benefits of local food are not easily quantified, there are many qualitative benefits. Local food keeps jobs in the region and, done right, is good for the environment by keeping land in agriculture and by reducing the distance food travels from farm to fork. It can make our food supply more secure and less vulnerable to rising fuel costs, transportation strikes, droughts in other major farm states and other possible disruptions in the national supply chain. A resilient local-food system can offer economic advantages and as well as social and ecological benefits.

HEALTH BENEFITS

As of 2009, Ohio was the 10th fattest state in the nation, joining the ranks of mostly southern states in an annual report by the nonprofit Trust for America's Health. It ranked 17th in 2008, so it is moving the wrong way. The group ranked Ohio 15th for overweight young people. Ohio's adult obesity rate is 28.6 percent; the obesity rate for people 10 to 17 years old is 33.3 percent and nearly 17 percent of Ohio third graders are obese while another 18 percent are overweight. Based on current overweight and obesity trends, one-third of children today will develop diabetes over their lifetime and the odds increase to one in two for African-American or Hispanic children.

On a local level, in 2008 within the Columbus City School District, nearly one in four preschoolers whose body-mass index was checked were found to be overweight, as defined by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 44 percent of the district's 4,067 fifth-graders were identified as overweight or obese. The district said the number of students with diabetes has increased from eight in 2000 to nearly 180 students. In addition, admission rates, outpatient and emergency room visits to Columbus' Children's Hospital for obesity-related diagnosis codes more than tripled from 2002 through 2007, further emphasizing the troubling problem of pediatric obesity in our community.

Overweight children are at greater risk of suffering serious health problems as children and of growing up to be overweight or obese adults. For those young and in poor

economic conditions, the data do not look much better: In 2004, 13 percent of Franklin County children under the age of 5 and participating in WIC were considered overweight, according to the Ohio Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System. Left untreated, excess weight and obesity have a profound impact on health and are contributing factors to a number of chronic diseases, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.

A group of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that what's driving the obesity epidemic is “our national-scale system of food production and distribution, which surrounds children – especially lower-income children – with high-calorie products.” According to Dr. Tenley Albright, director of MIT’s Collaborative Initiatives program, which uses systems analysis to study broad social issues, 90 percent of the food eaten in our country is processed, meaning it has been mixed with ingredients, often acting as preservatives that can make food fattening.

Increased access to fresh, healthful regional food could begin to reverse some of these trends. Moving to a more regional food system could lower the price and caloric content of food by lowering distances food must travel from the farm to the dinner table – which in turn could make healthful food more readily available in communities referred to as “food deserts.”

A food desert is a district with little or no access to foods needed to maintain a healthy diet, but often served by plenty of fast food restaurants. Physical access to food stores can be difficult if the shops are distant, the shopper is elderly or infirm, or if public transport links are poor and the consumer has no car. Financial resources can further complicate the situation for people who lack the money to buy healthful foods (generally more expensive, calorie for calorie, than less-healthy, sugary, and fatty “junk foods”), or for people who can’t afford the bus fare to remote shops selling fresh foods and instead uses local fast food outlets. Finally, a lack of cooking knowledge or the idea that eating a healthy diet isn’t important can be another barrier to eating healthy foods.

According to Mark Winne in his book *“Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty,”* there are two promising solutions to meeting the needs of underserved communities with limited resources. The first is subsidized Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) opportunities, whereby local farmers or urban farms subsidize a share for a person in need either through a ratio of “full pay vs. partial pay” shareholders or by simply charging less and accepting electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards (food stamps) as a form of payment for a weekly share. (A CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation where the growers and consumers share the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, a farmer sells shares in the farm production of local food, the cost of which currently ranges from \$15-\$25 per week for a pre-determined number of weeks. The shares are redeemed in the form of the delivery of local, fresh food to the shareholder.)

The second opportunity uses mobile markets to bring high-quality, healthy food into communities that are underserved by supermarkets. In the summer of 2009, Local Matters, in conjunction with its partner, The Greener Grocer, launched the Veggie Van, a farm market on wheels in Columbus, as a way to address the issue of better access to local, delicious food in underserved communities. The Veggie Van made 25 stops per

week and was equipped with wireless credit card machines that could process EBT cards as payment. Cooking demonstrations were offered as an educational component to address the need to teach people how to use this unprocessed, nutrient dense food.

There also is a third model being considered to help central Ohio inner city neighborhoods gain access to healthful food. The “corner store initiative” seeks to increase access to healthful, affordable food choices through the community’s corner stores, which are typically a source of alcohol, cigarettes and high-calorie, low-nutrient food. With support from local stakeholders, corner stores could receive assistance in making a business plan and infrastructure changes to sell healthier foods such as fruits, vegetables and higher quality proteins.

Each of these examples can make local food affordable for impoverished urban neighborhoods – or rural areas – that lack grocery stores, decrease food miles and carbon footprint as well as create market opportunities for local farmers.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

Many people view farm fields as “vacant” land, ripe for development. This view is shortsighted and misguided. Shane Farnsworth, economic development director in Fairfield County, has said Ohio farmland already is developed. When the state was settled in the early 1800s, it was mostly woodland or prairie, then was cleared for economic development: agriculture.

Now, 200 years later, agriculture still should be viewed as economic development. In 2007, products raised on farms in the 12-county region sold for \$1.1 billion. That figure is just market value of raw products paid to farmers, and does not include processing or other added value. Nor does it include the spending of farmers, who use their receipts to buy tractors, harvesters, seeds, fertilizers or other goods sold by local businesses.

Building a regional food system would allow those figures to rise. Farmers could diversify and raise produce for local consumption on some on their land, or raise livestock for local markets, and sell either of those more profitably than corn or soybeans. In a system that includes local processing of those products, that added value stays in the local economy and creates jobs – jobs that will stay put.

Agriculture also adds to the local tax base – even with the Current Agricultural Use Valuation (CAUV) factored in. CAUV is sometimes derided as a property-tax break for farmers. But it actually ensures that farmland is taxed on the basis of its use, rather than the use a developer might want to put it to.

Even with the CAUV advantage, farmland in Ohio typically generates more in taxes than it receives in services. The American Farmland Trust has conducted Cost of Community Services Studies in many communities across the country in the last 15 years, including studies in four Ohio locations. One of those, in Knox County, found that residential development in the county required \$1.05 in services for every dollar it generated in taxes. Commercial and industrial land needed 38 cents in services for every \$1 in taxes, and agricultural land received just 29 cents in services for every \$1 in taxes – despite the

CAUV break. In other studies, the numbers may vary, but the trend is the same: Residential areas, on average, do not pay their own way. Farmland (along with commercial and industrial land) help pay for the services to residential areas. In effect, farmland subsidizes the services received by residents of new subdivisions.

Section 3 – The current situation – producers

Central Ohio farmers raised \$1.1 billion worth of agricultural products in 2007. Of that, \$703 million was grain, oilseed and dry beans or peas for processing or export, and another \$56 million was nursery, greenhouse, floriculture and sod products. That leaves just \$336 million, about 30 percent of the total, for food – vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry and dairy. This amounts to about \$118 worth of food per person in the region annually – a very small percentage of the food each person consumes.

A 1983 study (*Toward a Sustainable Ohio in Food, Farmers and Land*, part of the Cornucopia Project of Rodale Press) described Ohio as a “food colony” that produced commodities that were shipped elsewhere for processing then re-purchased by Ohio consumers at higher prices. In subsequent years, the consolidation of Ohio farms and the commodification of Ohio agriculture continued. Ohio continued to lose large and small meat processing facilities. Acreage that once produced fruits and vegetables for Ohioans, and grazing land for hogs, cattle and dairy cows, increasingly made way for commodities such as corn, soybeans and, to a lesser extent, wheat.

As a result, much of the produce consumed in Ohio comes from California’s Central Valley and Florida, our beef comes from western feedlots and our pork comes from large-scale confinement operations in Ohio and other states. From 2002 to 2007 in central Ohio’s 12 counties, cattle production declined slightly (5.8 percent) to 125,548 cattle and calves, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. In the same period, pork production increased 14.6 percent to 261,227 hogs and pigs, with significant increases in Delaware, Marion and Morrow counties and declines in Fayette and Union counties. In the 10 central Ohio counties for which comparative data are available, the value of sheep production increased 38 percent from 2002 to 2007, to \$3,346,000.

In recent years, Ohio has seen a slow and steady increase in small, often diversified and often organic, farms that produce food for a growing local market. Some of these farms are on the fringes of large urban areas, and more recently in urban neighborhoods. Community gardens, established by neighbors or local organizations, are becoming more common, with food produced for personal consumption, for public sale or donated to food pantries.

It is difficult to get reliable farm-production data for the region. The national agriculture census, conducted every five years, is the source of much data in this assessment, but some key information is missing. For example, available figures show a decline in the market value of produce (the Census category is “vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes”) from \$4.7 million to \$4.2 million between 2002 and 2007. But the data do not include 2007 figures for Licking County, which had nearly \$1 million in produce sales in 2002, and two other counties.

Central Ohio has at least 80 farms growing fresh produce for local markets in the 12-county region, plus 21 orchards and berry patches growing local fruit, and nine farms selling food directly to investors through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs or “subscription farms”). Another 22 farms produce beef, pork, lamb and goat for local markets, and 15 more specialize in local poultry and eggs. The region has at least twelve farms that produce local honey or maple syrup, and at least two fish farms. It also has over 150 community gardens combined in the region’s 12 counties.

This is a partial listing, primarily of operations that sell through farmers markets, farm stands and pick-your-own businesses. It does not include off-the-beaten-path farm vendors who do not have regular hours. Nor does it include many of the increasing number of growers, such as Amish or Mennonite farmers, who sell to wholesalers or through auction barns rather than direct to consumers. The list was created from information provided by OSU Extension offices, Local Matters, the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, Ohio Proud and other local sources.

Those 160 or so producers are a tiny fraction – about 1.6 percent – of the 9,928 farms in central Ohio. Those farms range from 1,000-acre grain farms or egg farms with millions of hens, to horse farms, hobby farms or market gardens that net less than \$1,000 per year.

Establishment of a regional food system could play a pivotal role in influencing the number of farms. The 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture showed a net decline of 688 farms in the 12-county central Ohio region from 2002 to 2007. That reflects a decline of 132 farms in Franklin County, but also increase of 134 in Marion County, and small gains and losses in other counties, with no discernable pattern.

The biggest declines are in mid-sized family farms, while the number of the largest and smallest farms is on the rise. The largest farms, those with over \$500,000 in 2007 sales, tripled in the region, to 533. The smallest farms, those with under \$1000 in annual sales, often produce for local markets, and their number increased by about 14 percent, to 3,090. A regional food network might also help the vulnerable mid-sized farms: By diversifying to grow for local markets, especially larger-scale sales to institutions, they may have a better chance of survival.

The 2007 Census data do not include urban farms, which are on the rise in Ohio and across the country. Columbus and Franklin County have seen a steady increase in the number of urban farms, community gardens and even the number of city dwellers with backyard hens and bee hives, which further demonstrates public interest in local food. The Columbus Public Health, Recreation and Parks, and Development departments are collaborating with residents on community gardens. And Franklin Park Conservatory is home to the American Community Gardening Association.

In the Linden area of Columbus, the New Harvest Café, city government and Columbus Public Schools are working together to expand the cafe’s community garden and bring nearby high school students into vegetable production. The private Columbus Metro High School and OSU have a student-run community garden and farmers market that began in 2009.

There also is an opportunity for new types of farming and farm products – aquaculture, for example. The Ohio Aquaculture Association has a few central Ohio members, but there is room for growth in this field. The Ohio Department of Agriculture plans to add an aquaculture specialist in an effort to keep more of Ohio consumers’ seafood dollars in the state.

One of central Ohio’s fish farms contracts with other growers in the state to meet the needs of a growing business. Barry’s Perch ‘n More, in Marysville, is part of a diversified agricultural business that has the potential to do a lot more with local food.

Section 4 – The current situation – processors/distributors

In 1996, the extended Hartzler family in Wayne County opened a small dairy processing plant – Ohio’s first such plant after decades of losses of family dairies. It came at a time when the state was focused on large plants, and on increasing the size of Ohio livestock farms in order to attract large meat processors, and dairy processors, such as the large Dannon yogurt plant in western Ohio. The Hartzler plant was an anomaly, but also the beginning of a trend.

In more-recent years, the state is viewing smaller plants as models for other regions of the state and working on ways to help small, local meat-processing plants remain in business and to grow.

Licking County is the region’s dairy-processing hub, and until recently had three plants of different sizes and focuses. Tamarack Dairy in Newark is owned by the Kroger grocery chain and recently reached high employment of 200 workers who produce milk, yogurt, cottage cheese and sour cream. Up the road in Utica, Velvet Ice Cream employs 135 full-time workers and churns out premium ice cream for Ohio and nearby states. Also in Utica, Milkman Manufacturing, with four full-time and three part-time workers, had produced milk under the Ohio Organic Family Farms label, from cows raised on three central Ohio farms. The plant had been growing, but lacked capital to expand to meet the need, and stopped production in the fall. Another firm is investigating purchase of the Utica plant.

Dairy is one of the agricultural product lines in which Ohio has potential to be self-sufficient, but a complex federal marketing system makes it hard to determine the extent of self-sufficiency. Ohio now is dairy deficient – it consumes more milk than it produces. Fortunately, Ohio has a long history as a major dairy state and still has the infrastructure for it – many dairy-producing regions, including large and small processing plants. But some of what Ohio produces is processed in other states, and much of what Ohio processes came from out-of-state farms. Likewise, it is impossible to determine how much of what is produced in central Ohio is also processed and consumed here. Small and organic plants that are exempt from the federal system are better-able to track their local orientation.

Ohio is the nation’s leading producer of Swiss cheese and has long been a major producer of other cheeses, especially in the Amish country of east central Ohio. But additional specialty cheeses are emerging, with at least four producers in central Ohio counties. This trend also includes such products as organic and goat cheese.

The 12-county central Ohio region has 36 small, locally-oriented poultry- and meat-processing businesses – at least one in each county except Marion. Many of them are slaughtering facilities, while others process and package meat harvested elsewhere. While Ohio has lost many of its small plants over the years, it still has more than most states, and Ohio’s state inspection program is respected across the country. Most of these small plants are inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, but some are USDA-inspected and can sell their products across state lines.

An informal survey conducted in summer 2009 by the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council found considerable interest among small state-inspected meat processors in a regulatory change that would allow them to ship their products across state lines. The 2008 federal farm bill included a provision that would allow state-inspected plants to do that, and the USDA is considering rules to guide that program. The new rules, as written, would not make this easy, however. The value of interstate shipment to a local-food system is in its ability to increase markets for processors. If processors increase their capacity for cross-state sales, they also increase their capacity for local business.

Poultry poses a particular challenge. Ohio has a few large-scale poultry-processing plants, but those businesses located primarily in east-central Ohio are associated with companies and brands and do not process birds from independent producers. In fact, King & Sons Poultry, northwest of Dayton, near the Indiana border, is the only commercial poultry processor in the state that serves independent producers. It is not centrally located, yet it serves small poultry producers all over Ohio. The only other option for small poultry operations is on-farm processing, but farms that choose this option are limited to 1,000 birds per year and are required to sell them on the farm; they cannot be sold through retailers or at farmers markets.

One Franklin County business is interested in starting a poultry-processing operation, and the Ohio Department of Agriculture is in talks with various organizations, including the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, about operating a mobile poultry-processing facility. It could be based in one location up to two weeks at a time, then move to other parts of the state. A firm in Galion, Ohio, has already built such a facility for the State of Vermont.

Restaurants and other retailers are a market for local and free-range poultry, but the lack of processing capacity is a bottleneck that deters farms from raising poultry or from expanding their existing flocks to meet that demand. Creation of a mobile facility was a recommendation of the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council.

The council also recommended the opening of at least one new flash-freezing facility and one food-business incubator in Ohio by the end of 2010. (Such incubators, also called “shared-use commercial kitchens,” are facilities with commercial-grade kitchens for processing and canning products for commercial sale. Fledgling businesses can rent space to make their products.) The Center for Innovative Food Technology (CIFT), based in Toledo, is opening a facility that could freeze fresh produce for packaging. CIFT and the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in Athens already have incubator kitchens.

Central Ohio groups also are getting into the act. The not-for-profit Economic and Community Development Institute in Columbus is working with Ohio State University to rent commercial kitchen space at OSU's Food Industry Center so entrepreneurs can prepare and can their sauces, salsas and other food products. Other Columbus organizations are looking into community kitchens, as are groups in Knox and other counties in the region. Groups in Knox and Morrow counties have had discussion about using a facility in Mt. Gilead for flash freezing. Some produce distributors in Columbus have expressed interest in distributing frozen Ohio-grown produce if it were available.

Freezing and canning are important for several reasons. First, they make Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables available to consumers year-round. Second, they are an additional market for growers of Ohio produce, which could spur increased local-food production. Third, they provide a market for produce that is unsold at farmers markets and other venues. Ohio farmers report that, at times, some of what they grow is plowed under for lack of a market.

FOOD AND TRANSPORTATION

If each of us produced all of our own food (including the seeds, water, energy and fertilizer needed to grow and process it), transportation would not be a component of agriculture. In reality, however, almost no one grows anything remotely close to all of their own food. Even farmers, particularly those involved in monoculture production of crops such as corn and soybeans, grow relatively little of their own food. Our food system both nationally and locally is dependent on a massive transportation infrastructure.

There are two principal components of food transportation: farm to market and market to table. Food rarely travels *directly* from farm to market; it typically makes stops along the way for processing and packaging. For prepared foods (such as frozen dinners) there are likely multiple stops. In contrast, fresh, unprocessed food typically makes only one trip from market to table – be that table in a home, a restaurant or at an institution such as a school or a hospital.

The transportation system that brings food from farm to table in central Ohio is typical of such systems across our nation. It has the following key characteristics:

- It is driven by our desire as consumers to have an immense selection of food choices throughout the year that is largely divorced from the seasons and from our location – think pineapples in December in Ohio.
- It involves transportation of most food products over long distances averaging hundreds or even thousands of miles. An oft-cited 2001 study done in Iowa showed that the average distance for food arriving at a Chicago terminal warehouse by truck was 1,518 miles. A 2008 study done by the Michigan Department of Agriculture found that 90 percent of the U.S. food supply is transported by truck, and that truck traffic was expected to double by 2020. Travel distances are increasing – the average distance has increased by about 25 percent since 1980.

- Locally, the current Columbus Produce Terminal opened in 1963 on East 5th Avenue, conveniently between Port Columbus Airport and the tracks of what was then the Pennsylvania Railroad. But officials at Sanfillipo Produce say the vast majority of the fruits and vegetables they distribute now come into the terminal on trucks – which produce more carbon emissions than any other form of food transport.
- It often involves substantial concentration and centralization – from massive stockyards to humongous terminals to gargantuan warehouses to cavernous supermarket megastores.
- It is petroleum dependent and hence vulnerable to interruptions of supply and fluctuations in fuel prices.
- It relies on transportation systems – harbors, airports, railway, waterways, highways – that are subsidized.
- It creates pollution costs that are externalized, i.e., that are transferred to the environment and taxpayers instead of being internalized to the cost of the food itself.
- It is unequally distributed, with some consumers, particularly those in poorer neighborhoods in the central city, having to travel far greater distances than others in order to have access to both quality and selection of food.

Two facilities on the west side of Columbus are emblematic of the immense distances involved in transporting food from farms to our plates. Interstate Cold Storage operates two warehouses, one on Roberts Road and one on Setterlin Drive. The Roberts Road facility has 4.2 million cubic feet of space and 18 refrigerated docks where interstate tractor-trailers can load and unload pallets of food. Even though this is large, it is dwarfed by the Setterlin Drive facility, which has 7.3 million cubic feet of space and 35 docks. These two facilities alone have a combined 11.5 million cubic feet of space and 53 refrigerated docks, and they serve only a portion of the food needs of the central Ohio region.

While distances from farm to market are often great, distances from market to home have significance as well. In recent years the term “food desert” has come into vogue, and refers to areas, typically in the central city, where large supermarkets have either pulled out or never located in the first place. According to an article in the May 26, 2009 issue of *Time* magazine, “[m]any of these communities are, quite literally, starving for broader and healthier food options beyond the seemingly ubiquitous fast-food chains and corner stores selling barely a handful of fruits and vegetables – at relatively high prices.” Food may travel great distances to get to our region, but it often stops several miles short of lower-income residents, particularly if the food is fresh and healthful. Compounding this problem is the fact that low income households are 6 to 7 times more likely than other U.S. households to not own cars.

Modern supermarkets are bigger than the grocery stores that existed when Ohio had broad local food availability in the past, but there are fewer of them.

Thus, in designing a better food system for central Ohio, we need to address both the vulnerability of our modern food distribution system to disruptions in transportation fuels (and to the pollution that long-distance food transportation causes), and the difficulty than many low-income citizens have of accessing a variety of healthy foods without unduly long trips that may be beyond their means.

Section 5 – The current situation – consumers

Local Matters is a Columbus-based not-for-profit organization that has promoted local foods on several fronts since 2002. During the group's Local Foods Week in October 2009, staff and volunteers spoke with consumers from many different neighborhoods and backgrounds. They found that, while there is a great deal of interest in the idea of buying local food, consumers need better information about what is available, where to find local food and, in many cases, how to prepare fresh ingredients. They also were surprised to find continued misunderstanding among the general population concerning local food and its perceived advantages, despite the large amount of information that is available.

This anecdotal finding exists even though locally grown Ohio food is more readily available, more widely reported on and more popular than it has been in decades. New farmers markets sprout up each year across the region, more restaurants and retailers are seeking and featuring local fare, and more farmers are growing for local markets.

But the lack of knowledge about local food is not the same as a lack of interest. Research by the Social Responsibility Initiative at The Ohio State University finds that Ohio consumers consistently support local food and are willing to pay more for it. Its survey found that:

- 98 percent of Ohioans said it is “very important” (64 percent) or “somewhat important” (34 percent) for state and local governments to develop food systems throughout Ohio.
- Over 75 percent of Ohioans say they bought food directly from a farmer; the median amount spent on such direct sales in 2007 was \$68 per household.
- 23 percent of Ohioans reported “frequently” purchasing local food in 2008, and median household spending among this group was \$200.

Local Matters emerged as the idea of “local” food took its place alongside “organic.” During its “Local Foods Week,” the group created, and trademarked, playful terms such as “I am Delicious”™ and “Localicious”™ as a way to start conversation about the benefits of local foods and a local food system. The vision, in conjunction with the Ohio Department of Agriculture (which also organized an “eat local” challenge in September 2009), is to expand the event to communities around the state in 2010. A coordinated marketing effort like this is one way to raise awareness about the benefits of a local food system and the importance of local food as a way to affect social, economic and environmental change.

But the challenges of making fresh, healthful local food readily available to all in central Ohio go far beyond marketing and promotions. The sad reality is that too many people in the region do not have easy access to any form of produce, local or not. Central Ohio, like many parts of the country, has “food deserts” – areas without a grocery store in easy reach. Some of these are urban deserts – neighborhoods that have been ignored by grocery chains and where residents are without cars and have limited access to proper shopping.

Some are rural deserts, where the nearest grocery may be two towns away. Ironically, residents must drive past miles and miles of farm fields in order to buy food grown in another state. People in such areas are at even more of a disadvantage when fuel costs rise. For example, Madison County has only two groceries in its 467 square miles approved for purchases through the federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program.

The Columbus Department of Public Health is doing extensive research of food deserts in Franklin County, and developing “food balance scores” – which reflect residents’ distances from grocery stores and fast-food outlets. The department is mapping neighborhood proximity to grocery stores over 25,000 square feet and to fast-food restaurants. Neighborhoods in which residents are equidistant from groceries and fast food have a food-balance score of 1. Residents closer to groceries than to fast food have a desirable lower score; but those who live close to fast food and more than a mile from a grocery store have a higher level of food imbalance.

As might be expected, there are urban food deserts in Columbus. But food deserts can emerge in smaller cities in the region, too. Delaware recently lost the only grocery store in the city’s core when a Kroger store just south of downtown closed in November 2009. There are other grocery stores on the edges of Delaware, to the north, south and east, but the residents of the immediate area, many of them lower-income, no longer have a grocery within walking distance.

The urban and rural food deserts have one other thing in common: the nearest food retailers tend to be convenience stores that have plenty of soft drinks, potato chips and snack cakes, but not much in the way of healthful, wholesome food. These can hardly be considered meaningful oases in a food desert.

Many people not only lack access to fresh fruit, vegetables and meat, but also suffer health problems related to improper diet. Health departments and local non-profits at the state and local levels try to address this in a variety of ways: public education, farmers markets (such as the one held at the Columbus Department of Health) and promotion of community gardens and urban farms. But even when fresh produce is available, groups such as Local Matters have found that the need to educate people who are accustomed to fast food or packaged food about how to prepare fresh, nutritious foods is equally important. Another challenge is to demonstrate how limited resources can be used to buy local food and maintain a healthy diet.

Local Matters makes materials about wholesome food preparation available to its Veggie Van customers and also reaches parents and caregivers through their children. To accomplish this, Local Matters teaches its flagship 28-week nutrition education program,

“Food Is Elementary,” to over 700 vulnerable 3-7 year olds each week. During each one-hour weekly class, a team of two food educators teaches children what it looks and feels like to eat healthfully. This program is taught in 28 classes per week in public elementary schools and the Childhood Development Council of Franklin County Head Start programs.

There are also different trends in consumer demand. The mass market that has emerged with large-scale processors over the last 50 years has been built on consistency. There are fewer breeds of commercial livestock and poultry, and they are bred and raised to be a consistent size so consumers can get the same thing every week. But another trend, driven by local-food advocates, restaurants and celebrity chefs, has made many people hungry for diversity, for different breeds of livestock and more eclectic species of fruits and vegetables grown in a more sustainable manner.

This diversity may come at a cost, because specialized products cannot be produced as cheaply as those grown through economies of scale. However, it allows local food advocates to point to the “externalities” of the current food system that are not accounted for in the shelf price of goods but are paid by taxpayers nonetheless. An example would be the pollution generated by transporting food that is not paid for by the trucking company in the price of the fuel nor by the consumer in the purchase price of the item.

Katherine Harrison, general manager of the sheep processing plant at Blystone Farms near Canal Winchester explains that lamb and goat are among the most expensive meats, per pound, in the country. Half the lamb Americans consume was raised in this country, and all that is raised here is consumed here. The other 50 percent comes from Australia and New Zealand, but that total accounts for a small fraction of what is raised there. South Pacific farmers raise large quantities of standardized lamb for export, but U.S. farmers raise a variety of breeds.

Ohio production could become more standardized to drive down the cost. Or, as Harrison seems to prefer, Ohio producers could try to educate consumers and encourage them to try different varieties, determine their own preference and deal with the markets and producers that meet their needs.

Blystone’s niche is the central Ohio immigrant market. There are other efforts to reach out to Ohio’s increasingly diverse population. Franklin County created community garden plots on county-owned land in 2009, in an effort to help Somali immigrants produce the crops they desire. In the Cleveland area, chef and local-food activist Parker Bosley is using grant money to help Latino growers in Lake County grow crops not usually available locally. The Ohio Department of Agriculture is funding a project by the Mid Ohio Food Bank to identify specialty crops that could be consumed in central Ohio ethnic communities.

At central Ohio restaurants, the prospects for local food are mixed. Many independent restaurants in Columbus and other communities feature local foods and try to buy local whenever possible. Examples include: the Northstar Cafes, Rigsby’s, Alana’s, Surly Girl Saloon, Betty’s Fine Food & Spirits, Tip Top, Latitude 41, Café Bella, Black Creek Bistro, Dragonfly Neo V, and New Harvest Café, which serves produce grown in its own

community garden. A growing number of chefs here and across the country are attuned to cooking what's in season, and to sourcing local products, including heirloom varieties of produce and non-standard breeds of livestock. In late 2009, the National Restaurant Association unveiled an annual survey of more than 1,800 professional chefs – members of the American Culinary Federation (ACF) – revealing that local sourcing of ingredients, sustainability and nutrition will be the hottest trends on restaurant menus in 2010

Central Ohio produce distributors note that while the independent restaurants often seek local products, the restaurant chains do not. Instead, they are using their own supply chains in order to ensure consistency and volume, but also as a way to address their food-safety concerns. Local distributors say the chains insist on “traceability” – cartons that are labeled with dates, the producers’ names and other information in case there is a food-safety issue that needs to be traced back to the source. For that reason, and because of expected new federal food-safety laws, Ohio growers in the coming years may have to address traceability concerns. This may be a particular challenge when it comes to dealing with Amish farmers.

The situation with retailers is similar. Many independent groceries feature local produce in season and local meat and poultry year round, when possible. In Columbus, Weiland’s Market advertises its local produce, and some local meat. Managers say they would sell more local meat if they had a large enough reliable source. The Hills Market in Columbus has an Ohio source for meat. The Ohio-based Buehler’s Fresh Foods chain also sells a lot of Ohio meats. Much of the sourcing is centralized at the chain’s Wooster headquarters. But the manager of one of its 12 stores, in Delaware, says local managers have flexibility to buy local when possible.

Some large chains, such as Giant Eagle and some Kroger stores, have that same approach to local flexibility. But most of them also have their own supply chains, which may or may not have a local orientation. The Save-A-Lot chain includes some stores that buy fruit and vegetables in season from the Owl Creek produce auction in Morrow County. Other chains use Columbus-based distributors as a backup for their own distribution and, in the process, may get some local produce.

Institutional buying has the potential to jump-start the infrastructure businesses that are a crucial part of building a local-food system. If universities, hospitals, school districts and others make a commitment to buying local, investors and business leaders may see a stable market and put money into processing and distribution.

Kenyon College, in Knox County, made such a commitment in 2002, and now gets 35 percent of the food that students eat from surrounding communities. Denison University is heading in the same direction, as is the Granville school district. Ohio State University also is in the midst of a push to buy local.

Section 6 – Resources

Central Ohio’s most important agricultural resource is in dwindling supply. In the last 10 years for which data are available, the 12-county region lost 230,231 acres of farmland –

more than two-thirds of it between 2002 and 2007, before the housing slump hit. At the same time, the region had a net loss of 760 farms.

These figures require a bit of analysis, however. In each of the 12 counties, the number of the largest farms – those with over \$500,000 in annual sales – grew substantially between 2002 and 2007, doubling in every case and tripling in half the counties. Meanwhile, the smallest farms – those with under \$1,000 in annual sales – also saw rapid growth. Regionwide, the largest farms, which tend to produce corn, grain, dairy cattle and hogs for commodities markets, more than tripled from 173 to 533. The number of the smallest farms – often “hobby” farms, horse farms or specialty producers of local food – increased by 436 to a total of 3,090.

The loss of farmland acres also requires some explanation. The 230,000 acres not being farmed in 2007 were not necessarily paved over or developed. The U.S. Census of Agriculture measures acres in agriculture every five years. Some of those acres may have been fallow in 2007, but remain available for agriculture. Most of the total, however, is believed to have been developed. What’s worse is that a large percentage of the farmland in the region is classified by the USDA as “prime farmland” – the richest and most productive land for producing food, but now threatened by suburban subdivisions and related commercial strips.

The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) tracks land that is, in fact, converted from agricultural to developed uses. Between 1992 and 1997, Ohio lost 156,000 acres of prime farmland to development, and was second only to Texas in the number of prime acres that were converted. In the same time period, Ohio was 44th in the nation in rate of population growth.

According to a 2002 map prepared by American Farmland Trust (AFT), the 12-county central Ohio region is made almost entirely of “high-quality” farmland – the NRCS definition of prime land, combined with AFT’s definition of “unique” land that is very productive. Eight counties in their entirety fit this definition, and the remaining four – Knox, Licking, Fairfield and Ross – are more than half high-quality farmland. But virtually all of five counties – Union, Delaware, Franklin, Pickaway and Fayette – were considered under a high development threat. Most of the remaining counties had large swaths of threatened land. Only Madison and Ross appeared largely spared. Prime land also requires fewer artificial inputs – fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides – in order to be productive, which is critical at times of high-energy costs, or energy shortages.

The following state and federal programs help farmers and rural landowners keep their land in agriculture and help them conserve natural resources on their land:

State farmland-preservation resources:

- Agricultural Easement Purchase Program
- Agricultural Security Areas
- Agricultural Districts
- Current Agricultural Use Valuation
- Land Trusts and agricultural easements

Federal farmland-preservation and conservation resources:

- Farmland Protection Program
- Conservation Reserve Program
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
- Conservation Security Program
- Wetlands Reserve Program
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
- Forest Legacy Program
- Grassland Reserve Program

While it's important to keep Ohio farmers on the land, it's equally important to prepare the next generation of farmers. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has a new website to support beginning farmers, called beginfarmingohio.org.

Ohio not only has some of the richest soils in the country, it also has plentiful water. It is situated between the Great Lakes and a great river, the Ohio, and has a mild, temperate climate with ample rainfall in most years. Unlike California, where the great Central Valley depends on irrigation to produce so much of the nation's fruit and vegetables, Ohio has plentiful water resources that are naturally available. The importance of our land and water resources is not always recognized.

Capital is an essential resource in building a regional food system. Farmers need financing for land, equipment, livestock, seeds and fertilizers. Processors and distributors need financing to build or expand their operations, and to buy equipment.

Ohio has the capital for these initiatives. It has many private lenders; Farm Credit Services of Mid-America, a federally created lender of last-resort for agriculture; USDA loans and programs; state programs (such as Linked Deposit in the Treasurer's Office); and not-for-profit programs, such as Economic and Community Development Institute in central Ohio. But these institutions are not always aware of or focused on local-food initiatives.

Section 7 – Barriers

There are many barriers to establishing a regional food system in central Ohio, but none was created with the deliberate intention of undermining local production of food, and none is insurmountable. We hope that by identifying barriers, and then making recommendations on ways to overcome them, the region can join in a coordinated effort. The barriers fall under the general categories of Infrastructure, Land, Farmers, Markets and Public Awareness.

INFRASTRUCTURE:

Probably the biggest barrier to developing a regional food system in central Ohio is the lack of infrastructure capacity. The region has produce and livestock auction houses, meat and dairy processing plants, distributors of fresh and processed food, and facilities

for processing and canning food products. But it doesn't have *enough* of these to feed the region, and it lacks a coordinated network of processors and distributors. The region also lacks a poultry processing plant and a facility to flash-freeze local produce for winter consumption. And it lacks an aggregation or distribution center where farmers can take their products to be packaged for distribution.

The once-easy availability of local food in central Ohio vanished as local groceries gave way to regional and national chains – which grew to rely on their own suppliers and to do their own food processing. In the same period, agricultural policies and practices grew to favor specialized and larger-scale farms that produced commodities for mass-processing elsewhere.

Fortunately, Ohio has retained enough of its food infrastructure to have a foundation for growth. These are some of the infrastructure-related challenges to building a local-food system:

- Lack of coordinated institutional buying.
- Lack of co-ops, brokers, other aggregators.
- Declining number of local distributors due to vertical integration of retail chains.
- Lack of capacity in existing meat processors, and lack of sufficient poultry processing.
- Lack of flash-freezing facility.
- Confusing regulations: health regulations and weights & measures standards vary from county to county.
- Proposed federal food-safety regulations, leafy-green marketing agreements and milk marketing agreements that pose a threat to local food systems.
- Lack of community kitchen incubators for processing.
- Lack of aggregation points and kitchens for urban community gardens.
- Difficulties in finding capital to expand or create infrastructure businesses.
- Unmet needs for training a workforce for food-infrastructure jobs and devising plans to ensure the jobs are filled by current central Ohio residents.

It will not be easy to build a local-food infrastructure. Existing distributors tend to be either part of vertically integrated corporations, as in the case of grocery chains, or independent businesses that are not inclined to build a network with competitors. Establishing aggregation or distribution centers could be expensive, at a time when the economy is slow and lenders are not eager to invest in new ventures. Farmers are independent-minded and show no eagerness to form cooperatives to jointly distribute their products.

A Columbus produce distributor insists that Ohio needs at least eight and possibly as many as 12 aggregation centers where farmers could take their produce and other goods to be chilled, sorted and packed for distribution. These could be private businesses, farmer co-ops or not-for-profit ventures, such as food banks. The Mid-Ohio Food Bank, for example, has a new distribution center designed beyond its needs, and has an interest in local-food systems.

One possible way to “jump start” the local-food infrastructure is through institutional buying. In central Ohio some institutions already are committed to buying local when possible. Kenyon College buys some 35 percent of food served on campus from local sources. Denison University and Otterbein College also buy local food. Ohio State University is in the early stages of an effort to buy locally. Some school districts and county jails in the region are as well. One challenge facing these institutional buyers is that they may be expected to pay local producers and distributors upon receipt of their products. This may require more flexible practices by institutions that usually deal with large companies and deal with large invoices over time.

As significant as these measures are, they are only a beginning. But a sustained effort by colleges and school districts throughout the 12-county region to buy local food would send ripples through the farming community and in business circles. Businesses and lenders would see a growing market, and they would be more inclined to invest in distribution efforts and in the expansion of processing facilities. Farmers, in turn, would be more likely to diversify their operations and grow produce and livestock for these local markets.

But even with clear markets for local food, those who are building the infrastructure need financing to build their businesses and a trained workforce to keep them going. Capital is a particular challenge in an economic climate that has lenders skittish about loans to new ventures. The workforce challenge includes not just finding workers who are prepared for the jobs, but a strategy to make the jobs available to current central Ohio residents and avoid a race to the bottom that leads to low-wage jobs.

LAND:

While Ohio has some of the best farmland in the country – 11.6 million of the state’s 26.2 million total acres are classified as “prime” farmland by the National Resources Inventory – the state has no broad, large-scale policy to protect that land.

The barriers to preserving central Ohio’s rich farmland include the following:

- Lack of innovative conservation and development (land-use) policies.
- Limitations of the Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP), which excludes urban-edge land.
- Limitations of federal farmland-preservation programs, which are complex, with red tape.
- Lack of private land trusts in some areas, such as Franklin County.
- Lack of other tools, such as transfer of development rights by counties or townships, or across jurisdictions.

The Agricultural Easement Purchase Program is the highest-profile effort and it has permanently saved 136 farms and over 30,000 acres since 2002, at a cost of \$25 million from the Clean Ohio Bond Fund. The AEPP, however, has been focused largely on large corn and soybean farms in the less-populated western part of the state, although that may be changing to include specialty farming and land closer to urban centers. The state effort is supplemented by the federal Farmland Protection Program, but that

program has cumbersome regulations that delay the process and frustrate many applicants.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture also oversees the Agricultural Security Area program, in which landowners and local governments agree to temporarily halt development for 10-year periods.

Still, farmland is often considered “undeveloped” land awaiting “higher” uses by officials of counties and townships across the state. Many counties in Ohio have no rural zoning, and many that do have zoning have weak regulations that do little to protect valuable farmland. Nor does the state encourage local communities to strengthen those policies. While the state calls on counties and townships to have a “comprehensive plan,” state code does not define such a plan. In the absence of a definition, state courts have held that a color-coded zoning map is acceptable as a comprehensive plan.

While Ohio was once a national leader in planning and zoning (in 1919 Cincinnati was the first major city with a comprehensive plan, and Euclid’s 1921 zoning code was basis for the U.S. Supreme Court to establish the constitutionality of zoning), it has been long surpassed by other states. Since the advent of Interstate highways, regional shopping malls and exurban office parks, Ohio has not substantially updated its land-use policy.

As a result, there is a patchwork of local policies that may vary wildly from county to county. Despite the lack of a clear state policy, changes are beginning to emerge with state resources supporting the balanced-growth initiative that originated with the Ohio Lake Erie Commission and now is expanding through the Ohio Water Resources Council. Balanced growth planning efforts that incorporate preservation of agricultural land as a value are under way in five central Ohio watersheds.

In addition to land preserved through government purchase of easements, hundreds of Ohio farmers have donated easements to permanently protect their land from development. Such donations may be made to local governments or state agencies, but are typically made to private, non-profit land trusts. Donors receive federal income-tax breaks for the donations. Unfortunately, there is a lack of land trusts in some areas, such as Franklin County. This is significant because easements are essentially meaningless unless there is a financially secure entity like a land trust that exists to enforce the easement over the long haul. The region needs more land trusts to accept easements and help shape land policies.

FARMERS:

The 12-county central Ohio region already has nearly 200 farms producing food primarily for local consumption. But building on that success and creating a regional food system is not as simple as getting more people to do what these farmers already are doing. Existing farmers, and others getting into local markets, will have to tie into locally oriented distribution networks and may have to make changes in their operations in order to keep access to the system.

Here are some of the challenges facing local-market farmers and others who consider growing for local consumption:

- Producers often do not have the quantity or consistent quality that retailers demand, or labeling that traces food sources and will need training and guidance to meet those demands.
- Cooperative businesses are one way for small farmers to get a large enough supply to satisfy distributors and retailers, but independent-minded farmers are reluctant to enter such ventures.
- Some farms will need to extend the growing season through such methods as high tunnels/hoop houses in order to make fresh local produce available longer.
- Farmers who diversify into local-food production may have new equipment needs, and will have to find financing.
- Newcomers to agriculture will need knowledge to get started and training to be ready for marketing.
- The state needs a program to link prospective new farmers with those who are retiring and don't have heirs interested in the farm.
- Growing and processing food for local consumption will create jobs, but there are challenges in finding and training workers.
- Institutions that incubate new businesses tend to focus on other industries, primarily those viewed as "high tech," whereas food processing facilities, while essential, are typically viewed as low tech and of little or no interest to conventional incubators.

One of the biggest concerns of distributors and retailers that seek to buy and sell local food is getting consistent quality and sufficient quantity in order to cheaply and efficiently market those goods. One Columbus-area produce distributor, for example, said he could not buy a local farmer's asparagus because it was not sorted by size; restaurant customers, he said, demand a uniform size in the cartons they buy.

Ohio State University Extension already offers guidance to producers of some products and is interested in developing an online curriculum that farmers could refer to if they are considering producing for wholesale markets. Other non-profits in the state offer similar guidance, but a centralized, authoritative source would be of great value to Ohio farmers.

Education for farmers also could include advice on business models and more technical advice on maximizing production and extending the growing season. On business models, some small farmers need to consider ways to join forces to aggregate a large enough supply to meet a customer's demand. A farmer cooperative is one model. Another is used by a pork supplier who has a contract with Ohio University in Athens: the producer buys hogs from other farmers in the area to supplement what he produces.

Produce growers can extend the growing season with the use of greenhouses or high tunnels – plastic, unheated greenhouses that capture enough of the sun's energy to grow vegetables nine or 10 months a year in Ohio. This method is common in places further north than Ohio. In late winter and early spring, many tomatoes in Ohio chain grocery stores carry labels from Michigan and Canada. There is no reason why Ohio cannot

recapture that market. Small and specialty farms could benefit from research by OSU entomologist Joe Kovach that shows plots using integrated pest management and a mixture of vegetables can gross nearly \$100,000 per acre.

These lessons could be important for farmers who already are experienced in growing for local consumption. They would be especially useful for newcomers to farming.

Newcomers tend to be drawn to agriculture by an interest in local food. They also would be useful to conventional farmers who are interested in diversifying, growing livestock or produce to meet growing institutional needs and consumer demands. A farmer with 800 acres of corn and soybeans is unlikely to switch his whole operation to tomatoes. But if he grows 30 or 40 acres of tomatoes and peppers on a small part of this property, he could be a significant player in a local market.

Financing may be a barrier to farmers in building a regional food system. Again, newcomers face a particular challenge. The Farmland Center, part of the Countryside Conservancy in the Cuyahoga Valley, established a “Farm Link” program to match prospective new farmers with older farmers who are retiring and have no heirs interested in operating the farm. The Ag Viability Task Force of the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council has proposed that some form of that idea be instituted statewide.

While that sort of program can help new farmers find a place to farm, it does not provide the capital they need to run the business. Land can be expensive. New farmers have additional expenses in equipment, seeds, fertilizers, and pest control. Even longtime farmers who want to grow local produce on some of their acreage may face the expense of new equipment for planting and harvesting. Other farmers might want to expand into on-farm processing of meat, dairy products or produce.

Funding for these endeavors is scarce at a time when many banks are exceedingly cautious about lending. There are local, state and federal government programs to assist with entrepreneurial and innovative agricultural projects, but the region lacks a centralized source of information on all the programs. There also are private loans for small farms and processors, such as those from the non-profit Economic and Community Development Institute in Columbus.

Just as there are challenges in funding for farm operations, so are there challenges in finding and training farm workers. Most of the existing farms that grow produce locally are small. But if local food is to have mainstream availability, larger farms are likely. Growing fruits and vegetables is labor intensive, both in the cultivation and harvesting. The Ohio farms that grow produce on a large scale rely on migrant labor, and must provide housing for workers. Central Ohio growers will have to be prepared for this, or to find other sources of labor.

MARKETS:

One of the biggest barriers to getting Ohio-grown food into the hands and mouths of all Ohioans is access to markets. For farmers, access means getting the fruits of their labor onto the shelves and into the coolers of grocery stores. For far too many consumers,

access means getting to a store that has fresh local food. These are the market challenges for a central Ohio regional food system:

- Not enough stores in urban and rural “food deserts.”
- Not enough fresh, local food in the small stores located in those deserts.
- Lack of local-producer access to large retail markets due to competition for shelf space, inflexible retail models, etc.
- Creating institutional markets (schools, colleges/universities, counties, state agencies) for locally-grown food – creating large, stable markets, jump-starting the growth of processing and distribution businesses.

The problem of urban and rural food deserts cannot be solved just by improving the local-food distribution system in the region. Having a network capable of delivering food to all neighborhoods is not good enough if those neighborhoods do not have grocery stores, or the corner stores do not stock fresh local foods. This glaring deficiency in our food distribution network is a disservice to people in a state and a nation that have obesity and health-care-delivery problems. These underserved areas also often lack pharmacies and other basic needs, even though retail studies by Chris Boring, of Boulevard Strategies, show that neighborhoods such as the Near East Side of Columbus have substantial buying power that could support such stores.

Even where there are ample supermarkets, it is sometimes difficult to find local food. Local products have trouble competing for shelf space in many grocery chains. Part of this is because some producers fail to meet the quality or quantity standards that grocery chains insist upon to meet their customers’ expectations. But some critics say part of the problem is inflexible policies on the part of the stores. From a grocery chain’s perspective, it is much easier to buy meat and produce in very large quantities from established suppliers and distribute them from a central location. Often they want products available throughout the chain, or a district of the chain. But that does not allow the manager of an individual store to buy fresh produce or local specialty products from a farm or business in the community.

PUBLIC AWARENESS:

One of the most important parts of building a regional food system is building public awareness about the importance of local food – changing misperceptions about its cost, helping people understand the economic, social and health benefits of a local-food system, more-clearly defining “local food,” educating people about the preparation of fresh local food. Here are some of the challenges in promoting local food:

- Lack of reliable single source of information on local foods.
- Mistaken perception that local food costs more than non-local food.
- No marketing campaign to promote local food, or to define it and distinguish it from organic and natural.
- Many people would have problems preparing local meat and vegetables even if they were readily available; they need education on food preparation.

Many organizations have listings of local-food sources: such as the Fresh Connect guide offered by Local Matters or the Good Earth Guide from the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association. But some are statewide listings, and others are more localized. There was no comprehensive listing of central Ohio growers, processors and distributors of local food.

The local-food movement's roots are linked to the growth in popularity of organic foods, which are often sold at a premium. Because of this, there is a perception that local foods, too, are more expensive. Restaurateurs such as Elizabeth Lessner LaRue in Columbus beg to disagree. She has said many times that, in season, she buys local food as much for economic reasons as for quality. A 2009 study by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Iowa found that the price of in-season produce at farmers markets was competitive with, and often cheaper than, comparable grocery prices. Likewise, shoppers at summer farmers markets enjoy not only the camaraderie with shoppers and farmers, but also the bargains on good food. But as much as farmers markets have grown around the region, they still serve only a small portion of the population.

Some retailers lack information about the benefits of local food. A survey of Knox County food retailers showed that many did not perceive an interest among their customers in buying local food. Yet consumer surveys by Ohio State University consistently show strong support for local-food systems. This suggests that, while consumers may not specifically ask for local products, they would respond if food retailers promoted local goods.

Local food has not yet gone mainstream, and it won't until consumers, retailers and farmers all see the potential and benefits. One of the biggest benefits is healthy eating. But in a culture awash in fast food restaurants and convenience-store processed-snack packages, it is difficult not only to make people aware of healthful local food, but also to teach them to prepare fresh ingredients. Fast food franchisers have a 50-year head start on marketing. Fortunately, public health departments do a lot to promote better eating. Groups such as Local Matters take the message to schools, often getting the word to adults through their children.

The news media can help get the message out, too. But it is hard to coordinate the message without a single strong voice for local food. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has launched a "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" campaign to promote the idea of local food. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has the Ohio Proud label that Ohio-grown and -processed foods can use in grocery stores. And while the program has made strides in recent years, it is still woefully underfunded, and is likely to remain so given the state's tight budget. The state has been unable to take up the recommendation of the Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council to put \$2 million into a comprehensive public education and marketing campaign for Ohio-grown food products.

Conclusion

A local food system is nothing new in central Ohio. The Columbus area, with about 60 percent of the current metropolitan population, had eight dairies in 1959. It also had 10 meat packers and 25 produce distributors – 16 of them based near the old Central Market. Though a variety of economic and social factors steered us away from the local sourcing that was common in the past, new economic and social forces make this a good

time to look anew at local food. More farmers are growing for local markets; local processors are feeling pressure for growth; petroleum-dependent systems are increasingly vulnerable to market disruptions; and public interest clearly is on the rise.

There is great potential to build a regional food system that can make farms more viable; keep land in agriculture; create jobs on the farm, in food processing and distribution; reduce transportation costs and petroleum dependency; and keep consumers' food dollars circulating, and recirculating, in the local economy. A regional food system also can lead to greater access to healthful food in central Ohio's urban and rural food deserts; promote healthful eating and living; strengthen rural and urban communities that grow and process food; and create a resilient network of farms and food-related businesses that are not dependent on and vulnerable to circumstances in other states or countries.

We produced this assessment as the basis for a series of recommendations that will lead to a regional food system. We hope that this plan will encourage local governments to adopt regulatory and procurement policies that promote local food; businesses large and small to buy and sell local food; and central Ohio consumers to learn more about the availability, benefits and preparation of fresh, healthful local foods.

CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD PLAN

Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

VISION

Fresh, safe, healthful and affordable local foods are easily and equally accessible to everyone in central Ohio and distributed through a system that promotes sustainable farming practices and resilience in the region.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This report is created to assess all components of a regional food system in the 12 central Ohio counties, to make policy recommendations to local governments, and to serve as a resource to businesses and organizations on food decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Central Ohio consumers have a growing awareness of, and interest in, food that is produced locally. The number of farmers markets has increased steadily, and more restaurants and groceries are featuring local products. A growing number of farmers in the 12-county region raise crops and livestock primarily for local consumption, and distributors, large and small, are seeking local foods to satisfy the demands of their customers.

The region seems poised for an explosive growth in the local-food economy. This growth will not be easy, however, because many barriers stand in the way: policy barriers that allow the loss of rural farmland and restrict the use of urban and some exurban land for food production; insufficient capacity in the local-food processing and distribution infrastructure; business barriers that limit access of local products to many stores and restaurants; inconsistent and inefficient regulation of farmers markets and other food businesses; lack of access to fresh, healthful and local food for people in rural and urban “food deserts;” lack of public awareness about the availability and benefits of local food; and more.

The recommendations in this report show how to overcome the barriers and provide a plan for the 12 central Ohio counties to expand the regional food economy and make local foods readily available to people of all income levels throughout the region.

Goal: Increase the supply of local food

1) Establish agricultural cooperatives for local food. These arrangements could take shape in many ways. In Washington, wheat growers formed a co-op to supply flour directly to Seattle bakers. In Kentucky, farmers banded together to truck their produce to Cincinnati restaurants. In central Ohio, one farmer contracts with other growers who produce the potatoes and sweet corn for his Community Supported Agriculture farm. Many farmers markets operate as cooperatives. There is room for standard cooperatives in which producers share in the costs and revenues of processing or distribution, but there also is room for innovation – new types of cooperative arrangements. Cooperative arrangements could be organized around shared distribution, or the need to aggregate larger quantities to meet the needs to large retailers or institutional buyers. They could be organized around processing, such as a flash-freezing facility or a poultry processing plant, or for other purposes.

Support is available for the creation of such cooperatives. The Ohio Cooperative Development Center is part of Ohio State University Extension’s South Center in Piketon. It is a statewide effort devoted to helping farmers and others organize cooperatives or other ventures that can bring people together for coordinated production, processing, distribution, marketing and other activities. Local-food advocates should follow up with the Center to keep track of the formation of cooperatives and to work with farm groups to promote the establishment of cooperative ventures.

Cooperative arrangements also could apply to farm equipment and even labor. A co-op or other not-for-profit organization – or a county government or soil and water conservation district – could own planting or harvesting equipment needed by small local-food growers and lease it to them in a shared-use arrangement, much like “car share” entities that are

emerging in urban areas. Likewise, there could be a “worker cooperative” in which a group of producers shares in the hiring of farm workers, who have steady work as they move from farm to farm in a given area. Many farmers markets are co-ops, which could be a model for neighborhood-based co-ops in urban areas with local production, processing and sales.

2) Adapt to changing food-safety standards and consumer demands. Producers must prepare for an emerging need to trace even local food grown on small farms back to its source. This may require improved labeling or bar codes on all boxes packed for distribution, with responsible record-keeping by distributors and producers to enable tracing of food sources in the event of a health problem. Some grocery and restaurant chains may expect such measures now if they are to buy from small and local sources.

Retailers and distributors will expect certain quantities and quality of the local food they handle. Producers need to prepare for what distributors identify as a need to sort produce according to size and quality, and to chill produce soon after harvest – either at the farm or an aggregation point – in order to extend the shelf-life of Ohio products.

3) Adopt new practices to extend growing seasons. This can include plastic mulch to produce berries earlier in the season, hoop houses and high tunnels to grow vegetables in the early spring and late fall, and greenhouses for year-round growing. These practices can make Ohio-grown food more mainstream by keeping it available and in the public eye for most of the year. Though it requires change, expense and some risk for farmers, it can bring benefits to those farmers and to Ohio agriculture in general. Some innovative farmers already use these methods, but wider use is needed to meet the needs of distributors and consumers who want Ohio crops through most of the year. State and local governments, non-profit organizations that do micro-lending and private lenders should make loans or grants available to producers who want to invest in these methods.

4) Prepare the next generation of food farmers. The average age of Ohio farmers continues to rise, which means many farms in the coming years may be changing hands. Many small farms that focus on local food, however, are operated by newcomers to agriculture. The region needs to make efforts to monitor those trends and build a foundation for the next generation of food producers.

A growing local-food economy should be an impetus for joint vocational schools in the region to revitalize their agriculture offerings. Community sponsors – businesses, not-for-profits, local governments, chambers of commerce – should support such vocational efforts. The school programs should focus not just on agricultural practices and job training, but also on the business aspects of operating a farm: risk management, business plans, financing, etc. For adults making career changes or turning a hobby farm into a primary business, training and information should be easily available through community colleges or OSU Extension. A resource and referral site should be available. Information could be gathered by students at The Ohio State University, through public-policy classes or volunteers at OSU’s student-run farm. The site should include such information as ranges of cost to buy or rent farmland, and availability of federal and state grant and loan programs.

Central Ohio's aging farmers should be educated on ways to keep their land in agriculture and find successors, while still providing for themselves in retirement. Switching from commodity production to local-food production for a regional system, with extended growing seasons and cooperative arrangements with others, is one strategy to make a farm more resilient. Rather than sell their land to pay for their retirement, farmers should be encouraged to build a strong, viable farm business, of which the land is an integral part. On their retirement, then, they would sell the *business* – not just the *land*. They should build their businesses to be stable and marketable.

Goal: Expand the local food infrastructure

5) Increase food-processing capacity: This would include an independent poultry processing facility, expanded meat-processing capacity, a flash-freezing facility; canning, storage and cooling facilities.

Poultry producers in the region must either process their own birds on the farm, which limits the number they can legally handle, or drive almost to Indiana for processing. A mobile processing facility proposed by the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation would help, but would not be enough to meet significant increase in independent poultry production. Farmers, or farm advocates, should band together to identify an existing business that could expand to include poultry processing, or an operator for a new facility; then seek financing from commercial lenders, Farm Credit Services, non-profit micro-lenders, state and federal grants or other sources. State and local governments should consider loan or grant programs that support local processing, and review regulation to see that they do not stand in the way of food-infrastructure expansion. Citizen groups and non-profits should work with farmers, businesses and local governments to encourage such programs.

The region currently has some 36 businesses that process hogs, cattle and other livestock and game produced in the region. Most of them are small plants that do custom processing for direct sale. Some are fully scheduled for custom work, others say business has slowed because fewer farmers are raising hogs and cattle. Immigrants and ethnic and religious groups should be included in efforts to promote halal and kosher processing. There is a need for a larger, regional processing facility that can provide wholesale beef, pork, goat and lamb to grocers around the region while reducing the distance and cost, both to ship animals for processing and to ship processed meat for sale.

6) Improve aggregation and distribution of local food. The region has well over 100 farms that grow fruits and vegetables largely for local markets, and there is room for substantial growth in production. But it is not sustainable or efficient for every producer to truck produce separately to urban markets. In addition, urban markets may prefer or demand consistency in size and quality, and a method of tracing products back to their source. Both farmers and distributors could benefit from regional centers where fresh-picked produce can be chilled and packaged for distribution, or stored for winter use; farmers cite a need for storage space for cabbage, apples, squash and root crops such as carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips and beets. Such centers could be operated as farmer cooperatives, or by non-for-profit organizations, or private business. Farm organizations or

consumer groups should spearhead an effort to find operators and locations and financing for such centers. The centers could have multiple uses, including storage, cooling, processing, or serving as a local-food auction site.

7) Establish incubators for local-food businesses. The Athens and Bowling Green areas have community kitchens operated by not-for-profit organizations that lease use of the facilities to fledgling caterers and makers of sauces, salsas and other canned goods. Central Ohio organizations and entrepreneurs have cited the need for such an incubator here. Incubators such as the state's Edison Centers and Tech Columbus have succeeded with a focus on technology businesses; a similar effort should be directed at food businesses. The Columbus Chamber or other local chambers of commerce could assist with such an effort. While there is no centralized facility, there are some examples of commercial kitchens that are leased to businesses in central Ohio – The Ohio State University and Columbus State Community College, as well as some private businesses. Churches, armories, catering businesses, nursing homes and other entities often have commercial kitchens that could be leased when not otherwise in use. A not-for-profit organization or a local government agency could coordinate the availability of such facilities, or such an organization could own and operate its own facility. Lenders could follow the model of the Economic and Community Development Institute, a non-profit micro-lender in Columbus that has helped several food-related startup businesses. Likewise, there is a need to follow up on business startups – to stabilize businesses and set them up for long-term viability.

Goal: Improve the viability of farm and food businesses

8) Develop a workforce for food production and processing. State and local governments, schools, chambers of commerce and others should do more to promote on-farm agriculture jobs. Central Ohio farms and food businesses need a well-trained workforce for on-farm and processing jobs.

Growing food for local consumption is more labor-intensive than commodity production. As a result, a local-food system will lead to more farm jobs – some of which will be filled by immigrant labor, but some of which could be filled by young local workers through internships or other programs. The state should include agriculture and farm workers in the Job Creation Tax Credit and Third Frontier reimbursement for newly created jobs. Rural and urban school districts should promote hands-on vocational work, internships and apprenticeships, including farm work.

Farms and food-processing businesses, whether they are established operations looking to expand or startup businesses, face big challenges in finding workers in a field that does not typically have a high profile. In the past, high schools and joint vocational schools often had extensive agriculture programs. But with the steady decline in the number of diversified family farms over the years, and the growth of a national food distribution system, many of those ag-education programs have shrunk. While 94 percent of OSU's graduates from the College of Food, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences find jobs in their field, those jobs are increasingly off the farm (16.2 percent in construction systems management, 13.3 percent in agribusiness and applied economics, 15.9

percent in the horticulture and turfgrass fields, 12.8 percent in agricultural education or communication, 27.3 percent in animal science).

The transition back to regional and local food systems will create new local jobs, but also will create a need for programs that train farmers, farm workers, butchers and other food-processing professionals. Vocational schools and higher education should begin to adjust their curricula to accommodate the opportunities and needs for farm and food workers.

9) Promote large-scale institutional purchases of local food. Incremental increases in local food production by farms in the region are not enough to force processors and distributors to make the investment in expansion. But if universities, school districts and hospitals make a public commitment to buying and serving locally produced foods, businesses and investors will see that local food is more than a fad, and they will be much more inclined to increase the capacity to handle local food.

Institutional buying cannot occur on any grand scale until the local-food infrastructure is expanded; that expansion will create new markets, inducing producers to grow food for local consumption. To ensure supply is available as demand is created, it will be important to coordinate these various efforts.

Kenyon College in Knox County already has local sources for more than 35 percent of what is served by the college food service. Ohio University in Athens and Otterbein College in Westerville have made similar commitments, and OSU is quickly moving in the same direction. Each new college, university or school district that makes that commitment helps send a message to which food distributors – Ohio-based AVI and national firms Sysco and Bon Appetit, for example – already are responding. County jails, state prisons and other agencies, and hospitals are among the other potential large-scale buyers of local foods.

Central Ohio and the state need a guide for institutions on the logistics of buying local – finding producers, processors and distributors – and a network of institutional chefs and buyers who can be mentors for their counterparts at other institutions. Culinary programs at vocational schools, community colleges and other locations should emphasize in chef training the quality and value of fresh, local food.

10) Ensure that funding for a local food system is accessible. Farms and food-processing businesses, whether they are startup businesses or established operations looking to expand, face big challenges in securing the finances for new ventures. Some private lenders are more informed than others about agricultural- and food-related businesses. Though there are many government and non-profit programs to help fund these operations, it is often hard to find information about them. County, state and federal governments have loan and grant programs spread among many different agencies. At the county or regional level, there should be a resource to direct farmers and businesses to appropriate programs. These could be part of a county planning and economic development department, a county Extension office, a community improvement corporation or a regional Resource Conservation and Development council or regional planning agency. Or these entities could team up to conduct regular workshops on funding options.

Sources include, but are not limited to, such federal programs as U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development loans and grants, Farm Services Agency programs, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grants, Small Business Administration programs; and such state programs as the Ohio Treasurer's Linked Deposit program, programs in the Ohio Department of Development and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Rural Rehabilitation grants from the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and state specialty crop funding which can support local food system development and marketing efforts. In addition, there are private and non-profit lenders such as banks, Farm Credit Services, foundations and non-profit micro-lending institutions such as the Economic and Community Development Institute in Columbus. Most of these sources do not have local food as a primary focus, but their resources would apply to local-food businesses.

Existing programs must be better utilized to support distributors, processors, retailers and institutions that are currently participating in some fashion in the local foodshed. Partners should capitalize on available networks or facilities with incentives to improve or expand utilizing local commodities.

Supporting existing operations costs less than investing in start-ups, plus this retains the current economic base while increasing economic activity.

To implement this recommendation, distributors, processors and retailers should partner with local agencies to research needs of operations and match programs that will bolster their sustainability. Consider some of the same types of abatements and/or credits for investment in improvements or expansion as mentioned below in Recommendation 12.

11) Ensure that resources are available for urban food production. There is a lack of information about urban gardening opportunities, such as those available through the Columbus Land Bank. Many communities have properties that have been designated for community gardens and a directory is usually kept in the Office of Development. However, this resource is sometimes difficult for interested parties to find and there is very little promotion about this resource. A community could have residents, students, church groups, or businesses that have an interest in creating a community garden, but do not know how to find available properties in their community. Flint, Michigan, has a land-bank model that has attracted national attention for fostering community gardens. Central Ohio communities should look at that model.

Strategic marketing of the available plots of land would help both community residents and local producers find available land to increase their production, thereby increasing the amount of local food available in local markets. Moving food production closer to the consumer reduces the time between harvest and consumption, reduces travel and fuel emissions of food being transported into a community, provides local income and keeps food revenues in the community. MORPC's Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group can develop recommended marketing strategies to promote the availability of land for urban agriculture and to reach networks of potential land use clients. Online websites can be improved to be easier to navigate.

These efforts should have a multi-lingual component to ensure access to Spanish- and Somali-speaking residents of the region. Those populations have food preferences that may not be met through conventional local-food channels.

12) Help food farmers operate more efficiently. Look at existing businesses, not just startups, and focus on reducing fixed costs and increasing marginal revenue (through increasing yield, adding value, extending the season, etc.). Develop efforts for shorter-term financial assistance for farmers (as opposed to long-term or perpetual farmland protection).

Currently, many efforts focus on new businesses at the expense of existing ones. But it is critical to sustain and support expansion of existing sustainable enterprises in addition to encouraging new enterprises. Supporting only new enterprises creates an unlevel playing field and fosters unfair competition. Profitability is a better driver of growth or development than protracted incentives. Supporting the profitability of existing enterprises gets production and active marketing of commodities expanding more quickly. This acknowledges and supports private enterprise's need for flexibility and autonomy.

To address profitability, property tax abatements or additional credits are potential solutions. Additional tax credits based on jobs or hours of labor are another. Offering cooperative purchasing opportunities on inputs like electric or propane for cooling of products or heating of greenhouses may be feasible. A more-comprehensive scope of promotional efforts and cooperative advertising campaigns serving more than just one segment or type of enterprise could also help. To implement these recommendations, local taxing entities or utilities would be involved, as would food-related agencies and businesses.

12.1) Expansions into modified or additional production require capital and improved business planning, and cost- and risk-management. Such higher-risk expansions require control of initial costs, allowing the producer to avoid an unfeasibly high margin of return.

To implement this recommendation, producers could be offered a cost-sharing arrangement or matching assistance grant. Coupling USDA Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) grants for high tunnels with something like local land bank resources may encourage expansion or increased production. A supportive network or joint facility operation could increase value-added opportunities. For example, greater access to community kitchen facilities or flash freezing equipment may be provided through cooperative ventures with the Ohio Department of Agriculture or local institutions. The partners to implement this recommendation could include OSU Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC); Ohio Department of Agriculture; Columbus State Community College; Farm Service Agency; local processors; and vendors of equipment.

Goal: Remove policy barriers to a local-food system

13) Ensure government support for local-food efforts. County, township and municipal governments should adopt resolutions supporting a local-food system, promote government purchase of local foods, and consider establishing local food policy councils. These steps have been taken by communities across the continent where local-food systems are being established. In Philadelphia, San Francisco and Toronto, municipal governments have been a driving force in promoting local food. The most-successful efforts have used public-private partnerships to tap the energy of not-for-profit advocacy organizations and food policy councils with broad representation.

14) Make sure government regulations and policies are aligned with local-food goals.

The state and region need a city, county and state food-policy audit. The audit should identify state code and city and county ordinance language to identify laws and policies that may inhibit local-food production, processing and marketing. The audit also should identify policies and laws that are helpful to local food systems and use those as models for creating additional opportunities in other cities and communities.

Safety should not be compromised, but some regulations are written with one type or size of operation in mind, while also imposing restrictions on smaller operations to which the regulations do not readily apply. Proposed national leafy-greens farm standards, for example, would require 150-foot turnarounds at the ends of crop rows – a regulation that would shut down small farms with 300-foot rows. At the state level, regulators should reconsider the definition of “processing.” Currently, an Ohio farm that washes lettuce before selling it is subject to heavier regulation as a processing facility because of that washing. State and local health regulations regarding local food should be consistent. Land-use policies should recognize the importance of rural and urban agriculture. This audit could also examine other ordinance “language opportunities” that may include barriers to the creation of small, local food businesses like healthy food street carts, mobile farm markets on street corners, etc.

15) Establish “best practices” planning and zoning standards. These standards should focus on 1) preserving farmland, 2) encouraging local food production in urban and suburban areas and 3) land-subdivision regulations for preserving farmland and encouraging local-food production.

There is a perception among local officials that farmland preservation efforts mean loss of control, loss of flexibility, loss of revenue. Much of the land deemed “agricultural” is seen by local officials as merely “undeveloped.” In a time when cities and communities are struggling to balance budgets and replace services, undeveloped land is seen as lost potential revenue. Land that could be producing revenue in food production is being converted to developments at the same time existing structures sit vacant. This results in local consumers paying to have food trucked in to their communities and drives food dollar revenue outside the very community looking to preserve the local economy. It also results in new development that often does not generate enough tax revenue to support the public services it requires, perpetuating government budget downward spirals.

Local officials need to understand that food production is an economically viable industry that can contribute to the local economy, and this fact should be considered when zoning decisions are being made. As part of a model zoning regulation, local officials must be educated on best practices for supporting local food production and preserving farmland

15.1) Establish zoning best practices for preserving farmland. There are many different approaches to protecting farmland, but many policymakers tend to focus on one or two models, such as the purchase or transfer of development rights. Tools such as zoning are overshadowed, but may be better-suited for a community.

All farmland preservation tools should be identified and made available for local communities to explore. There is not always a one-size-fits-all solution. Fact sheets should be created outlining the various farmland preservation tools and information

sessions should be held for communities to become better educated on the various options. The Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at Ohio State University has looked at agricultural zoning, and “voluntary agricultural zoning” around the state. MORPC, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, local chapters of the American Planning Association and other entities should work with the Center to compile information and reach out to MORPC’s member communities.

15.2) Establish zoning best practices for encouraging local food production in urban/suburban areas. Zoning regulations often discourage farms and food-production operations. Zoning regulations govern what land uses may occur on a given piece of land, whether agricultural, residential, commercial or industrial. Local governments often have regulations that encourage the conversion of agricultural land to residential and commercial uses. This reduces the amount of nearby land available for local foods production.

Cleveland and Cincinnati have enacted ordinances that remove barriers to food production within the city limits. These ordinances include zoning codes that allow for keeping chickens and other smaller, domestic animals within the city limits and programs for permanently setting aside city land to be used for food production. This can help increase access to local, healthful food at an affordable price.

Zoning regulations can reduce the incentive to convert agricultural lands away from food-producing uses. This can increase the availability of local foods. MORPC can facilitate the development of a model zoning regulation or a list of best practices that communities can use to encourage local food production. MORPC should work with local communities, farmers, land owners and regulatory experts to develop the regulation or list of best zoning practices.

15.3) Establish land-subdivision regulation best practices for preserving farmland and encouraging local food production. Land subdivision regulations often discourage continued farm operations and presence. County Subdivision Regulations typically include two ways to divide land: (1) with a plat or (2) without a plat, utilizing existing road frontage. The “without a plat” lot splits typically receive limited review. This makes it very easy to carve a large tract of land into several small parcels not suitable for agricultural production. Utilizing existing road frontage also creates sprawl and discourages cluster type developments that would promote large tracts of land for sustainable agricultural production, especially in areas within limited zoning regulations.

Subdivision Regulations should be explored that encourage cluster lot splits utilizing common access drives that would help to reduce sprawl. This would help reduce the amount of land being converted from agricultural production. MORPC should work with local officials within central Ohio’s counties to develop model regulations (see also Recommendation 16 below).

16) Modernize Ohio land-use statutes. State law limits counties' regulation of land subdivision. While Ohio’s subdivision law sets the framework for counties to adopt subdivision regulations, its limitations could encourage a loss of farmland. Just as Greater Ohio’s recent “Restoring Prosperity” report called for updating Ohio land policy, we recommend changes that could address challenges presented here. For example, cluster lot splits (as proposed in Recommendation 15.3 above) could actually have a negative effect on farmland if there are not adequate mechanisms in place to keep the remaining land from being developed.

MORPC and central Ohio counties should examine how existing state law may affect the development of cluster lotsplit regulations. They should also explore any other deficiencies that state legislation may have on promoting local food production. MORPC and the counties should determine how to address these limitations within the boundaries of the existing state law or work with the General Assembly to create legislation that would help promote the cluster lotsplit concept or other best practice subdivision regulations.

17) Establish better partnerships with state and local governments. The Ohio Department of Agriculture and the USDA have many programs aimed at promoting local-food systems and preserving farmland. Central Ohio local-food leaders need to ensure that local governments and state and federal agencies work together to promote local-food systems.

Information about federal programs for farmland preservation often is not readily available to landowners. The federal government operates numerous programs aimed at preserving farmland, most of which are administered by the USDA. In central Ohio, many local governments are either unaware of the programs' existence or unable to make a sufficient connection with the federal government to access the programs' funding.

MORPC should work with the federal government and central Ohio member governments to exchange information on these federal programs. As with its federal and state funding processes, MORPC could conduct grant application workshops and provide information on its website. With a close partnership, local governments and landowners will be able to take better advantage of these funding sources in order to make more farmland available for growing local food.

Local-government linkages with the Ohio Department of Agriculture to foster farmland preservation and agricultural economic development are inadequate. The Ohio Department of Agriculture administers programs to preserve farmland and promote the production and consumption of local food. Some local governments are aware of these programs and some are not. When local governments are unaware of these programs, it reduces the likelihood of them being used, thereby reducing the production and consumption of local foods.

MORPC, member governments and representatives from the agriculture community should work with the Ohio Department of Agriculture to find common goals regarding farmland preservation and local foods. Many MORPC goals overlap with state goals, and once both entities find this common ground, they can devise a strategy to pursue state programming and funding sources to achieve local foods goals.

Goal: Increase the understanding of local food and its benefits

18) Establish a regional food policy council. Ohio already has several food policy councils, including one in Knox County. Most regions around the country with active local-food systems have food policy councils. A central Ohio council should include representatives from each of the 12 counties, plus members representing food producers, processors,

and distributors; local governments; schools; university research; non-for-profit organizations involved in local-food advocacy; health professionals; hunger advocates; and other interests.

18.1) One early task of this group should be to develop a list of non-governmental community “best practices” resources and models that can be shared in places in the region that are looking for ways to help underserved populations have access to healthful, fresh and local foods.

There is no single model to solve the issue of “food deserts,” but there are many creative strategies that are being utilized like “Corner Store Initiatives” that are connecting farmers directly to stores either with direct product sales or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) drop-off points, creating, among other things, systems that allow Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards to be used to purchase subsidized CSAs. Creating a resource point for communities to view these strategies would help prevent the duplication of services and allow resources to be used more efficiently. The Colorado Food Policy Council pushed this approach to promote easier links between food assistance programs and local food production, including direct market farming, community gardens, and CSAs.

18.2) The council should conduct a community-based assessment of different groups working on local food issues and bring the leadership of these groups together in a more cohesive fashion.

18.3) The council should convene a broad discussion about the difference between a “public awareness” campaign and “marketing” campaign. A public awareness campaign and a marketing campaign are complementary. An awareness campaign promotes the benefits of local food and a local food system. Strategies should “build the brand” and look at ways to promote local food, and to explain the food system and how it affects our lives in ways that we may not be aware of.

A marketing campaign should target specific market opportunities and develop strategies to connect growers so this market can be developed. While there is some concern that demand will outstrip supply, there seems to be agreement that marketing is needed to build demand, and that supply will expand to meet this growing need.

18.4) The council should establish a means of better exchanging farmland-preservation information among local-food advocates. This strategy might include the creation of a toolkit that could guide this process and provide methods for the assessment to take place that would help to target various components of the food system.

When discussing farmland preservation, some landowners and local officials mistakenly believe that any limitation on development is perpetual, meaning that once a limitation is put in place, the land can never be used for a purpose other than farming. This misperception can reduce the amount of preserved farmland, thus decreasing the availability of local food.

As part of broader education efforts, MORPC, its local government partners, the Ohio Department of Agriculture and farmland-preservation groups can explain different

farmland preservation options, noting that not all of them are permanent. This can increase the amount of preserved farmland by persuading otherwise-wary farmers to participate in these programs. This could have a cascading effect: As more farmers enroll, the programs can become more popular, perhaps encouraging enrollment in the perpetual programs as well.

19) Develop a state-level framework to assess urban food deserts. There is a need to integrate food-desert data on a statewide level and design ways for localities to integrate this information locally, verify the information and add local level resources. After reviewing these data as well as other resources on best practice and evaluation of alternative solutions communities can choose the option that makes the most sense for them. The Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council already is moving forward with this effort, in accordance with Governor Ted Strickland's reference to local food in his 2010 State of the State Address, when he announced *the Ohio Neighborhood Harvest – a large effort to map access to healthy and locally grown food. Strickland asserted that “there shouldn't be any neighborhood in Ohio where the only vegetable for sale is the pickle on a fast food hamburger.”*

20) Make local-food information and resources easily available. A multi-layered communication system should be based on information gathered by the regional food council. Efforts to promote a local-food economy and greater access to fresh, healthful local food requires reaching out to different audiences, so the messages and strategies will need to be approached in different ways to be effective with different groups:

- 1) One group is motivated to purchase local foods and needs more information as to where they can make these purchases. This group would include individuals, businesses, restaurants, etc.
- 2) A second group is starting to hear about local foods but still needs more information about the benefits of local foods and why it is important to support a local food system in order to begin to localize more of their food choices.
- 3) A third group, which lacks access to healthful, nutritious foods, is interested in healthier food choices rather than whether the food is local or non-local. The issue of better access can eventually be linked to local but is not the first priority.

Each group needs targeted strategies and messages. These can include a centralized website hub that could direct people to local food resources in their community and public announcements (like the old Ad Council spots) that address the benefits of local foods and are aired as public service announcements on radio and TV. Other strategies can connect the need for access to fresh, healthful food in underserved communities with the creation of market opportunities for local farmers. This could include corner-store initiatives with local farmers directly supplying some stores, or establishing alternative distribution systems that can be addressed community by community.

21) Establish programs that reach out to consumers about local food. This two-pronged outreach should a) expand early-childhood local-food education programs that teach children where their food comes from, what healthful, local food is and how to prepare it;

and b) create new solutions to address the fact that people lead busy lives and often don't have the time to cook from scratch.

21.1) The National Farm to School program is an educational initiative that connects schools and local farms with the objectives of serving healthful meals in school cafeterias; improving student nutrition; providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities; and supporting local and regional farmers. Food service operators are more likely to serve healthful, local food in schools if they know the children want to eat these foods. Ohio needs a better-coordinated, statewide effort to promote the elements of the Farm to School program, and the Ohio Department of Agriculture has taken steps by hiring a farm-to-school coordinator. The effort also should include adults and offer opportunities for parents, caregivers and children to cook together.

21.2) One possible way to reach busy adults is through "Community Supported Kitchens" that could purchase local food and prepare healthy meals that involve people in the community and also teach them food-preparation skills. These kitchens could have gardens attached to them, and teach cooking, canning and preserving classes. Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and EBT cards could be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at retail stores that could be part of such centers. Healthful, prepared foods could also be available at centers, possibly subsidized to make them affordable. This idea could be connected to another novel idea being considered called "Culinary Corps" – a program modeled on AmeriCorps that would allow culinary students to work off student debt from culinary school by working in these kitchens.

22) Adapt existing programs to meet local-food needs. Many communities have policies and programs designed for one purpose that also could be used to promote a local-food system. Land in land banks, for example, sometimes is used for community gardens and agriculture – a prospect that could become more common with legislation to allow more counties to establish land banks. Another example is to use programs that promote access to healthy food as a way to help residents of those neighborhoods start food-related businesses, thus encouraging economic development.

Communities could promote land banks by making information easily available to help people find the land, identify restrictions on the use of property and understand how to acquire or lease the available properties. Some community gardeners have felt restricted due to time limitations for leased community garden lots. Groups worry about investing too many resources to improve a piece of land, then seeing the government direct that land to other uses several years later. Restrictions placed on these properties inhibit production potential through improved soil quality, or the use of greenhouses or hoop houses to extend the growing season. *To implement this recommendation*, MORPC, Land Bank staff, Franklin Park Conservatory and farmers should work together on ways to ensure some continuity in support for garden use and maintenance.

23) Promote sustainability by linking infrastructure improvements with agriculture. Policymakers need to consider "outside the box" farmland-supporting policies. There is often a perception that infrastructure improvements result in a direct loss of agricultural production, but sometimes the two can work to mutual benefit. For example, bike lanes along a county road may increase the pavement width to better facilitate the movement

of agricultural machinery. Failure to recognize these benefits may yield less than optimal results.

Instead, the region should recognize environmental benefits and opportunities for farmland from the development of infrastructure, especially in relation to municipal stormwater issues – for example, being able to accept stormwater from paved surfaces and not contributing to water volume problems. Roundtable discussion groups looking into such solutions should comprise farmers, developers, and local policymakers.

24) Showcase local food in stores and restaurants. Persuade retailers and restaurateurs to adjust their business models to ensure shelf space for local produce, meat, poultry and dairy products. Entrepreneurs and small local-food producers and processors often have access to independent groceries and restaurants, but have trouble getting their products in larger businesses and chains. The large retailers are understandably focused on finding reliable products throughout their district or region, and therefore want products in large volume. Some producers and processors, however, are reliable and of high quality, but may credit their quality to smaller volume and may not want to get much larger. To overcome this barrier, larger retailers, like the smaller, independent retailers, should consider the consumers at individual stores and make room for very-local products that may vary from one store in the chain to another.

Implementation

This Assessment and Plan provides a comprehensive portrait of the local food system in central Ohio as it exists today. It also charts a course, through its 24 recommendations, to numerous improvements that will allow the system to deliver more affordable, healthful local food to more people in central Ohio while creating jobs, preserving farmland and making the system less petroleum-dependent and more resilient.

The next step is implementation. MORPC is committed to promoting implementation through the efforts of its staff and through the numerous volunteers who work through and with its Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group. Implementation efforts are beginning immediately. Achieving full implementation, however, will require participation by more than just MORPC staff and volunteers. We will need the assistance, cooperation and, in many instances, leadership of our state and local government agencies, private businesses, community groups and passionate citizens.

We therefore conclude this Assessment and Plan with an invitation. Please join us in making the vision set forth in this document into a reality! Contact our Center for Energy and Environment at (614) 233-4178 and we will let you know what you can do to help. Together we can ensure that central Ohio has a local food system that ranks among the best in the world.