

## Napa Food System Report

July 1, 2009

Dear Napa Community Leader,

Napa County is world renowned for its beauty, agricultural products and culinary culture. Yet among its residents, the food situation is not so picturesque. Napa County ranks second to last of all California counties in food security – the ability to put food on the table at every meal. Diet-related chronic disease rates are increasing, with diabetes rising from 5.1% to 8.3% between 2003 and 2005, surpassing the California average (7%).

There are racial, economic and spatial inequities involved in these problems. While rates of overweight among white residents are at a disturbing 49%, African Americans and Latinos have even higher rates, at 69% and 77%, respectively. 38% of low income residents have reported food insecurity, and the food that appears practical for people with limited income (i.e. provides many calories at low cost) contributes to chronic illness. Some areas of the county have less access to fresh, healthy food than others, an indicator of health outcomes that correlates both with poverty and race. A recent study has shown that life expectancy in the Bay Area varies as much as 14 years depending on the neighborhood where you live.

With less than 2% of our local agriculture used for food production, Napa County relies on the global conventional food system (which is characterized by long-distance imports and unsustainable industrial farming and livestock practices). This reliance:

- Contributes to environmental damage (including climate change);
- Gives us less control over the safety of our food;
- Distances us from the important nutrition education aspect of food production;
- Minimizes the historic role of food as a catalyst for building social capital;
- Leaves the community with very little food security in case of a regional emergency; and
- Fails to support the local economy (if only 20% of food spending were shifted to local food system business, the financial impact of that spending could be eleven times that of spending on non-local business).

The good news is that there are many individuals and organizations in Napa County who are dedicated to improving many of these problems that touch Napa's food system – the interconnected system of all the policies, programs, mechanisms, infrastructure, capital and values that go into the production, distribution, consumption and disposal of food. Professionals and other advocates from the fields of health, agriculture, economic development, environmental sustainability, labor, city planning, social services, food security and transportation are all devoting resources and creativity to address many of these food system-related issues from within their fields.

From my conversations with many of these advocates, it appears that to take these solutions to the next level – to make them more widespread, more sustainable, and to more directly address root problems rather than taking care of symptoms – there needs to be collaboration across fields and the infrastructure to support this collaboration.

Other communities around the Bay Area have taken on the challenge of integrating these different fields to support and reinforce each other's work and to find solutions to common challenges. Whether it is in the form of advisory food policy councils (Berkeley, Contra Costa County, Marin County, Oakland, San Francisco and Sonoma County) general plan policies (Marin), city food and nutrition policies (Berkeley), or community food assessments (Alameda County, Contra Costa County, Oakland, San Francisco), these strategies serve as infrastructure to facilitate and

maintain ongoing relationships, policies and programs that improve a community's quality of life through its food system.

An organizing body in Napa County could provide the structure, staff and resources (among other creative partnerships and programs that the community could innovate) to:

- Connect at-risk youth to food production apprenticeships;
- Restructure policies that are barriers to farming and farm marketing;
- Provide incentives for fresh food and healthy low-cost restaurants in underserved areas;
- Connect nutrition and cooking educators to communities with high rates of diet-related disease;
- Facilitate pedestrian and bicycle access to sources of healthy food;
- Systematically support school and community garden programs;
- Connect local farmers to institutions such as schools, hospitals and businesses; or
- Build a certified community kitchen to incubate small food businesses, use local food, provide space for basic cooking classes, certification for shelter meal donations, and rentable space for affordable meal preparation programs and higher-end culinary classes.

The first step toward these creative partnerships is for community leaders and food system stakeholders like you to come together to discuss common concerns and share resources. The group could collectively identify priorities for learning more about the local food system (perhaps conducting a community food assessment), determining the best structure to make change (such as an advisory or active food policy council) and creating immediate interdisciplinary solutions.

There is an upcoming opportunity for such a collaborative process. The agricultural community, through the office of the Agricultural Commissioner, is considering a forum to discuss barriers to local food production in Napa County. They are open to broadening this discussion to larger food system issues. I invite you to learn more about this opportunity and to lend your support to creating a forum that will cross agricultural, business, health, planning and environmental lines.

In my full report, *Comprehensive Planning for the Napa County Food System: A Preliminary Study of Problems and Possibilities* (available at <http://recipeforsustainability.com> under Napa Food System Report), I provide a more in-depth look at Napa's food system assets and challenges. I suggest models for strategies both for specific programs and policies and for a participatory process that would identify priorities based on the community's needs and interests. I hope you will read the report and consider how you and/or your organization currently interact with the food system, and what role you could play in improving Napa County's quality of life through changes to the food system.

Sincerely,

Joanna Winter