

'Eating local' strengthens economy

Tapping into Portage County resources could reap benefits for our budgets

What if someone told you there was a way to gain 25,000 small business jobs in Northeast Ohio, increasing economic output by \$4.2 billion and generating \$126 million in local and state taxes, while reducing energy use and pollution, increasing homeland security and conserving our environment?

Those are the positive benefits cited in a new report that examined the impact of shifting 25 percent of the dollars we spend on food (up from the current estimates of less than 10 percent) to food that is grown, processed, packaged and distributed locally.

Titled "The 25% Shift: The Benefits of Food Localization for Northeast Ohio & How to Realize Them," it was funded by local foundations and written by a team including an economist, a specialist in small business development and a local food system organizer. You can download it from the Northeast Ohio Food Web site: www.neofoodweb.org.

Think about it on your next trip to the supermarket. Take a look at the labels, although it's not always easy to determine your food's place of origin. It's estimated that an average meal has traveled over 1,200 miles by the time it reaches your plate. Sure we have winter to contend with here, but even at the height of summer, we are still buying produce from across the country and around the globe. Why on earth are we importing pasta sauce from Italy, for example, when we can grow tomatoes, peppers, garlic, and onions here?

World food prices are at a record high and oil prices are rising. Something is wrong when 73 cents of your retail food dollar goes towards distribution and only seven cents goes to the farmers that produced it. No wonder that so many farmers have been pushed to sell their land for development — if farming were more profitable, especially through opportunities for added-value food crops, farmland preservation would not be such an issue.

And think about food safety and security. The more dependent we are on outside sources for food, the more vulnerable we are to disruptions due to contamination, natural disaster or transportation. Wouldn't it be more comforting to know that as a region we could at least have the ability



GREEN PORTAGE

Christine Craycroft

to feed ourselves into the future?

Agriculture has always been an important part of Portage County's natural and cultural heritage, and its economy. As we consider the potential for Portage County's future, let's focus on our strengths. While billions of people in the world struggle with drought and depleted soils, we are fortunate to have plenty of water and productive farmland in a temperate climate. We have great potential to tap currently wasted resources for compost and bio-fuels, and a largemarket of consumers.

Besides the generations of families that have farmed Portage County, there is a renewed interest in supporting local foods here, evidenced by expanding farmer's markets, community gardens, produce farms, and creameries. There is a new Facebook group: "Portage Local FoodProject."

Some folks are hoping to develop 'incubator kitchens' to provide certified processing sites for value-added food products, as does the ACEnet kitchen in Athens, Ohio, which has spawned dozens of small businesses.

We at the Portage Park District are also considering options for utilizing some of our parkland for sustainable agriculture as a renewable revenue source and opportunity for public education.

We can grow our economy in a healthy, sustainable way by supporting our local food system. It's a more resilient economy, not as vulnerable to the whims of global markets, oil prices, and big business but rather one that conserves our natural resources and creates a fabric of local jobs that will be here into the future — after all, everyone has to eat!

Chris Craycroft is Executive Director of the Portage Park District. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier.

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