

Cover Story



Photo of Ada Township (Kent Co.) Farmers Market by Trumpie Photography

From field to fork Local food and the local economy

August is peak season for the many community gardens, farmers markets and other local food-themed activities around an agriculturally rich state like Michigan.

But local food can be about more than just a trend or a single season.

The term “food system” encompasses the many stakeholders, processes and linkages necessary to take food from its point of inception, on a Michigan farm for example, all the way to its eventual consumption (and disposal), whether that takes place at the dinner table, in a local restaurant or in a school cafeteria. En route from the grower to the eater, foods typically pass through processing (such as washing, packaging, or freezing), distribution and retailing facilities.

A locally integrated food system can strengthen and expand stakeholder interactions, processes and linkages occurring closer to home. Local food systems—or regional systems, which may consider a larger geographic area—can present a significant opportunity for economic growth and development in many places, including townships across Michigan. Plus, when the environmental, economic and social consequences of how food is produced and sold are more immediate, people are more likely to pay attention and work to ensure that all the activity along the supply chain benefits the community as much as possible.

WHY CARE ABOUT LOCAL FOOD?

Communities in Michigan and around the country are becoming aware—and even active in the development—of local and regional food systems. There are a wide array of reasons to do so:

Health & Access. It’s hard not to be startled by the latest national statistics: according to a recent Institute of Medicine report, two-thirds of adults, and one-third of children, are considered overweight or obese, at risk for a wide range of threats to their physical and psychological health and basic functionality. Michigan’s 2010 adult obesity rate ranked among the 12th highest in the country. The recent HBO mini-series, *The Weight of the Nation*, produced in conjunction with the Institute of Medicine and with the Centers for Disease Control’s national forum of the same name, reminds us of the costs and consequences of this national epidemic: \$190 billion annually, or about 20 percent of all health care expenditures, are attributed to obesity-related illness.

These statistics suggest that perhaps Michiganders have access to too much food. But it’s not nearly that simple. Issues of quality, cost and availability are all important factors that influence what we consume. Researchers have popularized terms for rural and urban areas with limited access to fresh produce and/or an overabundance of fast, “unhealthy” convenience

options. In many of these communities, attracting a new grocery store may not be the most viable option to change the landscape.

However, townships may have opportunities to increase healthy food availability through corner stores, farm stands or markets, or other more locally driven means. Strategies like these may prove to be effective ways to reach out to underserved communities and address health inequities.

Response to demand. At the same time, there are encouraging trends related to the demand for fresh, local food. One indicator of such growing demand is the increased support for farmers markets. As of 2011, Michigan ranks third in the country for number of farmers markets recorded by the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Our 30 percent increase in number of markets between 2010 and 2011 nearly doubled the national rate of increase. Michigan also ranks among the top 10 states for our availability of winter markets.

Local food is also in demand outside the home. In the National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot in 2012" survey of 1,800 chefs, local sourcing of produce, meat and seafood top the list of trends. Along with local preference, concerns for health, nutrition and sustainability are referenced in nearly all of the top 20 responses.

Institutions such as schools and hospitals are also increasingly interested in sourcing locally. More than 60 Michigan schools or school districts have registered "farm to school" programs in the statewide directory (www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu). These programs include efforts to offer local foods in school cafeterias, along with other activities that promote connections between Michigan students and agriculture. Additionally, over 100 health care facilities in the state have signed the "Healthy Food in Health Care" pledge, which includes a commitment to increase the availability of local food in their systems.

Economic development. The increased demand for local food creates many economic development opportunities to ensure a steady supply and the necessary processing and distribution infrastructure. Moving toward a more regionally integrated food system also means that more of the money spent on food circulates locally, resulting in greater economic activity.

The state's aging farmer population presents an opportunity for a new generation of farmers to step in and begin new farming enterprises. Even small-scale, value-added food production, such as the production of artisanal baked goods, jams, sauces or cheeses, can present a small business development opportunity. As outlined in Michigan's Cottage Foods Law, updated in June 2012, some of these products are eligible for production in a home kitchen, while others require the use of a commercially licensed facility.

Local food can also contribute to a township or region's placemaking efforts. The Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance and the Pure Michigan campaign promote a series of "foodie tours" around the state. The farms, orchards, markets, restaurants,



Visitors to the Ada Township (Kent Co.) Farmers Market can make a day of it, as the township's historical society and parks and recreation department offer complementary programs on market days.

Photo of Ada Township Farmers Market by Trumple Photography

wineries, brewpubs and bakeries that make up these tours represent desirable amenities to locals and visitors alike. Even a single facility, such as a farmers market, can serve as a nexus for community activity in addition to promoting food access and direct support for regional growers.

Environmental sustainability. In addition to the aforementioned interests in strong local economies, equity and community health, local and regional food systems may address environmental dimensions of sustainability as well. Creating markets for local food products can help farmers stay on their land. A growing interest in urban agriculture can spur the creation of green spaces in more developed areas. Furthermore, moving toward a more regionally oriented food system activity can mitigate the dependence on long-distance transport of food and associated natural resource impacts. Communities can prioritize the preservation of farmland and consider adaptive reuse of vacant parcels or structures to enhance the state's food system infrastructure and pursue smart growth.

TAKING ACTION

There are many opportunities for townships to take action on food system strategies, whether in a lead or a supporting role.

Expanding food production. Community gardens offer residents opportunities to grow their own healthy food and build relationships with their neighbors in the process. In some cases, community gardens are also set up to give back to community members in need.

The **Independence Charter Township** (Oakland Co.) Parks and Recreation Department operates the Clarkston Community Garden, which was resurrected at the request of community members in 2009, on land that was donated to the township for passive recreation. Each year, community members pay \$25-\$35 (depending on residency) for one of the 78 plots in the garden. They also commit to spending 10 hours in the shared ►



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community plot, where all the produce harvested is donated to a food bank in Clarkston or Pontiac. The garden has a goal of donating 10,000 pounds of food each year.

Independence Charter Township provides a well, a portable restroom, two sandbox spaces for young children to play while their parents are gardening, and basic mowing and rototilling services for the garden. It also manages applications for the plots and provides some marketing support for events associated with the garden. Managing the shared community plot, supervising volunteer hours and most other tasks are handled by a volunteer garden manager.

“Ultimately, we’d like to see the garden connect with area schools and provide an outdoor classroom,” said **Kelly Hyer**, recreation supervisor for Independence Charter Township. “There is a real disconnect with kids knowing where food comes from. The garden plays a role in helping encourage healthy eating habits from a young age.”

Local food production need not be limited to fruits and vegetables. Interest in the keeping of chickens, for example, is also on the rise among urban and suburban households. Several Michigan townships, such as **Ypsilanti Charter Township** (Washtenaw Co.), are in the process of considering backyard chicken ordinances at the urging of their residents.

Meridian Charter Township (Ingham Co.) amended its zoning code in 2011 to allow for the residential keeping of both chickens and rabbits. While the township heard from residents on both sides of the issue throughout the policy process, since its passage, “There hasn’t been a firestorm of opposition,” said Associate Planner **Rick Brown**. “A few people were

dismayed that we didn’t include some of the smaller lots,” while others were concerned for potential changes in character of the neighborhoods. In many of the latter cases, however, subdivision restrictions on those animals would supersede the township’s policy.

Improving food access. Farmers markets are perhaps the most popular type of food system activity supported by local governments, whether the support takes the form of land access, promotion or the actual administration of the market. Many Michigan markets are taking steps to explicitly promote the sale of local and/or sustainable products, as well as their accessibility to all consumers.

Springfield Charter Township (Oakland Co.) is home to one of Michigan’s newest farmers markets, now in the midst of its second season. Its tagline, “Naturally local,” and vendor requirements reflect the market’s commitment to showcasing naturally or organically grown produce, all of which must come from within the state. The township and its parks and recreation commission considered multiple sites for the market, ultimately selecting one of its parks, which simplified the permitting process and best addressed needs for parking and restroom facilities. On its inaugural opening day in 2011, the first families to visit the market were greeted with free tote bags. Market Manager **Laura Haselhuhn** noted that 75 bags were distributed within just 15 minutes. Though the market started small, in year two, it has doubled the amount of vendors and added the acceptance of Bridge Cards to expand the customer base as well.

The **Bath Charter Township** (Clinton Co.) Farmers Market is another market accepting Bridge Cards, along with credit or debit cards. In addition, the market is participating in the expanding Double Up Food Bucks Program, through which Bridge Card users are able to receive bonus tokens, doubling the value of their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, for the purchase of additional Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables. Besides offering patrons a full array of payment options, the market is one of few in the state that remains open throughout the year, moving to an indoor location through the winter.

Beyond farmers markets, townships can consider other opportunities to support access to healthy, local foods. County or district health departments, such as district 10 in northwest lower Michigan, have been piloting efforts to offer produce from local farms within and adjacent to local convenience stores. Townships could support similar projects by convening partners or providing guidance on any relevant municipal regulations.

Fostering food businesses. Townships can also support food and agriculture businesses in their communities, whether it’s helping new businesses locate and establish or considering underlying planning tools that could encourage a cluster of food businesses.

Incubator kitchens are an innovative business type that is gaining popularity. Companies like this can act as economic

development engines by helping to launch multiple food-based businesses in a community. **Delhi Charter Township** (Ingham Co.) is home to Incu-BaKe, LLC, which provides shared-use commercial kitchen space for food business start-ups, catering companies, cooking classes and anyone else who needs access to a certified commercial kitchen but cannot yet afford their own space. **Marcy Bishop Kates**, founder of Incu-BaKe, was inspired to launch the business in large part by the local food system activities she observed as a program officer for Michigan AmeriCorps. “Watching what those mostly young people did to the food system, in the Lansing area specifically, was just really amazing,” she said. Eventually, she thought, “Somebody has to jump out there and start creating jobs,” which she sees as a role for citizens, not just government, to play.

In addition to the facilities, Incu-BaKe offers business planning assistance to small food and home-based businesses and networks clients with other resources in the region and state. Bishop Kates also serves on the Delhi Charter Township Downtown Development Authority, which, she says, has been a strong supporter of the community’s small businesses. Still, access to capital is a constant fight for her clients, many of whom maintain other employment while they explore the potential for scaling up their food businesses. Bishop Kates asked, “How do we help some of these nontraditional entrepreneurs who are working to change the economy but aren’t your traditional model?”

Ann Arbor Charter Township (Washtenaw Co.) is home to a different kind of business incubator for emerging farm businesses. The township has been progressive in its efforts to preserve land for small- and medium-scale, diversified agriculture, largely through a purchase of development rights (PDR) program implemented by its farmland and open space preservation board. “It may be counterintuitive, but preserving farmland can be very cost-effective,” said Supervisor **Michael Moran**, noting that farms are generally net contributors to the local tax base. In cooperation with local advocates, such as Ann Arbor resident Jeff McCabe, and the regional nonprofit Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP), the township is now supporting—through land, water access and capital improvements—the Tilian Farm Development Center, located on a portion of its protected farmland.

Tilian operates a farm incubator program where beginning farmers have access to land and resources at the center’s site for two years, while they build capacity in farming knowledge and business planning in preparation for moving off-site. From the township’s perspective, Moran said, “Our primary interest has been in supporting opportunities for these small enterprises to experiment and see if they can be successful, and so far, they’ve been dramatically so.” Five farms have participated in this program since it first broke ground in 2011. The hope is that graduates go on to purchase land in the area, following in the footsteps of early graduates like the young couple who recently purchased 64 separate acres of the township’s protected land for their business, Green Things Farm.



Incubator kitchens can act as economic development engines by helping to launch multiple food-based businesses in a community.

Photo courtesy of Incu-BaKe, Delhi Charter Township (Ingham Co.)

The Tilian site also houses a farmer residency program, modeled after Michigan State University’s Organic Farmer Training Program and operated by FSEP, which provides experiential learning opportunities for prospective farm entrepreneurs. Residency farmers manage a year-round community-supported agricultural operation that aims toward self-funding the Tilian programs.

Ann Arbor Charter Township is also actively engaged in discussions around the development of a “food hub” that would provide critical infrastructure to support the flow of local food to local and regional consumers, markets and schools. Similarly, several Michigan communities are exploring the economic development potential of clustering food- and agriculture-related businesses together.

The synergy that can happen among entrepreneurs, and for an entire part of a community, is already happening in the Traverse City region at the Grand Traverse Commons, which straddles the boundaries of **Garfield Charter Township** (Grand Traverse Co.) and Traverse City. Among the shops, offices and lofts in the middle of the Commons is a growing group of innovative local food-based businesses and a farmers market, which are adding customers and cache to this redevelopment of a historic hospital campus. Local leaders are working to add smaller scale local food aggregation and processing facilities into this mix to help grow the cluster of businesses and meet needs of the region’s burgeoning local food sector.

This emerging food and farm business cluster at the Commons illustrates the concept of a “food innovation district”—a place where multiple food and agriculture enterprises locate in close proximity to one another, share resources, information and ideas, and form segments of a local food supply chain. The Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and Regional Food Solutions, LLC are currently working on a new toolkit to further support these types of efforts. ►

Photo courtesy of Tittian Farm Development Center, Ann Arbor Charter Township (Washtenaw Co.)



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The toolkit, to be released later this year, will offer guidance to help local officials take a range of steps to develop such districts locally, including planning and zoning approaches and economic development strategies. In the meantime, townships can inventory the types of food and agricultural businesses and activities already occurring within their boundaries and consider what shared resources could assist with their expansion.

GETTING CONNECTED

To learn more and connect with efforts already underway, townships can link into current state-level initiatives or join a local food policy group, if one exists in the area.

State initiatives and groups. Michigan Good Food is a statewide initiative to utilize state policies and programs to move toward a food system based on “good food”—food that is healthy, green (protective of natural resources), fair and affordable. The initiative also strives to advance a food system that is anchored in Michigan. In other words, a system where, to a significant extent, Michigan farmers and processors profitably sell their product in state, Michigan institutions buy food in state, Michigan consumers have access to healthy, local food, and Michigan distributors and other agri-food business facilitate these local exchanges.

The initiative is centered on the Michigan Good Food Charter, which was developed with input from hundreds of people across Michigan and released in June 2010. The charter puts forward a vision for the food system in Michigan, six goals to achieve by 2020, and 25 specific agenda priorities as steps to take towards those goals. In June of this year, over 300 people came together at the 2012 Michigan Good Food Summit to assess the progress made, to learn from each other’s successes and to strategize how to implement several of the agenda priorities in the next couple years.

Townships can link into this initiative in several ways:

- Follow progress through monthly newsletters.
- Utilize the associated resources, including the charter, work group reports on key aspects of the food system, and briefs on each of the 25 agenda priorities, to learn more about the issues and as a guide for taking action.
- Sign the resolution of support. (More than 250 groups and individuals have signed to date.)
- Attend biennial statewide gatherings.

Resources, including a link to sign up for the listserv, can be found at www.michiganfood.org.

Another state-level venue for addressing food system issues is the Michigan Food Policy Council. Formed by an Executive Order from Gov. Granholm in 2005, the council consists of governor-appointed members representing state agencies and a broad diversity of other sectors, including private industry, non-profits and the public. The council’s mission is to build on the state’s agricultural diversity to enhance economic growth and to cultivate a safe, healthy and available food supply for all Michigan residents. The council provides a venue for discussing and advocating changes in state policies in support of their mission. Townships and other interested parties can seek to present concerns or requests for such changes before the council.

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Local food policy groups. In more and more Michigan communities, townships have an opportunity to connect with established or emerging food policy councils or similar groups. One such group that recently formed is the Farm & Food Action Council of Southern Clinton County. The council formalized partnerships between Bath Charter Township, **DeWitt Charter Township**, **Watertown Charter Township** and the City of DeWitt. After public meetings and focus groups through 2011, the council approved their structure and bylaws late last October. Since then, they have formed committees around four key issues that public meetings revealed to be the most important: farm to school, community gardens and healthy food access, community kitchens, and marketing and distribution of local foods.

Find out if there is a food policy council or similar group that covers your township or region, and look for opportunities to become involved. Your community—and the region and state—can benefit from township efforts to increase citizens' access to local food. ■

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For more information

- **USDA's Know Your Food, Know Your Farmer Initiative:** www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer/
- **American Planning Association resources:** www.planning.org/resources/ontheradar/food
- **Michigan Farmers Market Association:** www.mifma.org
- **Incu-BaKe, LLC:** www.incu-bake.com
- **Tilian Farm Development Center:** <http://tiliancenter.wordpress.com/>
- **Food innovation districts:** <http://www.nwm.org/planning/planning-policy/food-systems-and-food-innovation-districts/food-systems-and-food-innovation-districts.html>
- **Michigan Good Food initiative:** www.michiganfood.org
- **Michigan Food Policy Council:** www.michigan.gov/mfpc
- **Farm & Food Action Council of Southern Clinton County:** Contact Jeff Garrity at jgarrity@bathtownship.us

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