

The Future of Food in Asheville & Buncombe County:

Addressing Poverty, Public Health, Local Commerce,
& Sustainability Through Food Security

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We have enormous opportunities regarding our community's commitment to ensuring a stable, healthy, and affordable food supply. Food security encompasses issues of poverty, public health, local commerce, and sustainability. The purpose of this paper is to:

- Define food security & discuss the state of food security in our community
- Discuss ways to improve our area's food security
- Discuss the creation of a Food Policy Council

Food Security

The World Health Organization defines food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”¹. Food security is central to the well being of the individual and society. The measure of citizens' quality of life and that of the city they live in can be understood in the context of their access to affordable, healthy, and locally sourced food. Food security must be a community priority if we are to address poverty, public health, local commerce, and sustainability in a holistic way.

Regional Food Security

- Fourteen of Buncombe County's fifteen ZIP codes contain a food outlet of some sort², yet one out of every six people in Western North Carolina experiences food insecurity.
- There was a 27 percent increase in county residents that receive food assistance, up to 31,011, in 2010.³
- In July 2011, 5,522 people in Buncombe County were on WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), up from 5,135 in May 2011.
- 50.1 percent of students within Buncombe County School System were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program during the 2009-2010 school year, up from 46.7 the previous year.⁴
- The 2010 Buncombe County Community Health Assessment found that only 58 percent of the population has access to healthy foods, higher than the state average, but much lower than the target value of 69.

¹ <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>

² <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/print/node/2035/30>

³ Buncombe County Annual Human Services Report for the 2009–2010 fiscal year

⁴ Profile for Buncombe County. The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Kids Count Data Center

Causes of Food Insecurity

- The presence of “Food Deserts” - areas that do not have a convenient, affordable, healthy food source nearby.
- High prices for healthy food even when it is available.
- Inadequate cooking education and nutrition information.
- Limited public awareness on the necessity and accessibility of affordable, healthy food.
- The availability of *Local, sustainable food* to the population.

Problems Associated with Food Insecurity

Having a ready supply of food indicates a family's economic stability as well as their access to locations that carry affordable healthy food selections. When there is limited access to healthy food or when families cannot afford it, then problems set in. Having little, or even inconsistent, access to healthy food can lead to:

- Impaired mental and physical development in young children⁵ (Food insecure children are 90 percent more likely to be in fair or poor health than food-secure children, and will require 30 percent more hospitalizations).⁶
- A poorly prepared and uncompetitive work force.
- Family and personal instability, where uncertainty over 'the next meal' creates a roadblock to dealing with other problems.

Improving Food Security

Local food is a simple, convenient, and powerful tool to achieve food security. While prices on imported processed food or fast food may be lower, the food is often of a lower nutritional quality, and the money spent on it seldom stays within the local economy. Local food is reliably healthy and beneficial to the economy, and there is a great opportunity for Asheville to expand even further on our robust local food movement.

In 2007 there were 72,087 acres used as farmland in Buncombe County.⁷ There are currently 15 major tailgate and farmers' markets in Asheville.⁸ In addition, 11 large

⁵ <http://feedingamerica.org/SiteFiles/child-economy-study.pdf>

⁶ <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/physical-and-mental-health.aspx>

⁷ http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/County_Profiles/North_Carolina/cp37021.pdf

community gardens are in use in the Asheville area. These gardens produce diverse types of food, from tomatoes to eggs to grapes, which are then used by the community in different forms, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

Improving food security infrastructure will expand access while creating a more sustainable region. A 2007 Study around expanding the Western North Carolina food and farm economy found that an additional 200 to 300 million dollars would be spent on locally sourced food within the region, were it available.⁹ Local food is clearly at the nexus of addressing poverty, public health, commerce, and sustainability within any community or region.

Food Policy Council

The problems associated with food insecurity are complex, and cannot be solved by one organization or one initiative. In western North Carolina there are dozens of organizations concerned with hunger and food security, and we have the opportunity to bring these groups together in a united, concentrated effort. A food policy council will allow members of the community to make a much larger impact through increased cooperation and collaboration.

A food policy council is a group of concerned people and organizations that determine the best course for an area to improve its food security. Food Policy Councils work across sectors, engaging with government policy and programs, grassroots/non-profit projects, and local businesses and food workers. One successful example is The Cleveland-Cayahoga Food Policy Council, which sponsored a “Regional Food Congress”, promoting better communication between organizations within the food community.¹⁰

⁸<http://www.exploreasheville.com/what-to-do/seasonal-fun/springtime-in-asheville/farmers-market-opening-dates/index.aspx>

⁹ “Growing Local: Expanding the Western North Carolina Food and Farm Economy” ASAP, 2007
<http://www.asapconnections.org/special/research/Reports/GrowingLocal.pdf>

¹⁰ “Food Policy Councils: Lessons Learned” Institute for Food and Development Policy, 2009
https://www.foodsecurity.org/pub/Food_Policy_Councils_Report.pdf

Council Makeup

Successful Food Policy Councils have a diverse makeup representing diverse sectors within local food production, distribution, and education - Farmers, community leaders, food banks, faith based groups, health directors, hospitals, community centers, non-profits, and local restaurants to name a few. Equitable representation across the community ensures that the Food Policy Council moves in a consensus direction. These stakeholders are the people with the ideas, resources, and ability to make a difference, and who, given the opportunity, *will* make a difference.

Goals of the Council

- Improve sustainability within the region.
- Coordinate production and distribution to increase efficiency.
- Expand food education.
- Improve land usage.
- Increase the access to healthier food options.

An Asheville/Buncombe Food Policy Council will allow diverse stakeholders within the community to have representation and a voice while they work together. It will also allow for greater communication among different food agencies, improving cooperation within the food system of the region. With the number of concerned organizations that exist in Western North Carolina, a food policy council can allow these groups to combine their ideas, their drive, and their resources to realize a comprehensive, effective strategy to address food security.

Appendix: Community Stakeholders

The working group met with the following individuals and organizations over the last three months in order to learn more about the issues of food security in our community.

- Cindy Threlkeld, Executive Director, MANNA
- Joshua Stack, Communication and Marketing Coordinator, MANNA
- Laurie Stradley, Director of State and Community Collaboration, North Carolina Center for Health & Wellness
- Gene Bell CEO, David Nash, CFO, Asheville Housing Authority
- Lael Gray of the Asheville Jewish Community Center (JCC)
- Terry Bellamy, Mayor of the City of Asheville
- Leah Ferguson, Executive Director, Asheville City School Foundation
- Greg Borom and Allison Jordan of Children First/Communities in Schools
- Scott Dedman, Executive Director, Mountain Housing Opportunities (MHO)
- Cindy Weeks, Community Rental Investments Manager, MHO
- Matt Raker, Chair of the Sustainable Advisory Committee on Energy and the Environment (SACEE) for the City of Asheville and Green Entrepreneurship Director for Advantage West.
- Charlie Jackson, Executive Director; Emily Jackson, Growing Minds Program Director, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)
- Stephanie Kiser, Administrative Director for Community Health and Corporate Wellness, Mission Hospitals
- Ron Paulus, CEO, Mission Hospital
- Holly Jones, Executive Director, YWCA
- Kristen Weaver, Director, Pioneering Healthy Communities

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- Steve Frabitore, President; Michel Baudouin, Board Member, Asheville Independent Restaurants (AIR)
- Vicki Meath, Just Economics of Western North Carolina
- Faculty, staff, and administrators at UNC Asheville
- Susan Garrett, Green Jobs Director, ABCCM
- Jessica Hocz, Mountain Valley Resource Conservation
- Asheville City Tree Commission
- Dr. April Tallant, Associate Professor, Western Carolina University
- Erica Anderson, Regional Planner, Land of Sky
- Rebecca Chaplin, Aging Program Specialist, Land of Sky, Area Agency on Aging
- Tony Buerskens, Training Team Coordinator, Green Opportunities (GO)
- Cathy Cleary, Immediate Past President, Slow Food and FEAST
- Sarah Danforth of Homeward Bound
- Byron Ballard of Interfaith Group
- Terri March, Coordinator, Healthy Buncombe/ESMMNC
- Cathy Hohenstein, Registered Dietitian, NC Cooperative Extension
- Cyndy Walhausser, Council on Aging, Buncombe County
- Julie Mayfield, Executive Director, WNCA
- Kevin Bose, Transition Asheville Food Network
- Jennifer Tuttle, Center for Science in the Public Interest
- Judy Daniels, Director of Planning and Development Department, City of Asheville
- Jeff Staudinger, Community Development Director, City of Asheville
- Kit Cramer, President and CEO, Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce