

Who:	Food Systems Workgroup
What:	A metro area workgroup
Where:	Greater Lansing

RESIDENTS PUT FOOD INTO FOCUS, UNITE LOCAL EFFORTS

Where's the food group?

That question came to the minds of Lansing-area leaders several years ago after surveys of residents in a three-county regional planning effort ranked food issues among the most important. Organizers looked around and found groups ready to work on every other issue but food, which ranked #3, #4, and #7 out of the 25 issues identified. Standing ready were an environmental group, a transportation group, a health group and more. But no group focused specifically on three inter-related, top-ranked issues for Ingham and Eaton counties: food safety, food quality, and access to healthy food. Now there are two such food groups.

One of these, the Food Systems Workgroup, arose directly out of the regional planning effort, after organizers called on Michigan State University Extension in Lansing for help getting a food group going. The Food Systems Workgroup is focused primarily on food issues and opportunities in the city of Lansing.

A council in Eaton County emerged independently and is, effectively, a rural counterpart to the urban council. Together, the two councils represent an organic "foodshed" response to the needs and opportunities in each community and to the region as a whole.

Like the term watershed, which covers the connection between rainfall and streams to bodies of water that they feed, the term foodshed captures the relationships that define an interrelated area of local and regional food interests such as supply from rural farms and demand from urban consumers.

"Our work is not defined by county lines," said Randy Bell of MSU Extension, an organizer of the Food Systems Workgroup. "It is defined by centers of population, whether large like Lansing or smaller like [the nearby city of] Charlotte."

The result is greater attention locally and regionally to the food issues that ranked so high in the tri-county planning effort. The result is also a greater and united voice for people and organizations working to make needed changes— from innovation in local governments' agricultural zoning to development of regional food markets in which producers and consumers from many localities participate.

For example, the Lansing-focused Food Systems Workgroup is now one of several official community coalitions that work together on local issues and initiatives under an umbrella network, called The Power of We, serving Lansing and surrounding areas. During the city of Lansing's master planning process,



Three hundred people from across Mid-Michigan attended the 2014 Everybody Eats Conference. This annual one-day conference is one of the projects of the Food Systems Workgroup and provides perspective and programming about food justice and democracy for people representing all sectors of the community-based food system.

the Food Systems Workgroup provided recommendations that are now part of that reference document for the city's goals and priorities. These include calls for urban youth engagement in food and agriculture, more neighborhood fresh food retail, and efforts to develop food innovation districts, which cluster community and entrepreneurial efforts for important synergies and community economic development.

What

The organizations active in the Food Systems Workgroup represent numerous Lansing-based community and entrepreneurial initiatives as well as connections to communities around the city, such as Eaton County. These organizations include:

Allen Neighborhood Center. *This nonprofit, based in Lansing's Eastside neighborhood, has over the years developed food initiatives that serve neighborhood residents as well as rural and regional businesses.*

Lansing Roots Incubator Farm. *This project of the Greater Lansing Food Bank provides low-cost startup land and resources to young and beginning farmers.*

Incu-Bake. *A commercial kitchen for rent to food entrepreneurs complete with business development and licensing assistance.*

And more ... From urban farms to health departments and hospitals, those working with the Food Systems Workgroup use its roundtable to function as a loose yet cohesive and growing coalition.

Why

Embedded in the Food Systems Workgroup's founding documents is the recognition that desired food system improvements will require greater food system understanding among producers, consumers, and policymakers. By standing as "the food group" ready to identify and tackle these issues in mid-Michigan, the coalition helps individuals and organizations take collective action both in the city of Lansing and collaboratively in the region with like-minded efforts.

How

The Food Systems Workgroup operates on two levels. One is its at-large committee, which is open to all by application. The other is its steering committee of up to 15 people from across the food system. The steering committee serves a coordinating and strategic planning role. The at-large and steering committees meet several times a year.

The Food Systems Workgroup spent more than a year getting organized with bylaws and other foundation-building efforts. Funding available then to the Lansing area through the federal "healthy communities" ACHIEVE program provided some support at this organizational development phase.

To learn more about the Food Systems Workgroup
visit <http://foodsystemsworkgroup.org>.

