

Johnson County Food Policy Council 2016 Recommendations

Approved May 23, 2016

Background:

The Johnson County Food Policy Council is charged by the Johnson County Board of Supervisors to provide the Supervisor's policy recommendations that aim to strengthen our region's community food system.

The Council's recommendations serve to provide specific actions the Board of Supervisors can take to strengthen our community food system by **removing obstacles** for farmers growing food in a way that enhances the human, environmental, social and economic health in our food shed, **creating a stronger market** for locally-grown food and related local food-based businesses and **utilizes the county's own resources** to support the local food movement.

For the purposes of this document, the definition of a food system, food shed and a healthy community-based food system are as follows:

A **food system** includes all processes and infrastructure involved in feeding a population: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consumption, and disposal of food and food-related items.

A **foodshed** is a geographic region in which there is a flow of food from where it is grown to a place where it is consumed. This also includes the land on which it is grown, the routes it travels, the markets it passes through and ultimately the tables on which it is served. A food shed is similar to a watershed in that foodsheds outline the flow of food feeding a particular population, whereas watersheds outline the flow of water draining to a particular location.

A **community-based food system** is a food system in which food production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and waste management are interconnected to enhance the human, environmental, social and economic health of a particular geographic area.

For more information on community food systems, read "Healthy Food, Healthy Iowans, Healthy Communities: Public Health Tools to Advance Healthy, Sustainable Food Systems" by the Iowa Department of Public Health, August 2013.

2016 Recommendations to the Johnson County Board of Supervisors:

1. Revitalize the County Poor Farm as a Local Foods Center

The Johnson County Food Policy Council recommends that the Board of Supervisors adopt a comprehensive master plan by June, 2017 that includes the transformation of the County Poor Farm into a Local Foods Center.

A Local Foods Center will increase agricultural production of local foods and return an investment for farmers as well as increase the availability of healthy, local produce and products available to our community.

A Local Foods Center can provide but is not limited to:

- Land access to farmers.
- Affordable housing on-site for farmers working the land.
- Public Gathering spaces (indoor and outdoor) for non-profit and other community groups to provide educational opportunities to residents.
- Infrastructure needs for food production.
- Clear signage highlighting land management practices that build soil and water health.

Past recommendations of the Johnson County Food Policy Council have called for the Board of Supervisors to find solutions to the unique challenges small farmers in Johnson County face, including the high cost of farmland and the need for housing on-site for farmers, families & workers. In addition, the JCFPC has called for the Board of Supervisors to find ways to support public gatherings on farms, agritourism and access to land for beginning farmers. We believe adopting a comprehensive plan that will ultimately transform the County

Poor Farm into a Local Food Center, and could include solutions for most, if not all, of these issues for small farmers in Johnson County.

In addition, the JCFPC recommends that the Board of Supervisors continue issuing the Request for Proposals (RFP) to farmers and organizations to grow food at the Johnson County Poor Farm on an annual basis.

2. Support the Development of Food Hub Entities in Johnson County

The demand for locally-grown foods in our foodshed is more than the supply. Food Hubs are the missing pieces that can help grow and make our local food system more efficient in every sector.

The food hub will allow for the distribution, aggregation, processing and storage of local foods.

We ask the county to support efforts in making food hubs a reality in Johnson County.

3. Ag-exemption based on land use and not minimum acreage size

The County's current minimum acreage restriction will continue to have a negative impact on small farms, which are vital to local food production. We strongly recommend the county change the current definition of a farm to exclude minimum acreage size.

We encourage the Board of Supervisors and relevant county staff to work to come up with an agreeable solution to not only declare Johnson County's support for small farmers through a proper definition, but to take action to ensure the county's small farmers are on a level playing field with 40 acre+ farmers.

The County should explore the possibility of defining a farm based on tax assessments rather than the current definition in planning and zoning. This would allow for the definition to be determined based on actual use. Planning and zoning could come up with a minimum lot size to discourage sprawl.

4. Adopt a Rural Ag-Tourism Zoning District

Adopt a new zoning district that supports rural establishments offering agricultural educational activities, local food markets, farm tours, orchards, cideries, community gardens, restaurants, bakeries & more where a majority of the products served are grown on-site. This type of zoning district will provide more economic security to these types of businesses than conditional use permits.

5. Soil & Water Conservation on County-Owned Farmland

The BOS should show their commitment to soil and water conservation by:

- Ensuring that any farm leases for the County Poor Farm and any county-owned farmland procured in the future, include language requiring the highest level of conservation practices for row crop systems. Some of these could include requiring the use of cover crops, contour and riparian buffers, setting aside less productive ground into federal conservation programs and extended crop rotations (beyond the corn-bean rotation).
- Find ways to support all efforts by non-profits, state and federal agencies to encourage and/or require scientifically sound agricultural practices that reduce nutrient and sediment loss, thereby improving water quality and soil health.

6. Small-Scale Meat Processing on Farms: On-Site & Mobile

The BOS should adopt policies that allow local farmers to process meat and poultry on a small-scale on the farm as allowed by state and federal laws. Specifically, allow farmers on A & AR zoned land to process 30 or less livestock per year, following all state and federal laws, by right. In addition, adopt a policy that allows for mobile processing units that follow all state and federal laws to operate in Johnson County. Adopting these policies will allow farmers to scale up their current offerings, increase their return on investment, diversify their farm and keep their business in Johnson County.

7. Local Foods Section in the Comprehensive Plan/ Land Use Plan

It is imperative that the updated Comprehensive Plan include a section on Local Foods. The BOS can help with this by having the Land Use Plan Update Committee provide a plan to the Board of Supervisors that includes this section. The plan should include such things as:

- Language on improving soil quality in Johnson County.
- The addition of edible landscapes along county trails, right-of-ways and roads.
- Ensuring that small farmers have a permanent affordable place to farm.

8. Johnson County as a Resource to Small Farmers

The BOS can create opportunities for farmers in a variety of ways. The county can provide information on the Johnson County website containing the following:

- A list of opportunities for farmers or community gardeners to grow food on county-owned land;
- An FAQ guide for those interested in farming in Johnson County that answers questions on policy, county resources, etc.
- Information regarding existing resources, particularly regarding land stewardship, local food production and sustainability for new, current, and future farmers and landowners.

Additionally, the county could provide building and equipment resources:

- The county has property, staff and heavy equipment that could be utilized. The county could set-up a program that would help farmers improve their land, whether it involves grading, drainage, brush clearing etc. In the end, farmers get land that becomes more productive and the county gets more local food grown by people who are experts in raising crops.
- The county has access buildings and property that could be used to house small farmers/entrepreneurs to use for light processing and packing. Additionally, a shared commercial kitchen space could prove valuable for the county and region.

9. Local Foods to Meet the Challenge of Food Insecurity in Johnson County

As noted by the Hunger Task Force report and echoed at the Food Policy Council's 2016 public forum, there is a need for a centralized "food hub" that allows for storage of donated fresh foods to food pantries. The county should sponsor the creation of a "food hub" that would aid food pantry operations and producers/retailers (see recommendation 3). Local food hubs could team up with food banks to provide storage for large donations of locally grown foods.

The County should provide funding to organizations already working in the community to alleviate food insecurity through existing or new programs that promote local producers.

Examples recommended by the Hunger Task Force include:

- 1) Pilot purchase of mini-portable carts for those with transportation barriers.
- 2) Farm stands near food deserts and schools that include education components.
- 3) Support local farmers and educate consumers on how to prepare and cook foods.

10. County Funding for Local Food System Education and Programs

The 2016 Food Policy Council forum found that one of the biggest barriers to local foods is food system education. Education is vital to the growth of a sustainable and inclusive local food system. Education includes all sectors and actors of the food system. We encourage the county to prioritize funding to organizations working to enhance the quality of our foodshed, provide community education on our food system, and increase the market for local foods in Johnson County.

The BOS supplies block grant funding to organizations working to reduce food insecurity. We encourage the county to continue to support this endeavor, and would also like them to also support organizations that work to *educate* the community about our food system and the importance of a quality foodshed. The county could further find innovative ways to partner with organizations and businesses on grants and initiatives by providing staff time, copies, and other resources to further the movement.

11. County Board of Supervisors as Influencers

The BOS could use their time working and meeting with the city councils of cities in Johnson County, state representatives and federal representative's to promote a community food system.

The County could encourage cities within Johnson county:

- Encourage cities to use their power to protect our foodshed.
- City-Owned land leased to farmers to be used for food production
- Support Urban Agriculture/ Local food-based businesses
- Purchase directly from or entice other local businesses to purchase from local food-based businesses
- Support farmers markets
- Enhance Community gardens
- Include Edible Landscaping in city land use plans

The County could encourage our State Representatives to:

- Fund a Local Food Department within the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship
- Provide more resources to farmers growing specialty crops;
- Financially support Farm to School chapters based on school size for sourcing local foods, food system education and building and maintaining outdoor classrooms/ school gardens
- Provide incentives to farmers that use production practices that increase soil, air, water quality OR disincentives for those that decrease quality;

The County could encourage our representatives at the Federal Level to:

- Pass/Adopt a proclamation in support the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, Section 109 of Title I of the House Bill Amendment
 - Every 5 years, Food programs for child & adult care centers: Summer school, School lunch, school breakfast, supplementing WIC;
 - Emphasis on nutritious foods & healthy food education
- Funding for Farm to School
 - School gardens, Outdoor classrooms
 - Local Food sourcing for school lunches
 - Food system education in schools
- Require farmers receiving federal assistance at any level to document methods used to increase soil, air & water quality; decrease soil, air & water quality

12. Reducing Food Waste and Promoting Composting Programs

According to the EPA, U.S. residents compost about 3 percent of their overall food waste.

- The county will support city-wide curbside composting with existing agencies and programs to achieve countywide curbside compost collection with an educational component. The County could also investigate the compost marketplace to look for strategic partnerships and market expansion opportunities.
- Continue the collection at all public county facilities of all compostable organics (food & paper waste), and diversion of same to the Iowa City landfill's compost processor.
- Sponsor education programs on reducing food waste.

13. On-Farm Housing for Farm Workers

On-farm labor is critical to the success of many farms. Access to farm work is valuable for migrant families as well as new farmers seeking to learn the trade. Essential to this working relationship is a safe and sanitary space to live for the duration of the farming months.

We recommend:

- To increase dialogue with farmers and explore options available to promote fair, affordable, sustainable on-site housing for farm workers.
- That regulations be made to address the need for suitable on farm housing for seasonal workers.