

## Building Local Food Systems Through Conversations

Local and regional food systems are promising areas of economic development and growth.

That's the premise of the "Harvesting Opportunity" publication from the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, and the related "Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas" symposium that took place in Lawrence in 2018.

Economic development is important, but there are additional benefits to communities and overall community development in considering these food systems, said Marlin Bates, director of the K-State Research and Extension office in Douglas County.

There has been sustained work in recent years in Kansas to study and understand barriers and opportunities that could help producers, processors and consumers, Bates said, pointing to the Kansas Rural Center's 2014 "Feeding Kansas" report and the work done by the state's Local Food and Farm Task Force from 2014 to 2016.

Those efforts, along with others in the years since, have been helpful to keep momentum going towards increasing the production of and markets for local food, he said. But they may not be the activities and intensity to achieve substantial results.

"We all like to believe not just that the work we are doing is good, but that it's the right work, and that it's sufficient," Bates said. "We aren't doing enough."

It's necessary to have those conversations and the community's interest, input and buy-in to potential ideas to build and maintain the systems, he said.

"The feds aren't fixing food systems, but local food policy councils are," Bates said, referring to the title of a December 2017 story in *The New Food Economy*. "Certainly, we are all culpable, if not responsible, for the way things are. If we recognize that, we have to act on those responsibilities."

Luke Mahin, executive director of Republic County Economic Development and a member of the North Central Kansas Food Council, attended the Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas symposium and found it useful in thinking about how the regional council could be helpful to local food and agriculture businesses.

Some of it, he said, reinforced his current approach to economic development.

"The conversation needs to be asking a farmer what they want to do and what their goals are, instead of the government angle of 'we're here to help,'" he said.

Mahin and Bates spoke about the symposium to the Kansas House Agriculture Committee on Jan. 29, 2019, and, more broadly, about some of the efforts to build local food systems in Kansas.

The committee members asked questions about economic impact and future plans, but they also told stories both during and after the informational hearing about their own experiences with gardens, farms, markets, and local producers, Bates and Mahin said – underscoring the need for those conversations to be part of the bigger narrative.

“If you don’t have a good experience with a farmers’ market or a local producer, it is hard to connect to that value,” Mahin said.

Rep. Jason Probst, a Hutchinson democrat who serves on the House Agriculture Committee, suggests inviting policymakers to farms, markets and other businesses in the food system to help them better understand what’s going well and what could be changed through policies.

Those experiences are helpful to lawmakers to both make progress and to help reduce the likelihood of unintended consequences of policies, Probst said.

“There has to be a way to show (policymakers) that the system in place is in place because of inertia, not because it’s best or because it’s right or because it’s our only alternative,” he said. “It’s that way because we built this infrastructure around a certain way of doing things, whether it’s transportation or food retail, and we perpetuate the systems because they are known, they are manageable, and because undoing them completely would create some upheaval we don’t want.

“There’s room to start saying, ‘what if we create a new system that doesn’t replace what we have, but creates alternative routes to get to where we want to go?’”

Opportunities to engage with local and state government officials took place this summer, Bates said, as Lt. Gov. Lynn Rogers led a listening tour of Kansas communities to guide the work of the newly formed Office of Rural Prosperity.

The Kansas Rural Center hosted a series of town hall meetings across the state to consider the “future of farming” as it relates to food, agriculture, climate and energy issues and rural and urban revitalization. (The final town hall will be in Kansas City August 19.)

One idea that could help Kansans come together at any time to talk about food system challenges and opportunities is a structured kind of community conversation, Bates said.

TALK Salina has found success with using the National Issues Forums Institute model for its conversations, said Greg Stephens, a co-coordinator and trained facilitator for the organization.

The model has been useful in helping community members have better, more productive conversations about complicated, systemic issues such as immigration, public safety, the surge in opioid use, mental health care and more, Stephens said. Participants review a discussion guide that outlines the topic and the advantages and disadvantages of potential solutions.

The emphasis is not on statistics but stories about lived experiences; facilitators do not rely on subject-matter experts, but lift up the expertise of the people in the room, Stephens said.

“This isn’t about solving problems,” he said. “Problems are solved in stages, and the middle parts of those stages are related to behavior change. When you hear people who are politically different than you telling stories about the same issue, that moves people to start rethinking the surface solution’s they’ve come up with.”

Stephens said he wasn’t aware of community conversations about local food that had been organized in this way – but would be a good fit for the National Issues Forums model.

“Food issues, local foods, and food policy aren’t talked about enough in these small communities,” he said. “They are significant, complex issues. I think a lot of people don’t think there are solutions to all this stuff. The solution is for people to start solving problems themselves. It’s not easy, but if it could happen quickly it could have a big impact.”

