

Fresh from ... the City

Citizens and local policymakers join up to get fresh foods to schools and neighborhoods.

by Mark Winne

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The Albuquerque high school auditorium was nearly full. On stage sat a dozen New Mexico state officials, physicians, and other health professionals, listening intently to a parade of parents, teachers, civic leaders, and even the occasional student—all speaking in favor of a proposal to ban sugary soft drinks and to require the state's public schools to offer healthier food.

Then it was the other side's turn. Standing in a carefully coifed cluster, immaculately attired and bristling with confidence, America's beverage industry representatives made their case for the retention of soda in New Mexico's public schools. Each of the speakers—none of whom were state residents—announced their names, punctuated with an alphabet soup of credentials that spanned the range of most known health disciplines. They argued that soft drinks were not as unhealthy as people thought, that the real culprit in America's obesity crisis wasn't too many calories but too little exercise, and that it was simply not right to deprive school children of the nation's iconic soda brands.

These arguments were as disingenuous as the case for healthy school food was compelling. But public institutions don't change easily, and corporations don't give up millions of dollars without a fight. A back room deal between state officials and the beverage industry nearly scuttled the proposed reforms. But the light of day was too bright, and the voice of citizens too strong. Today, the cafeterias of New Mexico's public schools no longer sell Pepsi or Coke. In their place, students find apples, chiles, and other locally grown fruits and vegetables.

The victory was by no means inevitable. The state's nutrition reforms were the direct result of work done by the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, an organized group of farmers, nutritionists, educators, activists, and others on a mission for healthier food.

But how do you start up agriculture in the middle of a city, and on a scale that will make a difference?



Cleveland city councilor Joe Cimperman at the construction of Wonder City Farm, one of the city's many "asphalt" vegetable gardens.

Photo courtesy of New Agrarian Center



From vacant city lot to fresh food: the making of Cleveland's Neighbors in Family Practice Farm.
Photos courtesy of New Agrarian Center

Big decisions about food, nutrition, and agriculture used to be the purview of a small cadre of agribusiness corporations and political heavy-hitters. But more and more, people are realizing that decisions that affect their food and health are too important to leave in the hands of others. Around the country citizens are holding their elected officials accountable for junk food in schools, food insecurity in poor neighborhoods, and the future of agriculture through groups called “food policy councils” (FPCs).

The FPC movement started more than 25 years ago in Knoxville, Tennessee, and now there are about 100 councils in North America. The councils come in many shapes and sizes—some organized by citizens, some established formally by an ordinance, state statute, or executive order. And increasingly, these food policy councils are publicly asserting that the nation’s food system must serve a triple bottom line—one that is good for producers, the environment, and all consumers, including low-income households.

Food Democracy at Work

Agitated chatter spilled out of the meeting room at the Boulder County Natural Resources building in Colorado as the 12 members of the newly appointed Boulder County Food and Agriculture Policy Council gathered over beer and pizza (both made locally) and put finishing touches on a strategic plan to boost local food production and distribution.

The discussion grew tense when one member protested that her values were not reflected in the plan’s current draft. Cindy Torres, the council chair, called a time-out. It wasn’t about whether the member’s perception was right or wrong. Food policy councils are committed to listening to everyone’s ideas. As discussion resumed, the reluctant member calmed, put aside her doubts, and accepted compromise language.

“We want everyone to know they have a voice in our food system,” says Torres. Such an inclusive process may take longer. Food policy councils are “like being in a big family,” she says. “All those people aren’t going away, so you better learn to deal with them.”

But Torres insists the payoff can be enormous. “At first we had only a collection of special interests. But now we have a vision that everyone can share and work for,” she says. “Yes, we focus on environmental sustainability, but in order for our work to have a long-term impact, we must also work on social sustainability.”

It’s that proximity to local voices that gives food policy councils their strength. At the federal level, where Congress and the administration make policies like the Farm Bill, the average citizen’s voice can get lost. But when food policy councils confront a local school board or state legislature, elected officials must listen and work with them.

This strategy has been successful in New Mexico, where the council has worked with public and private partners to advocate successfully for increased state funding for farmers markets and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

Food policy councils' commitment to building a "big tent," open to many interests, is starting to pay off in other communities as well. Cleveland, for example, has "brought together an amazing group of food system stakeholders who have a vision for a just and sustainable local food system," according to Jennifer Schofield, cofounder of the Cleveland Cuyahoga County Food Policy Council.

Like many so-called rust-belt cities, Cleveland has lost a staggering number of residents and supermarkets, leaving citizens stranded amid large tracts of vacant land with no place to shop. But Schofield saw vacant lots as future mini-farms, and the remaining corner stores as potential outlets for healthy food, not just candy, tobacco, and lottery tickets. "Anybody in their right mind knows that Cleveland's economic future isn't with the Fortune 500. We need to stimulate small, local businesses like food and gardening."

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The food policy council tackled that question by seeking citywide policies that could open possibilities for urban farming. They found a champion in City Councilor Joe Cimperman, a 10-year veteran of Cleveland's 13th Ward.

"Urban farming can be transformative in terms of the economy, nutrition, health, and public safety," Cimperman says. "Our goal is to make Cleveland a national leader in the local food economy." He and the FPC have secured a zoning change that permits community gardening. They are now working on new zoning to create larger plots, one-acre or more, and allow chicken-raising and beekeeping.

Similar approaches have succeeded in Portland, Oregon, where the 15-member Portland-Multnomah Food Policy Council has encouraged the city to open up more land for community gardens through their "Diggable City" project, which has turned the public spotlight on the need for more urban plots. Even though 3,000 people currently till the city's community gardens, there are still 1,000 gardener wannabes on a waiting list.

Portland is also thinking beyond a few garden plots. The council is working with the region's planning commission to encourage the inclusion of food access, affordable food, and the viability of state agriculture in the region's five-year comprehensive plan. Should they succeed, it will be the first time any major American city has recognized food and agriculture as key issues in city and regional planning.

Through such collaborations, food policy councils give ordinary people a chance to have a big impact on where their food will come from in the future. According to Pam Roy, co-director of the non-profit Farm to Table, the New Mexico council was created to bring about profound change.

"We could do food projects forever," she says, "but never get the kind of far-reaching results that we get by tackling state policy."

As new voices speak out through the FPCs, there's hope that food and agriculture decisions will start delivering what people really need—healthy, affordable, sustainable food.

Mark Winne wrote this article as part of Food for Everyone, the Spring 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Mark is cofounder of the City of Hartford Food Policy Commission, the Connecticut Food Policy Council, End Hunger Connecticut!, and the national Community Food Security Coalition, and author of *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* (Beacon, 2008).



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