

CMAP



Lake County Sustainable Local Food Systems Report

Executive Summary
April 2013

Acknowledgments

The Lake County Sustainable Local Food Systems Report is the cumulative effort of many individuals and organizations, including stakeholders who provided time and expertise to identify issues, opportunities, and recommendations to help successfully complete this report. Gratitude is due to all of the Project Team Partners, survey interviewees, and other stakeholders who lent their expertise to this project along the way.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Chicago Metropolitan
Agency for Planning



CONSERVE
LAKE COUNTY
Healthy Land for a Better Life

April 2013



Source: Liberty Prairie Foundation, 2013.

Executive Summary

Sustainable local food systems balance economic prosperity, environmental preservation, and public health while moving agricultural products from farmer to consumer. National, regional, and local trends indicate a shift in farming practices and consumer demand, as well as present an opportunity for Lake County to capitalize on this growing economic sector.

Regional agricultural production appears to be diversifying beyond traditional farming to include more vegetable and specialty farming on smaller plots of land. Additionally, there is market demand for food that is grown and processed here by our own neighbors, which generates and circulates money within our state and region rather than sending it elsewhere. By supporting and strengthening the sustainable local food system, Lake County is poised to tap into the added economic potential of increased jobs and production, while contributing to the healthy food options in the region.

In an effort to adapt to changing trends and conditions in the food and agriculture industry, a group of nonprofit, public, and private partners throughout Lake County joined together to explore the potential for strengthening the sustainable local food system in the county. Partners for this project include: Conserve Lake County; the College of Lake County; Farm Business Development Center at Prairie Crossing (of the Liberty Prairie Foundation); Lake County Forest Preserve District; Lake County Planning, Building, and Development (PBD) Department; Libertyville Township; Openlands; and private farmers. This group of partners worked with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) through its Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program on the Lake County Sustainable Food Systems project summarized in this report.

This project's primary objectives are to identify the key barriers to developing a sustainable local food system in Lake County and to propose recommendations for the County and local stakeholders to address those barriers. The strategy for achieving these objectives included:

- Educational materials explaining the economic opportunity of sustainable local food systems, including a printed brochure for decision-makers, a "microsite" and video, and involvement with programming at a local conference.
- A survey of various stakeholders involved in Lake County's food system.
- A review of Lake County regulations pertaining to the food system.
- Research on food policy based organizations that may be applicable to helping address barriers in Lake County.

Based on the findings from the assessment, this report offers recommendations for how to best move forward in supporting the growth of Lake County's sustainable local food system.

Recommendation 1: Recognize agriculture and food production as a positive, legitimate, and economically valuable land use.

Counties that border metropolitan regions, such as Lake County and the other collar counties, hold great potential for capitalizing on the demand for local products by urban populations. Lake County has already established a positive policy direction for a sustainable local food system. It is recommended that the County continue to strengthen and endorse such a system through its land use and development authority, as well as encourage perceptions of agriculture as a valuable, legitimate, and long-term land use that benefits Lake County's economy, character, and quality of life.

Recommendation 2: Investigate the potential to provide access to public land for food production.

The high cost of both purchasing and renting agricultural land makes access to affordable, right-sized farmland one of the greatest barriers to sustainable, local food production. This report recommends examining publically owned land as a potential resource for food production. Public land should be considered a temporary support to help build the supply side of the local food economic system until market forces can drive local food production through the private land market.

Recommendation 3: Consider farming infrastructure in land use planning, and explore economic development strategies for supporting infrastructure needs.

Access to infrastructure and utilities for small scale local food operations, such as outbuildings, electricity, and an irrigation source, can be significant barriers to local food production. As part of its land use planning and policy decisions, Lake County should consider the location of existing farming infrastructure and utilities, as well as the feasibility and potential to install or otherwise provide necessary infrastructure and utilities. The County could also explore ways to support the installation of infrastructure, such as small loan or revolving loan programs, or incentives for farmers to coordinate and share resources with other sources of public financial assistance.

Recommendation 4: Integrate best practices and standards into farm lease terms.

There has been growing interest across the country in leasing arrangements that encourage better land stewardship. Sustainable, local food production strives to balance the agricultural practices that protect land and water health with the autonomy for farmers to grow what they want using the methods they prefer. One potential solution for striking that balance would be implementing performance standards, which could be integrated into leasing and licensing terms for tenant farmers. With performance standards, land managers are required to meet specific targets for indicators such as soil organic matter, soil erosion, water use, and runoff water quality. Setting such standards is a complex undertaking – both in establishing and enforcing the standards. Despite potential challenges, such standards could provide great benefits, helping target sensitive or at-risk lands for better land management and facilitating the increase of sustainable agriculture and local food production in Lake County.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen connections within the food system.

Assessing current networks in the food system and fostering stronger connections would be an important economic development step in Lake County, since strengthening these links between stakeholders will create new business opportunities and encourage innovation. There are a number of programs and initiatives that could be pursued to encourage stronger connections within the Lake County food system, including training programs for beginning farmers and product aggregation services.

Components of a sustainable local food system



Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2012.

Recommendation 6: Expand accessory and temporary uses.

Restrictions on the number, size, and type of structure(s) allowed to assist with agricultural activities can be a barrier for farmers on parcels smaller than five acres who want to extend the growing season or expand operations to a scale at which they can sell products for profit. A number of potential modifications could be made to County policies (specifically in the Unified Development Ordinance [UDO]) to allow for larger accessory structures for some parcels. Such policy changes would become the responsibility of the County's PBD Department, as well as the Health Department.

Recommendation 7: Support the local food system through information and coordination.

Relevant rules about allowable uses, accessory uses, temporary uses, and health and safety regulations should be summarized in a simple brochure format and readily disseminated to interested parties and local food system stakeholders. Educational materials, such as information packets or fact sheets, could be extremely helpful to people who are new to various sustainable local food system operations, whether they are starting a farm, a cottage food operation, or a commercial kitchen. Overall, transparency between departments and with the public should remain a robust goal for Lake County.

Planting crops in hoophouse structure



Source: Liberty Prairie Foundation, 2013.

Recommendation 8: Expand definitions and allowable uses to support local food activities.

Lake County can improve clarity about permitted agricultural activities by establishing definitions in the UDO for new sustainable local food system activities, both to clarify the permitted agricultural uses on non-exempt agricultural land and to recognize the significance and economic opportunity of the emerging local food movement. Lake County can further establish its support for a local food system by amending the UDO to specifically permit the keeping of honeybees and hens in non-exempt residential zones. These regulatory modifications can be achieved by directly updating existing UDO language (*Section 6: Use Regulations* in the UDO), and by augmenting this section with specific limitations to these activities.

Chickens in agricultural field at Prairie Crossing



Source: Liberty Prairie Foundation, 2013.

Recommendation 9: Enable composting for local food production.

This report recommends the facilitation of small-scale organic waste composting on non-exempt land to enhance sustainable agricultural practices and minimize agricultural landfill waste. This report also recommends regulations that exempt small-scale compost operations (such as those found in residential backyards) from restrictions as long as they are well-managed.

Recommendation 10: Ensure that processing regulations suit the local scale.

The Lake County Health Department should examine how federal and state health regulations impact the development of a local food system and advocate for the innovative application of those codes to best-suit local agricultural practices in Lake County. For instance, federal and state regulations on dairy processing require the use of large equipment, which can be cost-prohibitive for smaller, localized processing operations.

Recommendation 11: Align water management goals with local food production activities.

Stormwater regulations may act as a disincentive for the erection of permanent and temporary greenhouses, hoop houses, storage buildings, or other structures associated with food production. In order to encourage local food production on exempt and non-exempt land, the County should consider case-by-case exemption of certain temporary structures used for food production from Watershed Development Ordinance (WDO) stormwater regulations. Permanent structures that meet the threshold for WDO permitting should continue to be required to meet ordinance requirements. The County should also work with growers to implement conservation-based irrigation strategies, such as drip-irrigation, that will support the needs of local food production operations while meeting its water supply conservation and management goals.

Recommendation 12: Support and participate in the Lake County Local Food Working Group.

It is recommended that the project steering committee formed to guide this project continue to convene as an informal working group to address issues and barriers. Lake County should have a prominent role in the working group activities and should provide support in the form of staff participation, assistance with funding requests, and involvement of elected officials in discussions.

Fields in local food production



Source:Liberty Prairie Foundation, 2013.



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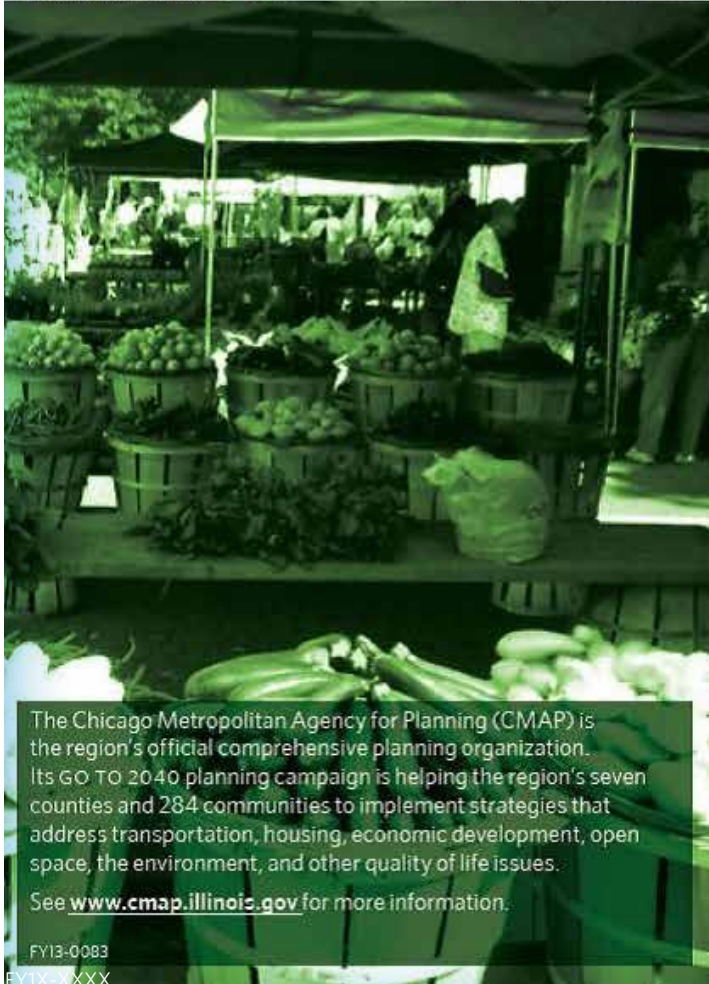
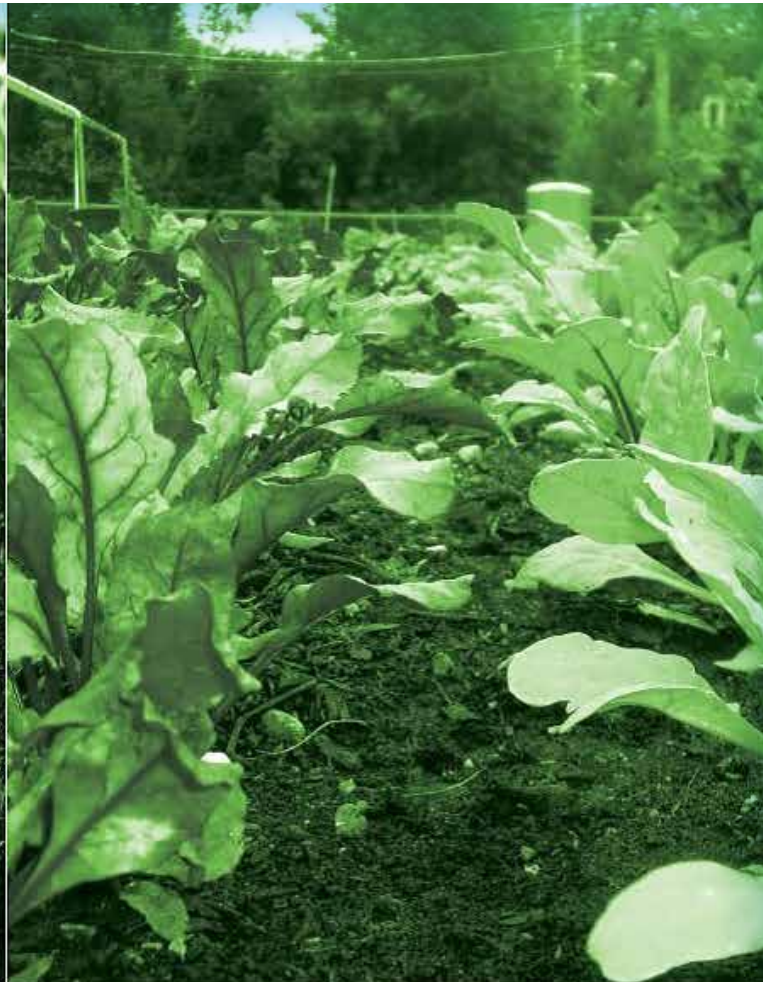
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Photo by David Johnson



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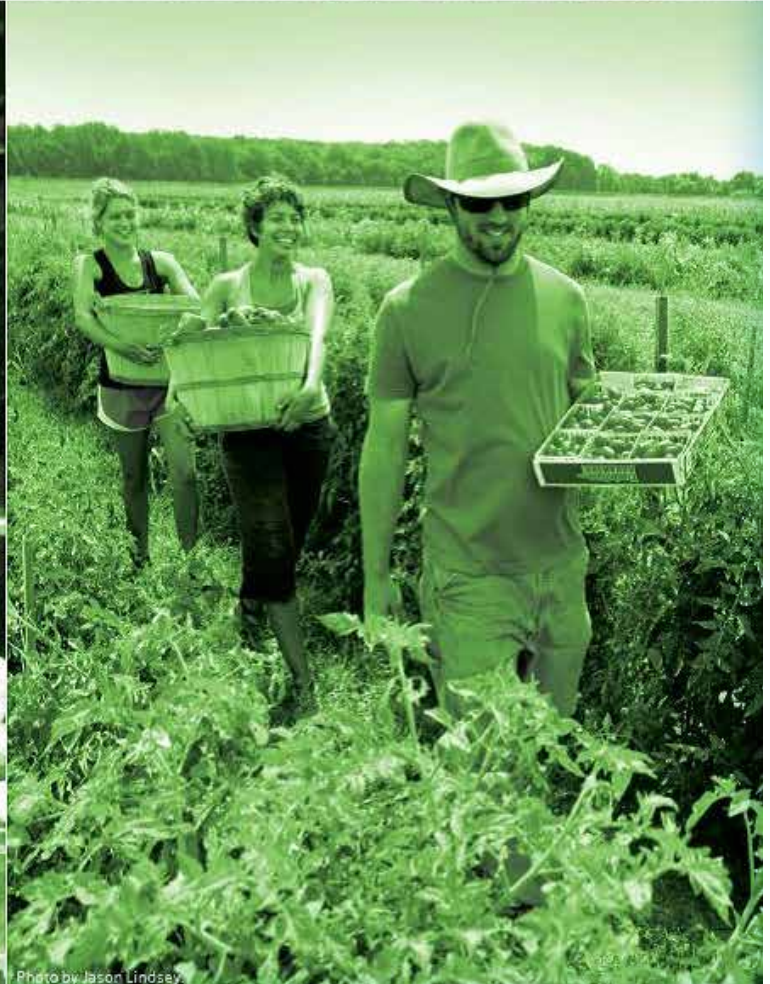


Photo by Jason Lindsey