

An Environmental Planner's Journey to Food Planning

by Deanne Glosser, Ph.D.

Introduction

How did an environmental planner become deeply involved in the food planning issue? Well, it all began when Professor Emeritus Jerome Kaufman, University of Wisconsin-Madison, gave the keynote speech at the American Planning Association's 2003 conference in Denver. I was fortunate to have attended Professor Kaufman's speech, which I can only describe as inspirational. Kaufman is a practicing planner and academic who challenged planners on a number of issues. He asked a number of thought-provoking questions, including, "Why aren't planners engaged in food system planning?"

I was stunned with the question for two reasons. First, as an undergraduate anthropology student, my interests focused on foodways, "...everything about eating including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it and who's at the table – is a form of communication rich with meaning. Our attitudes, practices and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves." (Harris, Lyon and McLaughlin, 2005, pp. VIII-IX). This interest in foodways led me to become a devoted cook, cookbook collector, and student of the history of food.

Second, food, air and water are three of the fundamental requirements for human life. Planners address a wide range of issues related to air and water but not food. I asked myself why. Elements of the food system relate to health and safety and quality of life – all issues addressed by planners.

Jerome Kaufman made me realize that while I had studied the importance of the food system in other cultures and had hobbies related to food, I had failed to make a professional connection between the food system and environmental planning. Why was this topic missing in comprehensive plans and urban and rural planning? I was determined to find out more, so I contacted Jerry Kaufman to find answers to these and other questions – little did I know where it would lead!

Food Planning

To begin our discussion, Kaufman defined the "food system" and "food planning". The "food system" is the chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution and access, consumption, and waste management, as well as all the associated supporting and regulatory institutions and activities (Born, et al, 2005, pp. 1). Food planning is a subset of the overall food system, narrowed to those issues for which planners can play a role.

An issue Kaufman and others had explored is why planners have not been engaged in food planning. He identified several reasons why planners have “paid less attention to food issues when compared with long-standing planning topics such as economic development, transportation, the environment, and housing. Among these reasons are:

- a view that the food system — representing the flow of products from production, through processing, distribution, consumption, and the management of wastes, and associated processes — only indirectly touches on the built environment, a principal focus of planning's interest;
- a sense that the food system isn't broken, so why fix it; and,
- a perception that the food system meets neither of two important conditions under which planners act — i.e., dealing with public goods like air and water; and planning for services and facilities in which the private sector is unwilling to invest, such as public transit, sewers, highways, and parks.” (APA, 2005, pp. 1)

In the Food System White Paper prepared for APA's Legislative and Policy Committee, Kaufman (and Pothukuchi) identified reasons why food planning should be of interest to planners:

- Planners are comprehensive in their scope and often examine the interconnectedness among urban and rural factors.
- Much of the landscape is devoted to the food system, so there is a strong land use connection.
- There are numerous economic factors related to the food system, including those global in nature.
- As stated earlier, food is vital to public health and welfare.
- There are social justice and disaster planning issues related to food.

APA Food Planning Steering Committee

This discussion with Kaufman led to the formation of a Food System Planning Steering Committee and a meeting at APA's 2004 conference. Paul Farmer, APA Executive Director, attended and provided support for the food planning effort. The group discussed a range of activities that could be undertaken, including creating a Food Planning Track at the 2005 APA conference and the development of an APA Policy Guide and PAS report on food planning.

Contact was made with APA's Legislative and Policy Committee to gauge the interest in the preparation of a policy guide. Because the topic was so new to planners, the Steering Committee was asked to prepare a White Paper to provide background everyone needed to begin to understand the scope of food planning and the potential role of planners. Brandon Born, Andy Fisher, Deanna Glosser, Jerome Kaufman, Wendy Mendes, Hubert Morgan, Mark A. Olinger, Kami Pothukuchi, and Samina Raja served on this committee. This committee embarked on a journey to integrate food planning into traditional planning activities. The Food System Planning White Paper was approved in 2006, and the committee next tackled the writing of a policy guide for consideration in 2007.

Community and Regional Food Planning Policy Guide

The Steering Committee was expanded to include planners and related food system professionals to provide guidance in developing the Community and Regional Food Planning Policy Guide. This policy guide was approved by APA's Delegates Assembly in April and by the APA Board in 2007. The entire policy guide can be found at <http://www.planning.org/policyguides/food.htm>.

The goals of this policy guide are to connect traditional planning to the new field of food planning in order to:

Help build a stronger, sustainable regional food system.

Find ways for the industrial food system to enhance the economic vitality, ecological sustainability and cultural diversity within communities and the region.



Photographs by Kami Pothukuchi

The policy guide identifies seven general principles. Each general principle includes two sections that provide planners with more detail and examples of the role planners could play to achieve the general principle. The general policies are:

The American Planning Association, its Chapters and Divisions, and planners support...

General Policy #1: ...a comprehensive food planning process at the community and regional levels.

General Policy #2: ...strengthening the local and regional economy by promoting community and regional food systems.

General Policy #3: ...food systems that improve the health of the region's residents.

General Policy #4: ...food systems that are ecologically sustainable.

General Policy #5: ...food systems that are socially equitable and just.

General Policy #6: ...food systems that preserve and sustain diverse traditional food cultures of Native American and other ethnic minority communities.

General Policy #7: ...the development of state and federal legislation that facilitates community and regional food planning, including addressing existing barriers.

General policy #4 is directly related to the mission of ENRE – support food systems that are ecologically sustainable. What does this entail? The specific policies include:

- Creating community and regional food systems to facilitate reliance on a region's resources to meet local food needs.
- Minimizing energy use and waste.
- Mitigate the adverse environmental effects that result from our food system.

The challenge we faced was to identify actions planners could take to address these specific policies. A few of the roles we identified for planners to address the ecological sustainability of the food system are:

- Encourage conservation of agricultural land and wilderness resources.
- Provide incentives and special zoning provisions to integrate locally supported agriculture into existing and new areas of residential development.
- Develop regional plans that strengthen markets for the region's food producers in order to reduce long-distance transportation of agricultural products and processed foods.
- Assist in conducting energy audits to assess amounts and sources of energy used in the region for the production, distribution, and consumption of food.
- Assess the solid waste stream and identify ways of reducing the volume.

There are many more possible ways in which planners can become involved in promoting the ecological sustainability of our food systems. However, this is a good start.

Summary

The period following Kaufman's keynote address in 2003 and the formation of the Food Planning Steering Committee at the 2005 APA conference has been an exciting and productive learning experience. The accomplishments made within APA in four short years should be noted:

- Development of a Food Planning Track for the 2005 and 2006 APA conferences. Jerry Kaufman and I organized the first one where we were concerned that we would have few submittals. We were pleasantly surprised to have received over 80 paper proposals! There was obviously more interest in food planning than we had realized.
- Approval by the Divisions Council to support the food planning effort as a cross-Divisional initiative in 2005.
- Development and approval of a Food System Planning White Paper by the APA Legislative and Policy Committee in 2006.
- Development and approval of the Community and Regional Food Planning Policy Guide by APA in 2007.
- Publication of an article by Kaufman and Glosser in APA's *The Commissioner*, entitled "The Food System: A New Addition to the Planning Field", Spring 2006.
- Preparation of a PAS Memo by Kaufman, Glosser and Pothukuchi, entitled "Community and Regional Food Planning" to be published in September 2007.

- Development of a PAS Report on the health issues associated with food planning through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and matching effort from APA's Research Department. Dr. Samina Raja and Dr. Brandon Born are two of the authors of this report.

Personally, I have gained much in the past four years – knowledge of the food system, friendships with people like Jerry Kaufman and Kami Pothukuchi, and a deep and profound interest in developing a strong local food system, for our health, the local economy, and the environment. I have become involved in a local organization, the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, which is committed to developing and nurturing local producers to strengthen the local food system.



I have also taken the initiative to form a Slow Food convivium, Slow Food Springfield. Slow Food is an international organization that serves to educate “people about how their food choices affect the rest of the world”. There are now over 80,000 members worldwide – all working to protect heritage livestock and heirloom crops, historic methods of food production, and most importantly, sharing food with friends and family. Our group schedules monthly events to meet local producers, promote healthy foods, and develop friendships centered on our food system.

Photograph by Kami Pothukuchi

Four years ago when I listened to Jerry Kaufman's keynote address, I did not anticipate the direction it would take me. I hope that each of you can see the connection between role as a planner and the food system and can begin to work towards creating sustainable, socially just, and economically sound community and regional food systems.

References

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- Author: Deanna Glosser, Ph.D.; President, Environmental Planning Solutions, Inc.; 22 Hollyhock Drive, Riverton, IL 62561; www.epsi1.com.