2015

Suffolk County Food Policy Council

The steps and actions taken by the Suffolk County Food Policy Council in 2014 and an evaluation of next steps.

1/31/2015

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I. MISSION AND GOALS

- **The Mission of the Food Policy Council:**
  - **Promote the production, distribution, and awareness of locally grown food.**
  - **Strengthen and prioritize policies that will improve food access, health, and nutrition.**
  - **Enhance the regional food system by utilizing local agriculture and farming.**

III. MEMBERSHIP

Name	Organization	Representing	Subcommittee
Gregson Pigott	SC Department of Health Services	SCDHS	Food Equity
August Ruckdeschel	SC Department of Economic Development & Planning	SCEDP	Why Buy Local?*
Stephen Kramarcik	SC Department of Social Services	SCDSS	Food Equity
Joe Gergela	Long Island Farm Bureau	LIFB	Why Buy Local?
Michael Haynes	Long Island Cares	Food Equity Advocate	Why Buy Local?
Randi Shubin-Dresner	Island Harvest	Food Equity Advocate	Food Equity
Vacant		Food Retailers	
Robert Schaefer	Divine Brine	Food Processor	Why Buy Local?
Joel Panagakos	J. Kings	Food Distributor	Why Buy Local?
Erin Thoresen	Sustainable Long Island	Community-Based	Food Equity*
Meghan Ashford-Grooms	Health & Welfare Council of Long Island	Community-Based	Food Equity
John Woods	UFCW Local 1500	Local Food Workers	Food Equity
Vacant		School Administration	
Iman Marghoob	Stony Brook Medicine	Presiding Officer Designee	Community Gardens*
Vivian Viloria-Fisher	Suffolk County Legislature	EPA Chair Designee	Food Education
Vacant		Regional Planning Council	
Zahrine Bajwa	Cornell Cooperative Extension	County Executive Designee	Food Equity

*** Designates Subcommittee Chairperson**

Community Garden Subcommittee

The community garden subcommittee of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council aims to help the people of Suffolk County learn to grow and gain access to foods that will help them lead healthier lives. The subcommittee is tasked to identify the means and resources necessary to build, grow, and support community gardens across Suffolk County and to help foster an appreciation and knowledge of growing one's own food.

Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:

- **Sites to grow seedlings for Long Island gardeners** – Committee members have speculated on the availability of greenhouse sites that could be used to purchase or grow seedlings for community gardens. Further investigation is needed, particularly the exploration of facilities through Cornell Cooperative Extension, BOCES, and other school programs.
- **Access to water at community gardens** – The subcommittee has looked into how they can persuade or convince municipalities to pay for the gardens to be hooked up to the Suffolk County Water Authority (SCWA). The initial payment is usually approximately $1,600-$1,800 to get access to water, an absolute necessity for a community garden. It is understood that the SCWA cannot waive fees or charge discounted rates – it has been suggested that government partnerships could consider ways to offset or cover the costs of the initial hook-up and/or waive the first year of water fees as a way to incentivize development of community gardens.
- **The establishment of a 501c3 Long Island Community Gardens Association (LICGA) -** A 501(c)(3) would create an opportunity for LICGA to become an umbrella organization under which community gardens on Long Island may apply for grants for funding. Often financial constraints limit gardens from expanding and attracting new members which, in turns, limits overall food access. Currently, the LICGA steering committee is comprised of volunteers from Sustainable Long Island, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Stony Brook Medicine, garden managers from Bellport and Huntington Station, and school garden teachers. LICGA is currently working with Hofstra Law Clinic to establish a not-for profit status and currently maintains the website with assistance from Sustainable Long Island and Stony Brook dietetic interns. It is also hoped that the creation of a 501(c)(3) will create funding opportunities to address previously referenced challenges such as water access and greenhouse availability.
- **Educational events to be hosted by LICGA –** The LICGA is organizing workshops for gardeners scheduled to be held in Spring 2015 and has submitted proposals to the Long Island Food Conference scheduled for April 25, 2015.

2014 Accomplishments:

- In 2014 the committee organized a workshop at Stony Brook University hosting community and school gardens from Nassau and Suffolk Counties. As a result of this workshop a Long Island Community Gardens Association (LICGA) was created, which includes members from both school and community gardens.
- A LICGA steering committee was created which meets monthly. Additionally, an LICGA website was developed with funding from Sustainable Long Island and work by Stony Brook dietetic interns. The website www.longislandcommunitygardens.org is updated weekly and can help interested parties identify local community gardens via a Google Map app. It also serves as an informational warehouse for region-specific information about community and school grant opportunities, "starting a garden", workshops, conferences and events. It is the online heart of community gardens on Long Island.

- The LICGA hosted a Veterans' Day film screening of *Ground Operations-From Battlefields to Farmfields* at the Wang Center at Stony Brook University, a film about veterans going into agriculture. Congressman Tim Bishop attended and awarded several vets who have been active in LI community gardens Congressional awards. Farmer/poet Scott Chaskey, an active supporter of community gardens on Long Island, and past president of NOFA-NY, was also present and held a book-reading and signing of his book *Seedtime*. Mr. Chaskey has served as a longtime supporter and mentor to community gardeners.
- The NYSDOH community gardens grant was extended an additional year extension till March 31, 2015 and then another six-month extension ending September 2015.
- LICGA has submitted two proposals for presentations for the Food Conference of Long Island at Hofstra University, set for April 25, 2015.
- LICGA steering committee has become incorporated and is pursuing 501(c)(3) status with help from the Hofstra Law Clinic.

Food Equity Subcommittee

The food equity subcommittee of the Suffolk Food Policy Council aims to identify actionable steps to achieve greater equity within the regional food system and to make recommendations to the entire Food Policy Council as well as the Legislature, and to identify or offer suggestions on legislation to achieve those steps.

Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:

This year the food equity subcommittee explored a number of issues that deal with increasing access to healthy, affordable food and beverage options, including promoting the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at farmers' markets and working with neighborhood corner grocers to expand and increase healthy choices.

- **SNAP at Farmers' Markets –** The acceptance of SNAP at farmers' markets is on the rise and over the past few years an increasing number of farmers' markets on Long Island have begun accepting SNAP. Data from the USDA Food & Nutrition Service show that between 2007 and 2011 the national number of farmers' markets and direct marketing farmers authorized to accept SNAP increased 360%.[1] SNAP redemption rates have increased dramatically across the country since the electronic benefit transfer card was introduced in 2004 (about 400%), and between 2011 and 2013 alone SNAP redemption rates nearly doubled. During that same time, SNAP redemption in New York State increased by 50%.[2] Despite these improvements, the overall value of SNAP spent at farmers' markets remains low and redemption rates on Long Island are comparatively lower. According to data cited in Sustainable Long Island's Food System Report Card (http://sustainableli.org/what-we-do/food-equity/food-system-report-card/), in Nassau County the value of total farmers market SNAP sales increased 203.5% between 2009 and 2010, from $866 to $2,628, while in Suffolk County it increased just 4.2% from $1,425 to $1,485 during the same period. Several studies have proven that SNAP is an economic stimulus: every dollar in new SNAP benefits generates $1.73 In economic activity.[3]
    - The Subcommittee has been conducting research into SNAP redemption and barriers to use of SNAP at farmers' markets and generally on fresh produce. Anecdotally there are issues around how to protect SNAP recipients from stigma and encouraging recipients to buy produce as opposed to shelf-stable items. The group proposes to continue to research the obstacles to using SNAP at farmers' markets, potentially through focus groups, and to gather current data about SNAP use at markets in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, as well as to develop innovative solutions to test and pilot. Solutions may involve increased promotion/advertising of SNAP acceptance in multiple languages, educational events or campaigns, and other ideas.

[1] Farmers Market Coalition, http://farmersmarketcoalition.org/snap-redemptions-at-farmers-markets-exceed-11m-in-2011/, accessed January 12, 2015.
[2] USDA Food & Nutrition Service, cited by Wholesome Wave, http://www.wholesomewave.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Farmers-Market-SNAP-Redemptions-by-State-FY1994-2013_2-copy-2.jpg, accessed January 12, 2015.
[3] Food Research and Action Center, http://frac.org/initiatives/american-recovery-and-reinvestment-act/snapfood-stamps-provide-real-stimulus/, accessed January 12, 2015.

- **Healthy Corner Stores** – While initiatives to improve food access have typically focused on establishing new markets or new projects, there is growing recognition of the need to take advantage of existing retail outlets and to work with them to expand the variety and quantity of healthy food and beverage options they offer to customers. The Food Equity Subcommittee has launched a new project to work with small neighborhood retailers such as corner stores, delis, and bodegas. The project aims to make more healthy food and beverages available to customers, to increase the amount of shelf space dedicated to healthy options and develop signage to promote these new options, as well as to attract more business to the stores through marketing and promotion, and to provide resources and educational materials to store staff and customers about making healthy choices.

Figure 1 Project participants and supporters at the kick-off in August 2014.

2014 Accomplishments:

To promote the use of SNAP at farmers' markets, the food equity subcommittee partnered with member agencies such as Cornell Cooperative Extension, Sustainable Long Island, Island Harvest, and the Suffolk County Departments of Health and Social Services to distribute flyers listing all the markets in Suffolk (and Nassau County) that accept SNAP and participate in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. The group discussed the importance of and benefits SNAP provides both in terms of making healthy produce more affordable to lower income individuals and families and the benefits to growers who participate in farmers' markets and direct marketing.

Healthy Corner Stores - For the Healthy Corner Stores Project, committee members identified the Neighborhood Country Market in the Village of Mastic Beach, located at 73 Whittier Drive. The group worked closely with the store's owner, Abdul Rattu to conduct an assessment and then expand healthy offerings at the store, and promote the stores participation in the project. The group developed a logo to help develop and promote recognition of the project, seen at right.

Figure 2 Healthy Corner Stores Project logo featuring Neighborhood Country Market

Other steps taken as part of the project include:

- An assessment conducted by a trained nutritionist of the store's inventory;
- Identification of strategies to expand healthy options and encourage customers to make healthy choices;
- A kick-off event that included showing off the stores new healthy offerings and new shelving, a survey of to determine customers' preferences and gauge interest in healthy foods and beverages, a recipe demonstration featuring samples of a healthy yogurt parfait provided by Cornell Cooperative Extension, coupons for $1 off of low-fat or fat-free milk, blood pressure screenings by the County Department of Health, and free meals for kids under age 18 offered by Island Harvest;

- Assistance with an application to become a WIC-authorized vendor;
- Addition of healthy fresh produce (apples, bananas, nectarines, avocados, etc.), low-fat milk, and low-fat yogurt to the stores regular inventory;
- Purchase of new shelving and a new deli case to showcase healthy offerings;
- Recipe demonstrations by nutrition educators at Cornell Cooperative Extension to showcase seasonal healthy items;
- Connecting the store with local lenders to discuss financing for new equipment for the store; and
- Design and printing of a new banner and signage for Neighborhood Country Market.

The Healthy Corner Stores Project kick-off event at Neighborhood Country Market was covered in the Tri-Hamlet News and News 12, and was attended by leaders from across the County including many members of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council and Suffolk County Legislator Kate Browning (3rd District).

Figure 1 Photos of new shelving and new deli case procured for Neighborhood Country Market as part of Healthy Corner Stores Project.

In September Sustainable Long Island secured a $50,000 grant from the Pritchard Charitable Trust to expand the pilot project to work with three to four additional stores. The subcommittee is also in the process of conducting outreach to additional stores in areas with limited access to healthy choices, and has developed relationships with additional stores. In fact, a store in North Bellport has expressed interest in participating in the project, and work with this store is just getting under way, beginning with an assessment of the store's offerings and customer preferences.

Other accomplishments of subcommittee members and their various agencies or organizations include:

- Sustainable Long Island provided technical assistance and guidance to community based organizations, North Shore Long Island Jewish Health System, and the Town of Southampton who ran seven youth-staffed farmers' markets helping improve access to fresh, healthy produce grown on Long Island.
    - The markets also featured educational events such as SNAP outreach done by Island Harvest to encourage people to learn more about the program and be screened to determine whether

they're eligible to receive benefits, and cooking demonstrations to showcase produce sold at the markets and teach customers how to prepare healthy recipes.

- Committee members researched and shared information about SNAP redemption systems and incentives that might be used to encourage more use of SNAP at farmers' markets.
- Members of the subcommittee have worked closely with the Community Gardens subcommittee and are working to support development of a Long Island Community Garden Association, including maintenance of the comprehensive website www.longislandcommunitygardens.org.

Next steps (subject to change per subcommittee guidance):

The subcommittee will meet again in late January 2015 to discuss the immediate next steps with the Healthy Corner Stores Project as well as other issues and priorities for the coming year. Potential ideas include:

- Assemble and distribute information about state and local regulations for cooking demonstrations and food sampling, and identify and explore possible changes in policy to encourage more use of cooking demonstrations as educational tools at farmers markets in safe, appropriate manner.
- Partner with recipients of the New York State Department of Health Creating Healthy Schools & Communities grant (to-be-determined) to develop and expand nutrition standards for foods and beverages purchased and served by agencies, organizations, and worksites.
- Explore additional policy changes and recommendations, possibly including, but not limited to the following:
    - Develop an ordinance that would allow certain community gardens or other non-farm gardens to sell produce they grow either on-site or at local farmers' markets;
    - Work with the Community Gardens subcommittee to advocate changes in regulations and practices to allow community gardens free or reduced-cost access to water hookups;
    - Explore encouraging renewable energy usage on farms to potentially reduce expenditures and generate income; and
    - Advocate standardization of data on food waste and composting on Long Island and disseminate to relevant stakeholders and decision-makers.
- Encourage and promote Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects. CSAs are membership based farm-shares in which members pay up front, in advance of the growing season, to support the farmer in planting and growing produce all season long. In exchange for the payment, members receive shares of produce that they take home to eat - typically a full share is picked up on a weekly basis, and half-shares are collected every-other week. CSAs are evolving and are offered in several locations throughout Long Island. The Subcommittee would like to encourage growth and development of these projects to help expand access to healthy food.

"Why Buy Local?" Subcommittee

The "Why Buy Local?" subcommittee of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council serves to promote the production, distribution and accessibility of locally grown food. The subcommittee aims to expand access to quality local food, enhance food security, promote sustainability, and expand economic opportunities for local agricultural producers, processors, and distributors.

Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:

- **NY Food Metrics Bill** – The subcommittee will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the Food Metrics Bill (S.4061/A.5102), signed into law in 2013. This bill establishes guidelines to help state agencies purchase more local food and requires them to report the geographic origin of any food they buy. The reporting requirement of this bill is important because once we understand how much local food state agencies buy, we can set concrete targets and sustainability standards for state purchases of local food. This state law, if effective, could serve as a model for Suffolk County legislation.
- **Food Waste** – Intermarché, a French supermarket chain, has recently launched a wildly successful "Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables" campaign that has both reduced food waste and increased affordable food access. While many local supermarkets offer discounts for aged produce, there is no real equivalent marketing effort to promote "ugly or abnormal" produce in the United States. Would local supermarket chains be interested in experimenting with this model?
- **Farm-to-School** – the Council has invited representatives from the educational arena to join our meetings and is looking for a formal appointment to the Food Policy Council for someone with an educational background, preferably with a purchasing background. The Council needs access to individuals who can facilitate farm-to-school lunch programs. Speakers are lined up in 2015 to discuss successful "Farm to School" efforts on Long Island.

2014 Accomplishments:

- **Agritourism Visitor's Center** – members of this subcommittee are exploring opportunities to bring an agritourism visitor's center to Long Island. This tourism center would offer information to tourists about Suffolk County agritourism options including, but not limited to, vineyard tasting rooms, agricultural educational tours, seasonal special events, fresh baked produce, farmers markets, petting zoos, and "pick-your-own" operations. Both the Governor's office and Empire State Development have expressed enthusiasm about expanding agritourism opportunities in Suffolk County. With the assistance of subcommittee members, The Town of Riverhead secured $700,000 in grants and loans to open an Agritourism Visitors Center in Riverhead.
- **Addressing the Agricultural "Brain Drain"** - According to the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture, the average age of the Suffolk County farmer is 57.6, which is 1.1 years higher than the previous Census reported. It is also .5 years higher than the NY state average and 1.3 years higher than the national average. If we want to maintain farming on Long Island, we not only need to find a way to preserve land and to keep the costs of farming down, we have to identify and groom the next generation of local

farmers. In light of this challenge, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, with Policy Council assistance and attendance, hosted two "Agricultural Education" Forums at Suffolk Community College in the month of May. The forums were intended to identify resources and develop opportunities to educate the next generation of farmers here on Long Island. The forums were split into a K-12 meeting and a College+ meeting. Several initiatives were developed and are actively moving forward as a result of this forum:

- An online survey was distributed to Suffolk County K-12 school districts to inventory their agricultural assets, wants, and interests in developing an agricultural curriculum in and outside of their classrooms (including after school programs, school gardens, greenhouse availability, etc.). 33 schools responded and have demonstrated an interest in expanding agricultural programming.
- At least two school districts (one on the East End, one on the West End) are pursuing the installation of greenhouses to complement educational curriculum and extracurricular activities. One East End High School is interesting in adding agricultural opportunities to its "Environmental Club" with the hope of developing Agricultural Education AP course in the future.
- Eastern Suffolk BOCES is working with partners to develop a summer "Ag Tech Internship Program" which would offer mentorship programs in agricultural commodities such as vegetable farming, aquaculture, greenhouse and horticulture, aquaculture, agritourism, or organic farming. The program is expected to launch in Summer 2015.

- **Funding Young Farmers** – Building on efforts to identify and retain next generation farmers, subcommittee members helped secure a $1 million in Empire State Development funding for the "Agriculture Capital Equipment Grant Program" which is a Long Island-based (Nassau and Suffolk Counties) program that creates a pool of resources to assist farmers making capital investments for their farming operation. The program will help 100-150 emerging and established farmers over three years acquire the equipment needed to start or grow their business and meet the increasing demands for food quality and safety standards. The program is an equipment cost-share program that will reimburse farmers up to 20% of the purchase cost of new or used capital equipment. Eligible parties shall include: 1) New and emerging farmers, including second-career farmers; 2) Farmers upgrading equipment to come into compliance with new food safety regulations and; 3) Farmers transitioning to new commodities or methods of production.
- **Online web presence** - The subcommittee has created both a Facebook account and a Twitter account (https://twitter.com/SCFoodCouncil). Editorial control currently resides in the Suffolk County Department of Economic Development & Planning. The Facebook account has 68 "Likes" and the Twitter account has 11 followers. Clearly both pages need increased reach to improve effectiveness.

- The 4th annual "Celebrate Grown on Long Island Day' was successfully held at the Suffolk County farm in Yaphank. The Food Policy Council will continue to seek ways to market and promote this important event.
- A report that was produced in 2013 summarizing the attitudes of 143 Suffolk County agricultural producers was authored by the Suffolk County Department of Economic Development & Planning and presented to the Food Policy Council. The findings of this report were the subject of several panels and presentations before policy decision makers in 2014, including the *Suffolk County Planning Commission* and the *East End Supervisors and Mayors Association*.

Next steps (subject to change per subcommittee guidance):

- Expand online presence. Grow Facebook and Twitter accounts.
- Explore programs such as Michigan's "Double Up Food Bucks" program which allows SNAP benefit enrollees to "double up" their benefits on fresh, local healthy foods at places like farmers markets. Can we find the funds and political will to support similar efforts locally?
- Trends such as "buying local," "organic," and "slow food" continue to advantage the local Suffolk County food industry. However, as demands increase, producers must be technologically prepared to date and label their produce to satisfy consumer demand. Consumers want to know where and how their produce is grown or raised. We must continue to work with producers, processors, and distributors to meet these expectations.
- Food Hubs – keep an eye of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) hubs in Wyandanch and Ronkonkoma. Can these hubs serve as "food hubs" and alleviate food deserts?
- Survey Suffolk County colleges and universities to explore interest and capability of agricultural studies and institutions of higher learning.

Other Actions, Issues and Recommendations

- Worked with Suffolk County Legislator Kara Hahn (5th District) to draft **IR 1096-14**, the **"Healthy Food Standards" Act**, which created new nutrition standards for Suffolk County vending machines and at concession stands in Suffolk County Parks, including beaches. The bill, which passed in July 2014, was based in part on the New York State Department of Health's Healthy Workplace Food Initiative. The legislation sets calorie, sodium, fiber and fat standards for food offered in the three County Beach Huts (private vendor operated) and also the 72 vending machines located throughout county buildings. It encourages local and organic produce purchasing when feasible to promote increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. The bill is a means of providing the public with more healthy options in public places in light of worrisome obesity rates recently reported in Suffolk County (59%).
- In September, the Food Policy Council spoke before members of the **New York State Council on Food Policy** during the State Council's listening tour. An overview of Suffolk County efforts was given and subcommittee members identified needs from the state including: increased expenditures on farmland preservation, increased marketing and branding expenditures, an adjustment to State programs to adapt to the unique nature of Long Island agriculture, continued support and funding for programs such as the Governor's Fresh Connect program for farmers' markets and other food projects, and renewed funding for programs like Healthy Food Financing Initiative to create and expand supermarkets and grocery stores.
- On October 9th 2014, members of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council spoke on panels celebrating **National Food Day held at Farmingdale State College and Hofstra University** (organized by Students for a Greener Hofstra), discussing the role and importance of policies and programs to enhance and improve equity within the regional food system. This was the second consecutive year that Food Policy Council members spoke at this event.
- **Rethink Your Drink** is a non-profit coalition that helps work sites, schools, public libraries, child care centers, PTAs, parks and public places in Suffolk County create healthier environments by improving beverage options. **Rethink Your Drink @ Work** is a free program that helps create healthier work environments across Suffolk County. The program includes a 15 minute presentation at the worksite, hosted by a registered dietitian. Feedback from employees is then collected using a quick survey. After reviewing the feedback the program director is then able to provide assistance (and items such as water pitchers and water coolers) to help the site create a healthier beverage environment. The program also offers technical assistance to hospitals that are implementing the New York State Department of Health food and beverage standards for hospitals. The Suffolk County Food Policy Council is working with Mather Hospital to promote this program and expand its outreach efforts.
- **Vacant Positions –** The Committee, with aid and assistance from the legislature, must fill Council vacancies and replace members who a) are no longer interested in serving and b) have not committed to attending further Council meetings.