Pamela Arifian, LEED AP

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Food plays a central role in the lives, health, culture and heritage of all members of society. The food system operates within and is influenced by social, political, economic and natural environments.
The impacts of our current industrial food system are increasingly apparent on multiple levels, and are enjoying increasing media attention, from articles in major magazines, to best-selling books and movies, and even to a very well-publicized vegetable garden on the side lawn of the White House. Food is connected to public health, with four of the six leading causes of death in the United States being heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers, which are all diet-related chronic diseases. It is also connected to social inequity, with the proliferation of fast food restaurants and convenience stores in place of grocery stores in many lower-income urban neighborhoods, creating food deserts, where the most affordable and accessible foods are high-calorie foods with low nutritional value.

There are also multiple environmental connections, from greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel dependency to unsustainable farming practices and loss of topsoil. As Michael Pollan points out, one calorie of fossil fuel could produce twenty-three food calories in 1940, whereas it now takes about ten calories of fossil fuels to produce one calorie of modern supermarket food. This spike in fossil fuel use is linked to the large machinery, petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers required to produce and harvest crops, the myriad trucks, refrigeration and packaging processes required to get the food to the grocery stores. Compounded by the fact that approximately 96 million pounds of perfectly edible food winds up in U.S. landfills annually, the carbon footprint of this industrial system is staggering. Additionally, there is a social connection, whereby the globalization and industrialization of the food system has resulted in lack of consumer awareness, loss of cultural heritage, and food security challenges, such as incidences of food-borne illnesses related to salmonella or E. coli. These impacts resulting from the industrial food system are interconnected and aligned with many of the major challenges that planners face.

The globally disruptive impacts of climate change and the increasing toxicity of oceans and soils are all major red flags when considering the industrial food system. With more than half of the world's population living in urban areas, the time has come for planners to take another look at our communities and consider the merits of local food production as a crucial part of a comprehensive food system and as a part of our communities.

The good news is that change is coming. The costs of transporting goods, due to dwindling oil supplies and rising oil prices, has been steadily increasing over the past few decades, and in many parts of the country, a safe and dependable water supply is no longer a given. As the price of oil and water rise, the cost of shipping food and ingredients around the world becomes a major factor in the price of food for consumers and the profitability of producers and suppliers. At some point in our future, this may make our current food distribution system cost-prohibitive. An extreme example of the effect a lack of oil has on food is Cuba. When Cuba was cut off from their oil supply following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, agriculture ground to a halt, and the daily caloric intake for Cubans dropped by 1600 calories as they struggled to adapt. Now, over 300,000 Cubans are employed directly by urban agriculture programs (not counting backyard gardeners), and over 70% of their produce is organic and within walking distance to the people who consume it.

The challenge for planners, then, is to proactively replace or supplement this transportation-based, globalized food production system with local urban systems. Fortunately, opportunities for local food production abound, and planners and city officials can adopt policies and programs to incorporate food production on multiple levels.

From Detroit’s Mayor Pingree’s Potato Patches in late 19th century depression, to the Great Depression welfare relief garden programs and the Victory Garden movement during World War II, history has shown us that investment in local food systems have high rates of return with respect to civic participation, community building, public health and food supply. In all of these cases, investment in local gardening initiatives as alternatives to charity ended up empowering the communities and resulted in tremendous social and economic paybacks. In the height of the Victory Garden movement in World War II, Americans produced 44% of the nation’s fresh produce, harvested from their front and backyards and preserved with the help of community-based education and processing programs.

There is an increasing amount of support and incentives for communities to take action. Recognizing that every year, we spend nearly $150 billion to treat obesity-related medical condition, the federal government
marshalling its resources to combat childhood obesity. President Obama declared September 2010 as National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, and created a Task Force on Childhood Obesity to develop interagency solutions and make recommendations on how to respond to the crisis. The Task Force produced a report containing a comprehensive set of recommendations that will put our country on track for solving this pressing health issue and preventing it from threatening future generations. First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Let’s Move! campaign earlier this year, with an ambitious goal of ending childhood obesity within a generation. The Let’s Move! campaign is a comprehensive, collaborative, and community-oriented initiative that addresses all of the various factors that lead to childhood obesity. As part of the campaign, Let’s Move! challenges local governments to commit to adopting preventative measures to fight obesity in four different areas, one of which is “Provide Access to Healthy and Affordable Foods.” Interest is growing rapidly in this initiative – the League of California Cities unanimously adopted a resolution endorsing the Let’s Move! campaign, and encourages all of its 480 member cities to take part.

In 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture launched its Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative to create new economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. The initiative is designed to eliminate structural barriers that have prevented local food systems from thriving, and includes $65 million in new funding. Grants are available, for example, to help community groups that work to bring more fresh food into underserved communities.

On a regional level, food policy councils are starting up all over the country, at the state, regional and local levels. Food policy councils (FPCs) bring together stakeholders from diverse food-related sectors to examine how the food system is operating and to develop recommendations on how to improve it. FPCs are enormously effective at facilitating the collaboration necessary to create effective and successful local food systems.

When people are given the opportunity grow their own food, or to know the people who grew it and can see where it was grown and learn about how it was grown, they care more about what they consume, the people who produced it, and they tend to waste less of it. Broccoli on a child’s dinner plate will take on a whole new interest if that child pulled it from the ground earlier that day, or watched her parents purchase it directly from the farmer. Interest in local food production has been growing appreciably in the last number of years, as evidenced by the increased popularity of local and organic foods, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs (in which consumers buy a share of a farmer’s crops and reap their returns in the form of weekly baskets of freshly harvested produce) and local harvest-sharing programs. More and more people are growing their own food, either in their backyards, school gardens or community gardens. Grassroots non-profit organizations, such as Growing Power (Milwaukee, WI) and Path to Freedom (Pasadena, CA), provide education through demonstration greenhouses, job training, online journals detailing best practices and challenges faced in home gardening, and a social networking site designed to connect backyard farmers with each other.

Recognizing this trend, many cities are taking steps to encourage and support the development of local food systems. Many cities are adopting policies, ordinances and programs to remove barriers and encourage local food production. The City of Seattle, for example, has adopted a goal to provide one community garden for every 2,500 households. Many cities, counties and schools have adopted policies, programs and ordinances that promote healthy lifestyles through a number of avenues, including eliminating the sale of junk food in city county or school facilities, providing incentives for stores that sell fresh produce to locate in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and creating opportunities or removing barriers to urban agriculture. There are many resources available for cities or communities interested in jumping on the healthy food bandwagon. Public Health Law & Policy, a non-profit organization that partners with advocates and decision-makers to help create healthier communities, provides free publications that provide best practices and model policies and ordinances that support urban agriculture and local food systems.

In the natural world, success is measured by diversity of life and the well being of all. Urban agriculture is an important component of a healthy, diversified food system in our increasingly urbanized world. The synergistic solutions to creating a more comprehensive and healthy food system are well-aligned with numerous community, governmental and national goals, including climate change adaptation, GHG emissions reduction programs, neighborhood revitalization, local economic development, fighting crime, socio-economic inequity, and public health, among others. Creating local food systems and the infrastructure to support them will require collaborative action from planners, decision makers, non-profit organizations, schools, community leaders and property owners. It will take commitment, time and effort to change policies and regulations to allow and promote this change. The benefits for public health, community, social equity, quality of life, the environment and economy? Priceless.