

Strengthening the local and regional food system in the Iowa Valley: Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative

Abstract: Creating a local food system can be achieved more efficiently by assembling a strategic plan with input from a variety of stakeholders and interested parties.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$34,250 for year one
\$37,396 for year two
\$38,475 for year three

Q What are effective ways for local producers to network with area consumers in order to develop a sustainable market for locally grown foods?

A Facilitated meetings provide a terrific opportunity for local producers to meet with area consumers and public officials to discuss policy and marketing opportunities. An effective local foods organization, such as I-Food, offers producers a forum in which to exchange ideas, learn from experts and other producers, and disseminate information about their production through the associated web site, producer list and related publications.



Background

The Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development office began coordinating efforts among key leaders and food system stakeholders in the Iowa Valley (Benton, Iowa, Linn, Poweshiek, and Tama counties and the Meskwaki Settlement) region in 2002. This effort, begun at the urging of local food producers and consumers, led to the formation of the Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative in January 2007. This project was an outgrowth of a community-identified need to formulate a regional food system plan.

The objective of this project was to complete the food system strategic plan for the Iowa and Cedar Valley region by August 2008, with at least three objectives identified and strategies in place to be conducted and fulfilled within the next three years. Project goals were to:

- Coordinate the efforts of the Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative, utilizing the best available data, an asset-based approach, and key local leaders with a stake in local food production and processing;
- Contract with Penny Brown-Huber to hold facilitated planning forums; and
- Guide the formation of the regional food vision and mission to achieve sustainable support for this regional initiative.

Approach and methods

A series of seven meetings, media reports, and a week-long program held at Prairiewoods Spirituality Center, involved a diverse cross-section of Iowa Valley residents. The planning process involved 77 people, with an additional 197 people surveyed, and more than 150 individuals attending the four related events held in the Iowa Valley region. Meetings included the S.E.E.D. conferences in October 2007 and



Linn-Johnson County local food task force meeting held September 2, 2008.

2008, the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture conference in February 2008, and the Prairiewoods conference in September 2008 during which local and regional food activities were highlighted.

Results and discussion

Key successes of the effort included drafting a regional food system plan, formulating plans for the creation of an agricultural park/incubator facility, developing a local food system plan for Linn County, developing resources such as directories for area producers and farmers markets, promoting the development of the Amana Farmers Market and developing land use policies in cooperation with the Linn County Planning and Zoning Department that benefit local food production.

Through the “A is for Apple” and Farm to School programs, in partnership with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and ongoing planning sessions with local school food service directors, project organizers have been able to reach more than 1,000 school-age children in the Iowa Valley in a way that was not anticipated. A unique partnership between Kalona Organics and Metro High School began in 2007 as a result of the project’s food planning efforts. In this program, high school students learn to use materials from Amish and Mennonite farms in the Kalona area, also contributing to the work of reaching a typically underserved school population.

Conclusions

The Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative has provided the needed facilitation to coordinate existing local food efforts and programs, and to develop a sustainable local food system plan for the region.

Impact of results

What began as a planned series of meetings between local food producers, consumers, and government leaders has become a focused effort aimed at providing a lasting resource for the development of a sustainable local food system. Future plans include a feasibility study for a proposed local food park/incubator and pursuing the development and expansion of local food production and consumption in the Iowa Valley region. Project partners also hope to hire an intern to facilitate local food efforts in the Iowa Valley region and in Linn County. Because of the project, important information has been gained about the local food situation in the region and the needs of Iowa Valley producers and consumers.

Education and outreach

Outreach efforts included seven community meetings, among them the week-long Prairiewoods Ecological Conference in September 2008, which reached more than 160 schoolchildren, 40 rural residents and a dozen local food producers. News



Dr. Ferruccio Trabalzi, Iowa State University, listened to feedback following his presentation to the local food group in December 2008.

releases publicized the Initiative and IVRCD staff visited 10 area farmers markets to promote the Initiative and survey 197 area consumers and producers. Staff prepared an informational brochure for regional distribution, and promoted the Initiative with presentations at a conference hosted by the Center for Health Effects and Environmental Contamination at the University of Iowa.

Leveraged funds

Additional funding was leveraged from these sources: Frontier Herb Cooperative, Witwer Foundation, Linn County Planning and Development, Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation, Johnson County Board of Supervisors, Ben and Jerry's Foundation, USDA Rural Development, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Farm to School Program. Total leveraged resources for the project were \$138,834, of which more than \$100,000 was specifically earmarked for producer support.

***For more information,
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