

The Lane County Food Policy Council

Background Information

Food is essential to sustaining life. Our food system-- by which we produce, process, distribute, access, consume food, and dispose of food waste-- has a significant impact on our environment, economy and health. As a country and a community, we act to ensure water is safe and accessible and that housing is adequate to meet demand. We must also work together to ensure the food system of our region functions well for the benefit of all.

The Lane County food system faces many challenges and opportunities.

- **Access-** One in five Lane County residents accessed emergency food in 2004; nearly one third of them were children. In 2001, more than 42,000 tons of food was sent to the landfill in Lane County. Much of that food might have been rescued for consumption or composted. FOOD for Lane County annually distributes 6 million pounds of food for emergency food boxes through community networks. Many rural residents living on limited resources struggle to get access to affordable food, and many seniors and disabled individuals living on fixed incomes depend on others for help. Many faith groups and nonprofits support our neighbors who need food assistance, yet the need continues to grow.
- **Economy-** With the loss of traditional processors like Argipac, jobs and food dollars are leaving the community. Many retailers, institutions and processors obtain produce from outside the region while local farms struggle. By re-linking local production with local demand, farming and food businesses can help develop the local economy. The natural foods industry provided more than 330 jobs and \$8.4 million in payroll to Lane County in 2002. Growth of farmer's markets, community supported agriculture and other direct marketing possibilities show promise. There is increased interest in linking institutional cafeterias with local farms. Increased food system coordination would keep money circulating in our community.
- **Natural Resources-** Between 1992 and 1997, 8% of county farmland went out of production. Opportunities for urban-rural dialogue and action for land conservation are needed as we consider our local food production capacities. Although discussions concerning natural resources can be contentious, this dialogue is important so our generation can meet its needs without diminishing the capacity of future generations.
- **Education-** Only 25% of Oregon 11th graders eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. More than 20 school gardens in Eugene and Springfield are helping educate children in growing and eating fresh foods. Fifty seven percent of Oregon adults are overweight, increasing their risk of diabetes, heart disease, and other preventable diet-related ailments. In addition to providing access to healthy

foods, education about food preparation and choice is an important response. Farm to cafeteria models support serving more local foods, which helps our farmers and improves nutrition for cafeteria diners.

Across the nation, more than 35 food policy councils are already addressing issues like these. They bring diverse stakeholders together to address a variety of interests and concerns. They provide a structure to identify and promote integrative solutions to food system deficiencies that benefit many constituents. A food policy council will allow us, as a community, to align our resources, policies and collective efforts to strengthen our food system and create a robust local food economy.

The Food Policy Council Work Group

This informal working group was formed in March 2004, in response to the Lane County Food Planning Summit. Over 60 people attended the Summit, where representatives from various countywide organizations joined policy makers and community members to discuss food system planning in Lane County. Summit participants agreed there were many food issues in Lane County that needed attention and that a food policy council would provide a useful structure for that purpose.

The Work Group was formed from Summit participants and other interested community members with the purpose of writing a recommendation for creating a food policy council in Lane County. Thirty people participated in the work group process, representing many parts of the food system, including farmers and ranchers, nutritionists, food retailers, policy makers, anti-hunger advocates, educators, direct marketers, food processors, students, consumers, community gardeners, food systems advocates, community organizations, schools, faith communities, economic development and higher education researchers.

After the Work Group created the Founding documents, a *Design Team* was formed to take all steps necessary to bring the Council into reality.

Mission of the Food Policy Council

The mission of the food policy council is

- To provide opportunities for a diverse cross-section of people to address our community's relationship to its food system, and
- To facilitate actions and policies that will promote community food security; strengthen the local food economy; and conserve and enhance agricultural capacity for future generations.

The food policy council will consider the following key indicators of community food security:

1. **Access** to food.
 - Access for all community members to enough nutritious and culturally acceptable food to support good health and an active lifestyle.
 - Removal of economic and physical barriers to acquiring food from non-emergency sources.
 - Capacity of the local community to feed itself in case of an emergency.

2. An **economically** vibrant local food system.
 - Thriving local farming, food processing, distribution and retailing businesses.
 - Strong markets for local food.
 - Adequate infrastructure and high-quality land base for the production of a consistent local supply of food.
3. Positive **environmental** impacts on the local food system.
 - Health and safety of farmers, workers and consumers.
 - Regeneration of soils, air, watersheds and wildlife habitat.
 - Reduction, reuse and recycling of production and processing wastes.
4. **Education** and empowerment of this and future generations.
 - In food choices, nutrition, growing and preparing food, and waste cycling.
 - In food business development (agriculture, processing, distribution, retailing).
 - In participating in food policy development and community food planning.

Activities of a Food Policy Council

The food policy council will consider the following activities (not prioritized):

- Catalyzing, initiating, and supporting innovative projects designed to improve community food security in Lane County.

This might entail:

 - *partnering with people, organizations and businesses on food-related projects;*
 - *supporting the development and growth of businesses that enhance community food security; and*
 - *planning for the eventual independence of projects in a way that maintains food policy council financial capacity to pursue new projects.*
- Strengthening connections between parts of the food system in Lane County.

This might entail:

 - *encouraging communication and partnerships among the diverse participants of the food system;*
 - *fulfilling a coordinating role between projects and people; and*
 - *bringing together different parts of the food system for Council projects.*
- Assessing the Lane County food system.

This might entail:

 - *researching areas of need and opportunity;*
 - *identifying leverage points for change in the system; and*
 - *celebrating areas of improvement or excellence.*
- Advising policy makers and the community on policies and actions that will support community food security and a strong Lane County food system.

This might entail:

 - *maintaining open communication with County and City governments through official governmental liaisons to the food policy council;*
 - *providing regular reports to government and community with recommendations;*

- *educating policy makers about the potential impacts of legislation on the food system; and*
 - *creating workplans for the implementation of recommendations.*
- Educating and engaging Lane County residents in community food security issues, the local food system and activities of the food policy council.

This might entail:

- *disseminating, encouraging and sponsoring research on food-related issues;*
- *being a clearinghouse of information for residents, businesses, policy makers, and organizations;*
- *making food policy council findings and operations public and accessible;*
- *supporting food system awareness activities for the public;*
- *supporting the creation and use of curricula on food issues in schools; and*
- *providing forums for public discussion.*

The structure of a successful Council is based on the following values:

- Commitment to community food security goals;
- Balance between policy and action activities;
- Diverse food system participation/representation;
- Formal relationships with County and City governments;
- Openness and broad participation; and
- Flexibility and responsiveness.

The Food Policy Council will achieve its goals through the following activities:

- **Assessing** the Lane County food system to identify issues and opportunities. Utilize assessment information to develop community health indicators, including setting benchmarks and strategies for assessing improvements over time.
- **Advising** policy makers and the community on policies and actions that will support a strong Lane County food system.
- **Educating** and engaging community residents in discussing food issues and actions to strengthen the local food system.
- **Catalyzing**, initiating, and supporting projects and businesses designed to improve the local food economy and access to nutritious food.
- **Strengthening** connections between components of the food system in Lane County, and creating a structure for people with diverse perspectives to find common ground for vision and action.