

Farm to City

Rebuilding the Food System, Face to Face

Questions of urban green design often focus on architecture, water management and transportation. Measuring energy consumption hints at the degree to which urban areas are reliant on outputs of natural resources to perform their daily functions. London, for example, necessitates 20 million tons of fuels each year and over a billion tons of water for a city of seven million. Equally vital, of course, is a population's need for food, which is even more concretely quantifiable in the form of acreage needed to sustain an urban populace. In Girardet's 1996 study, London's 2.4 million tons of food inputs equated to a need for 21 million acres of farmland. When translated into an ecological footprint, the city's clear dependence on external food supply shows its inherent unsustainable nature. As food is piped into the metropolis from further and further away, the need for fuel and transportation infrastructure compound urban dependence on outside resources. London's estimated *ecological footprint* (of 125 times its actual surface area) provides a measure on which to pinpoint areas of improvement. Appropriate land use immediately becomes a central issue for city sustainability.¹

Ebenzer Howard's model for garden city's considered the need for a close and ready source of farmland surrounding small urban areas. Industrialized cities were far too big for Howard's influential designs, but the realized importance of agriculture relationships between town and country remain relevant considerations for modern plans of sustainable cities. In Philadelphia, a city of 1.4 million people, ties to surrounding farmlands have been largely severed. The flow of food into urban supermarkets happens by train, boat and truck, with foods typically traveling between 1,500 and 2,000 miles to get to the dinner table. The suburbanization of Philadelphia's outlying farmlands continues at an ever increasing pace, constantly reducing the city's ability to boast of a food security blanket.²

¹ Beatley, p.233 (from Girardet table)

² www.farmtocity.com

Farm to City (FTC) emerged in 2000 to address Philadelphia’s vanishing food security. Along with several other local food advocates, Farm to City has set out to reinforce and reinvigorate ties between small farms and urban consumers. Their focus has been on multiple levels: economic sustainability of farms, cultural reconnection between citizen and farmers, and physical well being as a motivational factor for people to patronize local foods. While gains have been modest compared to the pace of rural development, Farm to City has found niche markets, ready customers and models of business that appear to be replicable. The project’s strategies and educational efforts highlight possibilities of sustainable food flows in a future that appears to be dominated by agribusiness and poorly planned suburban sprawl.

The American Farmland Trust, a small farm advocacy group, has published significant data surrounding American loss of farmland. They have found that the rate of

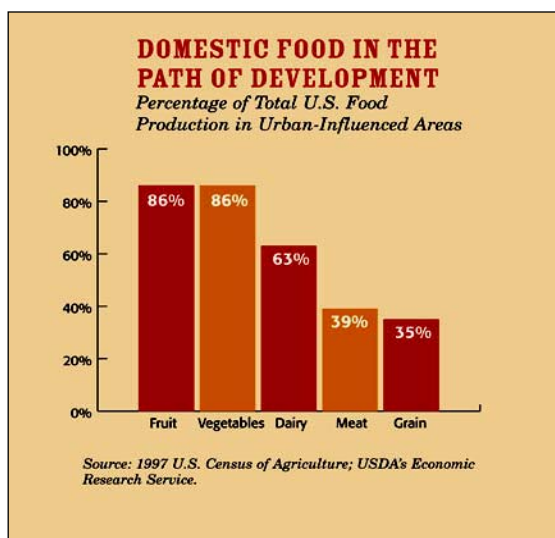


Figure 1: from www.farmland.org

acreage loss has been accelerating. Pennsylvania lost 23% more land in the 1990s than in the 1980s.³ They point out wasteful land development (with a major increase in homes larger than 10 acres) on prime agricultural land as a main problem. Additionally, the land closest to urban areas is most at risk. When compared to the American Farmland Trust’s map of endangered farmland (which is almost all

clustered around urban areas), the table of “food in the path of development” [figure 1] shows the degree to which our domestic food production is at risk. But when farm business “receives less than ten cents of the food dollar and sells commodities for 1950s prices,” it becomes clear that basic economics will favor the developers of gated country estates, strip malls and golf courses.⁴

The challenge to Farm to City becomes how to show the viability of endangered agriculture. Bob Pierson, the group’s founder, has applied various methods of re-

³ http://www.farmland.org/farmingontheedge/major_allstates.htm

⁴ http://www.farmland.org/mid_atlantic/index.htm

establishing links to urban customers. Farmers' Markets, buying clubs and community supported agriculture (CSA) are the three main thrusts of the organization. FTC acts as an agent, connecting products to city customers. Gone are the middlemen that reduced farmers' take from their crops and reduced their markets. Pierson's ideal transaction is between grower and buyer, face to face.

To that effect, the farmers' markets are the centerpiece of Farm to City's work. Along with the Food Trust (a local non profit), Pierson has overseen a renaissance in Philadelphia's farmers' market culture. FTC runs ten of the twenty-six weekly seasonal markets in the city, a four fold growth in the four years that they have been active.⁵ Community representatives constantly note how the markets strengthen the social fabric of neighborhoods as well as providing meaningful access to fresh produce to underserved areas of the city. In fact, Pierson includes "providing healthy food" as one of the three main reasons for the initiative (the other two being securing farms and farm income and ensuring humane treatment of workers, land and animals).

The highly visible nature of seeing fresh produce stands along city streets has proven to be an effective advertising tool. FTC's polls show that 80% of their customers discover the markets by walking by or by word of mouth.⁶ The markets have begun to accept Access cards, to increase market usage by people in subsidized food programs and thus increasing their demographic base of support. Pierson notes that Food Security "to many, is a discussion of whether low income people can afford nutritious food." While to others, it is an assessment of a region's ability to sustain its population with a local food supply.⁷ One sees the duality of the FTC strategy: provide immediate health support for city families and financial support for small farms, while, on a bigger scale, sowing seeds for a mutually supportive local food infrastructure.

The markets alone have led some participating farms to reorient their approach to their crops. "Cash crops" like corn and soy are replaced by a more diverse, customer appropriate mix of produce. FTC hasn't yet assessed their impact on their clients' economic standing, but Pierson shares how "one farm changed their whole cropping strategy and tree planting strategy after they started doing direct sales...and they now do 10

⁵ Interview with Pierson.

⁶ Interview with Pierson.

⁷ Interview with Pierson.

markets a week.” Still, other projects have allowed FTC to offer farmers more direct inroads to an inner city clientele.

The idea of CSAs is to enlist advanced buyers of a farm’s harvest through the form of shares. The model was developed by Japanese women in the 1960s and arrived in the United States in the 1980s. The CSAs allow FTC to access a higher end market of buyers already familiar with the value of fresh, local products. FTC’s administrated relationships between four farms and 262 shareholders has grown to include more than 350 shareholders, more than half of the citywide CSA participants.⁸ These customers are more concerned with organic practices and direct support of farms. Advance, lump payment stakes the customer to the farmer’s risks of crop turnout. Many CSA’s encourage family visits to the farms (as opposed to the usual city deliveries to drop-off locations) in efforts to strengthen family to farm bonds. And the financial indications are positive: Somerton Farms (a small half acre farm within Philadelphia’s city limits) exceeded the conventional revenue expectations of a farm of their size (\$3000) by over \$35,000, half of which came from their CSA.⁹

Farm to City further diversifies its entrepreneurial strategies with “buying clubs” designed for those not ready to commit financially to CSAs and to allow greater weekly ordering flexibility. Some CSAs offer the “pay as you go” aspects of buying clubs on top of their CSA commitment. Bob Pierson’s most novel effort appears to be the Winter Harvest buying club. With markets and CSAs typically finished for the winter and early spring, Winter Harvest connects participants with local products, meats, storage crops under the banner of organic practices and sound land stewardship. Again, the strategy has meant the difference for at least one local dairy farm, which credited the Winter Harvest buying club with his ability to remain in business.¹⁰

To an extent, the revitalized local food movement has been values driven. But the driving force appears to be high demand. FTC surveys at their markets ranked the reasons that people were shopping there: 71% of respondents cited the freshness of the food, 54% wanted to support local farmers, another 54% wanted products that were better for their health and 32% were looking for organic products.¹¹ Organizations like FTC and

⁸ Philadelphia Weekly

⁹ Philadelphia Weekly

¹⁰ Interview with Pierson.

¹¹ Interview with Pierson.

Food Routes (a national non profit) offer a diverse range of reasons to patronize local products: strengthen local economy, support family farms, safeguard family health, and protect the environment. The main draw remains quality and freshness. To that end, FTC partnered with Food Routes and other groups to “brand” local farm choices.

The “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” campaign logo aims to be the foot in the door for customers to access a local food buying guide with market information, CSAs, local buying restaurants and vendors.¹² By promoting the campaign, FTC advertises and educates not only for its own uses, but links people to a national campaign (currently in selected markets in 10 states) intent on rebuilding regional food systems. No evaluations of “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” have been performed as of yet, now in its third year. For Farm to City, the markets are the face of advertising and education.



Customers needn't consult labels, but instead can ask farmers directly about use of pesticides, hormones, or genetically modified crops. Relationships can be built and farm visits can be arranged. As mentioned earlier, the fundamental sight of the market is a highly efficient advertising campaign. With consistency and an expanding reach across the city, the willingness to shop, learn and support increase. Still, Pierson laments those who walk by. “[It] frustrates me very much is seeing people walk by a farmers' market and barely give it a glance, showing they have no idea what values the market represents.”¹³

This desire to catch as many people as possible in the local food movement has led to the plans for a Common Market. A feasibility study for a local foods distribution study has already received sizable grants (\$100,000) and has enlisted eight partners. The idea is to increase availability, facilitate value added businesses built off local foods and add to the growing infrastructure. FTC already operates 95% free from grants and subsidies. It remains committed to being a for-profit business that coordinated \$500,000 in farm sales in 2005. Compared to the FTC estimated 1.7 billion dollar food buying power of Philadelphia, there is great room for expansion. Another FTC unofficial estimate is that it would take a 12 square mile area (roughly the size of Fairmount Park) to put a CSA box in every

¹² www.buylocalpa.org

¹³ Interview with Pierson.

Philadelphian household from May to November. Not quite sustainable within the city limits, but all inside the realm of the city's local rural capacity.

Farm to City has relied on partnerships, high traffic locations, inexpensive marketing and an apparently strong demand for fresh products. Clever use of websites, email chains, list serves, word of mouth and visibly bustling markets have resulted in media exposure and examination by others seeking to replicate their model. Bob Pierson has already exported his buying club and CSA ordering web tools to two other groups outside of the city: "In 2006, we will aggressively market the web tools throughout the U.S."¹⁴

Several factors would facilitate a significant resurgence of rural to urban food infrastructure. Federal subsidies to agribusiness "crash crops", such as soy, tobacco, corn and wheat lock many small farms into mono-cropping's lack of diversity. Pierson mentioned that if he had the resources, he would provide technical assistance to small farms near cities, helping them to convert from field crops to fruit and vegetables that would be directly marketable through FTC distribution avenues. Additional federal support could be given to practicing the conservation grants delineated in the recent farm bill. Even on the city government level, there have been controversies around vending fees and relegating farm stands to the status of "hotdog stands".¹⁵ It would seem to be in the city's self interest to fund and encourage FTC and the Food Trust's work.

Long term threats to food security (local food suppliers as opposed to secure access to nutritious foods) do not seem to be on the radar of public policy. Could urban areas count on their food supply in the face of major economic, political, military, or natural disaster upheavals?

"It is not hard to imagine that someday energy costs will be too great to allow affordable food to be imported from great distances (transportation, pesticides, and fertilizers - all necessary for corporate agriculture are all dependent on cheap energy). Within 20 years, local farms using no or a minimum of oil-based inputs, could be growing most of our food because they can do it at lower cost. Also, it will only take one or two incidents (intentional or accidental contamination) in the highly industrialized and centralized food distribution system for major shifts in food distribution patterns, all in favor of locally grown products."¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview with Pierson.

¹⁵ City Paper

¹⁶ Interview with Pierson.

But without these threats being imminent, the main tool for converting citizens to local products seems to be the quality. Pierson also mentions general education to steer people away from prevalent processed foods as a necessary piece to the puzzle. A “kitchen culture” in general seems to be quickly slipping out of practice in mainstream America.

Advocates for a farm to city food connection claim health reasons, economic concerns and environmental issues as chief reasons to buy local. Additionally, there seems to be a wistful urge for people to reconnect with the roots of agriculture. I have often wondered if there is a certain urban pathology born out of disconnection to our food supply and the earth from which it grows. Is there an intrinsic connection that we all innately have and don't cultivate?

Despite the ever advancing developers, it seems rash to see hope in the movement for local food sustainability. One local CSA farmer illustrates the duality of our food system: “I don't think it's the future of food distribution. I think most of our food will be grown overseas, flash frozen and shipped to make way for the housing developments that want to move in, but right now there's a nice market for people who want super-fresh produce.”¹⁷ A successful beginning for Farm to City has given many people reasons to believe in its viability. The next few years and next few ventures may reveal whether it can produce for truly significant sectors of city residents.

¹⁷ Philadelphia Weekly

References:

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Interviews with Bob Pierson (Director of Farm to City)

www.farmtocity.com

www.farmland.org

Website of American Farmland Trust (small farm advocate and non profit)

www.foodroutes.org

Website of national local food advocate (non profit)

www.pasafarming.org

Website of Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture