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Grinnell Area Local Food System Initiative

Abstract: This project provides a model for formation of a consortium of organizations to encourage and oversee the development of a local food system based upon sustainable farming practices.

Question & Answer

Q: What should I do to market my food products to institutional buyers?

A: The most important initial steps are to organize with other like-minded producers and then meet with institutional representatives to understand their product needs and decide how producers can cooperate to meet those needs.

- Facilitate connections between producers and the community, and
- Promote diversified, resource-conserving agricultural practices.

Approach and methods

The program was initially staffed with a coordinator and a student assistant. Baseline research included identification of Grinnell area institutions involved in providing food to the public that might realistically move toward more reliance on local foods. At the same time, local suppliers interested in selling to these institutions needed to be identified. After conducting these surveys, a few institutions were chosen to work with suppliers to consider what products and volume of production would be needed. Initially it was decided to focus on three product categories: a meat, a storable vegetable, and a fresh (perishable) vegetable. Concurrent with developing relationships between buyers and sellers, the coordinator was expected to support the process, track economic data, and conduct educational programs.

Results and discussion

Increase the demand for locally produced foods by selected institutions in the Grinnell area. The project received initial assistance in design from Kamyar Enshayan of the University of Northern Iowa. A coordinator was hired in 2002 to coordinate and organize meetings, contact institutions, and coordinate efforts between growers and institutions purchasing their produce. An alliance was

Background

The Grinnell Area Local Food Alliance (GALFA) was formed to highlight the role that local food can play in fostering healthy agro-ecosystems, individuals, and communities. The diversity of Grinnell's economic base combined with the presence of Grinnell College offered a promising venue and foundation for such a movement in the area. The GALFA project modeled its local initiative on earlier efforts in Iowa and other states, and set out to utilize flexibility and experimentation in creating a local food system well suited to maximize the attributes and needs of the community.

The central objectives of the Grinnell Area Local Foods System Initiative were to:

- Increase demand for locally produced foods by selected institutions in the Grinnell area,
- Facilitate connections among producers,

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established with Grinnell College Dining Services and more than a ton of produce was delivered to them between August and November 2002. Five cooperative meetings were arranged between the growers and ISU Extension and the Grinnell High School Vocational Agriculture Department. Six Grinnell area institutions were contacted to determine their interest and needs in local foods. Unfortunately, the coordinator left the project for personal reasons, and reporting and documentation efforts were not completed.

A second coordinator began work in August 2003. Surveys were conducted of local food-buying institutions and the coordinator worked with these institutions and local growers to increase interaction. Special efforts were made with restaurants to develop marketing strategies for local food menus. GALFA decided not to have the coordinator act as a broker for the growers, and this added more responsibilities for the producers. Another avenue explored was production of a newspaper insert version of the Grinnell Area Local Foods Directory to promote GALFA's work, local food producers and vending opportunities in the region.

Promote diversified, resource-conserving agricultural practices. The Poweshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District Office, an original GALFA partner, produced and distributed more than 250 copies of the *Grinnell Area Food Producers Who Market Locally* directory over the lifetime of the project. The district office has received requests from 68 customers for information about alternative livestock, farming and crop projects, with the resulting addition of ten local producers to the directory. The district office has provided information to several hundred customers on organic farming practices, integrated pest management, and soil conservation alternatives for diversified agriculture practices.

Conclusions

The GALFA project was successful in facilitating connections among food producers and between producers of local foods and the community. The many outreach activities, and marketing and education events contributed to the accomplishments. The GALFA project also promoted diversified, resource-conserving agricultural practices through its partnership with the USDA-Natural Resources

Conservation Service and the Poweshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District, reaching several hundred customers with information and technical support.

GALFA workers found it very challenging to identify institutions willing to make the extra effort to purchase local food and simultaneously to identify producers who were willing and able to work with the buyers. The limited population base in Grinnell combined with a group of smaller scale producers made the task more difficult. The decision of the Grinnell College foodservice department to contract with a large-scale supplier of already-prepped vegetables after significant discussions about buying local was disappointing.

Future efforts will focus on building a stronger producer base, adding a second farmer's market, and aggressively promoting local food.

Impact of results

While the institutional buying component of the project did not initially flourish as expected at Grinnell College, a group of ten Grinnell students undertook a group independent study project in spring 2006 aimed specifically at finding ways to increase the amount of local food served in the college dining halls. This recently completed project, carried out with the full cooperation of the college administration and the director of the dining services, resulted in the creation of a statement of college policy to use more locally-sourced food and to an expression of commitment on the part of dining services to do so. The group's efforts also increased the awareness of and interest in local foods in the Grinnell public school system, where plans were developed for a pilot program of a locally-sourced snacks during the 2006-07 school years. The GALFA group will continue to advocate the local food initiative with area institutions and buyers, both in the immediate Grinnell area and regionally. The group is considering sponsorship of several local food events such as an annual local foods meal at the college, at a local restaurant, and/or at the county fair.

Nearly 6 percent of the Grinnell College Dining Service budget currently is spend on local foods. More than 85

percent of students surveyed this year indicated that they were generally interested in more local food options, and 63 percent said they were willing to pay a higher board fee to increase the amount of local food available in the dining halls.

Education and outreach

Publications included a directory of Grinnell area food producers (updated annually), newspaper ads and features, GALFA brochure, and web site. Presentations were made at the Grinnell Area Leadership Group, Grinnell Chamber of Commerce, Poweshiek County Extension, Iowa Network for Community Agriculture annual conference, Poweshiek County Fair, and the

Grinnell High School Vocational Agriculture Department. Other outreach efforts were extended to local CSAs, a Grinnell farmer's market, and the "Gardens to Cafeteria" project of the Grinnell-Newburg School District. Also, a Grinnell chapter of "Plant-a-Row for the Hungry" was initiated in the summer of 2005, and is continuing in summer 2006 with financial support from Grinnell College.

Leveraged funds

The Leopold Center grant was not used to leverage more research funding, but it did assist GALFA in obtaining additional funding from Grinnell College to support the "Gardens to Cafeteria" project in the local public schools, and the "Plant-a-Row for the Hungry" program.

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