

The Local Food Movement and City Planning

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Recently, many nonprofits and urban dwellers are bringing food production into dense, inner-city neighborhoods far removed from typical agrarian providers. In the Gulf region, with its subtropical environment, plentiful rainfall, and warm climate, the local food production model seems like a logical fit. A look at successful local food operations in cities show what type of agrarian activities are in keeping with the social dynamic of a city, and the type of situations where local food production can affect the quality of life in urban neighborhoods. Local food success depends on how the economics behind local food production integrate into the day-to-day life of city dwellers.

The Economics Behind Local Food Production

Economic numbers taken over the past 30 years show that local food has become a small, but notable, niche industry in the American economy. Local food markets, where consumers can directly purchase food from farmers, have grown from \$551 million in sales in 1997 to \$1.2 billion in sales in 2007.¹ Similarly, the number of farmers' markets in America has grown from 2,756 in 1998 to 5,274 in 2009. However, the farms that specialize in direct-to-consumer sales tend to be grouped around the urban corridors of the Northeast and West Coast. These numbers suggest that while local food operations have grown in abundance, they are still essentially a small, cottage industry growing in the shadow of wealthy, urban areas. In order to facilitate the expansion of local food into smaller urban markets and regions, it is important to understand the economic dynamics that give rise to local food ventures in the first place.

One economic facet of farming that local food advocates should keep in mind is that it is difficult to run an agricultural operation on production alone. Numbers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveal that 91



Photograph: Ryan Johnson

percent of American farm households have at least one family member working a non-farm job to make ends meet.² Thus, crop production is unlikely to be the only economic venture on a farm. Prepared food may help farms bridge the economic gap. Unfortunately, most small farms are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to selling prepared food, as they don't have the time or resources to go through the different licensing, permitting, and inspection requirements typically associated with the sale of prepared food.

Recognizing this, many state legislatures have passed laws known as "food freedom" laws, which exempt homemade foods from permitting and inspection requirements.³ Food freedom laws contain key restrictions that inform the sale and exchange of homemade goods. For example, home production businesses must sell their goods to an "informed end consumer," which, in other words, means someone aware that they are buying something not

regulated by the government. Food freedom products cannot be sold in grocery stores or out of state, and regulators retain the power to investigate any complaints of foodborne illnesses. Notably, the state of Wyoming expanded its food freedom legislation to include products such as raw milk, rabbit meat, and farm raised fish, with the exception of catfish. Since the passage of the 2015 legislation in Wyoming, however, no complaints have been linked to businesses operating under food freedom laws. Also, from an economic standpoint, the food freedom law has been a real shot in the arm to the local food movement. Wyoming has roughly 50 farmers markets statewide, a figure that has grown by 70 percent since the passage of the food freedom law in 2015.

Local Food in the Big Easy

In order to get a sense of what the local food movement can look like in the Gulf States, it only makes sense to turn to New Orleans, one of America's great food cities, to examine the farming initiatives taking place there. A 2014 article from nola.com indicates that there are around 200 growing or land-based projects based in New Orleans and a sizable majority of them are food gardens.⁴

One prime example of local food sourced in the community is the VEGGI Farmer's Cooperative.⁵ The cooperative is an outgrowth of the Mary Queen of Viet Nam Community Development Corporation, a group that represents the interests of the Vietnamese community in the New Orleans East neighborhood. At first VEGGI Cooperative was a food hub, which collectivized and marketed produce from local growers in the neighborhood, but eventually it grew to include neighborhood greenhouses that train gardeners on aquaponic growing systems. When VEGGI was first conceived it was as a way for out of work residents to receive a basic income while they looked for a way to reenter the workforce. By late 2010, however, many of the working-age people had either found new jobs or were cutting their hours back at the co-op, so a new group of residents stepped up to care for the gardens. Today, many of the primary workers at the garden are nominally retired, and spend five to six hours a day tending the garden. The growth and transformation of the gardens, both physically and demographically, show how local food can be a positive contributor to the rhythms of life in a large city.

A different type of urban farming in New Orleans is demonstrated by Paradigm Gardens. Paradigm is an urban farm that works closely with some of New Orleans finest chefs to produce specialty food items.⁶ The only comparable producer for these food items reportedly is located in Ohio, which means that local chefs save money if they can procure their food through Paradigm Gardens. In addition to its food operations, Paradigm has other revenue streams such as hosting school field trips, concerts, and other events at its facility.

With such a sizable number of food enterprises it becomes necessary to build a support network to encourage and support these fledgling ventures. This is where Edible Enterprises steps in. Edible Enterprises is a commercial kitchen and food incubator, which is operated by Goodwill Industries of Southeast Louisiana.⁷ The purpose of the kitchen is to provide home-based business owners with experience in food preparation and to give them a space where they can prepare potential products. The facility houses three fully equipped kitchens, but it also provides unique machines helpful in preparing homemade products for distribution, such as an automated wraparound labeler that can label more than 100 bottles per minute.

Fair or Fowl: Raising Livestock in Urban Areas

While few urban dwellers object to growing crops within city confines, raising animals for the purposes of food production may have negative spillovers or externalities associated with them that planning professionals must be mindful of. Chickens are likely the most common urban livestock. A survey compiled in 2013 estimated that one in every 100 households in the United States keeps chickens.⁸ Chickens raised in urban or semi-urban areas are commonly known as backyard chickens. Proponents of backyard chickens often point out their value as egg producers, the benefit of using their waste as yard fertilizer, and that they are low maintenance animals.⁹ A number of city residents are expressing concerns about backyard chickens though, citing the noise and smell produced by chickens and the potential for chickens to attract rodents and large predators.¹⁰ The debate over backyard chickens has spurred a larger debate whether urban livestock ventures are in keeping with the social and cultural life of a city.

Local regulatory responses to backyard chickens have been varied, ranging the gamut from prohibiting all livestock in city limits to devising guides and a permitting process to promote the proper care and maintenance of chickens. In the city of Vancouver, Canada, backyard chickens are promoted as being useful in developing personal sustainability and helping the city become more green. To encourage residents to buy a clucking companion of their own, Vancouver's regulations allow up to four hens per lot and residents can consult the city's online guidelines to learn more about keeping chickens.¹¹ The city, however, still bars ducks, turkeys, and other livestock within the city, and chickens are allowed only for egg production.

A robust regulatory apparatus for animals can be difficult though since laws dealing with urban livestock tend to be multilayered.¹² Laws such as zoning ordinances, animal control ordinances, and public health ordinances all can have a direct effect on the regulation of livestock. However, planners may lack specific skills and knowledge necessary to address questions about livestock. Planners may look to coordinating their rules and regulations with nonprofits and agencies devoted to the responsible care and treatment of animals. In the city of Fort Collins, Colorado, for example, local regulators let the Larimer Humane Society handle the permitting process for backyard chickens.¹³ Since legalizing backyard chickens in 2008, the Larimer Humane Society has issued nearly 700 total permits for keeping chickens. This system provides limited regulatory oversight to an organization with considerable knowledge of animal care and which has a compelling interest in seeing that animals are properly handled and taken care of.

In addition to utilizing local expertise on animal welfare, planners should also take time to evaluate how local livestock laws will interact with the zoning code, determining whether livestock should be restricted to a few key zones or permitted across all land use spectrums. In the city of Mobile, Alabama, a wide range of livestock is permitted within city limits. However, keeping livestock is allowed only in residential agricultural zones, with the exception of chickens and bees, which are allowed in all residential zones. Another approach by communities is to permit livestock in all residential zones but to place restrictions on the minimum lot size necessary to keep livestock animals.

Conclusion

Small-scale food production in cities can be a valuable addition by promoting economic agency and providing a greater array of diversity in city uses and activities. There is an inherent tension, however, between local food in urban areas and maintaining public health standards. Though growing crops in vacant lots does not impinge upon the life of a city, raising chickens or other livestock in urban areas might be detrimental to city health without appropriate guidance and oversight. Local food ventures located near metropolitan areas must also be nimble and creative and diversify their goods and services to stay afloat. However, if local food operations are cultivated by local residents, they can grow and prosper over time and provide the fruits of social resilience and economic vitality. 🐔

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Endnotes

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