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# OAKLAND LOOKS TOWARD GREENER PASTURES

## The Oakland Food Policy Council

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Long known for its grit, Oakland hopes it will soon be recognized for its green. In December, the Oakland City Council voted unanimously to allocate \$50,000—received in a recent energy settlement—toward the creation of a city-wide Food Policy Council (FPC). This body's primary mission will be establishing a sustainable urban food system in which 30 percent of all of Oakland's food needs will be produced within the city itself or its immediate environs.

The details of such an undertaking are still vague, and a specific timeline has yet to be drawn up. The city anticipates that by December it will have selected an organization to handle formation of the FPC, additional funding will be secured, and a strategic plan drafted. In heading the effort to form the FPC (which will be independent of city government), the chosen organization will advocate for the implementation of new food policies and convene meetings with city officials, community organizations, and the public to further its mission.

"It will be interesting to see how it plays out, that's for sure," said Heather Wooten, who co-authored a lengthy report on Oakland's food system and submitted it to the city last summer. "Oakland has a great opportunity to be a national leader."

The report, which Wooten and Serena Unger wrote as graduate students in UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning, was initiated in 2005 by Mayor Jerry Brown's Office of Sustainability. The findings provide the basic framework for the new food council and outline a long set of what the authors consider to be achievable goals.

Among them is the crucial goal of food security and public health. This would involve strategies that ultimately eliminate the need for emergency and charity-based food sources and ensure that all residents, regardless of income or location, have



access to local, fresh, and nutritious food.

Energy efficiency will also be a crucial component of the FPC's agenda, from increasing local, sustainable food production and decreasing carbon emissions inherent in long-distance food transport, to encouraging green business and clean energy principles in the city. Along these lines, the FPC will also address the city's zero-waste food potential by encouraging the elimination of nonrenewable materials and further promoting food scrap composting.

Finally, the FPC would promote economic opportunities in the food sector, establishing direct links between producers and consumers and creating living-wage jobs for residents, while also promoting "food literacy" programs and activities that would influence the public to make healthy and sustainable choices about what they eat.

"This is a long-term commitment by the city of Oakland towards sustainability," said Wooten, who also acknowledges the formidable challenges that the FPC will face. She notes that Oakland has a remarkably diverse and progressive population with a history of community involvement and grassroots action, as was evident during the handful of public meetings in city hall meant to gauge support for a food council.

In fact, the city has already taken significant steps to reduce food-related waste, outdoing the efforts of other progressively minded cities. In 2005, Oaklanders began placing their food scraps and garden waste next to their recycling for weekly pickup. Neighboring Berkeley won't begin its composting pickup until this summer or fall at the earliest.

Oakland also made headlines recently by a ban on all disposable polystyrene foam (such as Styrofoam) food service products, which went into effect in January. San Francisco is expected to introduce a similar ordinance in June, to the cha-

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grin of the California Restaurant Association, which opposed Oakland's ban.

A recent study by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy found that while Californians are four times as likely to find a fast food restaurant or convenience store as a grocery store or produce stand, Oakland actually had the best ratio of healthy to unhealthy food options among large cities in the state. This finding may come as a major shock to anyone driving through the "food deserts" of East and West Oakland, where liquor stores and fast food joints are ubiquitous and real food alarmingly scarce.

In fact, food insecurity is prominent in many of Oakland's low-income neighborhoods, where residents lack direct access to affordable nutritious food. For instance, West Oakland's more than 20,000 residents, 40 percent of whom live below the federal poverty line (2000 U.S. Census), have only one full-service grocery store in their community. Not surprisingly, the same population also suffers from high rates of diabetes, obesity, asthma, and other health conditions resulting from nutritional and environmental factors.

Yet Oakland's relatively high "food ratio" demonstrates that, although they aren't evenly distributed throughout the city, there exist ample resources and institutions, such as frequent farmers' markets and high-quality grocery stores, providing nutritious food.

And while skeptics may argue that striving for 30 percent local food production in a city like Oakland is a ridiculous endeavor, food justice proponents say that having so little local food in a Bay Area city is far more absurd.

In their study, Wooten and Unger evaluate the agricultural productivity of the city's and region's land and find that in an approximately 300-mile radius of Oakland, there are over 20 million acres used for food production, accounting for more than \$16 billion in food sales. They note, though, that while some of the most productive farm land in the world lies right here in California, almost half of state agricultural production is exported and the majority of food consumed in the state comes from far away. The average food item in America travels about 1,500 miles from farm to plate, which the report suggests is a blatantly unnecessary and egregious waste of energy as well as a complete undermining of local economies and quality food sources.

While noting the proximity and plethora of sustainable farms, the report goes on to highlight the potential of significant food production within the confines of the city:

"While many argue that the City is too crowded, space too valuable, or land too contaminated to produce food within the City, our research on urban gardening projects shows that there are many innovative ways to maximize space for food production within an urban setting."

Wooten and Unger found 35 community-based gardens in Oakland and pointed to the area's long growing season and the immense social, cultural, educational and environmental benefits of urban gardening. They mention several unique organizations working toward increased urban food production, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.

"I really believe that if the people have a political will to support them, the FPC can really effect pretty major changes in our food system," said Willow Rosenthal, founding director of City Slicker Farms, an urban farming project in West Oakland and one of the organizations mentioned in the report. An avid believer in the productivity of Oakland's land and its ability to provide significant food yields to its residents, Rosenthal, who has been involved in the FPC's conception, notes that the Council will only be effective if Oakland residents and city officials actually listen to, and follow, its recommendations. Policy work is slow and requires the ongoing attention of both city officials and residents.

"There's a huge opening with Ron Dellums as mayor of Oakland," Rosenthal said. "He talks about a sustainable city. We believe he will support [us]." Food councils in other metropolitan areas, she adds, in both the United States and other countries, have radically affected the local food systems.

According to the report, there are 31 state, county, and local food policy councils in North America, including in Berkeley, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon. Among the most notable is Toronto's, which was formed in 1991 and has helped double the number of community gardens in the city, worked toward distributing boxes of nutritious food to more than 4,000 low-income families each month, and assisted in drafting a citywide food charter.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," said Carol Misseldine, who while director of Oakland's Office of Sustainability helped initiate the food report. "Every city needs to do this—invest their dollars locally . . . [Oakland] has said, 'We get it.'"

Echoing Rosenthal, Misseldine notes the nongovernmental nature of the FPC and therefore, the degree to which it will initially require voluntary participation and acceptance from residents and local leaders in order to be successful. But, she says, many current hot-button issues and trends, such as climate change, gas prices, and security concerns, all help emphasize the necessity of local foods and the need for a food council to direct efforts to promote them, no matter how vast the goals may seem.

"The best things in our society come from big ideas," she said. "This is a good big idea." ❧

*The full Oakland Food Assessment Report is available online:*  
[http://oaklandfoodsystem.pbwiki.com/f/Oakland%20FSA\\_6.13.pdf](http://oaklandfoodsystem.pbwiki.com/f/Oakland%20FSA_6.13.pdf)