

# Food Systems Planning – An Opportunity for Planners in Private Practice

By Samina Raja, PhD and Heather Wooten, MCP

A hallmark of a livable community is the presence of a well-functioning community food system. A food system is the network of processes, institutions, infrastructure, actors, and resources that enable the production, processing, distribution, disposal, and consumption of food. In recent years, problems in the US food system have begun to receive attention from community members and policy makers alike. A sizeable population – especially in poorer urban and rural neighborhoods – has limited access to fresh produce with grave consequence for public health. High calorie low nutrition foods abound in many neighborhoods. Poor agricultural practices are threatening the country's soils and waterways. Economic challenges within the farming sector are forcing family farmers out of business and preventing new farmers from entering the occupation. In short, the food system is not working for a broad swath of American society.



Troy Gardens development in Madison, Wisconsin includes a working urban farm, community gardens, and affordable housing.

Planners have the capacity and training to think systemically about the food system, to engage community members in envisioning and planning a desirable food system, to assess the bottlenecks and opportunities within a community food system, and identify policies and strategies to strengthen and rebuild a food system. A small but growing number of planning practitioners are actively participating in the efforts to plan and strengthen community food systems that are environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and ensure that consumers have access to healthful and affordable foods.

This is an opportune time for planners in private practice to delve into food systems planning. In a survey of 192 APA members conducted in 2008, a significant majority (70%) of respondents reported food systems and healthy eating issues to be of high or significant priority for the planning profession.<sup>1</sup> Private consultants and their representatives, who constituted nearly a quarter of all survey respondents, also expressed significant interest but limited involvement in this growing area: only

22% of practitioners from the private practice sector reported being engaged in food systems planning. PPD members have an opportunity to develop expertise in this growing area, learn from examples around the country, and contribute to this growing area by disseminating ideas through their practice. One way to begin the foray into food systems planning is by integrating it within traditional planning activities such as the preparation of a comprehensive plan, as outlined below.

## Integrating Food into the Comprehensive Plan

Food touches on many issues already regularly considered in comprehensive planning, from land use, to economic development, to transportation. It also brings new issues into the plan, such as public health and sustainability. A fresh crop of plans provide examples of different approaches:

- Richmond, CA General Plan (draft)<sup>2</sup>: This plan highlights food in its innovative Community Health and Wellness Element, promoting urban agriculture and healthy neighborhood stores.
- Baltimore, MD Sustainability Plan (2009)<sup>3</sup>: Food and greening go hand-in-hand in this plan, which calls for developing an urban agriculture plan, increasing demand for local food by consumers and institutions, and partnering with the Baltimore Food Policy Task Force.<sup>4</sup>
- Madison, WI Comprehensive Plan (2006)<sup>5</sup>: The Natural and Agricultural Resources Element of this plan lays out a vision for preserving and enhancing regional agriculture resources and direct-marketing opportunities while growing new community gardens in the city. The plan proposes to protect a working urban farm within the city limits from development.

Planning consultants should consider how food might be integrated into each step of the plan process:

- **Existing conditions analysis/baseline data collection:** Just as planners might analyze housing stock and demand or identify existing parks and community open space, data about the local food system should inform policy development. This might include number of and location of healthy food outlets, local agricultural resources, and diet-related health data.
- **Community outreach/stakeholder engagement:** Good plans reflect the communities that they are design to guide; look for opportunities to engage stakeholders on food topics and find out more about local needs and priorities. In communities with active food policy councils<sup>6</sup> or other local health or sustainability coalitions, these groups can be a resource to planners.
- **Policy development:** Food can be treated as a stand-alone topic, or it can be integrated into other policy issues throughout the plan. In either case, it's important to identify implementation strategies (such as updating zoning ordinances or revising permitting processes) to support policy goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Raja, Born, and Kozlowski Russell. 2008. A Guide to Community and Regional Food Planning. Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Report No. 554, American Planning Association.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cityofrichmondgeneralplan.org/Content/10020/preview.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.baltimoresustainability.org/uploads/files/Sustainability\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.baltimoresustainability.org/uploads/files/Sustainability_Plan.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.baltimorecity.gov/Government/AgenciesDepartments/Planning/FoodPolicyTaskForce.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.baltimoresustainability.org/uploads/files/Sustainability\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.baltimoresustainability.org/uploads/files/Sustainability_Plan.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/>

## Food Systems Planning (cont'd from page 1)

### Challenges and opportunities in planning for food

With growing national attention on issues like childhood obesity and climate change, food policy is getting more and more attention from individuals and policymakers. Despite the national zeitgeist, there are still real challenges for practicing planners and planning consultants to integrating food into local plans.

Part of the challenge is that our understanding of how to effectively plan for food hasn't kept paced with the popularity (some might say "sexiness") of the topic. One example lies in the challenges of planning for urban and peri-urban agriculture in new and existing developments. A historic lack of understanding of the reality of food production on the part of urban communities is still apparent when well-meaning planners or developers create unrealistic expectations for how agriculture should function (paying residential water rates or getting approval from neighbors before planting cover crops, for example): "Everyone thinks they're the expert now and is telling the farmer how to farm," says Heather Rosenberg, Principle at CTG Energetics, a sustainable development consultant based in California. One of the roles of the planning consultant may be to bridge these gaps and help translate community needs and food system realities into workable solutions.

At the same time, Rosenberg sees many opportunities to help her clients think about food and planning through the lens of sustainability planning. She got her start in food system planning when the developer of a master-planned community asked her to suggest a use for a proposed development that was more sustainable than a golf course, and that didn't generate more project vehicle trips. At the core of sustainability planning is thinking about how community needs for clean air, clean water, healthy people, and yes – food – can be met in the context of a specific place. She cites inspiration from projects like Prairie Crossing, IL,<sup>7</sup> which successfully incorporated an organic farm into the heart of a new residential development.

### Resources

A number of resources are available for practitioners to get started with food systems planning. The Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning<sup>8</sup> adopted by the American Planning Association offers a good starting point for discussion (APA 2007). The American Planning Association also convenes conference sessions and workshops on the topic. A Planners Training Service (PTS) workshop on integrating public health into comprehensive planning, which included a module on food systems planning, was held in Spring 2010, and similar workshops are anticipated in the future as well. Finally, the Planning and Community Health Research Center<sup>9</sup> of the American Planning Association offers information and networking opportunities through membership in a Food Interest Group (FIG) for planners. Planners can also subscribe<sup>10</sup> to a "food planning" discussion listserv hosted by the University of Washington-Seattle.

*Samina Raja, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning School of Architecture and Planning University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 201 L Hayes Hall, 3435 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14214, 716-829-5881, [sraja@buffalo.edu](mailto:sraja@buffalo.edu), <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/planning/people/raja.asp>. On sabbatical leave during Fall 2010, and will return to the University at Buffalo in January 2011.*

*Heather Wooten, Planning for Healthy Places - A project of Public Health Law & Policy, 2201 Broadway, Suite 502, Oakland, CA 94612, (510) 302-3370, (510) 444-8253 (fax), [hwooten@phlpnet.org](mailto:hwooten@phlpnet.org), [www.healthyplanning.org](http://www.healthyplanning.org) ■*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.prairiecrossing.com/>

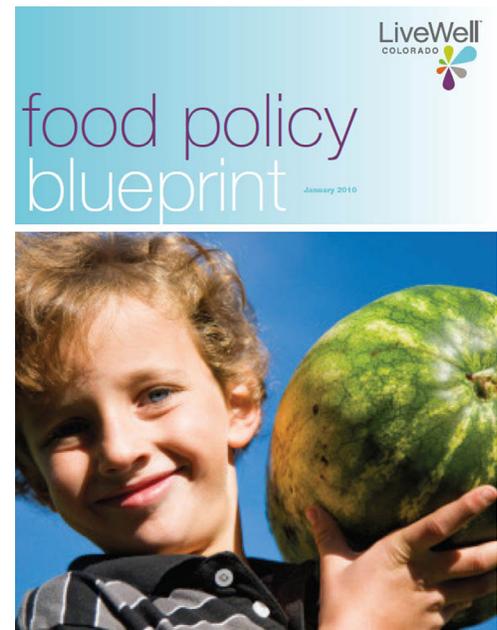
<sup>8</sup> <http://www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/food.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.planning.org/nationalcenters/health/food.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://mailman2.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/foodplanning>

## Spotlight on a Food Systems Planner

Wendy Peters Moschetti, MCP, founded WPM Consulting in Boulder, CO in June 2009. The firm advances policy change for healthy food systems, schools and communities through professional project management, collaborative and strategic planning, and facilitation. WPM Consulting aims to help create healthy environments that support the social, emotional, physical, and financial well-being of all community members by working with diverse partners to develop systems-level, policy-oriented solutions to critical issues.



2010 has been a year of growth for the consulting firm. The year began with the publication of LiveWell Colorado's Food Policy Blueprint, which was developed by WPM Consulting. The Blueprint was built upon a comprehensive analysis of the state's most promising strategies to improve access to healthy foods. (<http://www.livewellcolorado.org/assets/pdf/resources/blueprints/final-food-policy-blueprint.pdf>). Building off of many of the recommendations in the Blueprint, WPM Consulting has continued to work on several aspects of farm to school, food system assessments, and planning for food systems.

With her colleagues on Colorado Farm to School, Ms. Moschetti is creating a comprehensive toolkit for Colorado school districts to help them find, communicate with, and secure contracts with regional fruit and vegetable growers, while overcoming existing policy hurdles and developing regional farm to school networks. In order to inform these efforts, Ms. Moschetti is conducting an analysis of school procurement policies and issues in Colorado, mapping out the various federal and state agencies involved in funding, managing, distributing, and regulating school food, and the financial status and participation rates behind it all.

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## Spotlight on a Food Systems Planner *(cont'd from page 2)*

The firm has also focused a great deal this year on helping both communities and the state better understand their food system and ways to strengthen it. WPM Consulting has assisted community food assessments as well as developed a state-wide food assessment framework that is bringing together comprehensive indicators for understanding all aspects of the state's food system, with corresponding implementation tools for use by state or local stakeholders.

In 2011, WPM Consulting will be working with communities across the state to develop locally-relevant planning and health policies and regulations that promote healthy food systems, healthy eating, **and** active living in a more integrated fashion.

The firm's current clients include LiveWell Colorado (under the auspices of Federal ARRA Stimulus funds received by the state's public health department), the Colorado Department of Agriculture- Specialty Crops Grant Program, LiveWell Longmont,

and several other Colorado communities. In the fall of 2010, WPM Consulting will begin providing staff and management for the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council.

WPM Consulting works closely with colleagues across the state, including Colorado State University, Denver-based policy analysts, and small non-profits. The firm is supported by excellent administrative staff and multiple content-expert subcontractors. WPM Consulting will soon be building out a fellows program to work more closely with students from agriculture, public health and nutrition, and planning backgrounds.

Ms. Moschetti holds a BA in Social Work from the University of Washington (1998) and a Masters in City Planning from the University of California-Berkeley (2003).

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*Learn More: WPM Consulting, LLC, [www.wpmconsulting.net](http://www.wpmconsulting.net), (303) 819-2846, [wendy@wpmconsulting.net](mailto:wendy@wpmconsulting.net) ■*