



## System and Policy Change June 2009

There's a movement underway in Northeast Iowa. For the past two years the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI) has laid the groundwork to improve the policies, practices and systems that determine how food arrives on our tables and how our communities can grow opportunities for physical activity for all. Food & Fitness is a national initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. They have invested in collaborative efforts among Allamakee, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties to change the policies, practices and systems that prevent communities from being healthy.

ISU Extension has played a key role in bringing organizations and community members together from the arenas of Economic Development, Public Health & Hospitals, Schools, Colleges, DNR, County Conservationists, Churches, Government Officials, Producers, Youth and Parents from throughout the 5 county region. Over 600 people have been actively involved in the planning process.

Although planning has been the key focus to date, change is already underway. By developing quality relations, people are sharing information about our food and fitness environments and gathering data on what isn't known. This has led to better and more focused planning and the start of extensive collaboration and innovation in NE Iowa.

### System Change

Partnering with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, the Community Vitality Center and local organizations, one of the FFI work groups, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition, awarded \$10,485 in \$250 mini-grants to 34 local agriculture and food entrepreneurs to initiate or expand local food production and businesses. In 2 years, this has leveraged over \$745,965 in food and fiber infrastructure and resources for the region. By tracking just 4-5 institutions in the past 2 years, there

has been an increase of more than \$377,595 in increased local food sales.

Regular producer meetings on local food production and farm visits have been held, followed by several meetings bringing current and future food producers together with institutional buyers. This led to a local wholesale and retail Cresco-based horticultural company, The Plantpeddler, to convert about three of its eight acres of greenhouse space to grow several types of vegetables and fruits (beets, eggplant, leafy greens, kohlrabi, raspberries, green peppers, cucumbers, and several types of herbs). Over 6,000 tomato plants and more than 10,000 strawberry plants are also soaking up sun in these greenhouses.

When school districts in our five counties learned it could be possible to purchase local food for approximately 9 months out of the year, administrators from 14 of the 18 local school districts agreed to send representatives to participate in a Regional School Planning Team to explore options for getting more local healthy foods and increased physical activity into the daily routines of youth and their families. Schools realized if they collaborate together they may be able to purchase food together, share ideas that work, and connect with community resources through the NE Food and Fitness network. The NE Iowa FFI is excited because through this collaboration we could start to help the school system change their system so children and their families can have access to healthier food options and more opportunity for physical activity and play.

At the same time, Luther College in Decorah committed to purchasing 35% of its food from local producers and in the coming year will contract with local producers for 7 high volume food products. A second local college is now looking at buying more local food. As a result, a local food distributor expressed interest in purchasing and distributing local

food in our region. He says he is getting requests from local institutions.

The Food & Farm Coalition work group is exploring how to aggregate, process and distribute local food in NE Iowa. They also want to determine the feasibility of aggregating food in regions near schools for storage, processing, distribution, etc. They also would like to conduct feasibility studies of small scale processing (targeting larger scale food products being used in school institutions, where seconds could be harvested/purchased and processed to be used in schools). They are also interested in exploring the idea of starting with on-farm small scale processing with options leading to larger scale processing, including the study of kitchen models.

Youth engagement has been a key component of FFI from the start. A Youth Engagement Coordinator was hired to guide this component. This past fall school-based Food & Fitness youth teams started forming. Five are up and running, and six more are forming. On April 1, 2009 the youth held a conference and 111 youth attended from throughout the five county region. The youths' actions are leading to system change in our Schools. Some Youth surveyed students and families on food choices available at School Concession Stands. People responded they not only wanted healthier options, but were willing to pay more. Youth shared the survey results and research-based information on the rising obesity rates of children with their local booster club. In one district, the booster club is now working to put healthier food options on their menu.

System change around the built environment is in the beginning stages. Community volunteers helped create inventories of indoor and outdoor infrastructure in their communities, including playgrounds, parks, recreation centers and trails. Luther College students helped gather assessment data around school playgrounds and sidewalks. A regional FFI Built Environment work group was formed and has started discussions on how they could support schools with Safe Routes to School and joint-use facility agreements between schools and communities. This is the first time regional discussions around the built environment have ever occurred in the region.

This past fall, Senator Harkin's majority staff member, Dan Christenson visited the NE Iowa and spent a day with FFI members. He indicated the information and data shared would help as he drafts policy around the Child Nutrition Act. He has since followed up with the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative on several occasions. In addition, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack's staff has requested information regarding Farm-To-School programs and what is needed to get local food into our nation's schools.

## Policy Change

Policy change is an important driver to improve our food system and built environments. Because of the increased discussions surrounding these issues, several policy changes have already occurred:

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship has clarified the policy on the use of local food by institutions, including schools, care centers and hospitals. Because of this change, many local institutional buyers are again buying fruits and vegetables at Farmer's Markets or directly from local producers.

Several local city councils are responding to information presented in county meetings by addressing sidewalk issues before the Community Action Phase commences.

The Winneshiek County Cattlemen's Association took a proposal to the Iowa Cattlemen's Association to create a policy to support "further research, development and engagement by the beef industry as local food systems and local processing grow to larger markets for our future."

Together we are influencing policy and practice so everyone can be active and have access to affordable, healthy, locally grown food and opportunities for physical activity and play. Through collaboration and innovation we can become a model for other communities across the country.

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