"Black Farmers, Equitable Health and Food System Planning: Leveling the Field in African American Communities"

What does a $4.5 billion settlement for Black and Native American farmers, high obesity rates in African American communities, and a lack of equitable health and food systems options all have in common? How can planners work to bridge these gaps to strengthen food systems planning in communities of color? This brief article seeks to respond to these important questions.

**Black Farming Rise and Loss:**
According to a PBS special program, “Black Farming & Land Loss”: A History,” in 1920, one in every seven farmers was Black; in 1982, one in every sixty-seven farmers was black. Less than 1% of all farmers in America are African American today. Historically, after the Civil War, blacks acquired millions of acres of rural land. However, many families have lost their land due to legal actions resulting in forced sale. As title to a home becomes less clear and more fractioned across heirs, the risk of being forced out of the home by a legal action becomes greater. This issue has an important impact for planners. The impacts resulting from the lack of clear title for many that prevents access to wealth-generating tools commonly associated with land ownership is clear. Low-income and rural African Americans across the South are disproportionately hurt by the heir property problem. Lacking sufficient access to legal advice for most of the 20th century, many African-American landowners in the region were unable to take the necessary steps to preserve their assets, including drafting wills and otherwise planning for the disposition of estates. Many of these owners included black farmers. "Heirs' property," as this situation is called, presents two critical problems: heirs' property owners lack access to essential benefits of land ownership, including the ability to obtain a mortgage, credit, access to government programs and the ability to sell the property. Consequently, heirs' property often becomes a liability, or so-called "dead capital" for families who often already are struggling to achieve economic security. Second, owners of heirs’ property are particularly vulnerable to partition suits, tax foreclosure and other vehicles of displacement, making the fractionated title one of the leading causes of land loss among African-Americans. Planners particularly need to be knowledgeable of these situations in planning and development decision-making processes. Through better understanding, we can address larger neighborhood and community development issues that limit access for black farmers, rural communities and the neighborhoods that have limited access to fresh food options.

More information on the history of black farming and land loss can be found here: [http://www.pbs.org/itvs/homecoming/pdfs/homecoming_history.pdf](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/homecoming/pdfs/homecoming_history.pdf)
Black Farmers Begin to Gain Justice:

Lawsuits filed by Black and Native American farmers in the 1980s highlighted the unique intersection between race, agricultural farming, generational wealth and its impacts over the years to various communities of color around the country. The lawsuits filed argued that the U.S. Department of Agriculture ("USDA") had systematically discriminated against African-American farmers on the basis of race, in violation of the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and the Administrative Procedure Act.

A class action suit against the United States Department of Agriculture exposed the illegal denial of loans, disaster relief and other aid during the 1980s and 1990s to Black farmers. In November 2010, the United States Senate approved a $4.5 billion settlement for Black and Native American farmers. On December 8, 2010, President Obama signed the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 that provided funds settlements for minority farmers and Native Americans. In May 2011, a federal judge granted preliminary approval for the $1.25 billion class action settlement portion for black farmer’s late filer’s case section lawsuit. The struggle to pass this legislation and settlement dates to the beginning of the civil rights era in the United States.

The settlement seeks funds a separate settlement for Native American trust funds; and qualifying farmers will receive $50,000 under a settlement decided in 1999. The results of this settlement will have a tremendous influence on not only existing Black farmers but also their future generations by opening access and opportunities that were once limited to them. Organizations such as the National Black Farmers Association have been instrumental over the years in advocating for justice and resolution to this issue. More information on NBFA can be found at www.blackfarmers.org

Disparities in Health – High Obesity Rates in African American Communities:
According to the Office of Minority Health, “in 2009, African Americans were 1.5 times as likely to be obese as Non Hispanic Whites.” Unhealthy food options, consumption levels, high concentrations of fast food establishments in low-income neighborhoods, and limited access to recreational opportunities have lead to an increase in obesity rates among this group. Therefore, how can planners help combat and reduce high obesity rates, particularly in African American communities? Below are some recommendations:

- Encourage and design more walkable communities – sidewalks, walking and bike trails
- Design integrated open space and recreational opportunities in neighborhoods that are accessible to adults and children (include passive and active recreation spaces)
• Redesign zoning regulations in communities to accommodate innovative building environments to encourage compact or mixed land uses, provide mass transit connections, etc.
• Employ local educational campaigns for the public based on the relationship between the built environment and land use, fresh food access, and health disparities to
• Encourage community garden efforts and farmer markets in low-income neighborhoods

Disparities in Food Systems Access:
Many communities of color often face large disparities in their food systems planning from lack of grocery stores, fresh food options, community gardens, and locally grown and distributed produce. These impacts have been connected to larger issues of higher obesity rates and loss of general wealth opportunities for Black farmers and the communities in which they serve. Planners, however, can advocate and implement planning policies to increase food systems access such as the following:
• Better protect rural lands through preservation and agricultural zoning
• Promote opportunities in urban environments for diverse access to fresh food through farmer markets, community gardens, supermarkets
• Support ethnic cuisine and entrepreneurship opportunities,
• Improve transit access to food centers in low-income communities
• Increase reinvestment opportunities in urban areas
• Revisit zoning and land use decision-making to limit fast food establishments in concentrated areas
• Measure food systems access in communities of color to better plan and inform policymakers (i.e. GIS, etc.)

Together, Black farmers, planners, policymakers, residents and others can bridge gaps and leverage resources to provide equitable health and food systems planning in black communities for future generations.

RESOURCES:

APA Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning
www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/food.htm

Office of Minority Health
http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?ID=6456

National Black Farmers Association
www.blackfarmers.org

Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network
www.saafon.org

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