

## Local Food for a Re-energized Community Economy

*By setting a goal to rely heavily on food sourced from West Michigan we could provide residents with fresh, high quality food, sourced efficiently and conscientiously - saving farmland, the environment and energy while keeping billions of \$ locally, creating many new jobs, & revitalizing regional communities.*

### Why change from the current system?:

***The current food system is destructive to itself, our communities and ourselves – we must repair it or it will collapse and take us with it.***

- The global, industrial food systems that currently deliver most of the food we eat (95+%) is self-destructing. The use of petrochemicals (fertilizers and pesticides), commodity mono-cropping (corn & soybeans) and highly mechanized management techniques, destroy the soil ecology and surrounding ecosystems that enable plant and animal viability. Most of our food is grown in sterile ground only productive by our application of chemicals. Animal production is fraught with problems – whether the intense warehousing our livestock leading to sick and unhealthy animals, the risk of pollution to ground and surface water from waste lagoons or the risk of contamination at meat processing plants.
- The industrial food system degrades the quality of our food – selecting only for what is most profitable, rather than most nutritious, or best tasting. Further, when certain genetic strains of vegetable or animal varieties are chosen because they are the most profitable in the short term, we often lose the diversity of our agricultural gene pool – setting ourselves up for a future crisis.
- Largely, these and many more problems endemic to the industrial food system result from an intense focus on corporate profit made by small margins on large volumes of production. The corporate board room is disconnected from our homes and our communities, our landscape, our ecosystems. Because large agri-food corporations have such influence over prices on the market, they effect every farmer and community, and how and where the buying and selling of food is done. As a result, most communities in the United States import vast quantities of food from other states and countries. Corporate models and commodity food pricing mechanisms have decoupled locally raised food from nearby communities.
- The main exception to this is direct marketing – when farmer and customer exchange directly or through a retailer that purchased locally. Currently, only a small percentage of the food we eat is locally raised - only 6 to 7 percent % in West Michigan, based on recent USDA agricultural census data.

***Localizing our food system helps provides an opportunity to repair the damage to our food system and revitalize our communities.*** Keeping dollars spent on food locally, strengthening our capacity for self-reliance and keeping decisions that effect our food close to home. . Changes in consumer demand, business activity, farmer choices, and a uniting of diverse partnerships create a powerful opportunity to revitalize our communities.

- **Consumer Demand:** a) In 2000 there were no more than a dozen farmers markets in West Michigan, in 2009 there were nearly 40. b) Five years ago there were around 10 community gardens in the the area, now there are garden initiatives in a many West Michigan cities along with schoolyard gardens and even a garden now associated with the GRCC culinary program and a number of other colleges.
- **Food Related Businesses:** a) A decade ago few if any local restaurants, food service companies, or cafeterias planned for or demanded local or state sourced food products, in 2009 most local colleges, some school systems, a few hospitals and most locally owned restaurants consider local food sourcing important. b) Today there are a half dozen businesses & co-operatives seeking to deliver or provide year-round accessibility to local foods whether home or restaurant (Gourmet Specialty of Michigan, WM Co-op, Artisan Foods).
- **Farmers Seeking New Strategies:** a) MSU has an Organic Certificate Program, this successful program started in 2006, capturing the growing number of post college and mid-lifers and training them to be organic farmers. GVSU is currently looking into developing a food & agricultural training program. b) A decade ago there was one or two CSA (community supported agriculture) farms in our region now there are close to 20. c) There are over a dozen farmers in West Michigan utilizing hydroponics, season extension or year-round vegetable and fruit production, and there were practically none in 2000. d) The number of farms direct marketing poultry, milk, beef, goat, pork cheese and eggs directly to customers has grown from less than 10 in 2000 to more than 50 in west Michigan today. e) Many new farmers, mostly young people are starting farm businesses seeking a career that reflects their values around community, sustainability and family.
- **A diverse movement has emerged to bring about awareness & support change:**

There are dozens of books, documentary movies released every year on this topic. Michigan now has a food policy council, a Statewide Farmers Market Association, Food policy/education organizations in all regions of the state. City of GR now moving considering a chicken ordinance (EGR, Ann Arbor permit them). There is a statewide movement to create a Michigan Food Charter.

## **How do we change to a local food economy?**

Recognizing that local, community scale agriculture represents a real opportunity for economic development that also values land, environment and people. Community scale agriculture and farming are not taken seriously as an economic and regional development opportunity by most decision-makers – that must change.

### ***Realize the opportunities that exist in West Michigan:***

- A small portion of what is raised in West Michigan is consumed in West Michigan – a tremendous amount more of agricultural production can be directed locally.
- More farmland can be used more intensively for more consumable foods – small farmers produce from 2 to 10 times more per unit area than do larger, corporate farmers (Food First, 1999). Many of our farms are underproductive – for instance in Allegan Co – more than 60% of the farms had gross sales less than \$20,000 despite 80% of the farms being 10 acres or more in size and averaging overall about 172 acres in size.
- Michigan is home to the second most diverse agricultural landscape in the U.S. - there is no reason we can not raise most of the food we need.
- Infrastructure in W Mi lends itself readily to a local food economy; we have an existing vegetable & fruit processing and storage infrastructure, grain milling, dry bean production, many produce distributors and are home to large grocery retailers and food service distributors.
- We have nearly 8500 farms and over 1 million acres of farmland in West Michigan as of the 2007 Census of Agriculture and we have a food economy that verges on \$3 billion/ year with 1.5 million consumers in the region.
- Small scale intensive agriculture (diverse vegetable, animal or fruit production) might employ one or two people for every 5 acres – perhaps our region's 1,000,000 acres might employ as many as 200,000 people – not counting the other businesses associated with food.

### ***Consider a diverse set of strategies for building economic redevelopment through a new, localized agriculture, such as:***

- Increase amount of locally raised products sold through conventional channels such as grocers and food distributors (main line food distributors, grocery, etc) – this requires strong commitment and communication from a significant percentage of the purchasing public.
- Develop & promote alternative consumer purchasing models such as community supported agriculture and cooperatives (CSA, co-ops etc) to extend and diversify the choices in the marketplace.
- Increase the capacity for local production of the highest quality products using diverse strategies starting with extending the seasons, helping farmers move to the production of locally edible food and away from commodities, sublet farmland creating more small scale opportunities etc
- Create a sea change in the perception of farming – by urban people that it is a realistic business to start and by rural people that small and community oriented is possible (not just big ag.). Often farms can get a start for \$20 - \$30,000 or less and turn into a family supporting business in 3 – 5 years.
- Increase the capture of locally raised products through local large and small-scale value-added processing (large & home scale).
- Develop financial support (loans, grants, tax incentives etc) for a more diverse, localized agriculture.
- Work to bridge the urban- rural divide – learn and understand the communities that may be growing/consuming your food.
- Ensure food is affordable to all and profitable to farm worker and farmers alike.

## **Call to Action**

There is no greater need nor opportunity for new and current farmers to capture local markets and no better time for entrepreneurs to start local food based businesses. In these times of economic trouble, we need to keep every dollar we can in our economy and local farms and local food helps us do that. With unemployment at its highest in 26 years, we need to invest in new jobs that reinforce and strengthen our local economy. Agriculture is an endeavor that can be started with a minimum of capital on rented land within a rapidly growing market. We have a high demand for local food by more residents, restaurants and institutions than ever before. Now is the time to grow locally and re-energize our community & economy.

Food First (*Policy Brief: Small Farms More Productive than Large Farms but Threatened by Trade Agreements*), Peter Rossett, 1999.

by Tom Cary, Greater Grand Rapids Food Systems Council