Food Systems Planning Class Spring 2010
FOOD POLICY AUDIT
Executive Summary

A Community Engagement and Global Health Course
School of Architecture
University of Virginia
Taught by
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For more information, or for a copy of the Food Policy Audit to use in your own communities,
Visit: http://www.virginia.edu/ien/tanyacourses.htm

Class Project Overview

The 2010 Food Systems Policy class conducted the first ever Food Policy Audit of existing food policy infrastructure for the five counties and one city comprising Virginia's Thomas Jefferson Planning District. A food system includes all activities that directly or indirectly bring food from the farm to table – food production, processing, distribution, as well as marketing (Jess: have decided distribution includes transportation but doesn't necessarily include the marketing), affordability, and access. The goal of local food system planning is to support a network of local farmers providing food to local families through a range of community food outlets such as farmers' and tailgate markets, subscriptions or co-ownership in farms through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)schools, restaurants, hospitals, other institutions, groceries and emergency food providers. This network, in turn, supports multiple community goals of preserving working farmland, rural character, economic development, and improved diet and nutrition. The class defined policy broadly to include officially adopted policies, such as Comprehensive Plans, Zoning Codes, budgets, school wellness policies and strategic plans. It also included community programs and services as a way of measuring grassroots efforts that are growing the local food system and therefore affecting policies.

The Food Policy Audit is a new planning tool that was created in Fall 2009 by Jessie Ray, a graduate student in the Masters' of Urban and Environmental Planning and course Teaching Assistant; Tanya Denckla Cobb, Associate Director of UVa's Institute for Environmental Negotiation and class lecturer; and Tim Beatley, Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities. The Audit consists of approximately 100 questions divided among five categories, presented in simple spreadsheet form. Those

categories are: public health, economic development, environmental impacts, social equity, and land conservation/access to land for food production. The questions and categories are organized according to nationally recognized topics in food system planning, and are drawn from nationally recognized policy databases, such as the Prevention Institute's ENACT tool.[i] After a draft was completed in Fall 2009, Ray and Denckla Cobb asked a number of community leaders to review the Audit and provide feedback – to confirm the relevance of the Audit questions for our region and to obtain community ideas for additional topics and questions. Based on this feedback, they revised the Audit for students to use in the Spring 2010 class in a kind of "test run." If the Audit proved relevant, easy to use, informative, and helpful to the localities, they would make it available for public use.

Audit Project Goals

The Audit process is designed to assess the strengths, gaps and opportunities in local food system policies, and to identify community priorities for next steps to strengthen the local food system. Students used the Audit to identify existing policies directly related to food production, distribution and access, as well as community activities that might foster food systems goals. The Audit reveals the community's existing policy infrastructure only, not whether the policies have been implemented and achieved their desired effects. As part of the Audit process, students met with relevant community members, both government and non-government, to compare Audit findings with what is actually happening on the ground. Through this engagement process, students increased community awareness of food system planning and "ground-truthed" their research to increase its relevance and usefulness to the community. An overarching goal of the Audit process was to advance the food system conversation and provide a starting point for the region to work together to achieve common goals.

Audit Process

Students were organized into six teams of 3 or 4, and each team focused on a specific locality. For the first 6 to 7 weeks of the semester, teams researched local policy documents and answered the questions in the Audit according to what they found in their research. Once the students completed the questions, and identified existing policies and programs, they met with community leaders to review their research findings. Students asked the community leaders to identify policies they may have missed, help clarify language and program goals, and identify relevant grassroots community efforts that were impacting the local food system. These community leaders were also asked to use the Audit to identify their individual top 4 to 6 priorities for next steps in their community's food system. The students then compiled these individual "wish lists" to identify the community's top shared priorities; for the top 3 to 4 shared priorities, the students conducted additional research to provide beginning ideas and resources from other localities in the United States that might help the community pursue these priorities. The students were not expected to provide recommendations or outline specific strategies for how the localities should achieve these goals.

Summary of Student Findings

Below is a brief summary of the students' findings. This reviews the strengths and priorities of each locality in the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission (TJPDC), as well as common themes for the region as a whole. This summary is also meant to provide baseline information and serve as a conversation starter; it does not outline a specific strategy for how the TJPDC can accomplish these common goals. We hope that this summary also can be used as guide for others who may wish to use the Audit process in their own community.

The Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission (TJPDC)

The TJPDC comprises five counties and one city in central Virginia: Greene, the northern most county; Albemarle, the county that surrounds Charlottesville; Nelson, the southernmost county; Fluvanna and Louisa to the east; and the City of Charlottesville, the largest population base in the region. According to the TJPDC website: "Planning District Commissions promote the efficient development of the physical, social, and economic policies of all districts by assisting local governments to plan for the future. The purpose of the Planning District Commissions is to encourage and facilitate regional solutions to problems of area-wide significance. This cooperation recognizes regional opportunities and the importance of regional influences in planning and implementing public policies and services."[ii]

The region is mostly rural, with the exception of Charlottesville, designated growth areas in Albemarle and a few concentrated developments in the other counties. All of the counties are using some form of conservation or agricultural-forestal zoning districts, which are tools to preserve lands for farming, open space, or similar uses. The counties also have designated specific growth areas to prevent sprawling development and to preserve rural heritage and character. All of the localities also have adopted goals relating to sustainability. Charlottesville's City vision states, in part, that it wants "to be a leader in innovation, environmental sustainability, and social and economic justice."[iii] Fluvanna County's vision is to become "the most livable and sustainable community in the United States."[iv]

Regional Findings

While the students' work established a baseline of information, it was by no means exhaustive. Still, a review of their work provides interesting insights into our region's food system.

- Food system work in Charlottesville and Albemarle has progressed beyond grassroots activities and is becoming more institutionalized in community nonprofits, such as the Piedmont Environmental Council's *Buy Fresh Buy Local*, Jefferson Area Board of Aging (JABA), Quality Community Council (QCC), Community Obesity Task Force (COTF), Market Central, and UVA Dining Services and Hospital services. This seems to reflect a natural evolution from grassroots activities to institutionalization and policy development.

- Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville also appear to be more advanced in the realm of food system policy development than the rural counties of Nelson, Greene, Fluvanna and Louisa. This is to be expected, given the difference between these localities in population, budgets and local government staff available to develop and implement policies. But it also is a likely result of earlier grassroots activities, and subsequent local nonprofit interest in working for innovative policies relating to food.

- The rural counties of Nelson, Greene, Fluvanna and Louisa do have important grassroots activities, such as farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and community gardens. Given the progression in Charlottesville and Albemarle from grassroots activities to institutionalization and policy development, it might be expected that these counties will see a similar progression toward institutionalization and policy development.

- Throughout the region, there is an expressed need for more avenues and opportunities to foster and support new farmers entering the profession as well as younger generation farmers who can replace the aging farming population.

- Most localities place high priority on improving school food and nutrition for their youth. This seems to be an easy and natural point of entry for educating the community and improving its health and nutrition.

- Most localities are also interested in growing the food-based economic development opportunities, particularly through processing centers.

- Coordination among the different groups working to improve the local food system emerged as an important concern, particularly in Charlottesville and Albemarle. The food system touches virtually all aspects of community planning, and so it is expected that the number of nonprofits interested and working on food-related issues will only increase over time. The Audit found that community members would like perceived or real competition for limited resources to be addressed in productive ways. Also, it is likely that, as food-related activities in the surrounding counties increase, coordination will become important for the region as a whole. What this coordination should look like is unclear, but the Audit suggests the need for clear lines of communication so that everyone involved in the regional food system is recognized, heard, and aware of each other's work.

Locality Strengths and Community Priorities

For each locality, students identified strengths, challenges and opportunities through Audit research and conversations with community leaders. These conversations also identified community priorities for growing a stronger food system. Included here is a brief summary of just the strengths and community identified priorities for each locality. There was no attempt to coordinate, or compare and contrast information between counties. Each team worked independently, drawing conclusions about strengths and opportunities based on their research and conversations with the locality. This is an admitted weakness in our approach, as a strength for one locality might not be mentioned for another, even though it is equally present in both. Still, what is selected

as strengths and opportunities reflects the student team's best judgment about what is valued most by the county itself. The student reports contain much interesting information and insights about the localities, far more than can be represented here. For more detailed information, please see the student reports online at:
http://www.virginia.edu/ien/tanyacourses.htm#foodii

Greene County Strengths

- The county is rich in agricultural history and pride.

- Agricultural districts allow for most agricultural uses, including intensive options, such as food processing facilities.

- The residential zone R-1 includes by-right light agricultural uses, which could support community gardens on abandoned lots.

- The draft 2010 Comprehensive Plan focuses on transportation, land use, and economic development, all relevant issues for a successful food network.

- There is strong support for eco-tourism, and the county hosts several food related events, including a Strawberry Festival, farmers' market, and wine festivals.

- The School Wellness Policy Committee recommends that candy not be given as a reward for good behavior and that stopping physical activity not be used as a punishment. School vending machines have been stripped of junk food and a fresh vegetable option is included every day at lunch.

- The Jefferson Area Board of Aging (JABA) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) are working to increase access to healthful foods for vulnerable populations.

Greene County Community Priorities

- Green County community members did not have significant overlap in their recommendations for next steps; all individual priorities are listed in the student report. One area of suggested improvement was increased coordination between the existing hunger, economic development, and distribution services. However, because of the disparate priorities, the student team suggested the county leaders should pursue a county-wide conversation about its food system to develop priorities.[v]

Nelson County Strengths

- Nelson has adopted a School Wellness Policy.

- Nelson enjoys a strong sense of community.

- Nelson's Farmers' Market is host to over 20 vendors.

- Nelson adopted an Agricultural Land Use tax, requirements for riparian buffers and farming by-right zoning.

- Nelson financially supports the Local Food Hub, located in Ivy, VA. The Local Food Hub purchases from over 20 area farms; more than half a dozen of which are in Nelson County.
- Nelson is home to the innovative local currency program of Nelly May Bucks.

Nelson County Community Priorities

- Support more local purchasing.
- Increase variety of crops in land production.
- Educate Nelson County about food and obesity prevention.
- Support community gardens.
- Improve access to food through increasing the number of smaller grocery stores.

Louisa County Strengths

- Junk food has been removed from all the school vending machines. The schools also follow the Virginia Action for Healthy Kids guidelines, which are more strict than USDA guidelines. Louisa's Extension Office complements school efforts through its Family Wellness Services programming.
- The County has adopted a policy for recommended reduced pesticide use.
- Much of county is preserved in agricultural-forestal districts.
- The county allows gleaning in some locations.
- The county has developed land conservation maps, land use taxation, and requires riparian buffers and other environmental protection efforts.
- Some transportation is available to rural locations during the week days.
- The county is home to a Community Cupboard, which "provides monthly bags of non-perishable foods to income eligible individuals and families."[vi] Its industrial refrigerators are used for cold donation storage.

Louisa County Community Priorities

- Support community gardens.
- Improve public transportation for rural residents to food stores, including weekend service.
- Increase procurement of local foods, especially in schools.
- Increase awareness and promotion of farming as profession.
- Help farmers find new markets and remove restrictions on small farms.

Fluvanna County Strengths

- The county had adopted a School Wellness Plan, is aware of obesity risks, and participates in the Backpack Program.
- The county has established community gardens, and also offers free plots.
- The county has established a farmers' market and it continues to grow.

- The County economic development plan has an emphasis on increasing local business.
- The county supports important coordination between its social services to ensure coverage of area residents.
- The county promotes voluntary livestock fencing to keep them out of streams, uses an array of growth management tools including ag-forestral conservation districts and land use taxation.

Fluvanna County Community Priorities

- Continue preservation to preserve rural character.
- Allow more agricultural practices by right to allow farmers to supplement their income without having to go through the lengthy Special Use Permit process.
- Expand economic development opportunities for food-related businesses.
- Improve obesity prevention.
- Expand on existing initiatives, such as community gardens and food access.

Albemarle County Strengths

- Schools have adopted nutrition guidelines and a Farm to School Week.
- The County created a medical weight loss program for employees.
- The County has numerous active nonprofits working on food-related issues.
- The County provides support for local businesses through the Career Center, Small Business Development Center, and the Cooperative Extension office. The County also promotes the local wine and artisan scenes through its "trails" venues, i.e. the Monticello Wine Trail and the Artisan Trail.
- Two recent zoning amendments allow farmers more leeway in selling produce at farm stands and markets.
- The County has adopted an erosion control plan, riparian buffers, conservation easements, agricultural-forestal zoning districts, and other growth management tools.

Albemarle County Community Priorities

- Provide a land use taxation break for farms under 5 acres.
- Support an incubator for food-related businesses.
- Fill the approved agricultural support position.
- Adopt a local food purchasing policy.
- Support a regional food processing center.
- Increase education about nutrition and cooking, as well as local agriculture.

City of Charlottesville Strengths

- The City has numerous active nonprofit organizations working on food-related issues.

- City schools have adopted a wellness plan and strategic plan.

- The City offers multiple community gardens, and also has numerous parks and vacant lots that could be used to create more community gardens.

- The City has a thriving restaurant and shop culture that supports local foods.

- There is strong support for the farmers' market and for the EBT machine being offered at the market.

- The City has adopted a Green City Strategy, which includes statements about food miles and composting.

City of Charlottesville Community Priorities

- Ensure that nutrition and physical activity are integrated into educational curricula.

- Include food-specific language in the Comprehensive Plan

- Add a goal to reduce obesity into the City School Wellness Plan.

- Increase coordination among grassroots efforts.

- Create a permanent and accessible home for the City Market.

- Encourage and support CATEC programs to include an agricultural track to support new and beginning farmers.

Thoughts for Moving Forward

Based on feedback from both students and a survey of community participants, the Audit project was considered a positive and helpful experience by most. While food system planning is an emerging field, and the Audit is a "work in progress," raising many questions along the way, both students and community stakeholders shared that the Audit process itself was educational. Stakeholders were open and interested to meet with students and discuss the findings, were candid in their responses, and many attended the final class presentation. Several community participants who were familiar with food system work indicated that the Audit was a new and useful tool for looking at policy and its applications. Of community members that responded to a class survey, several indicated that the report information was informative and thought-provoking. Most partners were unsure whether the information would be useful to the locality just yet, but most were optimistic. One partner noted that the Audit process did not allow for the in-depth analysis desired by some community members, but did result in a quick guide to all the necessary components of a productive food system.

The student reports indicate that most food system work is happening naturally, at the grassroots level to address specific needs and not a result of direct policy. However, these grassroots groups are influencing, growing, and implementing key components of a food system. Because this is a new conversation in some localities, many of the

priorities reflect the beginning stages of growing a food system. Other priorities reflect a more sophisticated food system infrastructure, such as the priority for requesting an agricultural support staff position. While it is common in every arena that grassroots efforts generate activity before policy is developed and implemented, the next phase of food system development often includes policy infrastructure that seeks to institutionalize the awareness of, and commitment to, a healthy, accessible food system. Our region appears to have a growing interest in this next phase, and may do well to support a region-wide conversation to discuss next steps for growing our local food system.

For more information about each locality, please see the student reports at: http://www.virginia.edu/ien/tanyacourses.htm#foodii

If you have questions about how to use the Audit, or have ideas for student projects that could help the Thomas Jefferson Area Planning District in developing a more sustainable local food system, please contact:

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[i] http://eatbettermovemore.org/sa/enact/members/index.php
[ii] http://www.tjpdc.org/home/PDCinfo.asp
[iii] http://www.charlottesville.org/Index.aspx?page=92
[iv] "Comprehensive Plan." County of Fluvanna Home Page. Web. 11 Feb. 2010. <http://www.co.fluvanna.va.us/>.
[v] Taken directly from or adapted from the student report prepared by Katie Wolfe, Jen O'Brien, and Stu Andreason. Available online at http://www.virginia.edu/ien/tanyacourses.htm#foodii

vi http://www.louisa-county.com/LCliving/cupboard.htm