

VAN DERBURGH COUNTY

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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STUDY BACKGROUND

As the food movement grows, local food stakeholders and representatives are increasingly collaborating to tackle food issues and problems through the formation of food policy councils. Food policy councils come in many shapes and sizes, though are united in a central objective of bringing collective change to the food system at local and regional scales. Welborn Baptist Foundation recently collaborated with Nicolaas Mink PhD and Helen Schnoes MRP to help the organization conceptualize a realistic roadmap for the development of a food council and to help organizers identify necessary stakeholders and institutions that will serve as baseline for future action. The collaboration also sought to ascertain food system assets, propose opportunities for collective action, and recommend comprehensive and effective strategies for food system change. To complete this study, Mink and Schnoes identified and interviewed subjects based on their current roles in Evansville's food system. They also completed an assessment of food access points, transportation corridors, and demographic data, using publicly available data and Geographic Information Systems. Finally, relevant secondary research was conducted to support and confirm conclusions.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- 1** **Lack of cohesion among entities working to build a more vibrant, sustainable food system is limiting possibilities.** Qualitative stakeholder interviews suggest that a major limiting factor to local food system health and sustainability is fragmentation and poor coordination. This is causing undue inefficiencies and overlap, while wasting valuable resources that could be mobilized to build community assets and address inefficiencies.
- 2** **Evansville's local/regional food system lacks clear, identifiable leadership, especially at the institutional level.** Without clear institutional leadership, Evansville's food system will continue to experience challenges that will demand stakeholder's attention.
- 3** **About 40% of Evansville and Vanderburgh County residents live in census tracts designated by the USDA as food deserts, where a significant portion of the community likely struggles to access food due to income and transportation barriers.** As of 2010, just over 18,500 people within these areas live in poverty and farther than half a mile from the nearest grocery store. While in some census tracts this represents a small fraction of the population, for ten of Vanderburgh's 49 this describes at least a quarter of the local population. In two census tracts more than half of the residents experience both low income and low food access (at half a mile).



4 **Despite increases in grocery stores and supercenters, Evansville residents live in an imbalanced food environment.** Vanderburgh County stands out among its neighbors for recent growth in food retail outlets. However, mapping the grocery stores and other food retail outlets in Evansville reveals that many in the city's food deserts live far from the warehouse outlets on the outer eastern and western edges of Evansville that offer quality food at low prices—areas that are also less densely populated.

5 **A significant portion of residents in Vanderburgh County and Evansville face health challenges.** Only about one in every ten retail food outlets in Vanderburgh County generally offers healthy food, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Adding additional concern to the healthfulness of the local food environment, the USDA reports that just under one in three adults in Indiana are obese. The rate of obesity among low income preschool children has slightly increased from 2008 to 2011, to 14.2%. More broadly, over 12% of Vanderburgh County residents and nearly 16% of Evansville residents did not have health insurance in 2012.

6 **In Evansville, food problems are most profound among historically vulnerable populations.** One in three black residents and one in five Hispanic/Latino/a residents utilized the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2012. The significant racial disparities evident in this indicator of local food access challenges stands out when compared to the 12.26% of white residents using SNAP. Although over 80% of Evansville residents are white, the greater rate of food assistance use among its minority populations speaks to significant failings within the current food system for stakeholders to understand and address.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Dedicate one PTE staff member to coordinate city-wide efforts, with particular focus on council development. Ideally, this would be one FTE staff member. Successful food councils nearly always have dedicated staff time. This staff time usually takes a variety of forms, based on development stage and resources of the food councils. Based on current stage of development, we recommend someone with a background in Asset Based Community Development and/or experience with collective impact models of change.
- 2** Build capacity at a current or new non-profit in Evansville through direct or in-kind support to fill important local food leadership vacuum. Healthy local/regional food systems tend to have a not-for-profit leader(s). These not-for-profits are usually at the forefront of addressing food system issues, where government has failed to act and/or market has failed. Evansville lacks this entity, and thus is missing an element that could provide leadership and drive change in the food system. Officials should utilize resources and networks to help build this capacity.
- 3** Support citywide Food Plan or Food Strategy. Comprehensive community food plans are becoming an increasingly common tool for cities/counties/regions to ascertain and address needs. Seattle's recently-released Food Plan is one of the most celebrated. Community partners should drive the development and adoption of an Evansville Food Plan. A municipal food plan should set time-constrained, measurable goals that the city can leverage in community revitalization plans and can be used to benchmark progress and celebrate food assets.



- 4 Convene Core, with a Purpose.** In his October 2013 report, Ken Meter noted of the Evansville food system that: “Building stronger social networks that support local foods activity is more important than specific facilities at this point in time.” Partners should begin to pull together core stakeholders for a monthly meeting to work on a founding act.

- 5 Identify a “founding activity” for food policy council and act.** Launching a FPC through some sort of founding activity can powerfully affect group cohesion and build momentum. More too, such founding activities support legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of others. Sometimes, members of the FPC undertake such activities strategically, within a broader political framework or with community-building goals. Sometimes, these founding activities happen more organically, stemming from an issue that an engaged citizenry seeks to immediately address.

- 6 Continue to address healthy food access, preferably with an initiative and with a structure that would benefit the future food policy council.** Evansville’s food system is failing its residents and the city. As studies by McCullough et al., Meter et al., and Mink et al. have suggested, the residents of Evansville are suffering from significant market failures in the food system that are producing negative economic and public health consequences.



SHORT TERM.

This coalition should move immediately on one of two recommended strategies: (1) a “fresh, healthy food” marketing campaign, as outlined by Ken Meter, or (2) a strategic alignment with the Fresh Bucks program, now piloted in Indianapolis. Modeled after other Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program farmers’ market doubling programs, Fresh Bucks provides up to \$20 in matching incentives for use on locally-grown fruits and vegetables.

LONG TERM.

A coalition should be formed with River City Food Co-op to support the Co-op’s Board of Directors feasibility study to transition to a larger downtown location that will help to support urban revitalization and enhance healthy food access in core Evansville neighborhoods. Indeed, given current trends in the retail food environment, the co-op’s future success and viability hinges on moving to a larger location, and could align with interest in a downtown urban grocery store.

