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Local food, local policy: A case study on engaging policy makers in the development of their foodshed

Abstract: The purpose of this project was to conduct a series of meetings and programs to assess the knowledge, understanding and capacity of Johnson County (Iowa) policy makers to improve their local food system and to provide opportunities for stakeholders in the food system to interact and learn.

Question & Answer

Q: How can farmers engage policy makers?

A: Here are concrete examples of various ways to reach policy makers and promote greater awareness and foster support for farmer issues.

- Determine and prioritize core issues the group could address, and
- Articulate short-, medium-, and long-term goals to improve the Johnson County foodshed.

Approach and methods

Project activities included small group meetings, informative events/celebrations, presentations and semi-structured interviews with 10 decision makers. A representative of Food Routes, the national organization that oversees the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, spoke to local policy makers, farmers, and concerned citizens. An event at Sass Family Farms showcased Sustainable Table, a national organization committed to supporting local food systems across the country. A meeting to discuss food access in Johnson County, specifically in Iowa City, focused on the potential for farmers to provide surplus produce to institutions serving the poor.

Conclusions

- Although small group sessions were productive, the most valuable information came from one-on-one interviews.
- The chronological order in which the activities are carried out proved to be important. Small group meetings, events, and celebrations seemed to prime the pump for the success of the interview process.
- Relationships take time, but provide the foundation for sustainable collaboration.

Background

The purpose of this project was to assess the knowledge, understanding and capacity of Johnson County (Iowa) policy makers to increase the capacity of their foodshed* through policy making, project support and collaboration, strategic planning and goal setting, and leadership. (*A foodshed is the area that supplies food to a particular region.)

The project goals were to conduct a series of meetings with Iowa City council members, individuals on the Johnson County Board of Supervisors, city planners, local businesspeople, non-profit organizations, and engaged citizens to:

- Discuss current attributes of the local foodshed and the level of understanding and awareness of Johnson County policymakers,
- Identify and discuss potential policies to increase viability of local systems in Johnson County,
- Document challenges to implementing such policies,

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Budget:

\$2,995 for year one

- One challenge of working with policy makers was the open meeting law restriction on how many policy makers may attend a meeting at the same time.
- The Johnson County Local Food Alliance (JCLFA) needs to present a strong, consistent message or brand to policy makers and other constituents.
- Several policy makers suggested that the JCLFA build stronger connections to long-standing organizations and influential individuals.
- Further research could include a wider range of participants, with time allotted for relationship building for additional groups.

Impact of results

Awareness of local food issues has increased among local leaders, with some expressing enthusiasm for learning what is being done in other counties and states.

It wasn't possible to jump right in and work on specific policies because time needed to be spent on relationship building and learning about the group's goals and needs. While the project expanded the local knowledge about areas of interest, there is a further need to determine priorities and articulate goals.

Thanks to the interaction stemming from the project, the JCLFA will work to assist the local government agencies in planning efforts for public health and planning and zoning.

Leveraged funds

The JCLFA was able obtain support from the city of Iowa City (\$1,500) and the Johnson County Board of Supervisors (\$500) for two projects, Field to Family and Buy Fresh Buy Local.

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