

AGENDA PRIORITIES

23. Charge business support entities, such as the 18 Michigan Technical Education Centers, with identifying and supporting the equipment and process engineering needs of farmers and other agri-food enterprises, and ensure that food and agriculture are included in state and local economic development plans.

MICHIGAN CAN SEIZE FOOD, FARM POTENTIAL BY PLANNING FOR IT

Local governments are required to have master plans for designing their growth in ways that support community goals. Updated every few years, master plans are the place to describe priorities and guide action, including zoning regulations.

A few years ago, Randy Bell, a community food system educator with Michigan State University Extension, became interested in Lansing's re-write of its master plan. He hoped the plan would reflect strong and growing community interest in fresh, healthy food options and food and agriculture business opportunities.

As leader of the Food Systems Work Group, an ad hoc food council/advocacy group in greater Lansing, he knew there were many ways a master plan can move healthy local food development along. It can prioritize fresh food retail in certain neighborhoods, for example, or clarify the legality of collecting and composting food waste to build soil fertility.



Photo courtesy of www.lansingmi.gov

But food and agriculture is a relatively new topic for master planning efforts. "Over and over, the planners hear about roads, sidewalks, trails, walkability and transportation, but only snippets about community gardens, farmers markets and other food system-related concepts," Bell said. So when the planning consultant working with the City of Lansing asked the Food System Work Group for more detail, Bell and his colleagues were ready.

It took a few rounds to get in-depth attention to the full scope of the food system but the final plan eventually covered most of it, said Bell. "When the first draft of the master plan was released, the work group was pleased to find some references to the food system, but it was discussed primarily in the context of community gardening." Later versions included much more, such as urban agriculture job training for youth and development of food business districts and distribution hubs to support clusters of food and agriculture entrepreneurs.

"I'm very pleased that the Lansing plan, called 'Design Lansing,' is leading the trend of giving careful consideration to how plans for the built environment and the existence of local food systems collaborate for the greater good of urban residents," Bell said. "This is cutting edge master planning and it happened right here in Michigan's capital city."

Need

Many important things that happen in communities and regions, from improvements in higher education to economic development, come out of discussions and planning that takes place earlier. Michigan is in need of much more attention to food and agriculture in local, regional,

and state planning for education and community economic development.

Many entrepreneurs on the cutting edge, for example, cannot easily find the technical assistance they need to design and retrofit food production, processing and packaging equipment. This is because most of the agricultural industry has gone large scale, leaving smaller and mid-scale opportunities behind. Michigan has also put much of its technical training dollars and focus on manufacturing and high-tech industries, without looking at how those same skills and competencies apply to and could benefit food and agriculture, the state's second largest and fastest growing industry. Local technical assistance providers, such as M-Tec Centers in Michigan, generally do not have farmers and small food entrepreneurs in mind for job training or for providing low-cost services to local businesses.

Opportunity

By supporting food and farm entrepreneurs in a more committed and comprehensive way, the MSU Product Center projects that Michigan could increase the rate of agri-food startup successes¹ and the state could generate 23,020 direct and indirect jobs per year as a result.²

The 2006 report notes that nearly half of the jobs could come through relatively small capital investments in small businesses. The return on investment is remarkably high for the small-scale ventures, which represent 90 percent of the number of venture establishments that the report projects is possible with increased commitment and support from local and state leaders. It's important to note that small businesses do not necessarily remain small over their lifespan; many grow to become significant local employers.

Action

Many communities, such as the City of Lansing, are taking steps on their own to incorporate food and agriculture into plans, which guide future actions. Local and state leaders can broaden this work by:

- *Requiring economic development and other planning authorities to include food and agriculture in their identification and tracking of needs and opportunities.*
- *Requiring state funded technical assistance and business development institutions, to explore food and agriculture needs and develop plans for addressing them.*
- *Encouraging authorities and agencies tasked with addressing local needs to establish food and farm advisory councils, including representation from smaller diversified operations, which can guide their work.*
- *Drawing knowledge and examples from valuable resources, such as the American Planning Association's Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning.*

1-2-3 Go!

Start talking locally and show up for local government and other meetings where your input is needed for designing your community's future. Plant the seeds of things like food business districts and technical assistance for smaller farms and food entrepreneurs. Fertilize with information and support from Michigan Good Food. And keep elected officials and news media aware of the points you are making and steps your community is taking.

¹"Startup success" here refers to the U.S. Census Bureau term "establishment births," which are establishments that have zero employment in year t and positive employment in the first quarter of year t+1.

²Peterson HC, Knudson WA, Abate G. The economic impact and potential of michigan's agri-food system: Michigan State University Product Center for Agriculture and Natural Resources; 2006. http://www.miagcouncil.org/files/MI_Ag_Economic_Impact.pdf.