

NESAWG 2015 *It Takes a Region* Conference

Food Systems Planning Discussion & Work Group

Presenters: Erica Campbell & Heidi Stucker

Notetaker: Michael Zastoupil

Session 1

The discussion on Day 1 mostly involved three “panelists” sharing their experiences with food systems planning. There was a brief amount of discussion from other people attending the work group at the end of the session.

Brian Monteverd talked about his experience as the Food Hub Coordinator for a food hub project in Worcester County, MA. He was lucky to have a 5-year grant from The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, which allowed him and his team to do planning for one entire year. Input from representatives of an initial 31 (has grown to over 80) different organizations is being gathered to help plan the Worcester County food hub, and they have also partnered with the Chamber of Commerce in their area (which is an unlikely, but valuable, partner). Brian will be using several pilot projects to evaluate which resources are currently under-utilized in Worcester County that could be integrated into the food hub, for example kitchen space that is currently under-used at another organization in Worcester.

Sutton Kiplinger talked about her experience working with the Food Project and Dudley Grows in the neighborhood of Dudley in Boston. She highlighted the strengths of that particular neighborhood in building youth-based, urban agriculture. One strength is that the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is a very active group of citizens in Dudley who want to make their neighborhood better. Dudley also had the unique opportunity to invoke eminent domain to create urban garden space in their neighborhood.

Heidi Stucker talked about her experience working on the MA Food System Plan. She explained the organization of this very large endeavor, which involved a planning team, advisory committee, and working groups. They established broad goals and specific actions, and then held public forums to assess regional needs and find out who needed to be involved in the planning that wasn't yet.

Main Points:

- Food system planners need to include ALL stakeholders in the planning process, which can be difficult.
- A strong “backbone organization” (such as The Health Foundation of Central MA) is key to giving food system planners the funding and support they need to carry out an inclusive planning process.
- Don't build an expensive food hub right away, pilot collaborations with underutilized partners in the community first.
- Urban garden projects need to leave room for neighborhood members to innovate; sometimes economic development projects are stifling or a form of gentrification.

Main Questions:

Q. How are your organizations funded?

A. Dudley Grows – rely on other organizations (e.g. the Food Project) for grants and donors

Worcester Food Hub – 100% funded by The Health Foundation of Central MA

MA Food System Plan – state funded

Q. Farmers need high prices to make a living, but low-income people need low prices so they can afford to eat. How do you find that balance?

A. Rapid cycles of testing and feedback are key to quickly adjusting food prices to meet both farmers' and consumers' needs. Dudley Grows learned that collard, corn, and squash are foods that farmers and consumers agree on price, but broccoli causes disagreement.

Q. How do you keep task forces/working groups from becoming silos?

A. Stay adaptive; keep rapid evaluation & feedback loops a part of the planning process.

Next Steps:

Worcester Food Hub – conduct pilot projects and evaluate results. By learning what resources are already available and could be incorporated into the food hub, Brian and his team can better tailor the food hub to meet the county's needs and save money in the process.

Dudley Grows – learn from the informal food economy in the neighborhood and create more jobs for the community.

MA Food System Plan – start the implementation phase of the plan, and then use various metrics to continually evaluate the implementation results.

Session 2

Day 2 was much more discussion-based. Nearly everyone in the group contributed to the conversation about food system planning.

Main Points:

- Community-based planning is often more participatory than regional or statewide planning; it becomes more representational as you increase the scale.
- Implementation is harder than planning. Example: As a retailer, I want to help refugee farmers...but it's too difficult to sell ethnic foods at my store.
- A good food system plan starts with a backbone organization and then diffuses decision-making power into the hands of various stakeholders. As food system plans move into the implementation phase, make sure to decentralize decision-making power.
- It's not fair to expect people to help "set the table" without giving them a stipend for their time and work.
- Make sure the policymakers – community members relationship is not a one-way street.
- Funders should help "set the table" too, right from the start.

Main Questions:

Q. How can funders help fund the implementation process? (because it is very different than the planning process)

Q. How do you get funding for long-term, systemic changes (that funders might find risky)?

Q. How do we best share food system planning resources with each other?

A. Johns Hopkins' Food Policy Resources, National Food Policy Network, Growing Food Connections, American Planning Associations' FIG

Next Steps:

Start to use better metrics for evaluating implementation results, such as Results Based Accountability (RBA).

Peer-mentoring or peer-to-peer learning on food system planning and policy processes.

Enhance networking between food system planners to share resources and best practices.