

CREATING A COMMON TABLE

BY SAGE DILTS



At the Saturday Oakland Laurel market, Juan Perez of J&P Organics in Salinas receives payment via a WIC coupon. WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) provides Federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.

What would it take for a city to put healthy, locally produced food on the tables of all residents?

It's a question the City of Oakland is asking these days as it supports the creation of its first Food Policy Council, which will bring new policy priorities to the table, inviting a collaborative group as diverse and as energized as Oakland itself to determine the menu and share in the effort.

Oakland has a long history of involvement in the development of progressive food policy and has been a leader in food assistance programs, from the Black Panthers' school breakfast program in the 1960s to the first regional food bank in the 1980s. There are currently many innovative organizations and visionary individuals working from all different angles to improve access to good food in Oakland. Yet despite the commitment and hard work, the food system continues to fail many Oakland residents. For some the failure is inconvenient, but for others it is lethal: while gun violence makes headlines, the number-one cause of death in the city is diabetes.

Many of the groups and individuals working to improve Oaklanders' access to good food were identified by Serena Unger and Heather Wooten in the Oakland Food Assessment, their graduate thesis turned policy proposal published in 2005 through the Mayor's Office of Sustainability. Beginning with the ambitious question of how to increase the percentage of locally produced food consumed in Oakland, Unger and Wooten ended up writing a thorough evaluation of the city's current systems of food production, distribution, processing, consumption, and waste-handling. The report, in its assessment of the many actors and trends in Oakland's food activities, put forth recommendations that could help the city create a sustainable food plan. The first recommendation, and the one upon which all the others depended, was the formation of a Food Policy Council. This suggestion was put into action by a resolution passed unanimously by the Oakland City Council Life Enrichment Committee in January 2006.

Up until March of this year, the Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC) existed only as a coordinator working within Food First, the organization selected to incubate the project. But 80 people attended the Council's March kickoff meeting, at which Unger and Wooten spoke to a room filled with many of the "key stakeholders" they had interviewed for the assessment. The women had identified many areas of potential synergy and collaboration among those who were looking to create better food systems in Oakland. What they saw lacking was a way for those people and groups to talk to each other in order to put innovations and ideas into action. Up until this point, as Wooten explains, "there has been no common table where all can work together."

Policy changes made at a common table can make possible the scaling up of current efforts necessary for broad change. Wooten describes this as "the difference between a few community gardens scattered around the city and a truly changed community landscape with an expectation that every neighborhood in Oakland [have] a thriving

accessible garden. From having one or two food distribution centers in low-income communities to having an established network of successful retail stores that truly serve low-income, underserved neighborhoods. And it means going from the 1 percent or so of local food that currently is sold mainly through direct markets [farmers markets and CSA programs] to mainstream distribution and processing, which utilizes and taps into that local food stream and gets it into our local businesses.”

WHY A FOOD POLICY COUNCIL?

There are a number of reasons why existing policy may be holding significant, system-wide change at bay. For food in particular the majority of policy is made through the U.S. Farm Bill, corporate interests are maintained through powerful lobbying groups, and regular old eaters and smaller-scale producers simply aren't considered or are directly undermined. While there are no illusions that a food policy council in Oakland could change the power dynamics of policy-making on the federal level, there is much to be gained by taking action locally.

As Food First's director, Eric Holt-Giménez, explains, “There are many alternative food systems coming up: food justice, food security, slow food, et cetera, but all these come from different models of food production or food distribution. The Council is a way to focus all this new energy into a local political expression which is more compatible with the ways people are wanting to grow, process, and distribute.”

As a large and diverse body, the Council can help create a more coordinated approach to city-level policy around food. Many city

policies and actions affect access to good food, from transportation planning to development of new businesses. A council with members from all sectors of the system has eyes in more places to identify counterproductive public spending. Without the Council, the city might, for example, put money toward nutrition education for at-risk youth while also giving tax incentives to fast-food companies locating in low-income areas. Coordination on larger goals can help the city use its resources more effectively.

Perhaps most importantly, a common table means further community ownership over decisions and deeper involvement

in the economics of the food system. As many in the food movement have found, reaching toward the goal of increasing access to good food is an exercise in economic development.

Food stamps are potential drivers of economic activity, but only 23 percent of those eligible for federal food benefits actually receive them. That means there are tens of millions of dollars in unclaimed benefits that could be spent on local food.

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GOOD FOOD AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

“One way or another, food systems problems come down to economic issues of poverty and low wages in favor of higher profits,” says Alethea Harper, who was hired in October 2008 to coordinate the OFPC. Speaking last February from the cozy and decidedly un-office-like North Oakland home of Food First, she explains that “financial considerations are unavoidably the root of many of the food system’s issues and a crucial concern, which the council was created to address.” Since the food policy council is charged with taking a food systems perspective she believes they are going to have to talk about economic policy. “Part of the reason that [the OFPC] exists is so that there is a body that has the defined role to think in systemic terms and to consider all of the moving parts of how we eat.”

But a systems approach does not make finding solutions any easier. For starters, there is the trick of how to reconcile the goal of achieving a higher percentage of locally produced, high-quality food for residents with the goal of solving hunger (improving distribution and access) when local food and especially organic food comes at a higher cost.

“On the face of it, it looks like there is an inherent conflict; when you are talking about hunger you are often facing the cost of food. Then when you are looking at local, sustainable, or organic food, you are looking at wages for people who work to produce that food. On one side you are looking at vulnerable consumers who don’t have a lot of disposable income and need low prices. And on the other side you are looking at a sector of our economy and employment that has gotten very low wages. How do you increase the buying power of the local consumer without compromising the living wage needs of the food worker, producer, and processor?”

Untangling this knot necessitates creative solutions. Many of the actors in food system reform hold that in addressing the food security challenge there is a real opportunity to address economic development needs. The Oakland Food Policy Council will have the opportunity to seriously consider the kinds of creative economic strategies and innovative financing tools that could help keep money in the community and support local enterprise. There is already some low-hanging fruit in this regard. One of those fruits is the food stamp program, which is federally funded. Food stamps are potential drivers of economic activity, but only 23 percent of those eligible for federal food benefits actually receive them. That means there are tens of millions of dollars in unclaimed benefits that could be spent on local food. Food stamp use at farmers markets has been growing 20 percent per year.

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Harper brought up possible changes to public and private purchasing practices: “This could start at the city as an institution and involve requiring [purchase of] local products when in season, from local producers. Big institutional buyers, like Kaiser Permanente, which is already beginning such practices, can be a great force in establishing a reliable market. Starting with institutions and agencies is key. Oakland Unified School District is another potential source for change. Most school kitchens have been downsized to warming ovens, which necessitates processed food. There could be a central school district kitchen that uses local produce and brings it to all the local schools. There are all kinds of possibilities.”

At the March kickoff event many speakers laid out examples of innovative solutions focused on the economic puzzle. Jose Corona with Inner City Advisors stated, “We have to look at this as an economic development strategy. Not only to bring healthy, fresh, affordable food to the neighborhoods but it has to make sense for everybody. From the farmer all the way to the consumer. We want to make sure that the whole system benefits.”

This is to say that an economic model that creates winners and losers in the food system won’t get Oakland very far. The consumer, worker, and producer can’t be separated. Policies simply can’t benefit one over the other, because each is really one and the same. Affordable food can’t be created simply by cutting wages on the production and distribution end, and we can’t benefit farmers by just charging higher prices. What the Oakland Food Policy Council seems to be facing is the serious need for an integrative policy approach that deals with the fundamental questions of these economic structures. The council model, if done properly, may be well suited to take this on.

The hope is that, with everyone at a common table, the search for better solutions will not tolerate a system of winners and losers, and solutions may be easier to implement because all players are working together to see the work through, and all have ownership over the decision.

As I write this, the Council is not yet real because it has no seated members. There is a committee of people poring over applications, attempting to get just the right mix of Oaklanders to take on this ambitious work. By the time of publication the 21 members of the Council will be selected and the table will be set. What comes out of it is really up to all of Oakland.

Sage Dilts authors a blog, mindtomouth.org, on which she writes about the subjects of using limited resources to eat and live well and the use of domestic skills to practically support health and a vibrant regional food system. At the time we are publishing this magazine, she is on an epic adventure, traveling on foot from Oakland to Oregon, where she is getting married.

LEARN MORE

Keep up on the development of the OFPC, and find out when and how you can come to the table, by visiting oaklandfood.org.

The HOPE collaborative is an important partner of the OFPC and is always looking for people to get engaged. Pay them a visit at oaklandfoodandfitness.net.

To learn more about how Oakland-based Food First is addressing these issues on a global scale, visit foodfirst.org.