

Community Health and Food Access: The Local Government Role

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The national obesity epidemic has focused attention on the need for designing and building communities that promote active living, but the decline in routine physical activity in recent years is only part of the problem. Many adults and children have unhealthy diets, particularly those living in low-income urban neighborhoods, where a scarcity of grocery stores often makes it difficult and expensive to buy fresh, nutritious foods.

Local governments can help residents stay healthier by supporting policies and programs that encourage healthy eating. Local governments are recognizing the need to create an environment in which all residents have access to affordable and healthy foods in their schools and communities. Today, a growing number of resources and tools are available to help them provide people with a wider range of healthy food choices. This guide provides an overview of strategies and approaches that cities and counties can use to improve access to healthy foods, as well as case studies that examine success stories of community gardens, farmers' markets, food policy councils, and programs for children.



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INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating is not an issue that has attracted a lot of local government attention and involvement. Some elected officials and local government managers view food as a personal choice. They believe that people will eat what they want to eat.

Yet as the American diet has grown increasingly unhealthy, it has become clear that local governments do have an important role to play, mainly because they are in an ideal position to improve access to fresh produce and other healthy foods in their communities and schools.

In the last 30 years, the amount of calories people consume in the United States has increased across the entire population, and it seems likely that the rise is related to people eating more unhealthy foods. As of 2003, only a quarter of the nation's population followed the government-recommended diet that calls for eating five fruits and vegetables a day.¹ A number of factors determine what people eat, but access has a major influence. Studies have found that people buy food that is readily available. And today, it is often the case that communities with the highest rates of obesity also are places where residents have few opportunities to conveniently purchase nutritious, affordable food.²

Food access problems that serve as an impediment to healthy eating include

- **The Grocery Gap.** Low-income areas typically have one-third fewer grocery stores than middle- and high-income neighborhoods.³ This “grocery gap” means that poor people have fewer healthy foods to choose from and pay more for what's available. Corner stores and gas stations are often the only nearby shopping options in city neighborhoods and rural areas. These establishments regularly charge up to 49 percent more than chain grocery stores for the same food and rarely offer a selection of healthy fresh foods.⁴
- **Can't Get There from Here.** People without access to a car or adequate public transportation have a hard time getting to places that sell affordable quality foods. For those who do make the trip, the cost of taxis or other transportation can decrease the amount they are able to spend on groceries.
- **What's on the Kids Menu?** The ability of children to make their own food choices is especially limited; they depend on what parents and schools provide for them.
- **Cheap Eats.** People on a tight budget will naturally seek out less expensive foods. Unfortunately, cheaper foods are often high in calories and fat.

- **The Microwave Effect.** Limited time for and knowledge of food preparation can increase consumption of prepackaged or highly processed prepared meals.

Local governments have the power to remove these and other barriers to obtaining healthy, affordable food and to educate citizens about what they can do to live healthier lives. They also have at their disposal many strategies and policies that can be used to level the food playing field. For example, government land use and transportation decisions ultimately can determine how easy or hard it will be for residents in different areas to obtain healthy foods. Other options for making healthy foods more accessible include supporting neighborhood farmers' markets and community gardens, luring supermarket development to underserved areas, and enacting food-centered zoning ordinances. Many of these strategies have the added attraction of strengthening the local economy, bringing community members together, and enhancing the quality of life for all.

The role of local government in improving access to healthy foods is becoming much more important as rates of obesity and associated chronic diseases—such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, and cancer— increase in both children and adults.⁵ Previous ICMA publications have documented how the obesity epidemic has become a leading public health concern in the United States, affecting 30 percent of adults and approximately 9 million children over the age of six.⁶ Our children are especially vulnerable to the detrimental effects of a poor diet, and access to nutritious foods in schools and communities is critical to keeping our kids healthy.

Alarming, obesity could cancel out health gains that have been accruing for decades. Despite major achievements over the past century in reducing infectious diseases, the current generation of young people might be the first to have a lower life expectancy than that of their parents, and obesity-related illness may be the culprit.⁷ The economic implications of this epidemic also are severe. In 2000, the direct and indirect costs associated with obesity were approximately \$117 billion.⁸

A healthy, nutritious diet and regular physical activity can reduce the risk of obesity and associated chronic diseases, directly improving one's health and well-being and minimizing health care costs for local governments. After sitting on the sidelines, more and more cities and counties across the country are now exploring various strategies to promote healthy eating and adapting them to meet local needs. As they look for what they can do to improve the degrading American diet, ensuring access to high-quality foods should be a priority.

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BETTER EATING THROUGH FARMERS' MARKETS

Establishing and supporting farmers' markets can be an effective and flexible way for local governments to make fresh, healthy, and locally grown foods available to residents. Farmers' markets can vary according to a community's unique needs, constraints, and identity; they work in almost any jurisdiction. They typically attract a lot of people. By setting up a farmers' market, local officials can create a vibrant shopping experience that benefits area farmers, businesses, and consumers.

Unlike more expensive efforts to increase access to food, farmers' markets can usually support themselves with vendor fees, which help minimize the cost to local governments. Typically, the only direct costs are for advertising and marketing. Farmers' markets are fairly easy to develop. They can be planned within a relatively short time and do not face the stringent land use requirements applied to supermarkets or community gardens.

Although in some parts of the country farmers' markets are limited by short growing seasons, they are often popular events that attract residents and visitors alike. Susan McCarthy, city manager of Santa Monica, California, describes her community's farmers' market as "a cause of celebration" because it brings people together and provides a unique shopping experience.

What Is the Role of Local Government in Supporting Farmers' Markets?

Local governments can provide critical logistical support essential to the operation of a farmers' market. They can organize and manage a market at little cost. They also can support nonprofits and other groups that want to develop and run a farmers' market.

Here are some of the ways local governments can encourage farmers' markets:

- **Site location.** Local governments can designate public land for a market. The sites can range from a municipal parking lot, bus station, or park to a blocked-off intersection. Markets can be located in either commercial or residential areas.
- **Traffic control and parking.** Collaboration with the local police and/or planning departments can ensure that traffic is not disrupted if the market is located on a blocked-off street. Working together also helps ensure that farmers are permitted to park in a designated spot close to the site. Police and planning departments can ensure that street signage clearly indicates market days, times, and location.
- **Set-up, cleanup, and maintenance.** Local governments can use their department of public works to

prepare the site by setting up tents or tables. Public works agencies can also provide water and electricity, collect garbage, and oversee cleanup.

- **The use of food stamps.** Local governments can select vendors that participate in nutritional food stamp programs such as the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and Senior Nutrition programs. Markets that accept vouchers from these federal programs can help income- and age-qualified residents buy products they otherwise would not be able to afford or could not readily find.
- **Promotion.** Local governments can promote farmers' markets through city newsletters, event guides, and other inexpensive means. They also can increase the visibility of these markets with official signs and banners.

Beyond the Exchange of Food: The Many Benefits of Farmers' Markets

Many local governments are involved in farmers' markets because they recognize that their associated benefits go beyond buying and selling food. In fact, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of community farmers' markets across the country: the number of markets increased by 80 percent from 1994 to 2002.⁹

Local governments can increase their visibility in the community by establishing a presence at a farmers' market. Markets can become something of a community commons, offering an opportunity to interact with residents in an informal environment.

Local officials also recognize that farmers' markets help sustain small farms because they encourage people to buy locally and give farmers the chance to sell directly to consumers and earn a higher profit. The markets allow food growers and customers to build relationships, and that direct interaction keeps shoppers coming back. In addition, the local economy reaps benefits because the crowds attending the markets are likely to patronize nearby businesses.

In urban areas, a farmers' market can provide a window into another world, providing what might be a city resident's only connection to rural life. City dwellers who have the opportunity to buy direct from a farmer also have the opportunity to learn how food is grown.

The Current State of Farmers' Markets

Many farmers' markets managed by local governments have developed a variety of creative approaches to management, services, and activities designed to enhance the overall experience.

In Madison, New Jersey, the downtown development commission has established a set of official regulations and bylaws to clarify the purpose of the market, guide its daily operations, and inform vendors of what is expected of them.

The city of San Francisco has worked with the state of California to enable food stamp recipients to use Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) payments at farmers' markets. In the past, vendors were unable to accept EBT payments because the machines required to conduct the transaction are so costly. The city and state eliminated this barrier by providing a wireless EBT card machine at the Alemany Farmers' Market. All vendors can use the machine, which allows more low-income residents to shop at the market and vendors to sell more produce.

Reno, Nevada, provides group transportation to the city's farmers' market for older residents who are enrolled in the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. The East Orange Farmers' Market in East Orange, New Jersey, hosts a lunch-hour concert series for five weeks in the summer. During intermissions, speakers from the Department of Health discuss health issues and the benefits of healthy eating.¹⁰

The city of Holyoke, Massachusetts, has partnered with the Holyoke Food Policy Council, the Holyoke Health Center, and Nuestras Raices, a Latino youth farm group, to host a farmers' market. The partnership helps sustain the market's finances, pay the market manager's salary, and place advertisements on city buses.

In southern California, the market manager of the Santa Monica Farmers' Market airs a live radio broadcast every Saturday. The program, called *The Market Report*, reviews produce available that week.¹¹

Community farmers' markets are dynamic places that make healthy foods fun, accessible, and affordable. They can enhance quality of life, provide economic development opportunities, and reduce health care costs in the long term. Local governments play an important role in the success of these markets, whether they take the lead in managing the market or provide support for a private business or nonprofit organization. Through their involvement with farmers' markets, local governments send a clear message that improving community health is a priority.

ANN ARBOR FARMERS' MARKET AND FARMLAND PROTECTION

A Farmers' Market with Deep Roots

The history of the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market stretches back nearly a century. Jayne Miller, the city's community services area administrator, describes the market as "a focal point of the community," a place where residents have been able to purchase fresh locally grown foods for generations.

The city has been running the market since the market was established in 1919, but the city's role was formalized

Ann Arbor, Michigan

The city of Ann Arbor is located in southeast Michigan, 45 miles west of Detroit and 35 miles north of the Ohio border. The year-round population is 114,000 (75 percent white, 9 percent black, and 12 percent Asian); during the school year, an additional 42,000 college students attend the University of Michigan.

The university is the largest employer in Ann Arbor; high-tech, pharmaceutical, and biotechnology firms also contribute to the local economy. The city is often referred to as "Tree Town" because more than 100,000 trees have been planted along the streets and in city parks.

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only in 1998 through an ordinance that outlines the rules and regulations that govern the market today. Previously, the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market had been administered through different city departments, including the Administrator's Office and the Treasury Department. Today, it is managed by a full-time staff person within the Parks and Recreation Department.

Since 1931, the market has been set up in a former lumberyard in the Kerrytown District, one of four downtown neighborhoods. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, permanent sheds were built to provide enough spaces for 100 vendors.¹² The market is very popular, and the city is trying to expand it because there are many more vendors than there are spots available in the permanent sheds.

At the peak of the growing season, more than 150 vendors sell a wide array of locally grown fresh produce and homemade goods on Wednesdays and Saturdays. In the winter months, approximately 15 to 20 vendors sell their goods on Saturdays. The location is used for an artists' market on Sundays.

Three types of stalls occupy the farmers' market: permanent, temporary, and artist. All vendors submit an application to rent stall space, and they must prove that the products they sell are raised locally or are produced by themselves. City officials occasionally verify compliance with inspections. The rent paid by stallholders is a major source of revenue for the market, which is funded by a self-sustaining enterprise fund. On non-market days, the Downtown Development Authority rents the site for use as a parking lot, which provides yet another source of revenue for the market.

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Renewed Success in the Twenty-First Century

The Ann Arbor Farmers' Market has a rich history as one of the largest and oldest markets in the country. But its popularity dwindled in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to changes that have sparked a revival.

- During the 1980s, the city of Ann Arbor provided stalls to vendors to increase their attendance and sales at the market. Regular vendors who do a large volume of business were given additional stalls in areas of the market with more pedestrian traffic.
- The city has realized that professional management is an important component of the market's success. In July 1999, jurisdiction over the market was given to the Department of Parks and Recreation. The move eventually prompted the hiring of a full-time market manager who is able to devote attention to advertising and promotional campaigns, building relationships in the community, increasing vendor and customer attendance, attracting new vendors, and building relationships with current vendors.
- The market has become progressively busier because of increased vendor interest, a boost in public demand for products that contribute to a healthy lifestyle, and growing support for local agriculture. Overall, Miller says, more and more people in Ann Arbor highly value what the market offers.

Community-Based Planning

In two major initiatives, Ann Arbor relied on public participation to help shape the future direction of the farmers' market. First, the city developed a Farmers' Market Commission, composed of Ann Arbor citizens and vendor representatives. Second, the city is creating a farmers' market master plan, which is being shaped by community input. Market manager Jessica Black says it is important to build relationships in the community by including residents in the decision-making process.

The Farmers' Market Commission was established in 1998 by a city ordinance. It serves as an ongoing advisory board to guide daily market operations. Nine representatives sit on the market commission, including one annual vendor representative, one daily vendor representative, one artisan vendor representative, and one regular consumer. The remaining members are local residents who have an interest in the farmers' market. Representatives serve a term of one to three years and attend monthly meetings. Anyone can apply to be on the market commission; however, prospective members are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the city council. The commission gives a voice to people who work and shop at the market.

The Farmers' Market master plan has been under development since 2003. Ann Arbor has embarked on an expansion project to improve existing market facilities and diversify the use of the market space. Since the early 1990s there has been a long waiting list for new vendors who want to sell at the market—a testament to the market's popularity and its success for vendors. The city hopes to accommodate vendors on the waiting list and develop an enclosed facility for year-round use that can be rented for private functions to generate additional revenue.

Before it began any improvements, the city followed a community-based planning approach to evaluate the future direction of the farmers' market and is using feedback from residents as it develops the master plan.

Ann Arbor's first step involved creating a steering committee made up of local businesspeople, representatives from the Downtown Development Authority, city staff, and members of the Farmers' Market Commission. Consultants developed blueprints to maximize use of the market. They relied on meetings with vendors, focus groups of area businesspeople, customer surveys, and questionnaires that elicited feedback to fine-tune the final plan. The city received responses from a broad cross-section of stakeholders and is satisfied that it engaged the community in the process of shaping the future of the market.

Farmland Protection

Miller notes that the farmers' market is "consistent with what the community values," which includes protecting the region's farmland. In November 2003, taxpayers approved a 30-year property tax increase to be used to protect and preserve up to 7,000 acres of open space and agricultural lands within and around Ann Arbor. The tax measure, called the Open Space and Parkland Preservation Program, or the Greenbelt Program, is projected to raise \$80 million over three decades. Mayor John Hieftje promoted and sponsored the measure, which passed by a 68 percent majority.¹³ The city will be able to leverage the money to purchase conservation easements on active farmland. The city already has bonded \$20 million of the projected total, with the goal of protecting as much farmland as possible before it is sold for development or is too expensive to purchase.

The conservation easements fall under the category of purchase of development rights (PDR), which are voluntary sales of development rights. A PDR places a deed restriction on the property so that it will continue to be active agricultural property. The city is leveraging state and federal funds and partnering with neighboring jurisdictions in its efforts to preserve as much farmland as possible.

In May 2004, the city council formed the Greenbelt Advisory Commission to advise the council on farmland

acquisitions. It is composed of nine individuals, six of whom must live in Ann Arbor. They include one city council member, two representatives of environmental and/or conservation groups, one real estate development professional, one agricultural landowner or operator of an agricultural business, one plant or animal biologist, and three at-large community members.¹⁴

Since the greenbelt ordinance was implemented, the city has purchased the development rights of three properties near Ann Arbor. The land of one of these properties belongs to a soybean farmer and vendor at the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market, an example of how the PDR program can help sustain local agriculture and keep the farmers' market viable. The city council approved the purchase of development rights of three additional agricultural properties in 2006; each will have to meet criteria developed by the Greenbelt Advisory Commission.

The greenbelt ordinance protects farmland from development and helps keep agricultural land affordable. Because it supports the farming industry, the program is expected to have a positive impact on the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market, which requires that all vendors sell locally grown foods.

Many of the vendors and their families have roots in farming and the farmers' market that go back generations. The city of Ann Arbor has been proactive in laying the groundwork for the region's health over the long term by building relationships with these farm families. By purchasing development rights on farmland outside its boundaries, the city is attempting to do its part to ensure that future generations will have the same access to locally grown fresh foods that people in Ann Arbor have today.

COMMUNITY GARDENS: THE DO-IT-YOURSELF APPROACH TO BETTER DIETS

Community gardens are public spaces available to community members, and they can generate a substantial amount of healthy food. Some gardens are divided into individual plots that are leased or loaned for personal use; others are tended and harvested communally. They can be incorporated into a wide variety of existing facilities, including rooftops, vacant lots, public parks, schoolyards, and greenhouses.

In Boston, the Parks and Recreation Department estimates that the city's 3,000 garden plots generate approximately \$1.5 million worth of produce each year, guaranteeing that participating families will have access to healthy foods.¹⁵ They are a good resource for low-income residents who might otherwise be forced to rely on less nutritious foods.

Community gardens are associated with a wide range of public health, social, and economic benefits. Besides

increasing access to healthy foods, gardening is a great source of physical activity and recreation for people of all ages and abilities. Studies have shown that gardening can reduce stress, fear, anger, blood pressure, and muscle tension.¹⁶ Gardens also bring pockets of aesthetic beauty and tranquility to urban neighborhoods.

Community gardens can foster relationships among neighbors, who can work together to decide which foods to plant based on their cultural or taste preferences. The community garden also can make neighborhoods safer because they create meeting spots that increase vigilance on the street. And gardens can be outdoor classrooms where community members learn more about healthy foods and how plants grow.

Yet there are significant challenges associated with community gardens. Gardens situated on vacant lots can be threatened if the property owner decides to reclaim the land for development. In older communities with abandoned industrial properties, the soil might be contaminated with metals that require cleanup. The regional climate can limit the length of the gardening season or the types of produce that can be grown. Yet compared with many other strategies for increasing access to healthy foods, community gardens can be an inexpensive and cost-effective option for local governments, one for which cities and counties can often provide long-term support.

For example, in 2002, local government officials in Huntsville, Alabama, helped preserve a community garden run by a nonprofit organization called Care Assurance System for the Aging and Homebound (CASA) and helped relocate a community garden from the city's research park to a local botanical garden.¹⁷ Local governments also can preserve and protect gardens by providing the land or applying planning and zoning measures that ensure a property is used for agricultural purposes.

In jurisdictions across the country, local governments are using their departments of parks and recreation, health, and community and economic development to provide opportunities for community gardening. Local government strategies to develop and support community gardens include

- **Establishing a local government department as manager/operator.** In Arlington, Virginia, the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources oversees the management and operation of eight community gardens. The city has enacted regulations governing the operations of the gardens, including an annual fee for each plot. Cash collected from participants helps offset the cost of water access and maintenance.

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- **Cultivating better land use laws.** Local governments can protect the long-term viability of community gardening by using zoning or other regulatory tools to designate specific lands for certain uses. In the early 1990s, the city of Boston updated its zoning ordinances to include community gardens and other types of open space. These laws protect the gardens over the long term by limiting the types of development that can occur on these tracts.
- **Providing outreach and education.** Many community gardens are demonstration sites for educational efforts. The Issaquah, Washington, Resource Conservation Office promotes ecologically friendly landscaping techniques to help conserve water at the city's Pickering Farm Community Garden.
- **Partnering with local organizations.** Local governments often partner with nonprofit organizations, civic organizations, community groups, and educational institutions to support community gardens. In Louisville, Kentucky, Active Louisville, a partnership devoted to creating an active living community, is working with the Louisville Metro Housing Authority, the Metropolitan Sewer District, the Jefferson County Cooperative Extension Service, the Presbyterian Community Center, and other local entities to develop a community garden and outdoor classroom on the site of a newly renovated chapel. The sewer district will help secure irrigation infrastructure at the site, where individual plots will be made available to nearby residents.¹⁸
- **Changing local policy.** The city of Burlington, Vermont, passed a resolution supporting the long-term maintenance and expansion of its community gardens program.¹⁹

Clearly, when it comes to supporting community gardens, local governments have a variety of resources and expertise to offer. Moreover, the goals and objectives of parks and recreation and development agencies align easily with those of a community garden. By using the tools readily at their disposal, local governments nationwide are becoming a powerful force in the effort to fight obesity by using community gardens to improve access to fresh produce.

DES MOINES COMMUNITY GARDENING COALITION

In 1997, leaders from Drake University's Agricultural Law Center, the Des Moines Park and Recreation Department, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and city gardening clubs started talking to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) about what they could do to support

local community gardening efforts. The city recognized the high level of interest in supporting this type of work, and the group launched the Community Gardening Coalition, to be run by the Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

In its first year, the Des Moines Community Gardening Coalition (DMCGC) was staffed by a seasonal city employee, but it has required a full-time staff person since its second year. The DMCGC supports community "greening" projects by working with various community-based organizations and offering them the training and resources to achieve four major goals: beautification, education, community development, and food security.

Currently, the coalition supports approximately 100 community gardens citywide. Through these efforts it has touched more than 1,200 people since the program began. The DMCGC's definition of a community garden is broad. It can include vegetable, butterfly, and flower gardens; a community-organized tree-planting project; a plot-based garden where individuals are assigned space to maintain as their own garden bed; or a communal garden with multiple caretakers. The city's community gardens are located in parks, vacant lots, street corners and on property belonging to libraries, shelters, low-income housing developments, schools, and community centers. One-third of them grow fruits and vegetables.

Though Des Moines is in one of the nation's most productive agricultural states, food security is a pressing issue for lower-income residents. Assistant City Manager Mike Matthes emphasizes that it is the local government's responsibility to address the issue of food access and ensure that people have healthy foods to eat. Matthes describes the Des Moines community gardening approach as a "vehicle to serve a diverse group of people, and it really works with residents in a grassroots way."

Key Partners and Populations Served

A wide range of residents participates in the city's community gardens, and that diversity is reflected in the mix of partners affiliated with the DMCGC. More than half of all the Des Moines Neighborhood Associations manage some type of community gardening projects, including vegetable gardens and flower gardens. One plot-based community garden is located on Des Moines parkland. The coalition also works with a variety of nonprofit organizations, homeless shelters, and community centers, many of which have on-site kitchens but limited budgets and limited access to fresh produce. Community gardens enable nonprofits to add healthy fresh foods to the meals they serve while saving money.

The gardens also provide a way to serve immigrant communities in Des Moines. Many of the city's Sudanese, Southeast Asian, and Vietnamese communities are actively

involved in city gardening projects. Teva Dawson, coordinator for the DMCGC, describes community gardens as a good way for immigrants to grow things they can't get at the grocery store. She says she enjoys visiting the immigrants' gardens because she gets the opportunity to try vegetables she has never eaten before.

Young people are active in the city's community gardens as well. Some 30 schools—about half of all public schools in the city—have gardens. Many of the public schools in Des Moines are using their community gardens as outdoor classrooms, taking the opportunity to give students hands-on learning experiences in science.

The therapeutic benefits of gardening are apparent for many of the schools involved. Dawson says teachers have commented that students who have the most difficulty in the classroom often are some of the best students when it comes to working in the garden. One Des Moines school used its community garden to create a program in which students started a farmers' market and sold produce to their parents, which helped get adults involved as well.

Schools start community gardens for a variety of reasons, but they often are used for nutrition education. "It is amazing to work with kids in the garden. They'll treat vegetables like candy, they are so novel, and they look at cherry tomatoes like they are a new kind of candy," Dawson says. "It is proven that, if they grow it themselves, kids will be more likely to try new things."

Local Government Role

The coalition offers a number of resources to participating organizations and residents to help them develop, maintain, and sustain their gardens. The assistance includes

- Classes, planting events, and ongoing monitoring so that community members can learn the basics of gardening. The group also offers more advanced gardening classes, and it teaches the basics of community organizing to help maintain the DMCGC as a grassroots project.
- A monthly newsletter, *Sprouts*, which publishes updates on different gardens, news articles, recipes, and related information.
- Supplies and equipment that are needed to till the soil, haul compost, and lay wood chips. These resources exist in the Des Moines park system and are typically delivered to community gardens during the off season.
- Water, coordinated with Des Moines Water Works. The city provides access to fire hydrants for a number of community gardens.
- Free seeds to income-eligible gardeners. This program is run by the Des Moines Community Development Department, using Community Development Block Grant funding.

Des Moines, Iowa

Des Moines is the capital city of Iowa, with a population of nearly 200,000, according to the 2000 census. The largest city in the state, Des Moines is located in South Central Iowa and, like many American cities, is surrounded by large suburbs. In 2000, the city's population was 82 percent white, 8 percent black, and nearly 7 percent Hispanic. The state's greatest concentration of minority populations and the poor live in the central city. The median household income was \$38,408 in 1999, and slightly more than 11 percent of the population lived below the poverty level.

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The only direct costs for the coalition, which are covered by the Park and Recreation Department, are staff time for the program coordinator position and for employees who deliver supplies to garden sites. The staffing, while minimal, is crucial because it enables the coalition to establish relationships, get connected to community resources, and leverage other funds to support the program. Dawson says funding staff time is the most important thing a local government can do to support community gardens. "Staff can help coordinate and find resources, write grants, and connect with other department agencies," she says.

As coordinator for the DMCGC, Dawson has helped secure grants from federal and state agencies and from a number of local and national foundations. The program's positive effect on the city also attracts financial support from community members. In addition, local businesses have made in-kind donations to support the gardens.

The coalition coordinator serves as a liaison between the local government and local gardening groups, community organizations, and other participants. Dawson works with coalition partners to help them plan their gardens. She also engages county extension agents, landscape architecture students, and volunteers to provide resources and expertise to the DMCGC. Coalition staff members help people involved with the city's community gardens discover and tap into many existing resources that are free.

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“Digging Deeper” and Unearthing Food Security

The DMCGC is involved in a four-year project called Digging Deeper that is funded by a USDA food systems grant. Through this program, the DMCGC seeks to improve access to fresh and healthy food—“food at our fingertips,” as Dawson refers to it—by making it readily available in backyards or local parks. The coalition works with existing groups to help them implement specialized projects to address food security issues in Des Moines.

One component of the USDA grant is the delivery of 120 raised-bed kitchen gardens to low-income areas, where renters or homeowners can have a gardening plot to grow food near or in their backyards. The DMCGC offers basic classes to teach the gardeners how to maintain their plots. Ninety-five percent of the gardens in this program, which was launched in 2004, have been in use for multiple years. Dawson describes the initiative as inexpensive and easy to run. The program helps families take a step closer to becoming self-sufficient by giving them the opportunity to grow their own food.

The Digging Deeper grant has funded a second specialized project, the installation of nine “edible landscapes,” which are properties composed entirely of edible plants. Edible landscapes are designed by landscape architects who donate their time to help develop a plan for what to grow. The plants include fruits, vegetables, nuts, edible flowers, and other perennials. Many of the plants that are selected yield foods that cannot be found in grocery stores. The purpose is to provide an educational experience that highlights the diversity of foods that can be grown.

The organizations selected as sites for edible landscapes have few resources for planting and maintaining gardens. But with the support of the DMCGC they have started producing fresh food for the community while adding a new aesthetic to the neighborhood. Edible landscapes in Des Moines have been developed at a shelter, a food pantry, two schools, a community center, a neighborhood streetscape, a low-income housing provider, and two park sites. Often, the edible landscapes provide a beautiful urban oasis in dilapidated areas of communities.

Harvesting a Healthier Community

The Des Moines Community Gardening Coalition makes it easier for city residents to get healthy fresh foods by teaching people how to grow their own food and supporting grassroots gardening efforts. The group provides significant assistance to many gardeners who do not have the resources to purchase plant material and gardening supplies. Community gardening fosters relationships between neighbors, bringing people outside their houses to get to know one another. That in turn helps reduce crime

because more residents are meeting each other and keeping eyes on the street.

Residents are often surprised to learn that the DMCGC program is run by the city of Des Moines’ Park and Recreation Department because it does not fit their image of a city government function. The resources the coalition offers to support local community gardening efforts have helped build a positive relationship between the city government—especially the Park and Recreation Department—and many neighborhood associations, schools, and community organizations.

LYNCHBURG GROWS: QUEST FOR BETTER FOODS REJUVENATES A CITY

The city of Lynchburg, Virginia, has taken a multifaceted approach to boosting access to healthy foods in the community by collaborating with Lynchburg Grows, a local nonprofit organization founded in early 2004. The partnership has yielded broad benefits, including downtown revitalization, brownfields remediation, and economic development.

Lynchburg Grows uses urban agriculture to provide training in workforce development while creating job opportunities for those in need and people living with disabilities. The nonprofit is working with Lynchburg’s Parks and Recreation Department to boost recreational programming that targets youth, and it has promoted a business development plan to increase activity at the city-run community market. Through these efforts, the partnership is helping the city reach its goal of creating an environment that promotes active living and healthy eating.

Lynchburg Grows was conceived by a group of concerned citizens who initially came together to help a disabled man whose garden was destroyed when the grounds of his home were bulldozed. The loss of his garden, which he had tended for many years, attracted a lot of media attention, and the man’s passion inspired the organization’s founders to take action. They wanted to provide a source of healthy food for the community and help all residents—especially those with the fewest resources—get access to gardening.

The city has supported the nonprofit’s work in a variety of ways, such as adopting a resolution that led to the development of an urban farm and encouraging community members to get involved with Lynchburg Grows. The nonprofit has received in-kind donations as well. Lynchburg’s Public Works Administration has connected gutters from four greenhouses and run them underground to a 15,000-gallon holding pond to collect rainwater for plants. The city also has donated and delivered more than

1,000 tons of leaves and mulch, which otherwise would have been dumped in the local landfill, to use as compost.

Michael Van Ness, executive director of Lynchburg Grows, says the group's grassroots history and community orientation—along with its popularity and effectiveness—helped win the city's support. He adds that similar efforts can work in other jurisdictions, given the variety of community organizations around the country that offer similar programs. Van Ness notes that partnerships with nonprofits offer a compelling opportunity for local governments that want to increase access to healthy foods, improve food security, and enhance the overall health of their community.

Bringing Back Downtown Lynchburg

For more than 50 years, the H. R. Schenkel family operated a rose farm on 6.5 acres with nine greenhouses covering 70,000 square feet in the center of a downtown Lynchburg neighborhood. In 1999, the farm went out of business. The property sat abandoned for a few years and was seen as a detriment to the community. In 2004, after several plans to convert the property into housing failed, it was acquired by Lynchburg Grows. The nonprofit secured a lease-to-buy option to purchase the farm for \$319,000, which was below the value of the property's newest greenhouses.

Lynchburg Grows converted the old rose-growing operation into a productive agricultural operation and renamed it the H. R. Schenkel Urban Farm & Environmental Education Center. Lynchburg Grows hopes it will become the largest indoor grower of organic produce in the mid-Atlantic region, growing organic greens such as lettuce, Swiss chard, kale, and basil, as well as tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, carrots, and radishes. The food produced by Lynchburg Grows is sold to local restaurants and at the weekly community market. In addition, it has donated more than 400 pounds of food to local soup kitchens.

Meanwhile, the rejuvenation of the vacant greenhouse property has become a catalyst for the revitalization of downtown Lynchburg. The Schenkel property is adjacent to the Lynchburg City Stadium, a historic baseball park operated by the city of Lynchburg that is undergoing a \$5 million renovation. The city is considering a plan to integrate the stadium with the Schenkel Urban Farm and provide joint parking and restroom facilities.

Both of these sites sit next to the Allen Morrison property, a vacant brownfield that was recently accepted into the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality Brownfields Program. The city's long-term plan is to clean up the Allen Morrison property and redevelop it as a public park and open space that is connected to the urban farm and baseball stadium. City officials hope to partially open the site for public use by 2011.

Lynchburg, Virginia

Lynchburg, Virginia, is located in central Virginia on the James River, approximately 180 miles southwest of Washington, D.C., and 50 miles south of Charlottesville, Virginia. The city, which covers 49 square miles, is home to more than 65,000 residents year-round and thousands of college students during the academic year who attend the city's five private colleges and universities. About 67 percent of the population is white, and 30 percent is black. The median household income topped \$32,000 in 1999, when 16 percent of the population lived below the poverty level.

Lynchburg's well-developed trail system spans 23 miles of asphalt and earthen paths, and the local government has adopted many tenets of the "active living" approach to community planning to promote physical activity. Historically, Lynchburg's economy has relied on the tobacco industry and manufacturing. Today, manufacturing concerns employ more than 30 percent of the workforce, but telecommunications, nuclear power, and health services are now the largest industries.

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Kay Frazier of Lynchburg Parks and Recreation emphasizes the value of converting urban land that has been abandoned or is underutilized into vibrant public spaces. The success of Lynchburg Grows' urban farm and the city's work to create a downtown park next to the farm are prime examples. Frazier cautions that reclaiming brownfields requires a high level of commitment because of the need to learn a "whole new language" and process in working with the state Department of Environmental Quality. It took the city a few years to learn how to work with a brownfield because of liability issues and other challenges involved in moving the project through cleanup and redevelopment. But ultimately, the city's efforts to restore the property will create a thriving recreational area for all city residents.

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Van Ness is pleased to see local governments embracing active living concepts as a way to make communities healthier, but he views food access as equally important. It is particularly crucial in low-income neighborhoods. In addition to the Schenkel property, in 2004 Lynchburg Grows negotiated with the Lynchburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority to purchase five properties for community gardens in two of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Neighborhood residents will use the lots for personal food production. They will help beautify the area and contribute to neighborhood revitalization while also providing a secure food source for residents.

Lynchburg Community Market

The Lynchburg Community Market, sponsored by Lynchburg Parks and Recreation, is one of the oldest indoor farmers' markets in the country. During the past few years, the city has been looking for ways to improve the economic viability of the market, diversify its offerings, and explore opportunities for future expansion.

In the fall of 2004, Parks and Recreation hired the nonprofit group Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to study the current condition of the market. The Lynchburg City Council approved many of the key PPS recommendations to expand and diversify the market. In February 2006, the city received a grant to implement many of the changes. The award was in response to a proposal from Parks and Recreation, which worked with Lynchburg Grows to develop a business plan for the market, provide job training for disabled individuals who run the operation, and establish Lynchburg Grows as a market anchor.

As an anchor, Lynchburg Grows will increase the variety of foods available at the market, provide access to organic foods, improve overall food security for the community, and provide employment for disabled and disadvantaged individuals. Some of the PPS grant funding will be used to train Lynchburg Grows staff, work with the city's small business development center, and engage in market research that will look at food supply and demand issues in Lynchburg. Frazier notes that residents currently must travel outside the city to buy organic groceries and that research will assess food security issues and identify whether there is a shortage of grocery stores in the Lynchburg area.

Better Eating Through Education

According to the Healthy Lifestyles Coalition, central Virginia has the highest rate of childhood obesity in the state. Lynchburg Parks and Recreation is collaborating with Lynchburg Grows to give children and young adults at the city's seven community centers and after-school and

summer programs hands-on experience in food production while teaching them the importance of healthy eating. At the after-school programs, healthy snacks are offered through the Kids' Café run by the Lynchburg Area Food Bank, which Lynchburg Grows supports with donations. At the summer camp programs, Lynchburg Grows offers young people a series of four sessions that directly involve them in urban agricultural projects.

A number of programs managed by Parks and Recreation emphasize outdoor education. Parks and Recreation staff members participate in the Nature Zone Environmental Center program, where they take learning opportunities to school students. Lynchburg Grows is interested in participating in similar programming to bring farmers to the schools, host cooking demonstrations, and provide hands-on urban agriculture as part of the curriculum. Additionally, the farming facilities of Lynchburg Grows at the Schenkel Urban Farm function as an outdoor classroom where residents can learn about urban agriculture, composting, plant care, and maintenance.

Working with Lynchburg Grows has enabled the city to improve access to healthy foods. Together, Lynchburg Grows and the city of Lynchburg also have increased the capacity of the community market, enhanced the city's youth programs, and promoted downtown revitalization. The city and Lynchburg Grows hope that, as community members get involved with growing produce, they will be enthusiastic about trying the foods they have raised themselves.

SUPERMARKET DEVELOPMENT: GOING BIGGER FOR BETTER EATING

People have a difficult time maintaining a nutritious diet if there are no supermarkets or well-stocked grocery stores near where they live. Creating policies and incentives to promote and support supermarket development can be one of the most effective ways local governments can encourage healthier eating in communities that have little access to healthy foods.

Grocery stores and supermarkets, which sell many household items in addition to food, typically offer a wide variety of foods at prices that are cheaper than those in small shops and corner stores, and they provide more healthy choices. These larger food stores also can stimulate economic development and new investment, producing jobs and increasing the local tax base while improving accessibility and convenience for shoppers. Whether rural or urban, there are many benefits to be gained from opening new supermarkets in communities that have limited options for food shopping.

Convincing a supermarket or grocery chain to open a store in an underserved neighborhood typically requires a high level of commitment from local leaders and the ability to collaborate with other stakeholders. For local governments, overseeing the development of a supermarket from start to finish can be an expensive and lengthy process, but the link between public health and supermarket accessibility is clear.

Smaller jurisdictions may lack resources to attract new supermarkets. In urban areas, the cost of opening a supermarket can be significantly higher than in the suburbs, making it difficult to convince business owners that urban stores can be profitable. Yet local governments can reduce the financial and regulatory barriers that may impede supermarket development. They also can consider other ways to make a jurisdiction more attractive to supermarkets and grocery retailers, such as identifying potential sites and/or providing tax incentives.

Innovative Approaches

Many local governments have developed innovative strategies for assessing the need for food outlets and attracting supermarkets to neglected neighborhoods.

Assess food disparities. There are a number of ways to evaluate food access and determine if there is a need for new grocery stores. Since 1996, the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy, a collaboration of government officials and private organizations, has conducted a survey two to four times each year to track the fluctuation of prices and differences among city supermarkets.²⁰ The survey is intended to help consumers make informed choices about where the least expensive groceries are sold.

Commission a market analysis. Local governments can commission a market analysis or feasibility study to challenge the perception of many developers and supermarket operators that certain areas or neighborhoods are not profitable for business. The city of Gary, Indiana, commissioned a market analysis to help attract a grocery franchise to a supermarket lot that had been vacant for seven years.²¹ The analysis highlighted the profit a store could earn in that location.

Modify public transportation routes. For people without cars or access to public transportation that would take them to a supermarket, the problem of how to get to the store becomes a significant barrier to healthy eating. This dilemma mostly affects people living in urban and rural settings because there are typically fewer supermarkets nearby. Local governments can work with transit authori-

ties to reroute buses to connect underserved neighborhoods to large supermarkets. They can provide financial incentives to supermarket developers to locate on or near an existing public transportation route. Governments also can build infrastructure that supports pedestrian travel, including better lighting and sidewalks.

Knoxville (Tennessee) Area Transit developed the highly successful Shop & Ride program in 1990, which provides shoppers who spend a minimum of \$10 at a number of participating supermarkets a free one-way ticket on any city bus. Shoppers get their ticket validated at the store and present it to the bus driver as they board the bus. The city provides the bus service and bills the stores each month for the fares. Businesses appreciate the program because it brings in more shoppers, while shoppers benefit from having a convenient ride home from the store.

Streamline the business development process. Businesses and developers face many challenges as they negotiate with local government departments to start up a store. Local governments can help by developing a one-stop shop that centralizes information about the local business climate and investing in the community. In Chicago, Illinois, the Retail Chicago Initiative alerts developers to retail opportunities and seeks to improve local neighborhoods by providing area residents with amenities closer to home. The Retail Chicago Initiative has minimized red tape by offering a single access point for inquiries about retail development and customized analysis that matches development projects to neighborhood needs.²²

Additional Economic Development Tools

Conventional economic development tools can alleviate some of the costs and risks of opening a new supermarket. They also can make smaller grocers more competitive with large stores by helping them retain and expand the variety of nutritious foods they sell. These tools include tax credits, public/private partnerships, tax increment financing, and tax abatements. Tax exemptions and site facilitation also have been particularly effective.

- **Tax exemptions.** In 2000, the local department of planning and economic development in Washington, D.C., approved the Supermarket Tax Exemption Act, which targeted supermarket development in priority areas of the District of Columbia. This amendment offers supermarkets a property tax exemption for 10 years and an exemption on sales taxes for materials and equipment required for construction or rehabilitation.²³

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- **Site facilitation.** Promoting specific areas for supermarket development makes it easier to attract developers. In 1994, the Community Development Department in Cambridge, Massachusetts, did a comprehensive study to evaluate supermarket access for city residents. Aided by a Geographic Information System analysis, the city inventoried land parcels that would be suitable for a new supermarket that met both current industry standards and the needs of underserved residents. The city also considered the various regulations that applied to each potential parcel in order to minimize the uncertainties of the development process.

SCHOOL'S OUT: TIME TO LEARN ABOUT HEALTHY EATING

Alarmed by the dramatic rise in childhood obesity and related diseases, many local government managers are looking for ways to improve children's health. Out-of-school programs provide an important opportunity to directly influence what our kids eat. For local governments, after-school, summer, and other youth programs provide good opportunities to introduce good nutrition and other healthy behaviors to children.

Many school-aged children are at a critical and impressionable point in their lives, and the health-related choices they make will have a long-term impact on their quality of life. Through out-of-school programs, local governments can develop innovative and fun initiatives for kids and families, incorporate nutrition education, and provide nourishing snacks and meals. These programs can have a positive influence on kids' health that will last a lifetime.

Out-of-school programs often include a snack time, which gives adults an opportunity to teach young people about the benefits of healthy eating. Providing snacks and meals can make out-of-school programs more attractive to kids and their families, especially in low-income communities. In some areas, such programs may be the only place where children receive a nutritious meal during summer months spent out of school. Healthy snacks and meals, which may be eligible for reimbursement by state child nutrition agencies, can improve children's health and expose them to healthier eating habits.

These programs also provide an opportunity to involve children in physical activity. A study by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time found that more than half of all teens say they would watch less TV or play fewer video games if they had other things to do after school.²⁴ Young people who attend programs with diverse activities

can have fun and be more active than they would when left unsupervised or without structured programming.

Unlike school curriculums, there are no set guidelines or restrictions on activities for out-of-school programs. There is a flexibility to design activities that are appealing to kids, such as gardening programs like those offered in Des Moines (see page 9) or field trips with nutritionists to a grocery store. Kathy Spangler, a director of the National Recreation and Park Association, believes children are receptive to creative food programs, which help them think in new ways about health. Rowan County, North Carolina, for example, hosts an annual Food and Field Olympics, a one-day event related to healthy eating and physical activity for participants in the Salisbury Parks and Recreation Department's summer camps.

Local governments can tap diverse partners to contribute financial and in-kind support for out-of-school activities. They can collaborate with recreational and social services departments, as well as with nonprofits, and share in the benefits of grant funding, volunteers, and school resources. The Healthy Ventures program (see page 15) in Mountain View and Los Altos, California, has partnered with many community groups to develop youth programs around health.

There are also opportunities to link with schools, which might have additional nutritional and health expertise and programs to offer. In Worcester County, Maryland, the public school food service department has teamed up with eight after-school programs to offer healthy snacks. Program staff members pick up the snacks at the end of the day and serve them during the after-school programs. This initiative is made possible through the participation of Worcester County's public schools in the National School Lunch Program. Because the after-school programs partner with schools, they are able to serve these healthy foods at no extra cost.

Local government officials can help ensure that kids have access to out-of-school programs through a variety of strategies. They can provide transportation, subsidize the cost of program fees, or sponsor a program through their parks and recreation department. Low- or no-cost options include providing facilities for programs or taking the lead to help various partners jointly develop an initiative supporting healthier children.

Local governments also can raise awareness about healthy eating, and reduce the availability of junk foods at out-of-school programs, community centers, and other facilities. Described below are two effective ways to implement healthy eating strategies during out-of-school time and enhance the resources offered for recreational activities.

Vending Machine Policies

Local jurisdictions can specify the types of foods sold in vending machines and concession stands in local government facilities through contracts between the local government and vending companies. For example, a community can require that a certain percentage of beverages offered for sale be water or fruit juice. In Contra Costa County, California, the vending machine policy, which was developed by the County Health Services Department, outlines guidelines for foods and beverages sold in vending machines in any facility owned, leased, or operated by the county.

Service-Sharing/Joint Use Agreements

Service-sharing agreements with school districts or other jurisdictions can help local governments get the most out of money invested in programs and allow them to take creative risks on new programming.²⁵ The cities of Mission Viejo, Aliso Viejo, and Lake Forest, California, have an agreement with the Saddleback Valley Union School District to use their facilities for youth recreation programs. In addition, each city contributes funding for program staff.

MOUNTAIN VIEW/LOS ALTOS HEALTHY VENTURES

Healthy Ventures is an award-winning community collaborative that was established in 1992 in northern California to address the needs of low-income residents in the Mountain View area. The collaborative began with 17 organizations from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in the cities of Mountain View and Los Altos. Leaders of these organizations recognized that, for many of the area's low-income residents, there were language barriers to meeting such essential needs as food, clothing, and shelter. Officials were especially worried that these challenges would affect student performance. The partner organizations developed Healthy Ventures as a way to coordinate resources for children so they would have access to health care and other services.

During the 1993–1994 school year, the city of Mountain View signed a memorandum of understanding with Healthy Ventures to improve the quality of life for youth in Mountain View and Los Altos. Two staff members, the manager of youth resources and the coordinator of the city's multilingual community outreach program, represent the city's interests in Healthy Ventures.

Healthy Ventures updates its strategic focus every few years by hosting a forum where partners come together to identify new health-related topics they want to address. In the past, topics have ranged from improving after-school programming to securing dental care for low-income children. Obesity emerged as the focus for the 2005–2006 school year

Mountain View, California

Mountain View is located in California's Silicon Valley. The city, which covers 12 square miles, is 10 miles north of San Jose and 35 miles south of San Francisco. In 2003, the federal census estimated that Mountain View had 69,366 residents, 55 percent of whom are white, 21 percent Asian, 18 percent Hispanic, and less than 3 percent black.

Mountain View is home to many high-tech companies, and on weekdays the city's population grows to over 100,000. The median income was \$69,362 in 1999, when 6.8 percent of the population lived below the poverty level. The city shares a unified school district with the neighboring city of Los Altos, and many local agencies and organizations serve both communities.

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after the California Healthy Kids Survey revealed nutrition was a problem and a newspaper series focused attention on the childhood obesity epidemic.

After six months of brainstorming, Healthy Ventures planned three community education events targeting students throughout the school system, as well as the parents of preschool and kindergarten students. The goal of the programming was to encourage children and their families to make healthy choices about nutrition and fitness.

Education at All Levels

In March 2006, Healthy Ventures hosted a community education event for students at the local continuation high school, an alternative school for students whose needs have not been met in the traditional high school setting. A school nutritionist whose work is funded by the Lucille Packard Foundation presented a two-hour nutrition session.

Using an educationally enhanced DVD of the film *Super Size Me*, she had students watch scenes from the movie and discuss how, even on a small budget, they could make healthy choices about the foods they eat. Students also participated in activities that were provided on the DVD, including one where they designed their own business plans for a restaurant serving only healthy foods. Initially, the event was to be offered to only a small portion of the students, but school staff members were so enthusiastic that all 150 students participated.

Partnering Organizations

American Red Cross, Palo Alto Chapter
City of Los Altos
City of Mountain View
Community Health Awareness Council
Community Services Agency
El Camino Hospital
Foothill College
Los Altos Chamber of Commerce
Los Altos–Mountain View League of Women Voters
Los Altos–Mountain View Ministers' Association
Los Altos–Mountain View PTA Council
Los Altos School District
Lucile Packard Children's Hospital
Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health
MayView Community Health Center
Mountain View Chamber of Commerce
Mountain View–Los Altos Adult Education
Mountain View–Los Altos Union High School District
Mountain View–Whisman School District
Planned Parenthood Mar Monte
Santa Clara County Public Health Department
YMCA of the Mid-Peninsula

A few weeks later, Healthy Ventures held nutrition workshops for middle school students as part of the Mountain View Recreation Division's after-school programs. The programs, held at two local schools and staffed by teachers and city staff, sought to reach approximately 100 students on two afternoons at each school.

The first workshops were designed by a local nutritionist to teach kids about the food pyramid. They were based on information provided by the USDA Web site and California's Project LEAN. Project LEAN is a joint initiative of the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute dedicated to fighting childhood obesity and other chronic diseases through increased physical activity and healthy eating. The second series of workshops taught students how to prepare healthy snacks and adapt traditional family recipes to make them more nutritious. The school district's food service contractor donated all of the food and cooking supplies for the program. Students also had the opportunity to complete a take-home activity by asking their families how they make decisions about the foods they buy. Those who participated were eligible for a prize.

The final Healthy Ventures nutrition event, the Great Garden Day at Castro, was held in April 2006. This one-day healthy cooking and gardening session was designed for preschool through fifth-grade students who attend a local bilingual immersion school and their parents. The school has a large number of low-income students, and the event was held on a Saturday to ensure that it would be family friendly.

More than 100 people attended the program, which featured activity stations, including a salad-making workshop. Students and their parents also helped place dirt in garden beds and plant seeds for a preschool garden. As a result, preschoolers will be able to watch sunflowers, vegetables, and other plants grow throughout the school year. Two local nonprofits, Hooked on Nature and First 5, which focus on the role of nature in youth development, taught another seed-planting activity during the afternoon.

One of the most innovative features of the Healthy Ventures obesity initiatives was the fact that the partner organizations were able to maximize the services they offer to children and families at a relatively low cost, and there was very little budget impact on the partners involved. All funding for the initiatives came from grants and donations. Donations were made in honor of former Mountain View Mayor and Health Ventures Executive Director Mary Lou Zoglin, who in the last years of her life focused on creating obesity-prevention activities.

The Role of Local Government

The local government has contributed greatly to the success of Healthy Ventures and has helped assure that the initiative is truly a community effort. Vandenberg describes the city as "one piece of the puzzle," and adds that "all the pieces need to collaborate to make [Healthy Ventures] work. . . . There would be a gap if we weren't participating."

The Healthy Ventures obesity-prevention programs can be used in any state or city, as funds are available to adapt programs and workshops. With minimal effort, government officials can modify Healthy Ventures for local use.

It is important to consider the timing of the workshops when planning health-promotion and obesity-prevention events. Vandenberg acknowledges that it's hard to schedule workshops during school hours but that, by working closely with the school administrators, they were able to integrate sessions into the health curriculum. The Saturday event at the Castro School also worked well because many families were able to attend. Vandenberg found that reaching middle school students was more challenging because the programs were held during after-school hours, whereas the high school program occurred during the regular school day. Also, for middle school students the hands-on activities were more appealing than the nutrition workshops.

After working on the Healthy Ventures obesity initiatives, partner organizations reconsidered the foods they were providing at work-related meetings and community events. For example, one school board member who helped plan the city's Cinco de Mayo festival decided to replace pork tamales with chicken tamales to offer a reduced-calorie and

lower-fat menu option. The city of Mountain View's Gang Task Force now serves healthy snacks at events rather than the cookies they used to offer. These small changes send positive messages about nutrition that influence staff, as well as Healthy Ventures' target audience.

FOOD POLICY COUNCILS: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

When Mark Winne helped launch one of the nation's first food policy councils in 1992 in Hartford, Connecticut, there were few precedents. The Hartford group looked at food policy councils in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Toronto, Ontario, as examples, but it was essentially charting new territory.

To Winne the idea was common sense. Various state and local government agencies and offices long had been involved in food issues, but there never had been a single entity coordinating their efforts—no Department of Food, as he puts it. By establishing a council that would look at the big picture, he and others saw the potential to help disparate private and public groups work together on goals ranging from economic development and agricultural preservation to healthier citizens. Overall, local government officials viewed the council as a way to improve their offerings and make better use of existing resources.

“Food policy councils ensure efficiency because different people and different departments are working together,” Winne says. “It sounds so simple and simplistic, perhaps, but just sitting around the table with different interests in the food system creates new relationships that lead to new solutions.”

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy has succeeded by providing a forum for sharing and collaborating. While a number of other early efforts across the country faltered in the 1990s, many food policy councils established in more recent years are thriving. “The movement really has been picking up steam,” Winne notes. “There's been a lot of momentum in the last two or three years.”

Veterans of these efforts attribute the recent popularity of food policy councils to the lessons learned in the early years and a host of social changes, including heightened public concern about health and growing interest in farmland preservation, farmers' markets, and community gardens. “You have more attention to this whole set of food issues,” says Neil Hamilton, director of the Agricultural Law Center at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and chairman of that state's food policy council.

Making It Work

What makes a food policy council effective? It is important for these bodies, which often are created through state or local government action, to involve people from both inside and outside government. Hamilton notes that having an officially sanctioned council to examine food policy gives the group's recommendations and actions “a sort of official imprimatur,” which helps get buy-in from elected officials and other community leaders. That, in turn, motivates food policy council members to participate proactively.

“While these issues and these groups exist,” Hamilton says, “in many situations they've never had the opportunity to come together in this kind of comprehensive process. It can be really empowering.”

Whether a food policy council is established by a state or local government or by a nonprofit group, past experience indicates that it's important to start with substantial research about an area's food issues. It is also critical to involve as diverse a group of stakeholders as possible when setting an agenda and discussing solutions. The idea is to take a comprehensive look at the state or local food system and then recommend appropriate food or agricultural policies that address specific challenges. A food policy council that includes every perspective on the food system is more likely to win support for its recommendations and see them succeed.

Members of a food policy council typically represent every aspect of food production, processing, distribution, retailing, and consumption. Council members might include farmers, planners, and environmentalists. They might be public health and social service workers, school and government officials, food bank representatives, grocers, chefs, restaurateurs, and concerned citizens. Some or all of these participants might already be involved in local and statewide food-related debates, but typically they have not worked together to tackle problems.

Food policy councils can take on a wide variety of issues, ranging from farmland preservation and farm-to-school programs to community gardens and nutrition at food banks. Often a council ends up working directly with a local government department to address a challenge.

Winne points to the Hartford group's work on food access. They studied the layout of bus routes relative to the location of supermarkets, which were all in the suburbs. The council wanted to find out how difficult grocery shopping was for urban dwellers who were dependent on public transportation and had no food stores close to home. They soon discovered that the existing bus routes did not provide adequate access, and they worked with transportation planners to design a new bus route to a popular suburban store. When the new route was implemented, it

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reduced a 45-minute trip that involved several transfers to just 10 minutes.

At the state level, Winne has been involved in larger initiatives with the Connecticut Food Policy Council, including an effort to convince state government institutions to buy more farm products grown in Connecticut. The group brokered the first meeting between the state's top purchasing official and its top marketer for agriculture, which Winne says has helped boost business for the state's farmers. This kind of conversation could just as easily be started within local government and could have a significant impact.

Winne advises local governments considering creating a food policy council to ensure that every aspect of the food system is represented and to foster a collaborative culture. "Having good representation on the Food Policy Council is important," he says, adding that—ideally—the council should have some staff, whether they work for the local government or a nonprofit partner.

In addition, it is important to focus on issues on which it is easy to build consensus and to avoid those that are very divisive. Or, as Winne puts it, "check your agenda, or your ego, at the door."

PORTLAND/MULTNOMAH FOOD POLICY COUNCIL STEERS A RAPID COURSE

Food policy councils began to appear in the early 1990s, but few were formed in those early years, and fewer still survived. However, in the current decade, the concept has gained traction as food policy councils have started to mature and thrive across the country. The Portland/Multnomah group is one that has succeeded from its inception.

In its first few years, the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council developed several ambitious projects. It has hosted multilingual workshops to help Hmong, Latino, and other immigrant farmers develop ties to local farmers' markets, restaurants, and other businesses where they can sell their produce. It has led a regional effort to inventory pockets of urban land that are appropriate for growing food. It has assessed food access and done food planning in Lents, a low-income southeast Portland neighborhood, where nearly three-quarters of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. And it has convinced a food service provider working under contract with the county corrections department to commit to buying more locally grown produce for meals prepared for inmates.

The Portland/Multnomah council was created in June 2002 by joint action of the city of Portland and Multnomah County, which placed the council in the

city's Office of Sustainable Development. Tying the food policy council to a legitimized part of local government that is focused on similar issues has helped create one of the most active and successful councils in the country, says Neil Hamilton, director of the Agricultural Law Center at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. "It's the buy-in of the city and county," Hamilton says. "There was a context for them to think about food issues in a comprehensive way."

The council spent much of its first year defining its role and adopting a set of governing principles and goals. By October 2003, the group had prepared a set of recommendations that touched on everything from land use and city and county food-purchasing policies to access to healthy, affordable food for all residents. The recommendations quickly evolved into a work plan the council has been pursuing and fine-tuning ever since.

Members of the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council serve two-year terms and are limited to a total of four years on the council. The resolution that established the council called for it to represent the full spectrum of food interests, and the council is still working toward that goal. Members decided, for example, to add a citizen-at-large member to better represent consumer interests.

In the past, when people talked about food systems, they often focused on agriculture and land use aspects of the system—on the providers, in other words. Retailers and restaurants also were considered, but the citizens who rely on the local food system often weren't in the picture. The food policy council is broadening the discussion, notes Suzanne Briggs, the Portland/Multnomah council chair in 2006. "This is coming from a consumer's point of view," Briggs says. "That's the really exciting part of what's coming out of this whole conversation."

The council's first few years have been extremely busy with a mix of activities. One of the first issues members considered was city and county food purchasing. They immediately realized the potential impact of having language in all local government contracts that states a preference for using locally grown food.

Briggs cites the council's work with the county corrections department as the story "we always brag about."

The council met with representatives of the food service contractor that provides about 5,400 meals a day to people in the county corrections system and asked them to identify three seasonal items they could purchase from local farmers. The company, working with its food distributor, instead came up with about a dozen products that they now buy from local farmers, in some cases year round.

The food vendor held corrections contracts in seven other counties as well, so it has extended the practice

beyond Multnomah County. “The corrections officers and their food service partners caught the spirit of what we’re trying to accomplish,” Briggs says, adding that the council eventually will receive reports on how the new purchasing practices support not only local farmers, but also local food processors.

In another early initiative, the council in 2004 completed a study of food access in the Lents community. Since then, the community has worked with various partners to launch a variety of gardening efforts and has taken steps toward establishing a farmers’ market in Lents.

Diggable City

The Diggable City project is another council effort. It was initiated by a city commissioner who shepherded a resolution through the city council that called for an inventory of city-owned land suitable for community gardens and other agricultural uses. The food policy council worked with Portland State University urban planning graduate students to review roughly 1,200 plots of land to determine which ones were appropriate for gardening. They found 300 plots to be suitable for community and school gardens and small urban farms. The group has recommended three pilot projects to explore how to manage these public lands as an urban agriculture program.

Another high-profile effort funded by a grant from the USDA was a workshop the council developed for immigrant farmers. Portland is home to Latino, Russian, Vietnamese, Hmong, and other Southeast Asian immigrants who often farm on small plots throughout the region. The council developed the workshop to teach them how to market their products in local farmers’ markets, to restaurant chefs, and in other direct marketing venues. The first session, held in March 2004, was so successful that the council repeated the event in 2005. “We did the whole workshop in their native languages,” Briggs notes, adding that there were translators at every table interpreting the material covered in the workshop. “The room was buzzing all day long.” As a spin-off of the workshops, Sheena Xiong, a translator for Hmong farmers, has started a nonprofit group called the New American Farming Association. The group works with immigrant farmers to translate food safety rules and other regulations, and to help them tie into farmers’ markets and other opportunities to sell their produce.

Although the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council has accomplished much in a short time, the group’s veterans say they’re still on a learning curve. “We’re just now maturing into an organization that understands what policymaking is and what it takes to make it happen,” Briggs says.

Portland/Multnomah County

Portland is Oregon’s largest city, with more than 550,000 residents, according to Portland State University’s Population Research Center. Residents of Portland live in three counties that comprise the city’s metropolitan area—Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas. More than 690,000 people live in Multnomah County, of which about 80 percent are Portland residents. A small portion of Portland’s population—slightly more than 2,200 people—live in Washington and Clackamas Counties.

Portland’s population is about 78 percent white, 7 percent black, 6 percent Asian, and 7 percent Latino or Hispanic. In the city, the median household income was \$40,146 in 1999, when 13.1 percent of the population lived below the poverty level.

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She and others attribute the council’s early success to a number of factors, including people’s growing concerns about how far their food travels from producer to table. The frequently cited statistic in food policy circles is that the average fruit or vegetable travels 1,500 miles to market. More and more people are looking for locally grown food, notes Rosemarie Cordello, one of the Portland council’s founding members. “There’s a real qualitative difference between buying sneakers and buying food,” Cordello adds. “One of the important things that food policy councils are trying to do is bring back some autonomy in food at the local level, so that people know where their food is coming from.”

Cordello sees a long-term benefit in the council’s focus on promoting local agriculture, community gardens, and other elements of the local food system: the economic development it generates. In the context of the evolution of the global economy, she notes, Portland and other cities have found it increasingly difficult to retain businesses in the region and to attract new ones. “Companies can shop for employees anywhere,” Cordello says, adding that local governments often need to offer costly incentives to retain businesses. Food is one sector of the economy that seeds a lot of local businesses, she adds, pointing to one fast-growing organic and local foods store, called New Seasons,

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that is thriving in the Portland area. The food sector is | “a huge employment opportunity,” she says. “One thing about local food systems, they’re pretty labor-intensive.”

For any group that is considering launching a food policy council, Briggs echoes the advice of others, noting that it is critical to get input from every kind of stakeholder in the local food system. It is also important to find council members who are willing and eager to learn from one another. “I think the number one thing is having the right mix of people around the table,” Briggs says. Members should be open to other perspectives, and the group needs to develop a shared understanding of food planning. “The foundation that you lay in the beginning is crucial to the sustainability of it,” Briggs concludes.

ZONING, FAST FOOD, AND HEALTHY EATING

Even before the 2004 release of the documentary film *Super Size Me*, there was little debate that eating too much fast food creates health problems. Obesity has been linked to increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other serious medical problems in adults and children alike. Fast food establishments have become a primary target in the fight against obesity because they serve large portions of inexpensive high-calorie foods.

Poor diets and declining activity levels are now widely recognized as chief causes of obesity. Cities have done much to increase activity levels by designing communities to improve pedestrian safety and put restaurants, shops, and other destinations within walking distance of many residential neighborhoods.

Local governments can also exercise their planning and zoning powers to ensure that neighborhoods have a better balance between fast food restaurants and stores that offer more fresh nutritious foods. Cities and counties can adopt zoning ordinances and related land use policies that encourage access to healthy foods and/or limit or even prohibit unhealthy eating establishments, such as fast food restaurants.

While the use of zoning as a strategy specifically aimed at reducing obesity has yet to be tested in the courts, protecting public health is one of the main reasons local governments have zoning authority. A growing number of local governments have used zoning to restrict the number of fast food establishments for a host of other reasons, ranging from economic development and the protection of local businesses to the preservation of community character. In those cases, the courts responded most favorably to the cases that provided evidence that the regulations in question promoted public health and safety.

Municipal zoning codes help determine what type of food is available in neighborhoods. Current evidence suggests that the less restrictive zoning often used in low-income urban neighborhoods contributes to an abundance of unhealthy food options, particularly fast food. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that residents in many low-income neighborhoods often depend on these stores and restaurants because they do not have cars.

Local officials can use zoning to promote better access to fresh, healthier foods. In addition to restricting the number of fast food restaurants in a given neighborhood, they can provide incentives and designate certain zones or land uses to encourage community gardens, farmers’ markets, and grocery stores to locate in targeted areas.

Ban Fast Food Outlets and/or Drive-Through Service

Local governments have used three types of zoning strategies to limit the presence of fast food establishments in residential neighborhoods: a direct ban on fast food establishments; an indirect ban that designates a list of permitted uses that does not include fast food establishments; and a mixed approach that allows fast food establishments, but only with special or conditional-use permits. Following are examples of different kinds of approaches local jurisdictions have taken, where local officials restricted fast-food restaurants to protect local businesses, preserve neighborhood character, and for a host of other reasons.

In Carlsbad, California, there has been a ban on new drive-through restaurants in 35 classes of zones since 1996. The city of Newport, Rhode Island, classifies restaurants into four groups: standard, carry-out, drive-in, and fast food. Standard restaurants are permitted in all five commercial districts, but fast food restaurants are permitted only with a special-use permit in four of the five commercial districts. Drive-in and carry-out restaurants are not allowed in any of the city’s districts.

Ban “Formula” Restaurants

Local governments can use zoning regulations to ban national chain restaurants, including fast food restaurants. Nantucket, Massachusetts, followed this approach; the town banned any new restaurants owned by national chains from its downtown area.

Ban Fast Food Establishments in Certain Areas

A ban does not have to cover the whole city or town. In some cases, it might be more appropriate to ban or restrict the number of fast food restaurants in a particular area. In San Francisco, California, fast food outlets and other “formula” retail establishments are not permitted in the four-block Hayes-Gough Neighborhood Commercial District.

Restrict the Number of Fast Food Outlets

Some communities have decided that it is better to restrict the number of fast food outlets in a given area rather than ban them altogether. Berkeley, California, limits the number of fast food restaurants and carry-out food stores in its Elmwood Commercial District in order to preserve the district's character.

Restrict Density of Fast Food Outlets

Another approach restricts the concentration of fast food outlets by limiting how many of them are allowed in a given amount of space. For example, in Bainbridge Island, Washington, design guidelines that include a density limitation are applied to certain types of take-out restaurants.

Dispersal Strategies

Zoning dispersal ordinances are another technique that communities can apply to control fast food. Considering courts' long-standing approval of adult entertainment zoning regulations, these ordinances could

- Require fast food outlets to locate at a minimum distance from facilities for children, such as schools and playgrounds.
- Limit the number of fast food outlets per capita in an area.
- Limit the proximity of fast food outlets to each other.

While using zoning to fight obesity is a fairly new approach, zoning has long been used to protect public health. Local governments that are exploring new ways to address obesity as a public health threat should consider how they might apply zoning regulations to ensure that all neighborhoods have some balance in the types of food available at local restaurants and stores. This strategy could have a significant impact on families in low-income urban neighborhoods, in particular, where fast food retailers proliferate.

CONCLUSION

America's obesity epidemic poses a complex public health challenge, and local governments need to address it by creating policies and implementing changes in their communities and schools to support healthy lifestyles for both children and adults. Community designs that encourage more walking and biking are critical to residents' efforts to be more active. Yet, it is equally important for cities, towns, and suburbs to make fresh, nutritious foods available and affordable to residents in all neighborhoods.

Local governments across the country are exploring innovative programs to encourage healthy eating. The solutions include such tried-and-true initiatives as farmers' markets and community gardens, and a growing number of jurisdictions are finding new ways to support such efforts.

Many cities and counties also are exploring new approaches, such as creating advisory groups of farmers, grocers, restaurateurs, hunger advocates, and citizens to examine food issues and recommend policy responses. Local governments also are partnering with schools and nonprofit groups to make healthier meals available to children in summer and after-school events and to create nutrition education activities.

As more Americans become aware of the national obesity epidemic and the resulting health crisis, especially the damaging consequences already apparent in our children, they will seek out communities that support healthy lifestyles. Easy access to healthy food is quickly becoming one of the hallmarks of a livable community, and local officials should continue to explore and refine ways to make nutritious foods available and affordable throughout their jurisdictions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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USEFUL WEB SITES

Active Living Leadership

<http://www.activelivingleadership.org/>

American Community Gardening Association

<http://www.communitygarden.org/>

California Project LEAN

<http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov>

Community Food Security Coalition

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

Food Research and Action Center – Afterschool Resource Center

http://www.frac.org/Out_Of_School_Time/index.html

The Food Trust

<http://www.thefoodtrust.org/>

Healthy Eating by Design

<http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/index.php?id=392>

Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC)

www.lisc.org

National Association of Farmers Markets

<http://www.farmersmarkets.net/>

National League of Cities—Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

<http://www.nlc.org/>

National Parks and Recreation Association

<http://www.nrpa.org>

PolicyLink

<http://www.policylink.org>

Prevention Institute

<http://www.preventioninstitute.org/>

Project for Public Spaces

<http://www.pps.org>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

<http://www.rwjf.org>

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