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Local food capacity in north central Iowa: Nutritional need, economic strategy

Abstract: The Wright County Here's to Our Health Committee sought to expand local food activity in their area. This project offered information and support for added depth and breadth in the promotion of local food production and consumption.

Question & Answer

Q: How do a few sustainable ag-minded community members and producers generate more interest from the many on an issue that doesn't appear to register significantly on community and economic development radar screens?

A: The project began with documenting food and farming economics in a specific region of north central Iowa and working with a range of partners. There were significant disconnections between what is being produced and what is being eaten. Telling the story of the disconnections opens the discussion to a vision of reconnecting. The project activities were rooted in doing this reconnecting work. There's a lot of hope in approaching this work from this angle, but it is slow work.

The committee sought funding from the Leopold Center to bring fresh resources and analysis to the local food efforts and to emphasize the potential of local food production from agricultural and economic development.

The project objectives were to:

- Document and interpret the economic and community impact of local food in Wright County,
- Increase recognition of and support for specialty crop production, and
- Connect existing networks of support among north central Iowa growers.

Approach and methods

The project organizers integrated several strategies to better tell the local food story.

Economic documentation. Ken Meter of the Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis was hired to prepare a statistical analysis of agricultural production and food consumption in Wright County.

Growing partners and public education. The information collected by Meter was presented at a community meeting that highlighted the advantages of local food system development. The message also was shared with a dozen county organizations, and handouts and a display were produced. The slogan developed for outreach materials is "Eat Wright: Locally grown food. Satisfying, sensible, sustaining."

Background

The Wright County Here's to Our Health (HTOH) committee includes representatives from faith, education, health, and community development groups in this north central Iowa county. The committee's goal is to increase access to locally grown food for all citizens. Farmers markets were targeted as visible, established local food outlets. A local food voucher provided a way for lower income families to use these markets to meet nutritional needs.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$9,390 for year one

The 2004 Eat Wright Local Food Directory was based on similar regional food directories. The publication included more than 50 producers within a 30-mile radius of Clarion, the Wright County seat. Farmers markets, producers listed by food product categories, and local meat lockers were part of the directory. There were tips for buying local and a calendar of seasonally available products.

The Wright Food Festival was modeled after a community festival held in Kossuth County, whose festival coordinator helped plan the Wright County event. Locally grown food was cast in the broad circle of community culture. The event was held in a county park and featured a special farmers market, local musical talent, an all-local foods lunch, and a sweet corn-eating contest.

Growers support. A producers' meeting was held to encourage networking, share information and resources, and identify priority areas for further development. The turnout at the meeting was low, but this may have been the timing at the beginning of the year's activities. A follow-up producer meeting was held in January 2005 and improved turnout suggested that community leaders may be more engaged in the coming year.

Results and discussion

Data compiled by Ken Meter highlighted the farm and food economy of Wright County where food production dominates the landscape. According to Meter's figures, farmers in Wright County earned \$167 million from farm commodities in 2001, but spent \$187 million to produce those commodities, a loss of \$20 million.

As a community of eaters, Wright County's food budget proved to be another area of economic leakage. Spending on food was around \$30 million annually; of that, only about \$10,000 from eight farms (or far less than 1 percent according to the USDA) could be documented as direct farm sales to consumers. Of the \$30 million in food expenditures, \$17 million was spent on meals at home, with \$7 million for purchases of meat, poultry, fruits, and vegetables that potentially could be supplied by locally,

Conclusions

The data collected suggests there are some gaps in the story. The USDA figure of only eight farms engaged in direct sales to consumers may be under-representing the real situation. The Here's to Our Health Committee plans to obtain a more accurate picture of local food economic activity in the county in 2005.

The numbers and opportunity for local food producers proved to be a message that resonated with community groups. Use of the producers' directory and the food festival raised community awareness. The investigators hope this will spur deeper analysis of the county's local food options and help garner support for more specific development projects.

Impact of results

The project aimed to engage a broader audience in the conversation about local food as community and economic development strategy. The data and outreach efforts were intended to shift local food from being viewed as a garden hobby to being recognized as an innovative strategy with multiple benefits to the whole community. The organizing group attempted to reach a broad cross-section of the community: local leaders, decision makers, food buyers, consumers, producers, and the health and faith community.

The festival was intended as an avenue to build a connection with the Spanish-speaking population of the county, but was not successful. The committee will continue to seek opportunities to reach the county's Latino population both as farmers and consumers.

The power of locally grown food is a powerful message that the Wright County Here's to Our Health group will continue to promote. The committee acknowledges that there is a significant gap between the vision and current local food production. A long-term, strategic commitment to this work is needed.

Education and outreach

Project publications included the Wright Food Festival

survey and brochure, an Eat Wright Local Food Directory, various handouts, and results of the survey. A Powerpoint presentation has been developed for use at public events.

A community meeting on “Creating New Opportunities... One Bite at a Time” was held on March 9, 2004, and 30 community leaders attended. Five producers attended a

North Central Iowa Specialty Crop Growers meeting on March 25, 2004. Twelve public presentations were made between March and May 2004 at various group meetings in Wright County. The Wright Food Festival was held July 31, with 100 people attending.

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