

Strategic Plan of Action – Solano County Local Food System

Introduction & Background

In early 2017, Sustainable Solano began envisioning an environmentally and economically sustainable, value-driven, community-based local food system in Solano County. We also wanted to explore the potential for small-scale, consumer-driven food businesses (Community Food Centers) in each of Solano's seven cities, with the goal of increasing access to and consumption of local food. These Community Food Centers would be drop-off and pick up locations for local food (i.e. Community Supported Agriculture boxes and other farm products), have a commercial kitchen for the creation of prepared foods and have an educational space for building awareness on the benefits of eating/buying local food. Our interest in testing the feasibility of Community Food Centers has been growing since 2012, when our communities began showing signs of a local food movement. In response to their intent to source local food, we established the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) site in Benicia and launched a local food education program titled "What's for Dinner?" Since then, we have been interested in scaling up these efforts to bridge our communities with local food. Thanks to a USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) planning grant, in October 2017 we began formal research into both the feasibility of the Community Food Centers and a Solano County local food system as a whole. This grant also allowed us to accomplish an essential step in any local food system: building coalition among key stakeholders, food systems experts and representatives of various county agencies, and bringing them together as a functioning Local Food Advisory Board (see Attachment A). The Advisory Board had four meetings over the course of the USDA LFPP grant period (October 2017 – March 2019) and wishes to continue working together to further the development of a holistic local food system in Solano County.

The comprehensive process that resulted in the Feasibility Study document (Objective 8.1 in our planning grant; see Attachment B) was led by partners at UC Davis, with assistance by select members of our Local Food Advisory Board and Sustainable Solano staff. The group conducted extensive research of both primary and secondary agricultural data to gauge the viability of Community Food Centers. If feasible, Sustainable Solano would develop an effective Business Plan and outline implementation for local food businesses around the county that aggregate, process and distribute locally-produced, healthy food products. If not feasible, Sustainable Solano and its Local Food Advisory Board would examine the obstacles present and develop a Strategic Plan of Action to overcome them. The ultimate goal remains to increase consumption of and access to locally-produced agricultural products and develop new market opportunities for Solano county farmers and ranchers.

What the Feasibility Study showed was that Community Food Centers would not be a viable business model at this point in time. An excerpt is as follows, which also shows support for the creation of a Strategic Plan of Action:

In summary, we identified a limited interest and underdeveloped opportunities for small farmers to sell within the county and a relatively low consumer demand for local, value-added products at this point and conclude that the implementation of the originally proposed food centers is not feasible. Instead, we suggest moving forward with the development of a more comprehensive strategic plan (pg. 5).

Feasibility Study Findings & Recommendations

The Feasibility Study identified three primary obstacles in the current local food landscape in Solano County, which prohibited us from moving forward with a business plan for Community Food Centers:

- 1) Low levels of public awareness/knowledge around local food and the farmers who grow it,
- 2) Weak infrastructure within the farming community, due to little collaboration or consolidation of agricultural assets (i.e. distribution of products, leveraging pricing through a collective), and
- 3) County-level policies which do not fully support small- to mid-sized farmers (i.e. high fees for agritourism permits and farmers market participation for Solano-based farmers).

A thorough discussion of these findings, along with recommendations for next steps and benefits of successfully implementing the recommendations are found on pages 61-70 of the feasibility study (Attachment B). A summary of specific recommendations are as follows:

- *A strategic focus on supporting collaboration among small- and medium-scale farmers and providing services that strengthens market access before revisiting the development of a specific business plan (pg. 64).*
- *Initiatives that include coordinated outreach, education and marketing efforts that raise awareness of issues faced by local farmers and increase appreciation for local food, and directly or indirectly increase demand for locally produced foods within Solano County at the same time (pg. 64).*
- *An integrated local food systems approach that maintains and strengthens Solano County's agricultural roots and attracts new talent, given that the average age of principal operators continues to increase (60.8 in 2012), and farmers have been in business for 23.8 years on average (pg. 62).*
- *A concrete plan for funding, given that Solano County is severely underfunded in terms of grants and contributions by foundations as compared to other Bay Area counties (pg. 62).*
- *Identification of larger-volume customers and long-term contracts (as compared to individual consumers), which would ensure stable demand and greater farmer participation; for example, institutional buyers such as Kaiser Permanente and other hospitals, schools, or identified food assistance opportunities/needs within the county (pg. 70).*
- *Consideration of traditional cooperative models, or more recent hybrid models (e.g. New Generation Cooperatives or Limited Cooperatives Associations) as the organizational structure for a farmer's collaborative, which attracts outside investment in more flexible ways (pg. 64), and a plan for developing the cooperative in multiple stages (pg. 65).*
- *A thorough review of county-wide food assistance programs including funding and current sales volumes, as well as an exploration of future opportunities for local supply and management of these and related programs, to establish reliable supply relationships (pg. 64-65).*
- *A plan to address current agritourism policy so that these types of events could be pursued easily by farms and supported via an established farmer network. Events and family activities such as farm dinners, concerts, fairs, camps and workshops have the potential to raise both consumer awareness of issues faced by local farmers and the valuation of local agricultural production within Solano County. These events also attract consumers with relatively higher willingness to pay, and revenue from these activities might be used to subsidize outreach and distribution efforts targeted at underserved populations (pg. 65).*

- *Initiatives that educate the community about the benefits of local food/food systems and engage various stakeholders in collaborative efforts to implement Sustainable Solano's vision of creating an environmentally and economically sustainable, value-driven, community-based local food system (pg. 5).*

While research for the feasibility study was being conducted, our partners at Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC) reviewed current agricultural policies in Solano County and researched legal structures for potential businesses within the context of our project. This research resulted in three legal memos/documents referenced below: 1) a legal memo describing possible structures for an agricultural producers cooperative, 2) a policy memo regarding institutional purchases and 3) a policy memo regarding agritourism in Solano County.

The Food System Vision/Mission

Sustainable Solano also began expanding its vision and mission, as it related to the creation of a local food system. With non-USDA funds, we sought help from an outside food systems expert and consultant, Allison Goin (www.Allisongoin.com), to help us fine-tune our mission, vision, and next steps.

Mission: Create an environmentally sustainable, economically viable, socially just and equitable local food system in Solano County.

Vision: To diversify, expand and safeguard a local healthy food economy that will preserve farmland, its integrity and biodiversity in Solano County, and ensure food access for local communities.

We also adopted a working **definition of a food system**: *A local food system is a collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic, and social health of a particular area.* (<https://community-wealth.org>)

And, we identified the various components within Solano County that must work together so that everyone (regardless of income/status) benefits from the local food system. We developed a graphic to help communicate these key components (see Attachment C).

At the foundation of the system are both farmers and communities: farmers who are economically strong and members of a collaborative, and communities who are fully engaged. In the center are a variety of customers/consumers: 1) institutional customers (hospitals, schools, restaurants/processors, retailers); 2) direct-to-consumer sales outlets (farmers markets, CSA programs, farm stands, agritourism/events, and community kitchens); 3) a functioning food assistance economy (i.e. EBT, CalFresh programs); and 4) county/state/federal policy that supports not only farmers, but the system as a whole. It is vital that our communities become aware of how to source local food in Solano County and understand the benefits of buying/consuming local food. Only then can residents actively connect to farm products via one or more of the center sales/marketing channels.

Given the findings of the feasibility study, we are also incorporating key questions into this strategic plan:

- Should "local" be defined as only within Solano County? What are the benefits and challenges of limiting the geographic scope in this way?

- Provided that Sustainable Solano is the leading agent in the county to implement a local food system, what is the defined role and scope of the organization, given its current capacity? Should it focus on outreach/education/advocacy efforts to raise awareness, provide direct programming and services around local food, or operate as a business incubator? And could successful program models or ideas for local food enterprises be spun off independently from Sustainable Solano once they are tested?

Next Steps: Strategic Plan for 2019-2021

In response to the findings and recommendations of the feasibility study, along with our own anecdotal data from on-farm interviews and input from our Local Food Advisory Board, Sustainable Solano has developed a Strategic Plan with four primary Goal Areas and Outcomes, to support the creation of a local food system in Solano County.

Goal Area 1: Outreach/Communications – Increase widespread awareness in all stakeholder groups of the benefits of a sustainable local food system.

Goal 1 Action Steps:

- **Expand Sustainable Solano’s “What’s For Dinner” program to all seven cities in Solano County.** The “What’s for Dinner” program includes hands-on cooking classes and live demonstrations, and features recipes using local, seasonal ingredients. At each class, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box is shown to participants, and the process for acquiring CSA boxes is explained, and supported by promotional materials from area farms. We aim to host some of the cooking classes on area farms as well as in public spaces (i.e. libraries, community centers).
- **Expand consolidated CSA sites to all seven cities in Solano County.** In the Fall of 2017, Sustainable Solano brought CSA programs from four different farms together to one centralized location in Benicia (which were previously all around town): Terra Firma Farm (produce only); Tara Firma Farm (meat, eggs, cheese, some produce); Real Good Fish (fish and seafood); and Real Food Bay Area (raw milk, prepared foods, pantry items). One year later, all farms had increases in their subscription base, with half of the farms showing a 100% increase. Sustainable Solano will work with existing partners in Solano County’s six other cities to replicate this successful pilot, which allows farms to cross-promote to subscribers interested in local food.
- **Promote current agritourism efforts by local ag associations.** The Pleasants Valley Ag Association held their first annual “Open Farm Day” in Summer 2018, which was a great success, and Suisun Valley Vintners and Growers Association also holds events to raise its profile as a food/wine destination. Sustainable Solano will partner with these organizations and help promote their events on our website and via social media. (Note: these are two specific examples. The overarching goal is to have farms open to the public year-round as desired by the respective farm; however, the county’s current policies don’t support this goal. See Attachment D, SELC’s “Policy Memo Re: Agritourism”).
- **Expand Sustainable Solano’s existing “Conversations” series to all cities in Solano County.** “Conversations” is a series of films, lectures and guided discussions on sustainability issues/ideas, including food- and farm-focused themes (urban agriculture, soil health, permaculture, climate-smart farming, etc.) It also serves to close the feedback loop, giving Sustainable Solano staff the

opportunity to hear from the community and develop the program appropriately so that community needs/preferences are met.

- **With partners at Solano County Fairgrounds, assist in planning a “Bounty of the County” event.** This public event would celebrate and showcase local food, farms, wineries, distilleries and restaurants that source farm-to-table. We intend to pair select restaurants with farmers for the creation of “small plate” tastings of dishes prepared from local, seasonal ingredients. Sustainable Solano will also support farmers through the production of promotional materials to be displayed at the event, and hosting cooking demonstrations using locally-sourced ingredients.

Goal 1 Outcomes:

- Increased base of support for future efforts, indicated by larger mailing lists, social media followers, CSA subscriptions and/or attendees at events (including agritourism).
- Responses to surveys indicating increased awareness of Sustainable Solano’s local food work and the benefits of a sustainable local food system.

Goal Area 2: Farmer’s Infrastructure – Establish working relationships with institutional customers (short-term goal) and outline an organizational plan (long-term goal) to make farming economically viable.

Goal 2 Action Steps (SHORT-TERM):

- **Link farmers to institutional customers.** Sustainable Solano will contact foodservice managers of area hospital cafeterias along with restaurant chefs and caterers, with the goal of substituting out 1-2 seasonal products per month with those that are locally-sourced. We will research and select a platform for sales, and assist with the development of contracts between farm and institution. SELC’s “Policy Memo Re: Institutional Purchasing” (Attachment E) will also be referenced.
- **Create an “Info Hub” of farms/food in Solano County.** This hub of photos, stories and facts will support the narrative around local food in Solano County, and assist with the creation of promotional materials (below).
- **Increase visibility of farms/food through promotional materials.** Sustainable Solano will create signage and similar materials (i.e. table tents, menu notes) to be displayed at hospital cafeterias and restaurants/catered events which highlight the farmers and their food, and raise public awareness of local food available in the county.
- **Investigate distribution solutions with other agencies.** Our research has shown that distributing the food is a challenge among farmers; we will engage representatives of other agencies (i.e. economic development) to explore solutions to this problem.

Goal 2 Outcomes (SHORT-TERM):

- Farmers have consistent markets with stable demand via sales to institutional customers, which will strengthen them economically.

Goal 2 Action Steps (LONG-TERM):

- **Conduct a Farm-to-School assessment across all Solano County school districts.** The USDA Farm to School Census shows that some schools in Solano County are already taking steps toward Farm-to-School programs, while others are not. Sustainable Solano will arrange meetings with food

service directors at all public school districts to gauge interest/readiness in Farm-to-School initiatives, identify barriers to participation and examine their needs, with the long-term goal of applying for a USDA Farm-to-School grant. The implementation of a Farm-to-School grant would provide another institutional sales outlet for local farmers.

- **Facilitate the formation of a farmers cooperative, and/or a separate promotion/distribution business.** As was noted in the feasibility study, a farmers cooperative would provide many benefits, including leverage with pricing structures, logistics, etc.

Goal 2 Outcomes (LONG-TERM):

- Completed Farm-to-School assessment, which maps out readiness for school districts to participate in sourcing locally, and a clear project description for a USDA Farm-to-School grant.
- An established legal structure for the farmer's cooperative, using SELC's Legal Memo on agricultural producer cooperatives (Attachment F) as a guide, which was written specifically for farmers within Solano County.
- A viable business plan created, which supports direction/mission of the farmer's cooperative (see Attachment G – an initial draft of a business plan for the farmer's cooperative from Small Business Development Center was developed during the USDA funding period).

Goal Area 3: Partnerships and Community Support – Build and maintain strong relationships with core partners from different constituent groups; unify the group into an alliance.

Goal 3 Action Steps:

- **Expand and strengthen current Local Food Advisory Board; transform Board into Solano Local Food Alliance.** Sustainable Solano will continue to establish a strong, diverse, multiple-stakeholder Alliance and add new members so that other constituent groups are included (i.e. institutional customers, restaurateurs, economic development, Solano Land Trust, food retailers). We will define how they would function in the context of a food system, facilitate the group as needed to fulfill objectives/goals/vision and organize and lead at least 2 full meetings with the Solano Local Food Alliance between March - October, 2019.
- **With the Solano Local Food Alliance, define a measurable, overarching goal that can be used as a base line, which can be evaluated.** An example goal we are working with is “5 by 25”, in which 5% of the county's food will be sourced locally by 2025. It is estimated that around \$1 billion is spent annually in Solano County on all food (restaurants, grocery, corner store, etc.), and if we were to substitute even a small amount of “imported” food from outside the county with local food, the economic impact on local farmers/ranchers would be significant.
- **With the Solano Local Food Alliance, map the current local food system assets and develop meaningful indicators of success within the food system.** We will measure activity in all areas of the local food system (economic, social, environmental, etc.), create baselines and develop key indicators to measure success within a pre-determined timeframe.
- **Participate in forums/meetings of other organizations and county agencies.** Sustainable Solano will ensure continuous communication with key stakeholders and also participate in forums/meetings of other organizations/agencies, and prepare presentations. Examples include: Solano County Board of Supervisors, Economic Development, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Farm Bureau, Solano Coalition for Better Health, Planning Department, and agencies involved in food assistance programs such as Cal Fresh, SNAP ED, etc.

- **Engage in county-level policy work that affects local food systems.** We aim to review policies (or lack thereof), find examples of best practices and make recommendations for policy change that will improve the functioning of a local food system. A specific example of this is Solano County's agritourism policies, which are currently not consistent across all agricultural zones/designations, and fees required by the county are prohibitive for farmers to engage in events. We will use SELC's memo on Solano's agritourism policy as a starting point for discussions with county decision-makers to make it easier for farmers to host on-farm events and build relationships with their communities (see Attachment D, SELC's "Policy Memo Re: Agritourism").

Goal 3 Outcomes:

- Increased community awareness of Sustainable Solano through a broader network and more personal connections to the mission.
- Establishment of a strong, county-wide Solano Local Food Alliance which holds a clear vision/understanding of a local food system.
- Creation of a road map with hands-on opportunities for involvement by Alliance members, to create a local food system in Solano County.
- Updated agritourism and other county policies that support a local food system.

Goal Area 4: Organizational Capacity-Building – Increase Sustainable Solano's internal resources to be better able to reach above goals for local food system development.

Goal 4 Action Steps:

- Create a fundraising plan for each year with specific targets for individual donors, events and grants.
- Identify essential staff roles needed to support local food work.
- Ensure grant proposals adequately fund staff and other costs for implementation.
- Look for opportunities to allocate some funding in each grant proposal to help with evaluation, communications planning, and facilitation of Solano Local Food Alliance, and other areas which are not adequately staffed/funded internally.
- Look for affordable professional development opportunities to help current staff develop new competencies.

Goal 4 Outcomes:

- Clear path forward for how to increase funding streams and maintain financial stability.
- Staff will be ready to implement new projects when funding is secured.
- Outcomes for all prior goals will be more successful with adequate resources.

Conclusion

At this time, Sustainable Solano is the only organization bringing together diverse constituents and stakeholders, building coalition, and holding the vision of a local food system in Solano County. We recognize that local food systems are very complex, and their creation is a long-term project that requires years of commitment and immense cooperation from stakeholders, agencies, organizations and communities.

Sustainable Solano is committed to continuing this work – holding together stakeholders, finding funding and building capacity not only for us, but also for other participants/agencies/organizations working on the food system. As we look to the future, we are optimistic that this Strategic Plan will lead to increased connections with our communities and assist us with the creation of an environmentally and economically sustainable, value-driven, community-based local food system in Solano County that works for everyone.

List of Attachments

Attachment A – Local Food Advisory Board

Attachment B – Feasibility Study

Attachment C – Solano Local Food System graphic

Attachment D – SELC Policy Memo Re: Agritourism

Attachment E – SELC Policy Memo Re: Institutional Purchasing

Attachment F – SELC Legal Memo on Agricultural Producer Cooperatives

Attachment G – Draft of Business Plan by Small Business Development Center