

**BENTON COUNTY
COMMUNITY
FOOD ASSESSMENT
NOVEMBER 2010**



MINNESOTA'S
VISION
A Better State of Health

SHIP
Statewide Health Improvement Program

Benton County Community Food Assessment

November 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The obesity crisis has provoked a nationwide dialogue about the state of our ‘food system.’ From concerns about the quality of school lunches to the loss of gardening and cooking know-how to dramatic shifts in how our food is produced, processed and distributed, people are calling for systemic change. Citizens want a food system where healthy, nutritious food is affordable and easy to obtain everywhere, where farmers and workers receive fair pay for their efforts, and where animals and the landscape are treated with care.

Across the United States, local governments are becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of the obesity crisis on healthcare costs, county and city budgets, and the long-term health of residents. Furthermore, the economic downturn of recent years has further strained the resources of local governments, as increasing numbers of people seek emergency food support to feed their families. Local politicians understand that the future economic and civic resilience of communities depends on the well-being of its citizens. Fortunately, communities and local governments everywhere are stepping up to determine how to make these changes.

As Minnesota’s state government examined the specter of future healthcare costs and its effects on long-term economic and social vitality, it became clear that it was time to instigate systems, policy, and environmental change designed to improve access to healthy, affordable food. The Minnesota Department of Health launched the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) – a \$47 million dollar, two-year initiative with grants distributed to county and multi-county public health agencies. An innovative program, SHIP is designed to improve the health of Minnesotans by reducing tobacco use and the incidence of obesity through interventions that increase active living, healthy eating, and tobacco cessation. A significant portion of SHIP funding is used by community health agencies to transform food environments, so that, for citizens, the healthy choice becomes the easy choice. In order to change individual behavior, community environments must change enough so that these healthy choices are affordable and accessible to all.

BENTON COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

Benton County is no exception. In an effort to better understand what types of changes are required in order to improve the county’s food environment, Benton County’s Public Health Unit used SHIP grant funding to undertake a “Community Food Assessment” (CFA). Community Food Assessments are a comprehensive, participatory process designed to assess the current state of a community’s food

environment and generate recommendations about what can be done to create a healthier food environment for residents. Benton County's CFA sought to determine the following:

- What is the health profile of Benton County and what does it tell us about the food environment?
- What barriers exist that inhibit easy access to affordable, healthy food?
- What food assets and resources currently exist in Benton County that could be promoted or strengthened in such a way to improve the food environment for citizens?
- What changes could be made to the County's food environment so that all citizens have access to nutritious, affordable food?

The Community Food Assessment assembled data from a variety of primary and secondary sources (including existing data sets from federal, state, local and non-profit sources), interviews, focus groups, and community meetings to develop a clear picture of the resources, gaps, needs, and opportunities associated with Benton County's food environment. This report describes:

- existing food support for low income people
- agricultural infrastructure
- sources of food for county residents
- community food assets and traditions

Our recommendations are based on the use of both a research component and a community engagement component.

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

POPULATION PROFILE OF BENTON COUNTY

Since its incorporation, Benton County has been primarily agricultural and rural, with several small towns throughout the County and a more densely populated area along the southwestern border of the county. The County experiences development pressures in a variety of ways, both as the St. Cloud metropolitan area expands and the Twin Cities metropolitan area pushes northward. Some important demographic characteristics:

- Population in 2000 was 34,226; estimated population in 2009 was 40,193
- European American residents constitute 95.7% of the population
- Between 2000 and 2009, the population of Hispanic/Latino residents increased from 307 to 564

- Between 2000 and 2009, the population of African/African-American residents went from 386 to 864
- The 2000 Census showed 732 foreign-born residents
- Median incomes went from \$41,983 in 2000 to \$51,187 in 2009 (adjusted for inflation, this represents no real economic gain)
- 67.4% of Benton County residents identify as Catholic, the vast majority of which are of German descent

These statistics paint a portrait of a primarily European American, German Catholic farming community with strong roots in agriculture.

HEALTH PROFILE OF BENTON COUNTY

There are two dimensions that connect food and health for Benton County residents: hunger and obesity. Hunger has become increasingly acute in recent years throughout the United States, due to the economic downturn. In Minnesota, hunger has doubled over the last five years. One in eight children in Minnesota is at risk for hunger. Of those seeking emergency hunger relief, forty percent (40%) are children. Despite these statistics, Minnesota has the lowest rate for usage of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the United States. This is unfortunate, as participation in SNAP not only yields clear and immediate benefits for the hungry; it also serves as an economic engine for communities – injecting millions of dollars into local economies each year. Moreover, hunger is associated with increased healthcare costs, as psychological and physiological issues increase with food insecurity.

A look at Benton County reveals a similar picture. Demand for emergency food support by County residents has nearly doubled since 2007, resulting in a near-tripling of county government investment in emergency food support. According to Hunger Free Minnesota⁽¹⁾:

- The total number of people in need of emergency food support in Benton County is 7,722 (the number of people at 185% of the poverty rate or below).
- Of all meals consumed by individuals in Benton County, 65% are provided by individuals, 16% of individuals come from public sources (like free school lunches, EBT or WIC), 1% of meals are provided by non-profit sources (like foodshelves or soup kitchens).
- Of the 8.46 million meals needed each year by all Benton County residents, 6.9 million meals are provided.
- The rate of annual meals missing is 18%.

Clearly, there is room for improvement when it comes to meeting the emergency food needs of low-income families in Benton County. Yet, in a time of recession local governments face severe budget shortfalls, which mean stretching fewer resources much farther.

Hunger is not the only food-related issue in Benton County. The incidence of obesity and related health conditions are also cause for concern, particularly when local governments look to the impact of significantly greater and ultimately unsustainable future healthcare costs.

- 26.2% of Benton County residents are obese
- 6.1% have type II diabetes
- Benton County ranks 86 out of 87 Minnesota counties for deaths due to heart disease – the second worst in the state
- Benton County rates 87 out of 87 Minnesota counties in deaths resulting from stroke – the worst in the state
- Very few Benton County residents consume the USDA-recommended 5-a-day servings of fruits and vegetables, a consumption pattern linked to increased risk of chronic disease.

The above issues reflect a health profile for Benton County residents directly related to dietary quality. Thus, as communities within the County consider strategies to improve public health and reduce costs, effective means to increase access to affordable, healthy food should be paramount. These strategies should focus on cost, ease of availability, responsiveness to the cultural needs of the County's population, healthfulness of food, and existing agricultural assets.

AGRICULTURAL PROFILE OF BENTON COUNTY

This profile presents two opportunities when considering how best to improve the health of residents – cultural and agricultural.

AGRICULTURAL ASSETS

Benton County is an agricultural community, with the vast majority of its acreage zoned for agricultural production. Over 85% of the land within the county is zoned for agricultural use. Over 90% of farms in Benton County are family owned and operated. Currently, land usage in agricultural zones is primarily geared toward large-scale agricultural production, meaning agricultural products are distributed and consumed well beyond the borders of the county.

Table 1 – Benton County and Benton County Agricultural Acreage

Description	Acreage (in acres)	Percentage of Total Area
Total County Area	264,358	100.00%
Total Agricultural Acres	227, 951	86.23%

There are several farmsteads zoned for agricultural production in the county that raise fruit and vegetable crops, livestock, poultry and related products that are sold for local consumption. However, the vast majority of food and agricultural products raised in the County are produced for distribution far beyond county boundaries. Stakeholders interviewed for this report express concern about the viability of small family farms, including family-owned dairies and those that produce foods primarily for consumption by the local population. Moreover, while the average age of farmers in Benton County (51 years) is somewhat lower than the state average (57.1 years), community members worry about the aging population of farmers and what that means for the future character, economy and landscape in the county.

The potential exists for transition of existing agricultural acreage toward food production geared toward local consumption. Options include:

- Increase ways to use nearby community supported agriculture farms, creating a larger customer base and delivery sites within Benton County
- Work with local farmers to transition their agricultural production to food products intended for local distribution and consumption
- Explore potential of collaborating with farmers to use small plots of .25 acres or less for fruit and vegetable production by non-resident farmers
- Increase amount of healthy food produced locally distributed to a variety of retail and emergency food support outlets

These options present real alternatives and opportunities to use local agricultural assets as a way to build the local farm economy and the healthfulness of the local food supply. Moreover, they contribute to community food security, where the existing local ‘food web’ capitalizes on nearby agricultural assets.

CULTURAL ASSETS AND GAPS

The prominence of agriculture in Benton County also translates into important cultural assets when it comes to food. The community food system in Benton County is quite robust compared to many of its counterparts around the state. A "community food system" includes gardens, farmers markets, cooking and canning, hunting and gathering, and raising livestock for local and individual consumption. People purchase and barter food products directly from farmers and each other. A significant amount of meat consumed many of the county's communities is either hunted or raised for personal/family consumption by individuals or purchased directly from local producers. This meat is also processed locally at small meat lockers or certified on-farm locations.

Community members worry that food traditions - particularly gardening, canning and cooking - are fading quickly. They seek creative interventions that will increase family involvement in gardening, cooking and preserving foods as a way to ensure the health of families and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reviewed the health concerns, food and agricultural assets, and potential solutions to improve the health and well-being of Benton County residents. The following recommendations are based on this review as potential pathways to increase fruit and vegetable consumption by county residents, decrease the consumption of unhealthy foods, improve access and affordability of healthy foods for all, and increase the use of agricultural and cultural assets of the County. Based on the findings outlined in this report, we make the following recommendations (note that some findings cross more than one category):

CULTURAL ASSETS AND COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

- Develop strategies to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables to reduce the stroke and heart disease rate.
- Create community-based educational strategies for improving knowledge about nutrition and cooking skills of county residents.
- Tap into local elders for community initiatives that focus on increasing competency in cooking, canning, and gardening.
- Increase use of CSA farms by Benton County residents, increase the number of CSA drop sites throughout the county.
- Include land access as part of a comprehensive plan to provide gardening opportunities (e.g. provide access to land near or on lots with apartment buildings, Section 8 housing, and low income communities; create composting sites near these gardens).

- Organize a confederation of local CSA farms to accept EBT and then employ a promotional campaign through WIC nutrition classes, local public health service opportunities, and conveniently located drop sites in the major towns throughout the county.
- Explore how local meat lockers can also serve as a site for sales of other fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables.

LONG RANGE DEVELOPMENT AND LAND USE, PLANNING AND ZONING

- Explore the idea of an agricultural heritage zone policy.
- Launch professional development and education programs (e.g., topical brown bags) for city and county employees who work with food support programs, zoning and community planning and development and public health to explore opportunities for long-term food systems planning.
- Assess the availability of small plots of agriculturally zoned land in Eastern Benton County; determine and facilitate opportunities to generate fruit and vegetable production (several farmers are willing to donate small plots of land for others to cultivate).
- Review zoning and ordinances to ensure no roadblocks exist that prohibit food self-sufficiency (like chicken coops or fruit trees in yards).
- Review restrictions on signage to determine if they inhibit opportunities for local farmers selling fresh, healthy food to local community members.
- Create incentives to include gardening green space in design review processes.
- Target new farmers interested in small scale food production, oriented toward local markets via land succession and land match-making programs.

FOOD ACCESS

- Improve transportation and pedestrian access to supermarket for residents living east of Highway 10.
- Create mini-farmers markets in East St. Cloud and the surrounding area.
- Create "Market Bucks" campaign for farmers markets, where EBT-eligible farmers' market customers can use their EBT cards and receive additional incentive dollars for fruits and vegetables, accompanied by a promotional campaign to publicize this program.
- Develop community gardens in the most populated areas of Sauk Rapids and the area surrounding East St. Cloud for individual and family use.
- Establish a large garden at the Salvation Army Shelter for use in meals prepared on-site.

- Convene community dialogues with key stakeholders to discuss emerging opportunities at the federal, state, and local (school or district) level changes and barriers to improving the quality of school food.
- Adopt "Farm to School" programs and establish school gardens for all schools in the county.
- Develop relationships with key food retailers to increase their purchasing and promotion of locally produced, healthy food.
- Connect community advocates with local food retail stores to ensure diversity in food products that meet the cultural needs of diverse communities.
- Work with grocery stores to explore the feasibility of adjusting the schedule for special discounted items to better coincide with the provision of food assistance benefits for low-income county residents.
- As the federal menu labeling guidelines are implemented in 2011, restaurants that do not need to comply with the federal guidelines could be encouraged to add a 'healthy choice' meal or conduct their own menu labeling for their customers.
- Encourage locally owned restaurants that have a kitchen and prepare from-scratch foods to purchase, promote and sell locally grown products from farmers, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, potatoes, eggs, cheeses, meats, dairy products, and nuts.
- City and county zoning and planning could explore limitations on providing permits and licenses to new restaurants that are considered fast food or chain restaurants that do not offer healthy options.

FOOD ASSISTANCE

- Publicize the acceptance of WIC and SNAP vouchers at the Sauk Rapids farmers market.
- Explore the feasibility implementing EBT use at all farmers markets.
- Assess economic impact to Benton County Farmers through a promotional campaign that increases SNAP use by eligible persons in Benton County.

These recommendations will strengthen the local food system, contribute to the local agricultural economy, and improve the health of the community.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS TO CHANGE OUR FUTURE

Across the country, communities and government alike express grave concern about public health as it relates to food. Obesity rates are too high and are often accompanied by related health issues such as type II diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and mental health problems. According to economists, the long-term effects of the obesity epidemic translate into untenable healthcare costs as well as massive lost productivity and absenteeism for employees. A study, released by the nonprofit, nonpartisan National Bureau of Economic Research in October, 2010, suggests that nearly 17% of current US medical costs can be attributed to obesity ⁽²⁾.

Of particular worry is the obesity rate among US children and teenagers. Other studies suggest that obesity-related healthcare costs will only increase over time, as the vast numbers of overweight and obese American children acquire obesity-related chronic health conditions that require medical treatment over a lifetime. A recent Centers for Disease Control report revises the projected rate of type II diabetes in the year 2050 to 1 in 3 US adults. The obesity rate for children has doubled in the last decade; the obesity rate for American teenagers has tripled during the same period.

Yet, obesity is not the only problem. With the lingering economic downturn, communities are also facing serious hunger issues, which have fiscal implications for local governments. Emergency food support across the country is under severe stress, as hunger becomes an increasingly serious issue as a result of the recession. Local governments are facing growing financial pressures, due to the mounting need for food assistance by community members combined with significant budget cuts as a result of precipitously declining public resources. Hunger also impacts healthcare costs. Individuals with chronic hunger issues are also more likely to require ongoing medical attention, including problems resulting from nutrition deficiencies, mental health issues, and other physiological conditions that arise from hunger ⁽¹⁾.

Clearly, something must be done. On the food front, answers to the obesity issue proposed by experts and the public alike range from surgical intervention to school lunch reform to cooking classes to sugar sweetened beverages tax to menu labeling campaigns to calorie restricted diets. This variety of interventions focuses both on behavior change of individuals and systems-level changes designed to alter the lived environment for an entire community. The public sector has a role to play in resolving this complex and very serious problem, one that requires an effort to change policies, systems, and

environments that will enhance the overall health of our communities. In numerous social contexts, hunger and obesity are strongly linked. Where there is a high rate of hunger and poverty, there is also a high rate of obesity.

Minnesota is no exception. With an obesity rate of 25.5%, the public health, healthcare, private and public sectors are equally worried about the long-term impact of this epidemic on our economy, healthcare system, and population. In response to this issue, the Minnesota Department of Health – with \$47 million in legislative support – launched the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) in 2009. SHIP is designed to improve the long-term health and well-being of Minnesota communities by reducing obesity and tobacco use through strategies that change local policies and environments. As the inaugural SHIP managing director has suggested, SHIP was funded by the Minnesota legislature to “make the healthy choice the easy choice” for citizens across the state.

This approach suggests that by changing community environments to make healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity more available and affordable, individuals can make better choices that improve their health outcomes. The investment by the state in the SHIP initiative is designed to leverage substantial, preventative change in communities with an eye to reducing the effects of obesity and tobacco use on our economy, healthcare system, and citizenry.

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENTS AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) funding was distributed as grants to county and multi-county public health agencies to implement interventions across the state that would improve access to healthy food, increase community resources for active living, and discourage tobacco use and exposure. Benton County’s Public Health Unit received funding from SHIP and elected to undertake a “Community Food Assessment” (CFA).

Community Food Assessments are a hybrid: part research project, part civic engagement campaign. CFAs offer an opportunity to connect and galvanize citizens concerned about food and agricultural issues through a participatory research process that collects and analyzes information about a community’s local food environment. The design for a Community Food Assessment is extremely adaptable that can be customized to the questions, scope and desired impact of a given community. CFAs can be conducted at a neighborhood, city, county, region, or statewide scale.

Community Food Assessments employ existing datasets, like state and federal statistical and census databases; collect data on local food assets from a variety of sources; and oftentimes use interviews, surveys and focus groups to provide a comprehensive picture of what a given community’s food

environment is like. CFAs seek to understand – to the best extent possible – what the resources, assets, opportunities, challenges and needs are of a given community with respect to their food environment.

Community Food Assessments were first developed by the anti-hunger community to provide a picture of the affordability and accessibility of healthy food for low-income communities. Since that time, CFAs have become a helpful resource for communities interested in increasing access to healthy foods for all community members and strengthening local food systems. In many communities, the zoning and planning offices of county and city governments use the results of community food assessments to change zoning policies, review and bidding processes, and planning/development processes associated with food systems. The research and civic engagement processes of CFAs oftentimes result in an agenda for local systems change – through policymaking or programs and initiatives. Examples of changes that can result from a CFA include:

- Improving the quality of food served at schools, including vending machines, concessions, birthday celebrations, fundraisers, and school foodservice
- Developing local ordinances that limit the availability of unhealthy foods, provide an increased and stable land base for community gardening and urban agricultural production, launching menu labeling campaigns
- Increasing the presence of healthy foods in ‘food deserts,’ like farmers markets where low income community members can use EBT cards or the establishment of mini-farmers markets in local communities
- Providing new economic opportunities for local farmers to produce more fruits and vegetables that are distributed and sold locally

These types of changes have direct and indirect effects on a community. Results of a CFA can improve the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables to communities in a short period of time. Over the long term, changes like the ones listed above can slowly and dramatically improve and diversify the ways that community members have access to affordable, healthy food. Furthermore because of the civic engagement dimension of Community Food Assessments, networks of citizens become increasingly experienced at and interested in broader food quality issues in their communities.

BENTON COUNTY’S COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

Using SHIP grant funding, Benton County embarked on a Community Food Assessment to better understand the assets, resources, opportunities, challenges and gaps associated with the county’s food environment. The Community Food Assessment was undertaken in response to several realities that the

county has grappled with: hunger, obesity, related health conditions like heart disease and stroke, poverty and the lack of access to healthy food, and concern about the limited availability of locally raised products despite the county's status as an agricultural community. As is the case with CFAs generally, the Benton County Community Food Assessment is both a research project and a process to mobilize citizens to become engaged around food issues.

Benton County's CFA focused on several key questions:

- What is the health profile of Benton County and what does it tell us about the food environment?
- What barriers exist that inhibit easy access to affordable, healthy food?
- What food assets and resources currently exist in Benton County that could be promoted or strengthened in such a way to improve the food environment for citizens?
- What changes could be made to the County's food environment so that all citizens have access to nutritious, affordable food?

These questions informed the types of data gathered by the researchers, who used a variety of existing databases from local, state and federal sources; gathered information on local food assets from non-profits, individuals, research reports and other community resources; and conducted interviews and focus group with key local stakeholders.

The data collected during the assessment process were gathered to respond to the above research questions and provide an in depth portrait of Benton County's community food environment.

Benton County's Community Food Assessment explores the connections between health, income, food and agricultural resources in the community to better understand what steps can be taken to improve residents' access to healthy, affordable food.

INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITY IN DESIGNING AND EXECUTING THE CFA

A hallmark of Community Food Assessments is the involvement of local communities in the design, data collection, analysis, recommendations development, and community organizing. The Benton County CFA was no exception. There were several levels of engagement by individuals residing and working in the county, including a planning team, a community leadership group, as well as participants attending community meetings, focus groups and interviews. Benton County Public Health Unit SHIP staff served as core staff and partnered with the research firm to oversee and advise design, execution and review of the CFA process.

LEADERSHIP TEAM

A leadership team was formed to provide ongoing advisory and strategic support to the enterprise.

Leadership Team members included:

- Warren Peshl, Benton County Commissioner (Duelm, MN)
- Carol Mersinger, CROSS Foodshelf (Foley, MN)
- Alanna Shoquist, Second Harvest (St. Cloud, MN)
- Rick Miller, Central Minnesota Sustainability Project
- Tracy Ore, St. Cloud State University
- Patty Hackett, community member and community garden researcher

Leadership Team members were asked to:

- Provide oversight, contribute expertise, and share relevant insights about the county food environment for Benton County's Community Food Assessment
- Attend series of meetings from July – November, 2010
- Identify critical players who can contribute important insights into what the county food environment is like (for focus groups, individual interviews, and community-wide stakeholder meetings)
- Assist with identifying key questions to pose in interviews and focus groups
- Offer perspectives on data that can help shape findings for final report
- Refine and affirm final recommendations for report, including specific policy objectives
- Contribute thoughts to approach to communications and dissemination of final report
- Determine strategy for use and implementation of CFA findings after November, 2010

This Leadership Group has played a pivotal role in positioning the CFA to have a broader community impact, with connections to the community and a vested interest in the outcomes and recommendations.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Numerous members of the community participated in the Community Food Assessment. Residents of the St. Cloud Salvation Army Shelter participated in a focus group, as did clients of the CROSS Center in Foley and city and county employees. Local farmers, ethnic grocery store owners, grocery store managers, and meat market owners contributed their insights through interviews. Local community members attended public meetings in Foley and Sauk Rapids - farmers, school food service directors,

Extension representatives, concerned parents, foodshelf directors, and others. These public meetings provided a forum for people to discuss how and where they obtained their food, what challenges they perceive Benton County residents have around procuring food, and what needs exist related to the accessibility of healthy food for Benton County residents. They also reviewed the recommendations contained in this report and provided critical feedback to ensure that the proposed pathways for change meet the needs and aspirations of county residents with respect to their food environment.

The initial investment of these SHIP funds provided by the Minnesota Department of Health has supported the CFA process and the production of this report. It is up to the Benton County community, the myriad non-profit, governmental and civic organizations, and local institutions to determine how to make use of the recommendations provided in this report to improve the county's food environment. Fortunately, the combination of civic interest and local cultural tradition provide a strong foundation for carrying out the recommendations and ways of thinking about the County's food environment outlined in this report.

BACKGROUND

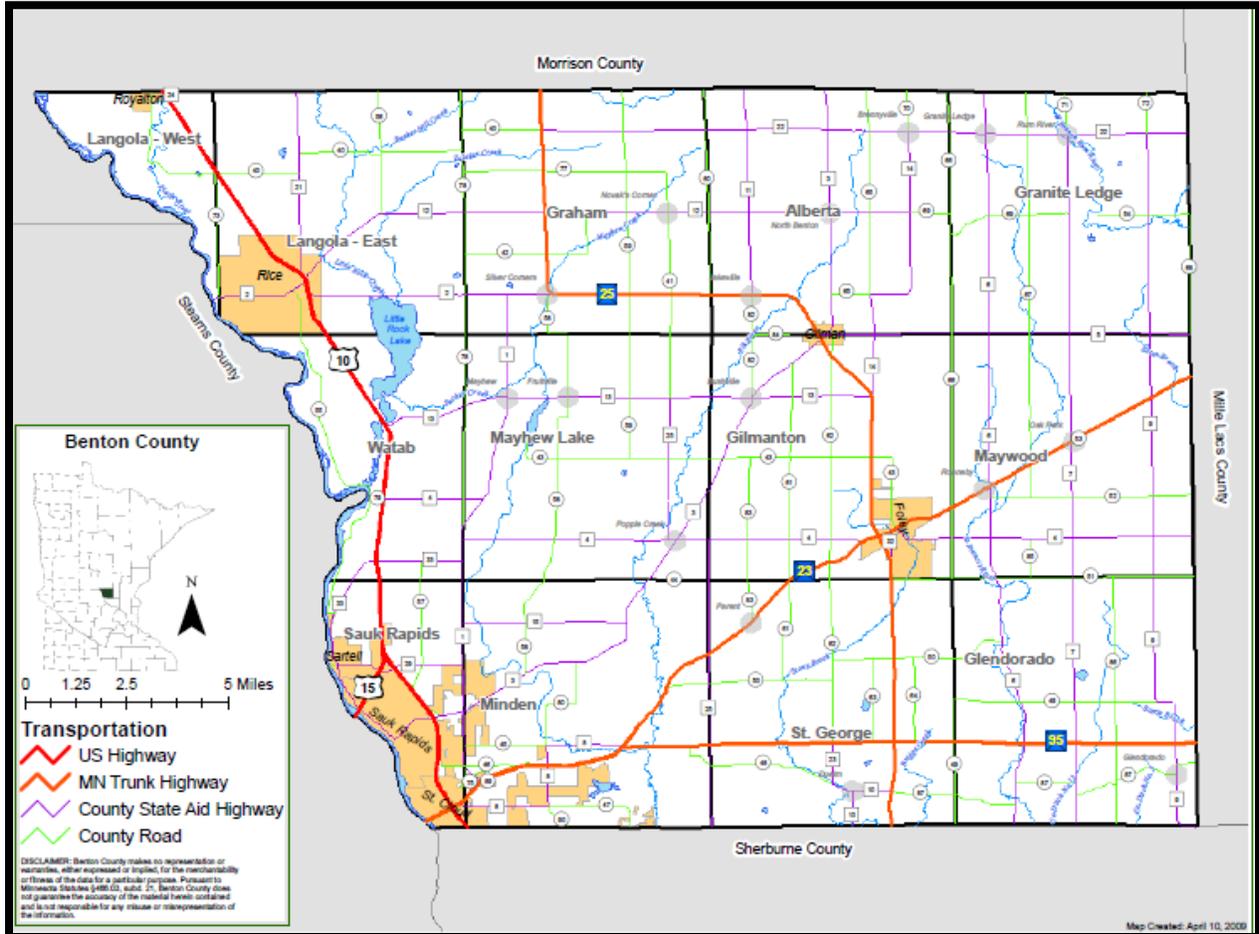
A food environment is a cultural environment. Thus, a Community Food Assessment should tell the story of a place, its people, traditions, practices and challenges. Statistics provide a measure of 'reality' to the picture, but in the case of Benton County the stories and engagement of the people in the CFA process have provided a living portrait of a vibrant, rural agricultural community where people trade, grow, hunt, cure, smoke, cook, and can food.

Yet this picture also reveals a community in transition. The population is aging and faces development pressures from the Twin Cities and St. Cloud metropolitan areas. Small family farms face extreme financial obstacles, while a few large agricultural landholders have recently bought up large tracts of land for commodity production. There is a worrisome incidence of obesity and related diseases, as well as issues of poverty and hunger. Community residents point to complex reasons for this phenomenon, including income, access, cost, and lack of cooking skills. Moreover, there is a newly emerging refugee and immigrant population who speak different languages, practice a variety of religious traditions, and have culturally specific dietary needs. For an ethnically and religiously homogeneous population, these challenges and changes present opportunities and obstacles to the county with respect to long-range planning around food, health, agriculture, and the community.

Despite the vitality of small-town food and agricultural traditions, County residents face serious food and diet-related health challenges and an overall food environment in need of significant improvement. There

are two dimensions that connect food and health for Benton County residents: hunger and obesity. This report lays out the complexity of the County’s food environment, the related issues and opportunities facing the community, and some proposed recommendations and solutions designed to improve the health and preserve the character of the community.

Map 1- Benton County



A SNAPSHOT OF BENTON COUNTY

The history of Benton County as an agricultural community extends back to the formation of the state; it was one of the original 9 counties in Minnesota. Located 70 miles north of Minneapolis, Benton County is bounded by Stearns County to the west, Morrison County to the north, Mille Lacs County to the east and Sherburne County to the south.

POPULATION PROFILE OF BENTON COUNTY

Since its incorporation, Benton County has been primarily agricultural and rural, with several small towns throughout the County and a more densely populated area along the southwestern border of the county. The County experiences development pressures in a variety of ways, both as the St. Cloud metropolitan area expands and the Twin Cities metropolitan area pushes northward. Some important demographic characteristics (4):

- Population in 2000 was 34,226; estimated population in 2009 was 40,193
- European American residents constitute 95.7% of the population
- Between 2000 and 2009, the population of Hispanic/Latino residents increased from 307 to 564
- Between 2000 and 2009, the population of African/African-American residents went from 386 to 864
- The 2000 Census showed 732 foreign-born residents
- Median incomes went from \$41,983 in 2000 to \$51,187 in 2009 (adjusted for inflation, this represents no real economic gain)
- 67.4% of Benton County residents identify as Catholic, the vast majority of which are of German descent

These statistics paint a portrait of a primarily European American, German Catholic farming community with strong roots in agriculture.

LABOR, EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

As is the case across the country, the recent economic downturn has affected employment, earnings, poverty rates and food insecurity. When comparing Benton County to Minnesota as a whole, earnings are significantly lower than the statewide average and unemployment is somewhat higher⁽⁵⁾. The percent of total population living in poverty is also substantially higher in Benton County as compared to the state as a whole.

Table 2 - Benton County Demographics ⁽⁵⁾ *unless noted*

	Benton County	Minnesota	United States
Population	40,193	5,266,214	307,006,550
Percent Total Population In Poverty (2008)	10.2% ⁽⁶⁾	9.6%	13.2%
Unemployment Rate ⁽⁷⁾	6.7%	7%	9.6%
Size Of Labor Force ⁽⁷⁾	23,489	2,961,692	153,854,000
Average Weekly Wage	\$646	\$881	
Average Monthly Earnings ⁽⁷⁾	\$2,370	\$4,634	\$4,185
Percent Annual Income Spent On Food ⁽⁷⁾			12.4%
Estimated Monthly Food Budget	\$340/Month Or \$85/Week		
Avg Household Size ⁽⁸⁾	2.56		
Avg Family Size	3.14		

HOME OWNERSHIP RATES IN BENTON COUNTY

According to the 2000 US Census, 67.3% of Benton County residents owned their own home, similar to the overall United States home ownership rate of 66.2%, but less than the average Minnesota rate of 74.6%.

Homeownership rates are of particular interest when addressing community food security, as homeowners are far more likely to have access to land for gardening than renters (particularly those residing in apartment buildings). ⁽¹⁰⁾

ELDERLY POPULATION

Like many rural communities across Minnesota, Benton County's population is aging. Just over 10% of Benton County's population is elderly - approximately 4000 individuals. With respect to age distribution, the County's senior population (ages 65 - 84) constitutes 10% of the overall population according to the 2000 Census, compared to 9% for Minnesota. Of this elderly population, approximately 11 percent are considered poor, which means at least 400 elderly individuals in Benton County may experience hardship with accessing affordable, healthy food. ⁽¹⁰⁾

During the course of this Community Food Assessment, stakeholders expressed repeated concern about rural elderly residents and their access to healthy, fresh food. There are transit options available in the county for seniors living in remote locations to attend medical appointments and take care of errands.

HEALTH PROFILE

The incidence of obesity and related health conditions are also cause for concern, particularly when local governments look to the impact of significantly greater and ultimately unsustainable future healthcare costs.

- 26.2% of Benton County residents are obese
- 6.1% have type II diabetes
- Benton County ranks 86 out of 87 Minnesota counties for deaths due to heart disease – the second worst in the state
- Benton County rates 87 out of 87 Minnesota counties in deaths resulting from stroke – the worst in the state
- Very few Benton County residents consume the USDA-recommended 5-a-day servings of fruits and vegetables, which is associated with improved overall health and a reduction in issues like obesity, type II diabetes, stroke and heart disease

Clearly, there are significant public health issues in Benton County that can be directly attributed to poor diet. Several questions emerge as a result:

- In what ways does the existing food environment support or inhibit good health?
- Does the county's food environment make healthy food choices easy or difficult? Costly or inexpensive?
- What knowledge base and resources do county residents need to improve their diets?

Given the high rate of obesity, stroke and heart disease in Benton County coupled with the low consumption rate of fresh fruits and vegetables, it is clear that the community needs to respond in a timely and effective manner to improve the food environment. As this report will demonstrate, the current food environment offers far too many convenient, low-cost, unhealthy options and too few options that are accessible, affordable, and healthy.

Food security = access to food by all people at all times for an active, healthy life

Food insecurity = limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods ⁽¹⁾

HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY IN BENTON COUNTY

Obesity rates and the accompanying issues are not the only food related concerns. Hunger has become increasingly acute in recent years throughout the United States, due to the economic downturn. In Minnesota, hunger has doubled over the last five years. One in eight children in Minnesota is at risk for hunger. Of those seeking emergency hunger relief, forty percent (40%) are children.

A look at Benton County reveals a similar picture. Demand for emergency food support by County residents has nearly doubled since 2007, resulting in a near-tripling of county government investment in emergency food support. According to Hunger Free Minnesota:

- The total number of people in need of emergency food support in Benton County is 7,722 (the number of people at 185% of the poverty rate or below) - approximately 20% of the population
- Of all meals consumed by individuals in Benton County, 65% are provided by individuals, 16% come from public sources (like free school lunches, EBT or WIC), 1% of meals are provided by non-profit sources (like foodshelves or soup kitchens)
- Of the 8.46 million meals needed each year by all Benton County residents, 6.9 million meals are provided
- The rate of annual meals missing is 18%

Community food security is a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that also maximizes community self-reliance and social justice. ⁽¹¹⁾

Clearly, there is room for improvement when it comes to meeting the emergency food needs of low-income families in Benton County. Yet, in a time of recession, local governments face severe budget shortfalls, which mean stretching fewer resources much farther. Moreover, hunger is associated with increased healthcare costs, as psychological and physiological issues increase with food insecurity. In addition to requiring more resources to provide emergency food support to county individuals during a time of economic downturn, healthcare costs also rise when people are hungry. These needs also strain local healthcare and social service resources, which are equally strapped for money as emergency food support programs.

Financial benefits of ending hunger⁽¹⁾

Without question, there are significant financial benefits to ending hunger. Most obvious: if all Minnesotans were adequately nourished, the \$1.26 billion to \$1.62 billion Minnesotans pay annually in direct and indirect healthcare and education costs for hungry individuals would be eliminated. In addition, there are a number of public programs designed to help prevent and/or combat hunger, such as the Supplemental Food Service Program (SNAP), which, if used to their full potential, could offer significant individual and societal benefits.

- For each \$1 invested by Minnesota in SNAP, the federal government contributes \$7.50, and Minnesota sees \$13.50 in economic activity that results from hungry individuals spending SNAP dollars in local grocery stores
- For each \$1 invested by Minnesota in SNAP and \$7.50 contributed by the federal government, Minnesota sees \$20.55 in savings by averting some of the costs associated with hunger
- A \$1 state investment in SNAP results in \$34 in combined economic activity and savings in Minnesota
- It is estimated that the average annual SNAP benefit in Minnesota of \$777 reduces the odds of hunger and food insecurity by 50 percent—if a hungry person costs the state of Minnesota up to \$2,816 as noted above, that cost would be reduced to \$1,408 by participating in SNAP

FAMILY FOOD BUDGETS AND EMERGENCY FOOD SUPPORT

As the above data suggest, individuals and families in Benton County have fewer financial resources to spend on food than the state as a whole. During the course of this Community Food Assessment, dialogue around the connections between poverty, the cost and accessibility of healthy food, the extent and types of emergency food support, individual knowledge about budgeting, purchasing and preparing healthy food

arose frequently in interviews, focus groups, community and leadership team meetings. Themes that emerged during these conversations cluster in the following way:

- Cost of and access to healthy food
- Knowledge of cooking, nutrition and household food budgeting
- Emergency food support options, extent of use and connection to hunger and poverty

Community members involved in this CFA express divergent feelings associated with cost and access to healthy foods.

Low-income clients of foodshelves and homeless shelter residents suggest that the cost of healthy food - particularly fresh fruits and vegetables. One foodshelf client indicated that she is able to grow, can and freeze many of the vegetables consumed by her family, suggesting that purchasing them (except when on sale or in season) is out of reach for her financially. Her family's disability issues, however, make this option difficult over the long-term. Other citizens suggested that a lack of cooking and nutrition knowledge, meant some low-income residents may select higher-priced, less healthy processed foods than fresh, healthy foods that require some preparation and may not cost as much.

Many stakeholders suggested that a variety of factors - seasonality, access to land, cost of food, access to transportation or safe pedestrian routes, gardening, cooking and nutrition knowledge, disability, and family traditions all inhibit the consumption of healthy food.

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT DATA, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CULTURAL ASSETS AND COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

As this report suggests, there remains a vital local food system in Benton County where numerous people procure their foods from local sources that reflects a strong degree of food self-sufficiency. Citizens still can, cook, hunt, garden, can and raise livestock, and many do. This cultural asset is something that should be preserved and strengthened, a recommendation that emerged in virtually all interviews, focus groups and community meetings. People have always purchased food from local sources in Benton County; community feedback suggests that residents purchase meat and egg products to a greater degree than fruits and vegetables. This could be due to a variety of factors, including people raising their own fruits and vegetables in gardens, a short growing season, or purchasing at roadside stands and farmers markets.

Community members worry, however, about the loss of cultural knowledge around gardening, cooking, and food preservation that has arisen across the county. Stakeholders suggest that the loss of these traditions is a core factor in the rise of obesity (as those affected increasingly consume highly processed convenience and fast foods). The loss of this cultural capital could also signal an increasing estrangement from the agricultural heritage of the county.

Another factor community members point to is the marked decline in the frequency and extent of family mealtimes. When food becomes an ‘on the go’ proposition, rather than a means of pausing and connecting with loved ones over a meal prepared from scratch at home, important social and familial traditions and connections also fray.

Local farmers also commented on community interest in purchasing locally produced foods from them, whether via retail outlets or direct. There is moderate interest in purchasing local fruits and vegetables, particularly during the growing season, by county residents. It can take several seasons to build a market base for farm-grown products, making it difficult for a farmer to earn an income from this market. Furthermore, one local farmer indicated that roadside sales in rural areas of the county may not be profitable, despite a desire to build and serve a local market. Finally, due to labor limitations, if a small-scale farmer wishes to have a presence at a roadside stand and a local farmers market, s/he can immediately run into problems due to a lack of additional labor or funds to hire someone. Retailers expect to pay low prices, which is a current challenge for local farmers associated with retail sales. Low retail prices make it very difficult for farmers to turn a profit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community members suggest that a core strategy to address obesity issues and increase the consumption of healthy foods should focus on the development of initiatives to build cooking, gardening and food preservation skills among youth, children and families. Local elders are local experts in all of these domains and could be tapped for community initiatives that focus on increasing competency in cooking, canning, and gardening.

There were no specific activities affirmed by stakeholders, although school-based, extracurricular, community education, family-based, churches, non-profit, Extension and other options were discussed as appropriate venues for this type of activity. Local advocates will need to convene to determine how best to initiate this type of activity in the community.

This approach suggests a behavioral change strategy that targets individuals, yet a focus group of city and county staff working in a variety of occupations connected to Benton County’s food system suggested a

more systemic approach to improving the nutritional knowledge and culinary/gardening skills of the community, including:

- Include land access as part of a comprehensive plan to provide gardening opportunities (e.g. provide access to land near or on lots with apartment buildings, Section 8 housing, and low income communities; create composting sites near these gardens)
- Review zoning and ordinances to ensure no roadblocks exist that prohibit food self-sufficiency (like chicken coops or fruit trees in yards)
- Create incentives to include gardening green space in design review processes

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND THE LAND BASE

Over eighty-five percent of the land base in Benton County is zoned for agricultural production.¹

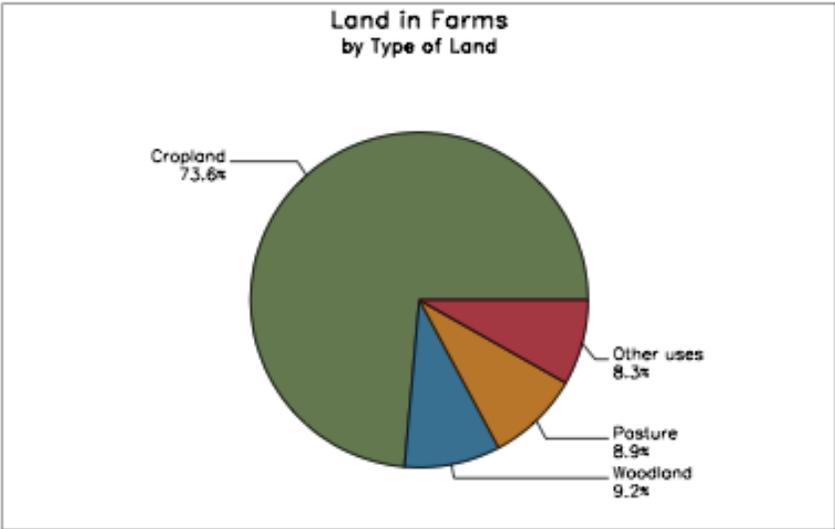
Table 3 -- Benton County Acreage (5)

Description	Acreage (in acres)	Percentage of Total Area
Total County Area	264,358	100.00%
Total Agricultural Acres	227, 951	86.23%

This zoning data describes the extent to which agriculture dominates the County’s landscape and the low population density across much of the county, reflecting its rural, agricultural character. Of this agricultural acreage, the vast majority is in crop production with some pastureland, woodland and other uses.

¹Zoning data provided by Benton County Planning Office

Figure 1 – Benton County - Land in Farms. Source (5)

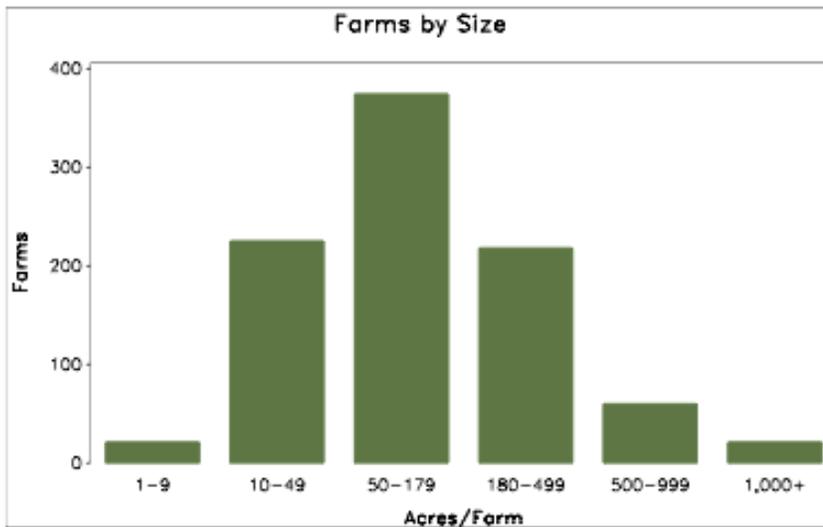


There are numerous farms in Benton County, all of which at the time of this report’s publication are owned by local families (as opposed to large corporations). In 2002, there were nearly 1,000 farms in the county. In five years, the number of farms decreased by 5% as did the number of acres in agricultural production. The average size of farms during this period remains consistent, at just over 200 acres. The median size of farms is 100 acres, with the majority of farms ranging between 50 and 500 acres. (5)

Table 4 – Farm Sizes and Production Values for Benton County and Minnesota, 2007

Category	Benton County	Minnesota
Total Area (acres)	261,297	50,744,960
Number of Farms	919	80,992
Farm Land (Acres)	185,994	26,917,962
Average Farm Size (Acres)	202	332
% Less than 50 Acres	2.68%	25.45%
% Over 500 Acres	0.88%	17.92%
Market Value of Ag Products Sold (\$1,000)	\$113,874	\$13,180,466
Average Market Value of Ag Products Sold/Farm	\$123,911	\$162,738
Average Net Cash Income/Farm	\$34,451	\$48,498

Figure 2 – Benton County - Farms by Size, 2007 (5)



In interviewing local farmers, however, much has changed since the 2007 federal agricultural census. Three Benton County-based farms have purchased sizeable acreages - up to 10,000 acres each - dramatically consolidating agricultural land ownership in just a few years, creating a class of ‘super farms’ far larger than other farms in the county. This has had effects that merit further consideration:

- Significant decrease in small family farm acreages
- Significant decrease in diversified agricultural production, as these new mega-farms only produce government subsidized commodity crops, like corn and soybeans
- Increase in property taxes for neighboring farms, as a result of the large-scale land purchase which makes it difficult for small farmers to pay their taxes and keep their land

A local farmer acknowledged his concerns about this trend. In a county where the average age of the farmer is 51.7 years (5) and few families have children who will take over the farm, this agricultural community faces worrisome challenges:

- A concentration of agricultural land ownership in the hands of a few landowners
- A decrease in the diversity of farm scale, production practices, and agricultural products in the county due to this concentration
- Untenable economic pressures on family farms as property taxes become increasingly burdensome
- A loss in agricultural heritage and related food production, preparation and consumption traditions as the average age of family farmers increases and moves into retirement
- A transfer of land ownership away from families, due to the aging population of farmers and the lack of interest by their children in continuing to farm
- A decrease in the overall number of local families in agricultural production and farm ownership

DISCUSSION

As the county takes this opportunity to comprehensively evaluate the relative health of its long-term community food security, these shifts in agricultural demographics, land base, and production profile further undermine the community's food environment. What is right now a relatively strong agricultural asset base that could be moved and encouraged toward increased production for local markets (including a large increase in fruit and vegetable production by local farms) is fading as an option. Benton County residents should take heed of this transition and explore how best to protect and preserve the agricultural heritage of the county and increase production and distribution of foods produced for local consumption.

FRUIT AND VEGETABLE PRODUCTION IN BENTON COUNTY

Much of the land used for agricultural purposes in Benton County is dedicated to commodity crop, feed crop, and livestock production. Despite the extent of agricultural production in the county, very little of it is dedicated to the cultivation of fresh fruits and vegetables; locally grown foodstuffs that could be made available to the local population. While numerous gardeners do grow their own vegetables, melons and berries in Benton County, many do not. There is not enough fruit and vegetable production in the county to meet the need for fresh fruits and vegetables of its residents.

Table 5 - Farms and non-grain crops in Benton County, 2007 (5)

Total Land, 2007	Number of Farms	Number of Acres Harvested
Total of All Farms	919	185,994
Crop Harvested for Sale		
Vegetables	11	1722
Potatoes	undisclosed	5
Berries	3	undisclosed
Fruit Orchards	9	13
Non-Citrus Fruits & Nuts	9	31

As the data suggest, there is minimal production of fresh fruit and vegetables in Benton County. As the community considers how to increase fruit and vegetable production to improve the health of the community, the short growing season emerges as a factor in limiting availability of the local supply. The

“high tunnel” or “hoop house” is becoming an increasingly popular option in Minnesota to address the issue of a short growing season – a low-cost structure that can increase the growing season by 8 weeks or more. There are a few farms in Benton County that employ high tunnels in production. As the community considers how best to increase fresh fruit and vegetable production within county borders, it should explore the use of high tunnels in production as a means to increase and extend productivity to benefit local consumers.

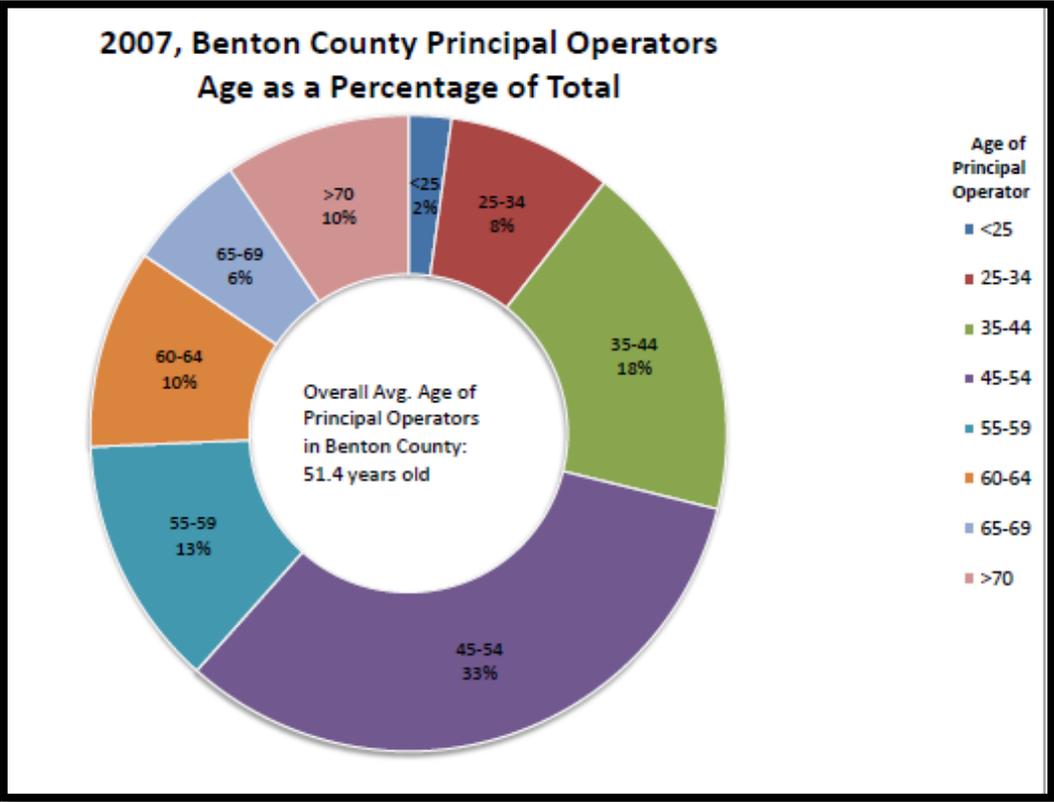
AGRICULTURAL DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of farmers in Benton County are of European descent. Fewer than 1% represent other cultural backgrounds. While the average age of farmers in the county (51.4 years), is lower than the US average (57.1 years), local farmers express concerns about the age distribution of farmers.

Table 6 - Benton County Farmer Demographics ⁽⁵⁾

Benton County Farmer (Operator) Characteristics	
Total Number of farmers	1,400
Men Principal Operators	831
Woman Principal Operators	88
All Farms with a woman operator	417
Average age of farmer (years)	51.4
Ethnic identity of farmer	
European American	1,389
Other {Native American ⁽¹⁾ , Latino ⁽⁵⁾ , Multi-racial ⁽⁵⁾ }	11

Figure 3 - Age of Benton County Farmers⁽⁵⁾



COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Community Supported Agriculture farms use a business model that represents an alternative approach for small farm profitability. CSAs (not to be confused with “CFAs” - the abbreviated designator for Community Food Assessments) require their ‘member patrons’ to pay a ‘share’ fee (which can be paid in full up front or on an installment plan, depending on the farm). While the size of shares varies, a typical CSA share includes 5 - 10 pounds of fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs that is delivered on a weekly basis to a central, local drop site, oftentimes for about 5 – 6 months of the growing season (from the lettuce of early spring to squash and kale in late fall). Members then pick up their boxes at the drop site for preparation and consumption at home. CSA farms typically use organic and/or sustainable practices, and some offer ‘shares’ of eggs, meats (including poultry, beef, sheep and others), cheeses, flowers, and some value added products. Most CSAs, however, limit their product lines to fresh produce, grown on the farm, harvested and distributed weekly throughout the growing season. New innovations in Minnesota CSAs include winter distribution of cold-climate vegetables like greens that are grown in passive solar

greenhouses year round or stored (like root crops) for ongoing distribution through winter months to subscribers.

Share boxes distributed by CSA farms tend to include products that use limited amounts of agricultural chemicals, a wide array of herbs and vegetables, heirloom breeds, and recipes for the subscriber. Across Minnesota, CSA farms are an extremely popular and growing option for many individuals interested in fresh, local food. Innovative models are emerging, where urban CSAs on small lots, use of EBT machines by owners, subsidized shares by local government or charities, or shares purchased by small school districts are all new ways of using the CSA model. A challenge facing the expansion of CSAs as a means to increase local fruit and vegetable consumption is financial. Many farms require full payment up front of several hundred dollars, which can be a real hardship for low-income families who may not have the financial resources to do so.

What is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

"In basic terms, CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests. By direct sales to community members, who have provided the farmer with working capital in advance, growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing." ⁽¹¹⁾

Map 2- CSA Farms and Drop Sites around Benton County



DATA COLLECTED

There are eleven CSA farms and/or drop sites serving an 8 county region, of which Benton County is a part. Their locations are designated on the below map. There are no drop sites for CSA farms in Benton County, although Foley residents do pick up boxes at Webster Organic Farms - a CSA located near Foreston.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- Several counties in the area have a total of 11 CSA farms (counties include Benton, Stearns, Wright, Sherburne, Morrison, Otter Tail, and Mille Lacs)
- These CSA farms provide 1,010 total subscribers with weekly fresh produce shares during the growing season. Some sell meat and egg shares.
- There are three CSA farms located within or very near Benton County: Cedar Hill Farm is located within Benton County proper; 2 additional CSA farms are located near Rice and St. Joseph in neighboring counties.
- Most of these CSA farms distribute their products to communities in the region.
- Some of the larger CSA farms only deliver their products to the Twin Cities and do not serve any communities in Benton County or neighboring counties

- Ploughshare Farm, Common Ground Garden and Farm of Plenty all have drop sites in St. Cloud (Stearns County) and are located on the bus line. These drop sites are closest to the highest population density, minority populations, and lowest income level populations of Benton County
 - Ploughshare Farm essentially services the St. Cloud State University community.
 - Common Ground Garden is operated by Saint Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, MN. The St. Cloud drop site is at St. John's Episcopal Church.
 - Farm of Plenty is the only CSA in the area that accepts EBT cards. It is on a bus route and near a major highway. However it is the farthest from the residents of Benton County.
- Cedar Hill Farm only services 10 subscribers, so their capacity to maintain a drop site or increase their subscription group is questionable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community Supported Agriculture represents a very real opportunity for creative problem-solving around fresh fruit and vegetable access in Benton County. Yet a CFA Leadership Team member suggested that the cultural attitudes of county residents poses an obstacle to broader acceptance and use of CSAs as a means to obtain fresh, healthy, locally produced food. The authors recommend several strategies that could be employed to increase the number of county residents procuring food via CSA:

- As the data indicate, numerous churches are affiliated with local CSA farms. A strategy that involves religious communities throughout Benton County is an excellent pathway for increasing use of CSA farms by Benton County residents. For example, a local church in one of the communities in the county can become a drop site with Sunday morning pick-up for its parishioners
- A nearby community center or non-profit located on the bus line of western Benton County could serve as a drop site for low-income residents living in that area. Because it accepts EBT, Farms of Plenty may be the most appropriate choice for this option
- Webster Farm Organic serves 100 subscribers via drop sites in St. Cloud, Milaca and Foley. As one of the farms offering the widest variety of produce sold, they may be a good candidate to recruit for adding a drop site in southwestern Benton County.
- The County Public Health Unit or local non-profits could organize a confederation of local CSA farms to accept EBT and then employ a promotional campaign through WIC nutrition classes, local public health service opportunities, and conveniently located drop sites in the major towns throughout the county

- Small agricultural acreage in Benton County not currently in production could be employed for CSA-oriented production. Partnerships with new or existing CSA farms could be established to explore this option

These types of inventive strategies not only increase the consumption of healthy foods by local residents, but also offer affordable solutions to low-income citizens while increasing the agricultural economy of the region.

FARMS USING SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION METHODS

A priority of some citizens involved in this Community Food Assessment was to determine the number of local farms that employed agricultural production methods typically considered ‘sustainable’ and the types of food products raised on these farms. Using lists and databases from multiple local sources as well as review by local citizens, the researchers were able to locate 3 farms in Benton County who self-identify as ‘sustainable’ farms. All three of these farms raise food crops, including a variety of fruits and vegetables. One also raises poultry for eggs and chicken.

29 farms in the area are either certified organic or self-identified as using some type of sustainable production methods. Many of these farms raise a diverse array of forage crops for livestock. Many also raise a variety of animals for different purposes: cheese, milk, eggs, and meats like pork, chicken and beef.

Of these sustainable farms, approximately one-third raise fresh fruits and vegetables. Given the data available, CFA report authors estimate there are approximately 2000 acres in fruit and vegetable production in Benton, Stearns, Mille Lacs and Morrison counties.

Oftentimes, farms that employ sustainable production practices reflect a few important characteristics that make them assets in the context of improving a community’s food security and supporting access to locally produced, healthy foods. *Many of these farms are family owned, relatively small in scale, and tend to have a diversified base of crops and livestock (including many fruits and vegetables and products processed, sold and distributed for local consumption).*

In reviewing the presence and profile of sustainable farms in Benton County, it became clear that expanding the scope of this assessment to include relevant farms in neighboring counties would offer a

more constructive picture of the role of sustainable agriculture in supporting the region's food security². Given the strong agricultural base in neighboring counties, it makes sense that these assets represent opportunities for procurement of healthy, locally produced foods that meet the food needs of Benton County residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Compared to the overall acreage of agricultural production, fruit and vegetable cultivation represents a tiny fraction of products raised on Benton County farms. Interested advocates in the county may want to explore the possibility of increasing fruit and vegetable production by existing CSA and sustainable farms to be sold at local outlets, including roadside stands, farmers markets, or local retailers like Coborn's or the meat lockers.

ROADSIDE STANDS AND ON-FARM SALES

Many residents of Benton County rely on local farmers for several types of food (fruits, vegetables, eggs, meat, etc.), which they purchase from or barter directly with the farmer. Local farms sell these products in a variety of ways, including on-farm sales and processing (meats) as well as roadside stands.

Most meats (beef and pork) purchased directly from farmers by local residents are taken to one of several meat lockers in communities across Benton County, including towns like Foley and Sauk Rapids, to be processed. There is one certified meat locker in Benton County, located on-farm. These meat lockers serve a large number of local hunters as well, processing venison. Numerous county residents purchase fowl like poultry and eggs from local farms as well.

Roadside stands are another community food resource where people purchase fresh foods from local farmers, usually on a seasonal basis. Many roadside stands sell fresh fruits and vegetables; some also sell eggs. In Benton County, 2 roadside stands hold "Retail Mobile Food Handlers" licenses. While there are other licensed roadside stands in neighboring counties, the distance is too far to be convenient for Benton County residents. There are additional roadside stands located across the county that sell specific products for a limited time, like sweet corn or pumpkins, and also those that are not on record with the county.

² Information on community supported agriculture farms and sustainable production practices farms obtained from Minnesota Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, Land Stewardship Project, Minnesota Grown, and Central Minnesota chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association

FINDINGS

While roadside stands do not play a large role in provision of healthy food for county residents, they are an important part of the cultural fabric of Benton County. On-farm purchasing and local meat processing remain a significant part of the county's food culture. There also remains a robust trade with local farmers, where county residents procure a significant amount of food - especially meats - directly from the farm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the County considers its resources associated with the culture and consumption of local food products, on-farm sales and roadside stands represent community fixtures that are a cultural, economic, and nutritional mainstay for many residents. As local farmers continue to age, the County will want to consider how zoning, community development and planning can sustain these important assets. Furthermore, the County may want to explore how local meat lockers can also serve as a site for sales of other fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables.

LONG RANGE DEVELOPMENT AND LAND USE, PLANNING AND ZONING

In the context of community food security, there are several dimensions to consider associated with the role that land use, zoning and planning play in meeting the long-term food needs of a community. In the case of this Community Food Assessment, there are two critical aspects to consider with respect to long-term food systems planning for Benton County: rural, agricultural production issues and urban, small-scale food production issues. For the purposes of this CFA, researchers reviewed ordinances, long-range comprehensive community plans, zoning codes and other relevant documents for Benton County as well as the surrounding counties.

BENTON COUNTY

Benton County's comprehensive plan around land use focuses on two key elements:

- *Rural Land Use* – sustains agricultural land use pattern in harmony with low-density rural housing. Supports agricultural practices, character, and lifestyle of rural culture and communities. Supports a farmers right to farm as long as they are using generally accepted agricultural production practices
- *Urban Land Use* – The County encourages zoning of small land parcels (primarily for housing) to ensure that the majority of land within the county remains in agricultural cultivation and prevents farming noise from bothering other residents.

There are currently no ordinances on the book that prohibit or encourage urban-oriented food production, including backyard chicken coops and beekeeping, front yard fruit tree cultivation or vegetable gardening, or protection of community garden plots through special zoning initiatives or land trust. Typically, these types of issues are handled at the municipal level rather than the county level.

MUNICIPAL ZONING AND PLANNING WITHIN BENTON COUNTY

Researchers also reviewed zoning, planning and ordinances at the city level within the county. In Foley, homeowners are welcome to garden and cultivate agricultural crops, but they may not keep livestock or raise chickens. Sauk Rapids is a community in transition that currently has land in agricultural production, but is looking to develop all of it for residential use. Nearly 40% of the land base within Sartell's city limits is vacant, but only 6.3% is zoned for agriculture. Within Rice's city limits, only 5% of the land base is zoned for residential use. 70% of the city's land is zoned for agriculture, with another 5% of vacant land on the edge of the city. With the exception of Foley, there are no ordinances on the books in any of the other towns that prevent people from raising chickens, beekeeping/honey production, fruit and nut tree cultivation, or fruit and vegetable gardening. One farmer indicated that he encountered issues with selling his fresh produce and value-added products like salsa on his farm, due to signage restrictions. He remains frustrated with signage regulations that also inhibit his roadside stand, even though it is located at a service station on a busy road.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report suggests, for Benton County residents who are landowners, there are numerous options for raising one's own food. There is adequate space within most of the communities in the county and very little in the way of zoning and ordinances that would restrict the ability of individuals to raise their own food. There are some recommendations that county and city planners and policymakers should consider:

- In Sauk Rapids, community planners should review land still within the city and just outside the city's perimeter to explore creating a zone for small-scale fruit and vegetable production, including community gardens.
- An ordinance should be passed that permits backyard chicken coops and beekeeping.
- Restrictions on signage should be reviewed to determine if they inhibit opportunities for local farmers selling fresh, healthy food to local community members.
- In all cases, cities and townships across the county should consider tax incentives focusing on farmers to do the following:
 - Increase the number of fruit tree orchards within the county.

- Ensure the availability of tax-free, permanently designated land for community gardens and fruit and vegetable production from local farms that is targeted toward local consumption.
- Land succession and land match-making programs targeting new farmers interested in small scale food production, oriented toward local markets.

FOOD ACCESS

TRANSIT

As many stakeholders suggested, transportation is a key issue for accessing food. Almost all retail stores within St. Cloud appear to be within blocks of bus routes, but weekend schedules mean buses run less frequently when families have time to shop. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, pedestrian access to level 3 and 4 food stores is a challenge in East St. Cloud. The lowest income population in lives near the interchange of Highways 10 and 23, where there is no good pedestrian access. This is a serious obstacle that prevents low-income community members who lack access to a vehicle from being able to shop at stores with the widest variety of healthy foods and the lowest prices. In other parts of the county – particularly for rural residents, access to transportation is critical to obtain food.

FARMERS MARKETS

In the last decade, Minnesota has seen a fourfold increase in the number of farmers' markets. Farmers' markets are community assets and an important part of the overall food landscape. In most cases, farmers markets allow people to have a directly relationship with the person who grows their food. Such markets are a good source of fresh and local healthy foods. When they adopt a role of emergency food support, farmers' markets can also play an important role in ensuring food access for the surrounding community.

There are three basic types of farmers' markets:

- Startup markets
- Emerging markets
- Mature markets

According to a recent report by the Community Food Security Coalition (12):

- Vibrant farmers' markets provide benefits to both consumers, producers, and the community.
- Consumers have access to fresh, locally grown food and connect with farmers and food production in a more intimate way. There is often increased selection and variety in the types of foods offered.

- Producers can connect directly with consumers to learn their preferences. Selling at a farmers' market allows small farm owner/operators to sidestep barriers typically presented when competing with large, commercial operations.
- Communities benefit from a robust farmers' market in several ways. Traffic to the area is increased, which boosts local spending. Community websites tout their farmers' market as an attraction for visiting or living in their community. In recent years, the markets have generated more of a "festival" atmosphere as noted in this report from University of Illinois Agrotourism:

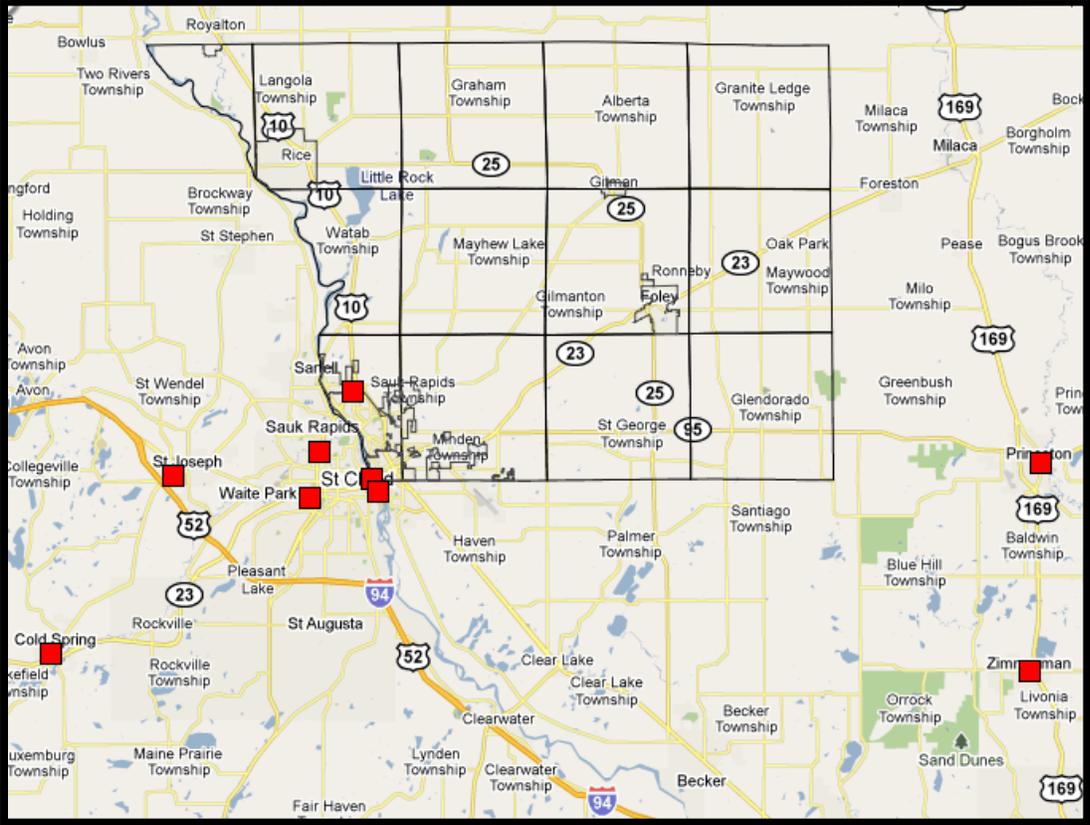
"... the farmers' market is being developed into a weekly mini-festival that provides benefits [not only] to individual farmers and consumers but also downtown business owners and the community as a whole." (13)

FINDINGS

There is one farmers' market in Benton County proper. Late May through October 2010, the Sauk Rapids market was open on Thursdays from 3-7PM. This was the market's fourth year in operation. Farmers Markets in Minnesota are required to bear the expense of incorporating EBT into their market. Hence, only 7 of Minnesota's 125 farmers' markets accept SNAP EBT cards (12). In and around Benton County, the Sauk Rapids Farmers' Market is the only market with vendors who accept WIC vouchers, which as of August 2009 can be used for fruit and vegetable purchases at farmers markets. Vendors choosing to participate in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and/or the Cash Value Voucher (CVV) are required to take training in order to offer these benefits to customers.

The St. Joseph farmers' market is a participant in the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), a federally funded grant project that helps provide low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for eligible foods (fruits, vegetables, honey, and fresh-cut herbs) at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community supported agriculture programs. The St. Joseph farmers' market has winter dates, which provides the opportunity for year-round access to locally grown and/or processed food.

Map 3 – Location of Farmers' Markets In and Around Benton County



There are no farmers' market located on the periwinkle, purple, or teal bus route in St Cloud, otherwise farmers markets in St Cloud appear evenly spread along bus routes; South St Cloud is underserved by both bus routes and farmers markets.

Table 7 – Details of Farmers' Markets in and around Benton County

Market Name	Address	City	County	# of vendors	Season Open	Day/ Hours	Types of Products Sold
Sauk Rapids	1911 4th Avenue N	Sauk Rapids	Benton	approx 16, space for 30 stalls.	Late May to Late October	Thu, 3-7PM	Vegetables, fresh berries, organic meats, and eggs, all from local farmers. Some vendors sell organic fruits and vegetables.
Princeton Farmers Market	111 South Rum River Drive	Princeton	Mille Lacs	20	May to October	Sat, 8:30AM-Noon	Large variety of fresh vegetables, fruit, bedding plants, eggs, meat, jams, honey and more. Minnesota Grown, producers are the vendors.
Zimmerman farmers' market	Fremont and 2nd Avenue. West	Zimmerman	Sherburne	15	Late May to Late October	Tue, 3-6:30PM	Fresh fruits, vegetables, bedding and vegetable plants, meats, eggs, honey, maple syrup, canned and baked goods.
St Joseph Farmers Winter Market	Fellowship Hall, Resurrection Lutheran Church	St Joseph	Stearns		Nov to April	Every other Fri, 3-6PM	Wide range of produce, meats, cheese and more grown within a 30-mile radius of St. Joseph. Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) participant.
St Joseph Farmers Market	610 County Road 2	St Joseph	Stearns	21 vendors selling food items	April to Late October	Fri, 3-6:30PM	Wide range of produce, meats, cheese and more grown within a 30-mile radius of St. Joseph. Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) participant.
Atwood Memorial Center Community Farmers Market	720 4th Avenue S. (St. Cloud State Univ.)	St. Cloud	Stearns	12	Late August to Mid-October	Mon, 11AM-3PM	Fresh, healthy, and locally grown foods
St. Cloud Area Saturday farmers' market	4150 2nd St. S (by Bremer bank)	St. Cloud	Stearns	21	May to October	Sat, 8AM-Noon	Garden produce, maple syrup, mushrooms, cheese, popcorn, strawberries, raspberries, jam/jelly, eggs, coffee, meats, chicken, herbs, baked goods, honey.
Urban Marketplace	St. Germain St. & 6th Avenue N	St. Cloud	Stearns	10	July to Sept	Wed, 11AM-2PM	Global, eco, educational and entertaining focus, offering locally grown produce

Market Name	Address	City	County	# of vendors	Season Open	Day/ Hours	Types of Products Sold
Cold Spring Farmers Market	700 1st St. South	Cold Spring	Stearns	approx 23	Mid-May to Mid-October	Wed, 3-6:30PM	Home grown fruits, vegetables, herbs, meats, honey, eggs, syrup, baked goods, jams & jellies.
St. Cloud Area Wednesday Farmers Market	1995 Hwy 15 N	St. Cloud	Stearns	9	Mid-July to Sept	Wed, 3-6PM	Garden produce, maple syrup, mushrooms, cheese, popcorn, strawberries, raspberries, jam/jelly, eggs, coffee, meats, chicken, herbs, baked goods, honey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create mini-farmers markets in the South of Sauk Rapids Township and Southeast Minden Township. A market on the east side of Highway 10 would provide easier access to low income people with limited means of transportation.
- Publicize the acceptance of WIC vouchers at the Sauk Rapids farmers market
- Explore the feasibility of implementing WIC voucher and EBT use at all farmers markets
- Create "Market Bucks" campaign for farmers markets, where EBT-eligible farmers' market customers can use their EBT cards and receive additional incentive dollars for fruits and vegetables, accompanied by a promotional campaign to publicize this program
- Identify partner(s) to help navigate the logistics of implementing these recommendations

COMMUNITY GARDENS

A community garden, in the broadest sense, is a place where multiple people gather to garden. A commonly held description is that a community garden is a public space dedicated for use by the local population to grow vegetables, flowers and herbs either for their own use or for use within the community.

These shared growing spaces provide multiple benefits both to the gardeners and the communities in which the gardens reside. The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) lists the following benefits:

- Improves the quality of life for people in the garden
- Provides a catalyst for neighborhood and community development
- Stimulates Social Interaction
- Encourages Self-Reliance
- Beautifies Neighborhoods
- Produces Nutritious Food

- Reduces Family Food Budgets
- Conserves Resources
- Creates opportunity for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education
- Reduces Crime
- Preserves Green Space
- Creates income opportunities and economic development
- Reduces city heat from streets and parking lots
- Provides opportunities for intergenerational and cross-cultural connections

FINDINGS

There are seventeen community gardens in and around St. Cloud. Seven of these are located in Benton County. The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project, run by the City of St. Cloud, operates four of the Stearns County gardens. Five of the seventeen gardens are located at churches.

Map 4 - Location of Community Gardens in Benton County and adjacent eastern Stearns County

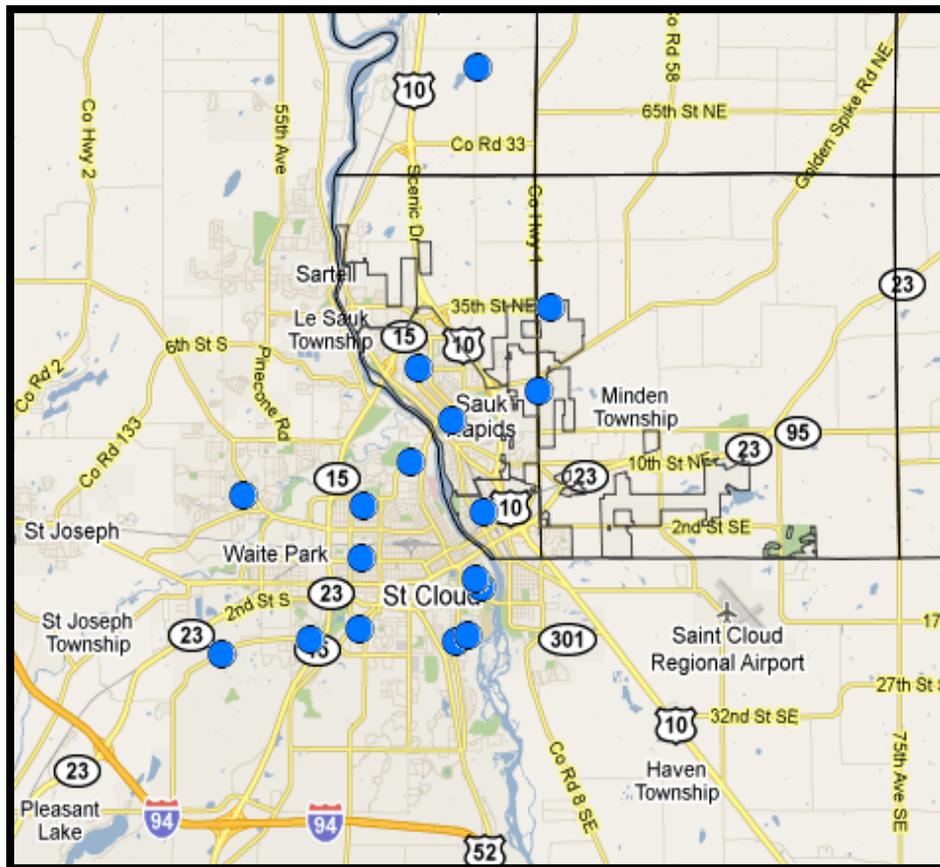


Table 8- Community Gardens in Benton County and adjacent eastern Stearns County

Name	City	County	Who sponsored by
Bethlehem Lutheran Community Garden	St. Cloud	Stearns	Bethlehem Lutheran Church
EastSide Center - Boys and Girls Club	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
Helping Hands Garden - Sacred Heart Catholic Church	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
Pantown Park (Madison Elementary School)	St. Cloud	Stearns	
Raymond Park	St. Cloud	Benton	
Roosevelt Boys and Girls Club	St. Cloud	Stearns	
Russel Arms Apartments	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
Schmidt Park Community Garden	St. Cloud	Stearns	The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project
St Cloud State Community Garden	St. Cloud	Stearns	St. Cloud State University
The 48 plot community garden at CentraCare Plaza in St. Cloud	St. Cloud	Stearns	The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project
The Fred Smoger Community Garden	St. Cloud	Stearns	The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project
The Good Shepherd Community	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
The St. Cloud Children's Home Environmental Center Community Garden near Cold Spring	St. Cloud	Stearns	The Central Minnesota Sustainability Project
Trinity Lutheran Church	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship	St. Cloud	Stearns	
Villages at Creekside	Sauk Rapids	Benton	
Whitney Recreation Center/Whitney Senior Center	St. Cloud	Stearns	

RECOMMENDATIONS

The nurturing and expansion of community gardens will have a positive impact Benton County's food environment in numerous ways, including

- increasing community food security for households;
- building community around food cultivation;
- enhancing property values and public spaces in neighborhoods; and
- strengthening the community food system for the county.

To enhance the already strong role of community gardens for Benton County communities, the following recommendations have emerged:

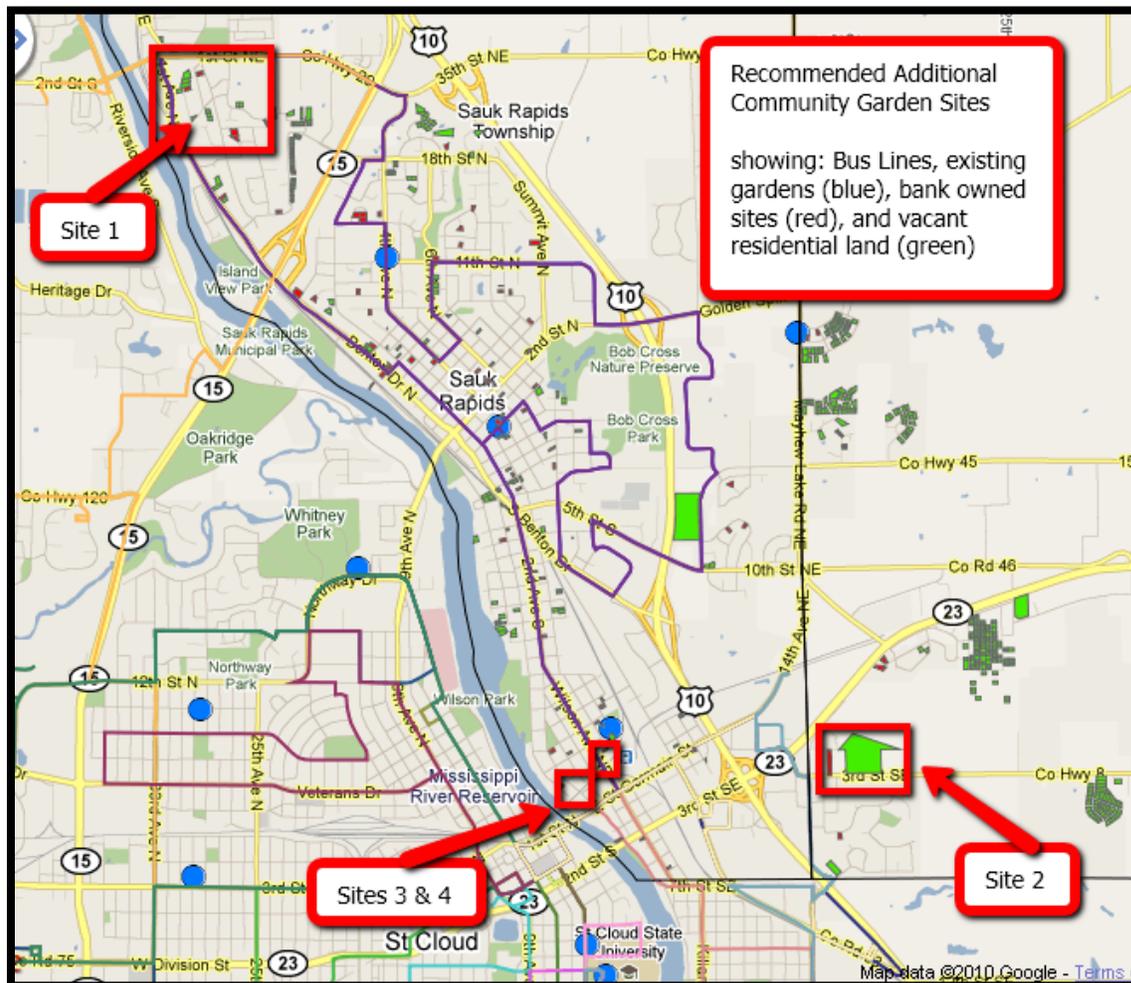
- Develop community gardens in the most populated areas of Sauk Rapids Township for individual, family and neighborhood use. The authors make recommendations for four potential new community garden sites. Locations were selected based on our review of the available data. Additional input should be gathered from community members, city officials, community gardening experts and other relevant stakeholders and experts. Recommended new community garden locations (shown on Map 5):
 - Recommended Site 1 - On 1st Avenue NE on the city bus route. There are vacant properties and bank-owned properties nearby.
 - Recommended Site 2 - Southeast of 3rd St NE – along the Route 75 bus line (indicated on the map as a blue-gray line) or between 3rd St NE & E St. Germain St., also along the Route 75 bus line. There is one large vacant parcel in the 2nd identified area (southeast). There is also a nearby bank owned property.
 - Recommended Site 3 – Is located near an existing community garden at the EastSide Center - Boys and Girls Club on 320 Raymond Avenue NE (Map 7). Although close to this garden site, the authors believe the demographics of this neighborhood warrant another community garden. This site area is north of the St. Cloud Amtrak Station, bounded by railroad tracks to the south and east, by 3rd Street NE to the north and Wilson Avenue NE to the west.
 - The neighborhood consists of approximately 6-7% minority population, with a median household income of \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year.
 - The population density is 20,000 to 30,000 people per square mile.
 - A plot of vacant residential land in this neighborhood should be investigated further as a possible community garden site.
 - There is also one small bank-owned property within this site area.

- Wilson Avenue NE, which bounds the west side of this area, is also a bus line.
- Recommended Site 4 – Nearby and slightly southwest of Site 3, is suggested Site 4 (Map 6). Located in a densely populated area with low income population, this site area is on either side of the railroad tracks in St. Cloud. It is bounded by 2nd Street NE on the north, E. St. Germain Street on the south, 3rd Avenue NE on the east and 2nd Avenue NE on the west.
 - This area has a population density of 20,000 to 30,000 people per square mile. Satellite imagery of this area (Map 5) shows apartment buildings as the primary feature.
 - The block south of the railroad tracks has a minority population of 10-11% of the total, and has a median household income of less than \$30,000/year. The area north of the tracks consists of approximately 6-7% minority population, with a median household income of \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year.
 - There are no vacant properties or bank-owned properties shown within this section. There is a bank-owned property approximately one block west of the 2nd Street NE / 2nd Avenue NE intersection.
 - The neighborhood can be reached via one bus line that terminates at the southwest corner of the described area. A second bus line is 3 blocks to the east on Wilson Avenue NE.
 - It is unknown how difficult it is to cross E. St. Germain St. or the Railroad tracks.
- Establish a large garden at the Salvation Army Shelter for use in meals prepared on-site
- Assess the availability of small plots of agriculturally zoned land in Eastern Benton County and determine and facilitate opportunities to generate fruit and vegetable production (several farmers are willing to donate small plots of land for others to put to this purpose).
- Provide education and support to both existing and new community garden organizers and coordinators on best practices and available resources. Provide technical assistance on identifying and applying for grant funds to help establish or run the gardens.
- Identify a partner to advise regarding the presence of particular success factors involved in choosing additional garden sites. Factors include access to water, soil quality, sun exposure, traffic and parking issues.
- Identify funding to establish community gardens that are available to new immigrant and ethnic minority communities.
- Initiate a plan that encourages churches and elder care institutions to create fruit and vegetable gardens that are tended by members/residents and used in the food service of that institution.

The designation of new community garden sites will fulfill several objectives that are described elsewhere in this report, including:

- Develop strategies to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables to reduce the stroke and heart disease rate
- Create community-based educational strategies for improving knowledge about nutrition and cooking skills of county residents
- Community Gardens could partner with K-12 schools to use the space as ways for young people to learn about food and nutrition. In addition, K-12 schools could partner amongst themselves to sponsor a community garden(s). Students from the various schools could connect in multiple ways. Teachers could implement individual course field trips and projects in class topics including science, biology, math, family science and physical education. Instructional modules would be designed to use the garden as part of the curriculum.

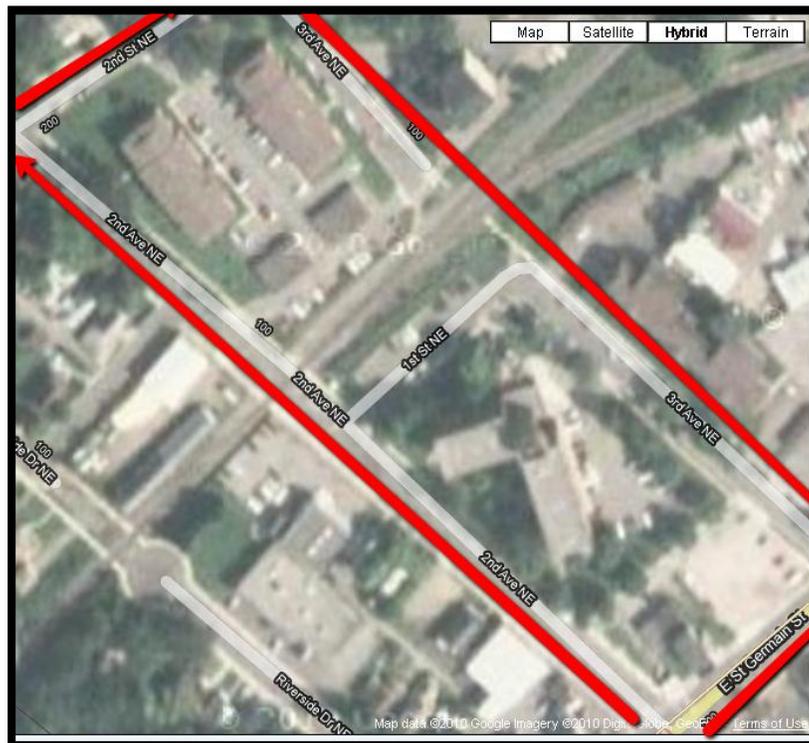
Map 5 - Suggested additional community garden sites in Benton County



Map 7 - Benton County Recommended Community Garden Site 3 - Satellite Image



Map 6 - Benton County Recommended Community Garden Site 4 - Satellite Image



SCHOOL FOOD

The quality, safety and healthfulness of school food are paramount concerns for communities across the United States. In response to alarming and widespread rates of childhood obesity and type II diabetes, policymaking bodies -ranging from federal, state, and local governments as well as school districts and individual schools - have initiated several reforms and new programs designed to improve school food. Efforts like the new “GreatTrays” initiative, Farm to School, school wellness policies (emphasizing school food, onsite vending machines, birthday treat policies, fundraising products, and school concessions), school health index tools, and a shift in nutritional guidelines all reflect a growing public commitment to fundamental reform around what children eat at school.

Sugar-sweetened beverages make up nearly 11 percent of children’s total caloric consumption. (14)

In many communities, when asked what systemic changes should be made to improve the food environment and general health of the public, many people point to school food as an important place for reform. This is the case in Benton County. In two community meetings and Leadership Team meetings, residents suggested that a comprehensive review of existing assets and initiatives in County schools targeting the improvement of school food would be important to include in this report.

The USDA sets dietary requirements which schools need to meet in order to receive federal reimbursement. In recent years, the USDA asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to provide recommendations for revising the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The IOM report recommended that school meals be aligned with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and that schools improve the healthfulness of food. The recommended new standards for school food are to:

- increase the amount and variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains;
- set a minimum and maximum level of calories; and
- increase the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat and sodium provided.

As expected because of increases in fruits, vegetables, and whole grain-rich foods, implementation of the recommendations is likely to increase the cost of the school meals, especially for breakfast. For the selected menus, the food costs for breakfast (*as selected* by the student) increased up to 18 percent and for

lunch (*as selected*) increased by 4 percent in the first analysis, which assumed moderate increases in students' selection.

For the changes recommended, market effects are expected to be the greatest for fruits, both because of higher expected supplementation in the breakfast program and because of limited domestic production. Other increased demand in the more limited markets for whole grain products, lower fat options for processed meats and entrées, and lower sodium options will present challenges to SFAs.

Minnesota does not have nutritional standards for competitive foods sold ala carte, in vending machines, or in school stores⁽¹⁶⁾. Twenty-eight states and D.C. have nutritional standards for competitive foods.

DATA COLLECTED

There are 13 public schools and 4 private parochial schools that serve Benton County students. All schools (public and private) that serve Benton County children have full kitchens available with the potential for extensive 'from scratch' cooking for school meals.

- Though full kitchen facilities are present, many schools choose to rely on processed or prepared foods that are reheated for student meals.
- Of the seventeen schools that serve Benton County students, two elementary schools have school gardens: a private school in East St. Cloud and a public school in Sauk Rapids. Neither garden is connected to its school's foodservice program.
- There has been some effort in the last few years to improve the quality of food served in school lunchrooms, which includes provision of fresh produce, increase in whole grains and decrease in less healthy, processed foods.

In 2007, 263,047 school meals comprised 20% of the publicly-funded food provided to Benton County's poorest populations.⁽¹⁵⁾

Benton County Schools Information on Gardens and Kitchens

Name of School	City	School Garden	Full Kitchen
<i>Foley School District</i>			
Foley Elementary School (K-3)	Foley		✓
Foley Intermediate School (4-8)	Foley		✓
Foley High School (9-12)	Foley		✓
St. John Catholic (K-6) / St. Johns Area School	Foley	no data	no data
<i>St. Cloud Area School District</i>			
Lincoln Elementary School (K-6)	St. Cloud		✓
St. Augustine and St. Mary's Cathedral Elementary School (K-6)	St. Cloud	✓	✓
<i>Sartell School District</i>			
Oak Ridge Elementary School (Pre K-4)	Sartell		✓
Pine Meadow Elementary School (K-4)	Sartell		✓
Sartell Middle School (5-8)	Sartell		✓
Sartell High School (9-12)	Sartell		✓
<i>Sauk Rapids/Rice School District</i>			
Sauk Rapids-Rice High School (9-12)	Sauk Rapids		✓
Sauk Rapids-Rice Middle School (6-8)	Sauk Rapids		✓
Mississippi Heights Elementary School (K-5)	Sauk Rapids	✓	✓
Pleasantview Elementary School (K-5)	Sauk Rapids		✓
Rice Elementary (K-5)	Rice		✓
Petra Lutheran (K-8)	Sauk Rapids		✓
Sacred Heart Elementary (K-6)	Sauk Rapids	no data	no data

In recent years, the Foley schools have made substantial improvements to the foods they serve students. For example, the foodservice director for the Foley school district offers fresh produce to students at every meal and has observed a significant increase in student consumption of these foods. The Foley schools have also increased their offerings of whole grain-based foods and reduced the amount of highly processed food. Furthermore, they have tightened their selection criteria for purchasing processed foods to avoid additives, sweeteners, and refined carbohydrates, selecting instead foods high in whole grains (like oats) and low in added sugars.

FINDINGS

There exist opportunities and challenges associated with changing school food environments in schools that serve Benton County students. Fortunately every school has complete kitchen facilities, which means that all schools are fully capable of storing adequate amounts of raw materials available for on-site, from scratch food preparation.

During community and Leadership Group meetings, county residents expressed keen interest in improving the quality of food served at schools in the area. Furthermore, they raised the issue of reintroducing home economics and gardening curricula. Concerns related to food and schools fell under three primary categories:

- Quality of food served to students as part of school meals program
- Availability of unhealthy food through vending, concessions, fundraisers and birthday celebrations
- Lack of comprehensive curriculum for students that focuses on gardening and food preparation skills

In terms of an agenda for reform, citizens identified several key areas for improvement:

- Increase amount of fresh fruits and vegetables served to students
- Reduce significantly the amount of food served that is refined or processed
- Increase amount of whole grain products served to students
- Shift school policies around contents of vending machines; foods sold at school events and concessions; foods sold as fundraisers; foods served in classrooms for parties and teacher incentives
- Reduce or eliminate reliance on refined, processed unhealthy foods served to students, including sweetened beverages and refined carbohydrates
- Introduce comprehensive gardening and cooking curriculum during the school day as well as extracurricular, out of school and summer activities

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there was widespread interest voiced by citizens involved in the Community Food Assessment, the researchers are unaware of any organized effort that currently exists to improve the quality of school food for Benton County students. It will take commitment and focus from a small group of interested county residents to initiate change in this area.

In order to foster and focus positive action toward improving the school food landscape, the authors make these recommendations:

- Convene a series of community dialogues with representatives from school administration, school board members, parents, teachers (including agricultural education, home economics, health, science, etc.) and other school staff, school foodservice directors, local farmers, FFA, and 4H to discuss emerging opportunities at the federal and state level, potential local level changes that could be made (at the school or district level), and barriers to improving the quality of school food.
- Adopt "Farm to School" programs within the schools and establish school gardens for all schools in the county. These initiatives could serve both as educational tools and as nutritional resources.

RETAIL FOOD

Like the rest of the United States, most Benton County residents purchase the vast majority of their food at retail outlets like grocery and convenience stores; specialty markets like ethnic grocery stores, meat lockers and small groceries; and superstores like Walmart or Target. Many county residents purchase their food from a variety of these outlets. For example, a rural Benton County resident may make weekly trips to Coborn's grocery in Foley and go once or twice a month to the Walmart or Target in St. Cloud to purchase staples and take advantage of sales and items that are less expensive at these stores than at their small-town counterparts. Many residents may purchase fruits and vegetables and staples at the grocery store, but purchase their meat at the meat locker and eggs or chicken from a local farmer. Likewise, residents may purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from roadside stands or a farmers market in the summer and buy their meat at the meat locker, purchasing other staples and baked goods at the grocery store. According to discussion among community residents at focus groups and community meetings whatever the combination of stops and locations made to purchase food, transportation is essential – especially for those residents living in the rural areas of the county.

For new immigrants, many rely on local ethnic markets to obtain their traditional foods. An interview with an ethnic market owner suggests that the inventory of his store is based on customer preference and request. He indicated that customers are extremely interested in staple foods and animal products, like meats, eggs and cheese; fruits and vegetables to a much lesser degree. Thus, much of the produce sold is imported from warm weather climates, where much of the clientele originally hails. Pricing structure reflects the income of the customers; the owner works with distributors that can give him the cheapest price which he can then pass along to customers. He does not purchase any food that is raised locally and procures Halal lamb and goat meat from the Twin Cities.

DATA COLLECTED

To better understand the retail food environment available to Benton County residents, this Community Food Assessment collected multiple sources of data, including:

- All stores approved to accept WIC vouchers
- All stores with retail food handlers' licenses issued by the County
- Stores identified by local community members that are designated as some type of specialty market

These data sources were separated into four distinct categories – Levels 1 through 4. Level 1 stores are convenience stores. Level 2 stores are specialty markets like meat lockers and natural foods coops. Level 3 stores are full-service, small ethnic markets geared toward new immigrant communities, including Latin American, Somali and Southeast Asian. Finally, Level 4 stores represent all large, full-service grocery stores.

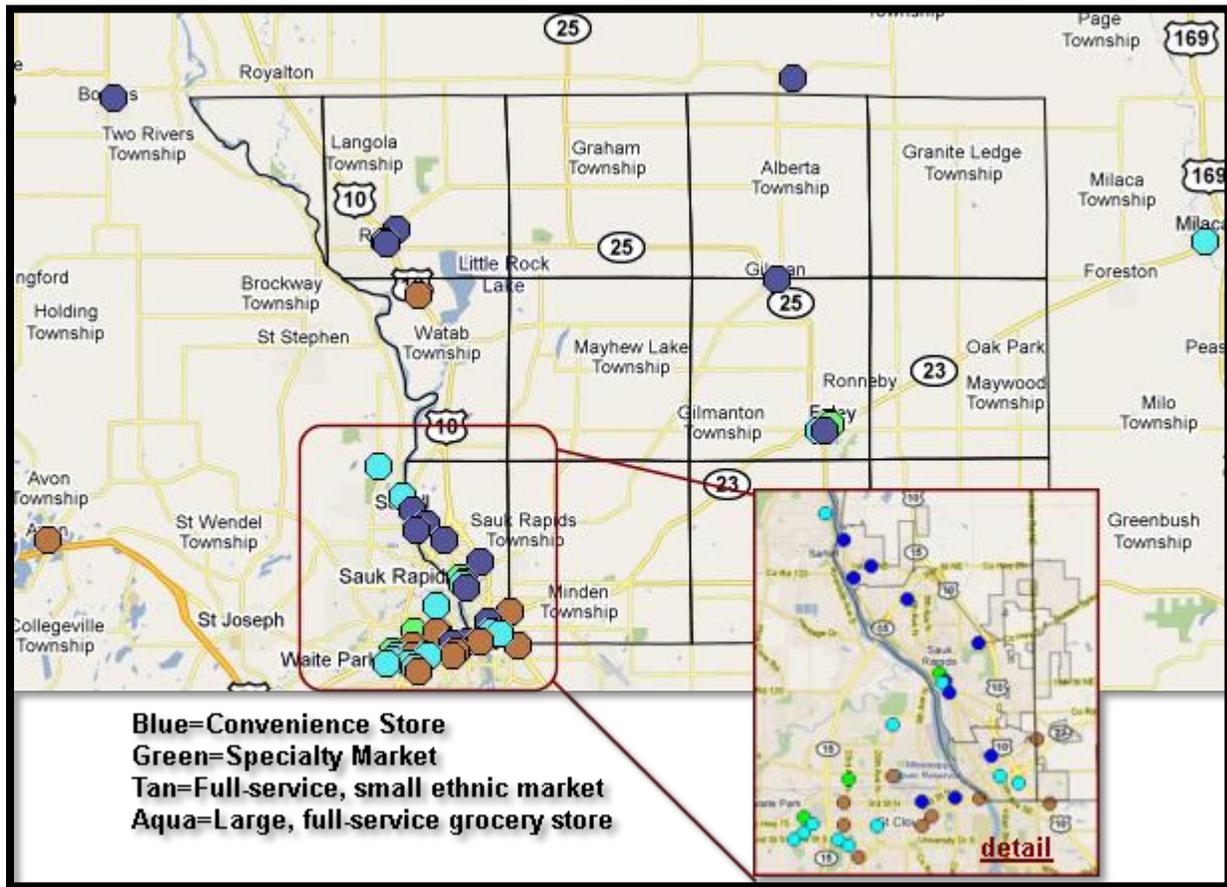
Table 9 – Types of retail food stores in and around Benton County

Community	# of Stores	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Benton Cty	30	9	3	1	6
Foley	4	1	2	0	1
Rice	1	1	0	0	0
Sartell	2	0	0	0	2*
Sauk Rapids	5	3	1	0	4
E St. Cloud	7	4	0	1	2

Level 1 = Convenience Stores
 Level 2 = Specialty Markets
 Level 3 = Full-service, small ethnic markets
 Level 4 = Large, full-service grocery stores

*In 2011, Sartell will have a Walmart and SuperTarget, which will add 2 additional Level 4 stores

Map 8 - Retail food store locations in and around Benton County



FINDINGS

Within Benton County proper, there are 30 food stores. Compared to the rest of Benton County, the entire city of St. Cloud (extending beyond Benton County borders), by far has the greatest number of level 3 and 4 retail food stores. The lowest income area in East St. Cloud has two level 4 retail food stores. There are numerous level 1 retail food stores across East St. Cloud, but they are not concentrated in low-income communities. The two level 3 ethnic food stores are, not surprisingly, located nearby the largest concentration of minority populations residing in a low-income area of East St. Cloud.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders participating in community meetings, interviews and focus groups indicated that they use retail grocery stores in neighboring counties frequently. There are numerous additional stores at all levels in Stearns, Mille Lacs, Morrison, and Sherburne counties, some of which are patronized by Benton

County residents. There is adequate saturation of retail food stores throughout Benton County and in neighboring counties that serve county residents.

Access and cost are the most pressing issues with respect to retail food stores, according to stakeholders. In interviews, focus groups and community meetings, they affirmed the adequacy retail food stores for county residents but expressed the following concerns:

- The cost of healthy food items – particularly fresh produce and quality meats – is too high for low-income people.
- Local level 4 retail grocers should work toward creating a larger market for selling locally grown food products, particularly fruits and vegetables.
- Retail grocery store specials rarely coincide with the that recipients of SNAP benefits and other government assistance like social security payments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To address the concerns outlined by the community associated with retail food stores, city and county planners should determine how to address the pedestrian access problem for residents living east of Highway 10, who wish to reach the level 4, full-service grocery store. An effective solution that resolves this issue could be developed through a couple of routes. A feasibility study to determine if an additional retail food store that sells healthy food on the east side of Highway 10 could be conducted. Community planners should explore what safe routes can be developed for pedestrians to the CashWise on the other side of Highway 10.
- Organized community groups may wish to approach level 4 retail grocers in the area to determine their willingness to expand their current purchasing of locally produced foods and/or initiate special marketing programs that will increase sales of local, fresh produce. Advocates may want to consider working with stores to explore the feasibility of adjusting the schedule for special discounted items to better coincide with the provision of food assistance benefits for low-income county residents.
- Connect community advocates with local food retail stores to ensure diversity in food products that meet the cultural needs of diverse communities.

RESTAURANTS

Between Benton and Stearns County, there are 170 restaurants that range from fast food outlets to sit-down chain restaurants to locally owned establishments.

Table 10 – Restaurants by Type in Benton and Stearns Counties

	Benton County	Stearns County
Total # of restaurants	71	105
# of fast food outlets	18	23
# of chain restaurants	20	26
# of locally owned restaurants	33	56

FINDINGS

Of the total restaurants in Benton County, 18 are pizza restaurants, 45 total serve some variation of fast or processed foods as their primary menu, and approximately 15 are restaurants that may serve some type of fresh vegetable or fruit. The scenario in Stearns County is similar.

An analysis of the types of restaurants available to East St. Cloud residents as compared to St. Cloud overall presents an interesting picture. In total, there are 18 fast food and chain restaurants in East St. Cloud. Most of these ‘chain’ restaurants in East St. Cloud are pizza restaurants. In St. Cloud, there are 35 fast food or chain restaurants. Proportionally, there are more local restaurants in St. Cloud than East St. Cloud, where chain/fast-food restaurants area almost twice the number of local restaurants. There are 31 locally owned restaurants in St. Cloud and just 10 local restaurants in East St. Cloud. There is also a cluster of chain restaurants in the highest income area, with a fast food cluster located in lower income area.

In reviewing the restaurants serving food throughout the St. Cloud metropolitan area and Benton County as a whole, there are very few restaurants that serve a wide variety of fresh, healthy options whether the establishment is locally owned, a chain restaurant or a fast food outlet. No matter what the income or location, it is difficult to obtain a meal at a restaurant in either county that has a reliable source and variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats and dairy products, whole grains, and healthy fats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Just as with retail food stores, there are an adequate number of restaurants available to Benton County residents. What is readily apparent, however, is how difficult it is to obtain a meal at most restaurants in the county that fit within healthy nutritional guidelines: fresh, whole foods prepared from scratch. County residents have several options they can undertake to address this issue:

- As the federal menu labeling guidelines are implemented in 2011, restaurants that do not need to comply with the federal guidelines could be encouraged to add a ‘healthy choice’ meal or conduct their own menu labeling for their customers.
- Locally owned restaurants that have a kitchen and prepare from-scratch foods could be encouraged to purchase, promote and sell locally grown products from farmers, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, potatoes, eggs, cheeses, meats, dairy products, and nuts.
- City and county zoning and planning could explore limitations on providing permits and licenses to new restaurants that are considered fast food or chain restaurants that do not offer healthy options.

FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

There are several emergency food support options available to Benton County residents who are food insecure, including federal, state and local resources. These include SNAP, WIC, USDA senior vouchers for farmers market use, foodshelves and Fare for All.

What is SNAP?

One of the most visible and extensive governmental food support programs is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Commonly known as ‘food stamps,’ SNAP recipients receive monthly food assistance based on their income. Recipients use a debit-style card at retailers to purchase food.

Individuals are eligible if their gross monthly income is less than 130% of the federal poverty guideline.

Enrollment in SNAP offers several benefits to local communities. High rates of participation in SNAP by those eligible contributes significant revenue to the local economy; reduces dependency on local public and privately supported emergency food support; and decreases the hunger rate among low-income residents. There are data that suggest higher rates of obesity and related diseases among SNAP enrollees compared to their low-income counterparts not enrolled in SNAP, but those data come from a study conducted in California. It is not clear if this holds true for Minnesota.

Some SNAP Facts

- 20% of residents in Benton County are low income.
- Approximately 50% of eligible Benton County residents are not enrolled.

Minnesota has the lowest rate for usage of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the United States. Benton County mirrors this trend: roughly half of those eligible for SNAP benefits are not enrolled, despite the relatively high rate of poverty and food insecurity. This is unfortunate, as participation in SNAP not only yields clear and immediate benefits for the hungry, it also serves as an economic engine for communities – injecting millions of dollars into local economies each year.

Table 11 - SNAP Facts

SNAP Facts	Benton County
2008 total SNAP benefits received ⁽¹⁷⁾	\$1 - 2 million
2007 total number participating in SNAP	778 - 2044
2007 percent of population participating in SNAP	0 - 4.9%
2007 ratio of SNAP participation to persons living in poverty	0.41 - 0.60

What is WIC?

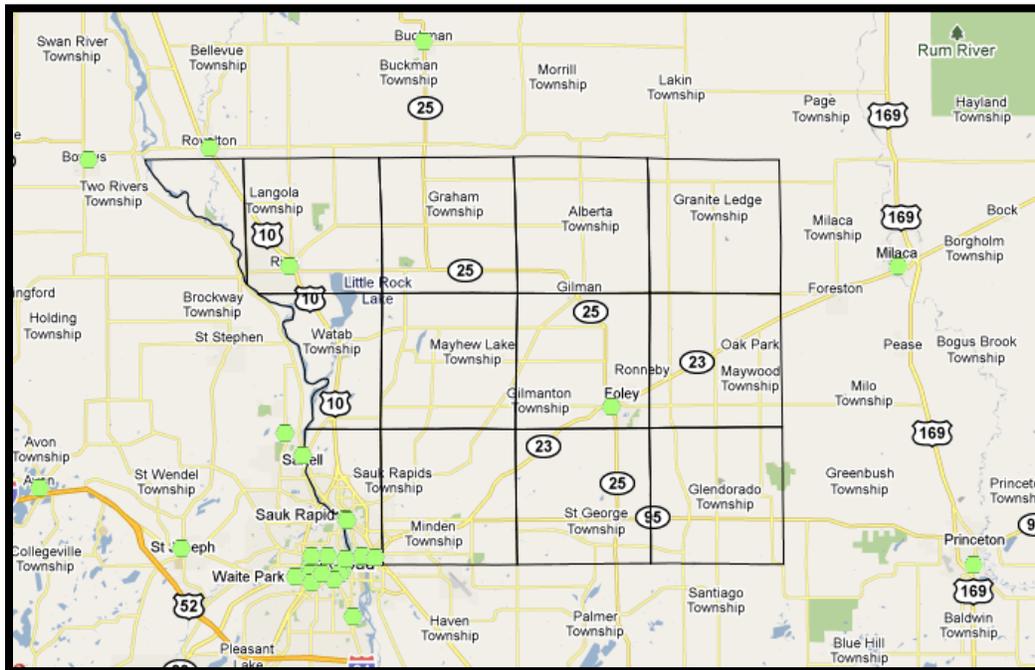
Another federal food support program targets women with young children - the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which provides nutrition education, nutritious foods, breastfeeding support and information. Enrollees in WIC receive vouchers that can be used to purchase fruit juice, low sugar cereals, beans, whole grains like oatmeal, and infant formula.

There are 55 stores in the area surrounding Benton County; only a handful accept WIC vouchers within county borders. Of these stores, a few are full service grocery stores, where shoppers have a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, meats, eggs and dairy products available. One of the stores is a small grocery store, which provides more limited offerings of other types of food. The remaining store is a drug store that sells some processed, frozen and convenience foods and no fresh foods.

There are other full and partial-service grocery and specialty stores nearby in neighboring Stearns County that also accept WIC vouchers, including full-service grocery stores and ethnic markets that cater to the Asian, Latin American, and Somali/Muslim communities.

Of the communities patronized by Benton County shoppers, St. Cloud, Rice, Sauk Rapids and Foley all have full-service grocery stores that accept WIC vouchers.

Map 9- Locations accepting WIC vouchers, Benton County and area.



Using WIC vouchers at full-service grocery stores affords consumers the opportunity to make better overall food purchases, given the broader array of healthy options. Numerous studies demonstrate that full-service retail grocery stores not only have the widest variety of healthy food options, but also price these healthy food options at a lesser cost than their convenience store counterparts. Using WIC vouchers at drug or convenience stores means customers have extremely limited options, which increases the likelihood that any additional food purchases made at these outlets will be processed and convenience foods.

“It is not feasible for low-income people to eat well in Benton County.”
- Salvation Army Focus Group participant

FOODSHELVES AND LOCAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Foodshelves provide a critical resource for food insecure households in Benton County. As this report suggests, approximately 20% of Benton County’s population is low-income. Yet, according to www.hungerfreemn.org, only 1% of food obtained by county residents comes from foodshelves or similar food assistance services. Benton County residents have five nearby foodshelves, including three in Benton County (Foley, Rice and St. Cloud). All of these foodshelves do offer fresh produce that is donated primarily from local sources (including stores, farms and gardens), with different types of fresh fruits and vegetables available depending on the venue and season. In Rice, the foodshelf offers primarily non-perishable produce like potatoes and is only open once a month. Whatever donations of fruits and vegetables they receive are distributed the same day they receive them, as there is no storage space. In Foley, the CROSS foodshelf offers fresh produce in season both days a week when it is open, donated by local gardeners and stored in new walk-in coolers. Only one foodshelf – Catholic Charities located in St. Cloud – makes culturally specific fruit and vegetables available on an occasional basis.

CROSS Foodshelf Snapshot: 2009

- Located in Foley, the CROSS foodshelf provided food for approximately 1100 families.
- Of the 3500 people served by the CROSS foodshelf, 1426 were children; 1909 were adults; and 165 were seniors.
- 91,000 pounds of food were distributed through the foodshelf.

Fare for All is another food assistance program in the area, coordinated by the Emergency Foodshelf Network. Offering low-cost packages of healthy food, Fare for All provides a variety of well-rounded options (vegetarian, meat only, staples, holiday and monthly specials, and a combined pack of fresh fruits/vegetables, fresh and frozen meats) at an extremely low price. There are three Fare for All drop sites in the area – all located in Stearns County (2 in St. Cloud, 1 in Melrose).

DATA COLLECTED

Data for this section were obtained in several ways:

- Existing datasets from www.hungerfreemn.org, United States Department of Agriculture, United States Census
- Background information from USDA and Emergency Foodshelf Network

- Local sources of information, including CROSS Foodshelf (Foley) website, food emergency brochures provided by the County to low-income residents, staff at all area foodshelves and Fare for All program
- Focus group and interview subjects, including clients of the CROSS Foodshelf in Foley and the Salvation Army Shelter in St. Cloud

FINDINGS

There are several options for locally operated emergency food support available to Benton County residents, from foodshelves to hot meals programs to homeless shelters. The findings suggest that the population, given the level of hunger and financial distress by residents of the county, vastly underutilizes these options. One foodshelf director suggested that this might be due several factors, including a lack of awareness of financial eligibility, a sense of obligation that food available at foodshelves should be left for the most needy, and a sense of pride that can prevent people from using resources they truly need but may be ashamed to do so. Despite the underutilization by eligible residents, foodshelves across Minnesota are experiencing record numbers of patrons in the last few years, as a result of the economic downturn. This presents a serious strain for these organizations, as the public and private resources available to provide financial support and donated foods has decreased as need has increased.

As part of this Community Food Assessment, patrons of the CROSS foodshelf and residents of the Salvation Army Shelter were interviewed in separate focus groups about their needs, challenges and interests related to the local food environment. Access to affordable, healthy food at foodshelves, farmers markets, and from retailers – particularly fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the year – was of great interest to focus group participants.

Price was not the only challenge mentioned by focus group participants. Reliable access to transportation and safe pedestrian access were also core issues. One client at the Foley foodshelf lacked a vehicle and had to walk or use a motorized scooter (due to a disability) to pick up food for her family. Returning home with multiple bags of food can be a challenge for those lacking a vehicle. Another client had a vehicle but was unemployed and had no means to purchase fuel for her car. A homeless single mother, she stayed with relatives out of town and had to rely on others to provide her with gas money or a ride to get to the foodshelf or grocery store in Foley.

Salvation Army Shelter residents described a similar story. All members of this focus group lacked a vehicle and relied on bus transport or walking to purchase food. Residents explained that the three meals a day provided at the shelter offered no fresh fruits and vegetables; canned produce was served. Breakfasts lacked protein and were most often highly processed, refined foods. Shelter residents indicated that a

convenience store was the only option that was close and safely accessible by walking. This store offered virtually no healthy options, so residents were forced by circumstance to select highly processed, unhealthy foods. A nearby full-service grocery store across the highway was a long walk, due to traffic and road design, which made it hazardous to reach on foot. Moreover, shelter residents are unable to keep or prepare foods in their room. If they wish to purchase fresh produce at this grocery store, they have to purchase prepared foods that are extremely expensive. One focus group member described spending seven dollars just to be able to eat some fresh fruit (cut-up melon, pineapple, grapes and berries), a significant amount of money given her budget.

While focus group participants at the Salvation Army spoke very positively about the public transportation system in the St. Cloud area in terms of cost, frequency, and convenient routes to grocery stores, the one-way trip to reach the most affordable full-service grocery store in the community took 45 minutes and required transfers – a challenge when loaded down with grocery bags on the return trip.

Without exception, focus group participants expressed desire for a diet rich in whole grains; healthy fats; high quality meats, eggs and dairy products; and fresh fruits and vegetables. Virtually all participants were extremely knowledgeable about what constitutes a healthy diet. Many had significant cooking skills, some knew how to garden and can. Of those interviewed only one regularly gardened; she was the only one with a home. Only a couple knew little about nutrition and food preparation; they happened to be the youngest participants. Furthermore, many were extremely sophisticated shoppers and knew where and when there were special discounts, seasonal sales, high quality food and the best prices on a variety of healthy foods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the needs and interests of foodshelf and soup kitchen clients, there are several steps that can be taken to improve access to healthy foods for low-income residents of Benton County, including:

- Establish a garden on-site at the Salvation Army Shelter where residents can garden and produce can be used in the kitchen for resident meals.
- Explore level and residency of patronage of Fare for All to determine extent to which low-income Benton County residents are using this program. Publicizing the Fare for All program through local foodshelves and through local schools may serve as helpful mechanisms to increase participation in this program.
- Numerous strategies to increase access to farmers markets for low-income shoppers were enthusiastically endorsed by focus group participants. Options include:
 - testing feasibility and promotional strategies for EBT use at area farmers markets;

- publicizing and expanding existing use of WIC vouchers at Sauk Rapids farmers markets and extending this program to other farmers markets in the area;
- enrolling and publicizing local farmers market in USDA program to provide vouchers for additional fresh fruits and vegetables for eligible seniors; and
- working with local transportation options for eligible seniors to make use of farmers market program.
- Addressing the pedestrian access issue for individuals living east of Highway 10 who need access to a full-service retailer is critical. County and city zoners and planners should explore options to address this issue. Options might include small-scale grocers that serve that side of the highway, improved pedestrian right-of-way signage or bridges, or examination of bus routes.
- Local foodshelves may also want to consider how best to meet the cultural needs of clients associated with fresh produce, including provision of peppers, onions, tomatoes and other culturally familiar foods for Latino, African and Southeast Asian immigrant communities.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reviewed the health concerns, food and agricultural assets, and potential solutions to improve the health and well-being of Benton County residents. The following recommendations are based on this review as potential pathways to increase fruit and vegetable consumption by county residents, decrease the consumption of unhealthy foods, improve access and affordability of healthy foods for all, and increase the use of agricultural and cultural assets of the County. Based on the findings outlined in this report, we make the following recommendations (note that some findings cross more than one category):

CULTURAL ASSETS AND COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

- Develop strategies to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables to reduce the stroke and heart disease rate.
- Create community-based educational strategies for improving knowledge about nutrition and cooking skills of county residents.
- Tap into local elders for community initiatives that focus on increasing competency in cooking, canning, and gardening.
- Increase use of CSA farms by Benton County residents, increase the number of CSA drop sites throughout the county.
- Include land access as part of a comprehensive plan to provide gardening opportunities (e.g. provide access to land near or on lots with apartment buildings, Section 8 housing, and low income communities; create composting sites near these gardens).
- Organize a confederation of local CSA farms to accept EBT and then employ a promotional campaign through WIC nutrition classes, local public health service opportunities, and conveniently located drop sites in the major towns throughout the county.
- Explore how local meat lockers can also serve as a site for sales of other fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables.

LONG RANGE DEVELOPMENT AND LAND USE, PLANNING AND ZONING

- Explore the idea of an agricultural heritage zone policy.
- Launch professional development and education programs (e.g., topical brown bags) for city and county employees who work with food support programs, zoning and community planning and development and public health to explore opportunities for long-term food systems planning.

- Assess the availability of small plots of agriculturally zoned land in Eastern Benton County; determine and facilitate opportunities to generate fruit and vegetable production (several farmers are willing to donate small plots of land for others to cultivate).
- Review zoning and ordinances to ensure no roadblocks exist that prohibit food self-sufficiency (like chicken coops or fruit trees in yards).
- Review restrictions on signage to determine if they inhibit opportunities for local farmers selling fresh, healthy food to local community members.
- Create incentives to include gardening green space in design review processes.
- Target new farmers interested in small scale food production, oriented toward local markets via land succession and land match-making programs.

FOOD ACCESS

- Improve transportation and pedestrian access to supermarket for residents living east of Highway 10.
- Create mini-farmers markets in East St. Cloud and the surrounding area.
- Create "Market Bucks" campaign for farmers markets, where EBT-eligible farmers' market customers can use their EBT cards and receive additional incentive dollars for fruits and vegetables, accompanied by a promotional campaign to publicize this program.
- Develop community gardens in the most populated areas of Sauk Rapids and the area surrounding East St. Cloud for individual and family use.
- Establish a large garden at the Salvation Army Shelter for use in meals prepared on-site.
- Convene community dialogues with key stakeholders to discuss emerging opportunities at the federal, state, and local (school or district) level changes and barriers to improving the quality of school food.
- Adopt "Farm to School" programs and establish school gardens for all schools in the county.
- Develop relationships with key food retailers to increase their purchasing and promotion of locally produced, healthy food.
- Connect community advocates with local food retail stores to ensure diversity in food products that meet the cultural needs of diverse communities.
- Work with grocery stores to explore the feasibility of adjusting the schedule for special discounted items to better coincide with the provision of food assistance benefits for low-income county residents.

- As the federal menu labeling guidelines are implemented in 2011, restaurants that do not need to comply with the federal guidelines could be encouraged to add a ‘healthy choice’ meal or conduct their own menu labeling for their customers.
- Encourage locally owned restaurants that have a kitchen and prepare from-scratch foods to purchase, promote and sell locally grown products from farmers, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, potatoes, eggs, cheeses, meats, dairy products, and nuts.
- City and county zoning and planning could explore limitations on providing permits and licenses to new restaurants that are considered fast food or chain restaurants that do not offer healthy options.

FOOD ASSISTANCE

- Publicize the acceptance of WIC and SNAP vouchers at the Sauk Rapids farmers market.
- Explore the feasibility implementing EBT use at all farmers markets.
- Assess economic impact to Benton County Farmers through a promotional campaign that increases SNAP use by eligible persons in Benton County.

These recommendations will strengthen the local food system, contribute to the local agricultural economy, and improve the health of the community.

CONCLUSION

One need only review projected healthcare costs linked to obesity and related health issues to become concerned about the long-term financial strain on county resources. This worry is compounded by the rising rate of hunger and resulting increase in use of emergency food support programs, which oftentimes receive financial support from local government. These issues represent a worrisome trajectory for local governments, which could be rendered incapable of meeting healthcare and food needs due to untenable costs and shrinking budgets.

A key public health solution to this constellation of issues resides in the local food environment. Does it allow for healthy, easy choices? Do low-income residents have a variety of options to obtain affordable, healthy food that is accessible? Does the food environment ensure that residents can easily eat the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables? Do rural and city-dwelling residents alike of all ages, incomes and ethnicities have the healthy food they need? Do all residents have access to land if they would like go garden? Do they know how to grow, preserve, and cook food? Do children have healthy food options at schools and community events? A comprehensive commitment to improving community

food environments is a preventatively-oriented solution that is far cheaper and more effective in the long run than trying to meet a steadily and significantly increasing healthcare and emergency food costs.

Benton County is uniquely positioned to comprehensively long-term obesity, hunger, and healthcare challenges. The availability of agricultural land, the culinary and agricultural knowledge base of many residents, the existing, traditional community food assets (like meat lockers, small dairies, farmers markets and widespread direct market relationships between farmers and consumers offer multi-faceted potential. Furthermore, the enthusiasm and relationships among city and county planners, the advocacy and engagement by local food-related non-profits, the interest of local policy makers, county units of government, educators, and the faith community offer a promising array of partnerships that can deliver on some of the recommendations in this report.

The recommendations offered in this report were generated from citizen feedback, analysis of data collected, and opportunities that are unique to the county. It will take committed citizens – working together – to develop the pathways for these recommendations to become reality.

*Benton County Community Food Assessment
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Table - CSA Farms and Drop Sites with Potential Impact to Benton County

Name of CSA	Street	City	County	# of subscribers	Drop-off sites/area covered	Produce sold
Bannockburn Farm	20212 Edom Road	Cold Spring	Stearns	100	Sells at St. Cloud farmers' market (4150 2nd Street S, St. Cloud, MN 56201)	27 acre farm offering USDA certified organic produce at local farmer's markets in St. Cloud and Cold Spring. The farm is renowned for its heirloom vegetable varieties and sells baked goods, jams, and jellies and other value-added products. The farm provides cut flower arrangements and produce to local restaurants and coffee shops. Bannockburn Farm also is a CSA offering naturally grown eggs, lamb, pork, beef, and chicken to its members.
Blue Ribbon Farm (CSA)	3623 156th ST NW	Clearwater	Wright	50	Sell at St Cloud FMs (both on Sat and Wed)	A variety of naturally grown vegetables will be offered and may include cabbage, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, peppers, sweet corn, cucumbers, lettuce plus more. Apples, watermelon, cantaloupe and raspberries and eggs.
Cedar Hill Farm (CSA)	7609 County Road 17	Rice	Benton	10	7609 County Road 17 Rice, MN 56367	Fresh gourmet beans, cukes, gorgeous beets, strawberry jam, dried herbs, gourmet vinegars and pickles, handmade goods, and more, dried and canned goods when out of season.
<u>Common Ground Garden (CSA)</u>	Under the water tower at St. Benedict's Monastery	St. Joseph	Stearns	70	Saint Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph (104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, Minnesota 56374) and St. John's Episcopal Church in St. Cloud (1111 Cooper Avenue South, Saint Cloud, MN 56303)	Vegetables, herbs, fruits, flowers
Culinary Delights Farm (CSA)	21621 County Road 83	Big Lake	Sherburne	125	On farm sale and drops off: Albertville, Anoka, Blaine, Coon Rapids, Maple Grove, Monticello, Ramsey, St. Michael.	High quality herbs and vegetable
Farm of Plenty (CSA)	22398 100th Ave	Randall	Morrison	125	Imagine Chiropractic 750 1st street South Suite 103 Waite Park, MN 56387. Other drop off not in Benton.	(98%) heirlooms
Farm of Plenty (CSA)	22398 100th Ave.	Randall	Morrison	125	15088 22nd Avenue NE, Little Falls, MN, 56345 750 1st street South Suite 103, Waite Park, MN, 56387	Accepts EBT cards!
Grandma's Garden (CSA)	4320 Sterling Drive	Big Lake	Sherburne	5	On site sale	Chemical-free, environmentally responsible and animal friendly produce grown by woman-power.

Name of CSA	Street	City	County	# of subscribers	Drop-off sites/area covered	Produce sold
PLOUGHSHARE FARM (CSA)	6653 Harvest Pl NW	Parkers Prairie	Otter Tail	325	On site and drop off at SCSU. No drop-off in Benton Cty.	
Schlangen Family Farm (CSA)	33236 Oakland Road	Freeport	Stearns	100	Drops off in Mpls	Greens, Eggs & Ham
Webster Farm Organic - Salad Days (CSA)	15455 195thAve NE	Foreston	Mille Lacs	100	On farm sale and drop off sites in Twin Cities. Serves members in the Twin Cities, St Cloud, Milaca, and Foley regions.	asparagus, many types of lettuces and Asian greens, wild greens, micro greens, mache, fresh herbs - basil, mints, oregano, tarragon, parsley, cress, dill, cilantro, arugula, edible flowers, sugar pod peas, over 50 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, spinach, summer and winter squash, cucumbers, potatoes, carrots, turnips, radishes, chives, onions, kohlrabi, beans, beets, cabbages, turnips, kale, peppers, tomatillos, sun chokes, chard, garlic.

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APPENDIX A: BENTON COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Owner/manager of a small-scale ethnic market

1. Please describe your store—location, size, types of customers, years in business.
 - 2 years in business
 - 1500 sq ft
 - Food, frozen, it is like a "normal" grocery store
 - Mostly Somali, also different customers from all over: Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, other Africans
2. How would your typical customer describe a healthy diet?
 - Rice, bread
 - Fish, goat, and beef – Halal
 - Some vegetarians
3. What types of foods do you carry year round? Are there certain fresh fruits and vegetables that you carry only during specific seasons?
 - Papaya, mango = seasonal
 - a. Tomatoes. Bananas, lemons, lime, apples – are year round
4. What factors affect which fresh fruits and vegetables you sell in your store?
 - a. He sells what customers want and also typical grocery store (non-ethnic) produce
5. Would you like to carry certain fresh fruits and vegetables or other healthy foods that you don't now carry? If so, what prevents you from stocking those foods?
 - Sells mostly what people request
 - Store is very small
 - If he wants to get something, he orders it, didn't appear to be an issue
6. Do your customers ever talk with you about wanting certain fresh fruits and vegetables or other healthy foods? If so, what do they say?
 - a. If a number of customers request something, he will carry it
7. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell more fresh fruits and vegetables? How about other healthy foods?
 - a. His store is small, he cannot carry everything, but he carries what his customers request

[Interviewer's note: The interviewee appeared somewhat offended by this question. As if I was suggesting he was not selling healthy food now.]

8. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell fresh fruits and vegetables at a lower price? How about other healthy foods?

- a. He goes with the wholesaler that can offer him the cheapest price

[Interviewer's note: It seemed as though asking what it would take to sell your food for a lower price may have been offensive – as if I were suggesting that it was not at a good price now.]

9. Do you have any other comments related to selling healthy foods to your community?

Good options at his store, people need to make better choices

Obesity is not good in the community

People need to make better choices

Genetics – exercise

Goat meat – People know that goat is fattier and fish is less fatty and better for you. He gets his meat from the cities and supply is not an issue.

Farmers' Market Vendor

1. How long have you been a vendor at the St. Cloud Farmers Market? 18 years
 2. What types of products do you sell? Vegetables, strawberries, melons, jam, wild rice
 3. How is the St. Cloud Farmers Market managed? What role do vendors have in managing it?
Managed by members and board made up of vendors.
 4. How would you characterize the Farmers Market's marketing plan? Done by a committee of vendors – pretty random
 5. What role do you think the farmers market plays in providing healthy foods to County residents?
Large role for those who shop with us (small percentage of total population)
 6. Who are the buyers at the St. Cloud farmers market? Educated people from the college and community
 7. If the County was interested in increasing access to fresh, healthy food sold at the farmers market to low-income families, what strategies could they use? Give coupons directly
 8. What improvements would you like to see at the St. Cloud Farmers Market? Permanent location with shelter and more space
 9. What type of support from the County would facilitate these improvements? Is there any policymaking at the County or city levels that would strengthen the farmers market? Financial support for a location
 10. From the standpoint of the farmer, what type of improvements to the local food environment would increase farmer profitability associated with local markets? Get information about existence of markets to more people
-

Retail food market manager

Summary: Many factors influence selection and retail of fresh fruits and vegetables, organic and/or locally sourced foods. Customer requests play a large role in determining what to stock. Ability to accommodate the storage and placement requirements of the food and price competitively are also important. A lack of reliable quality is an additional consideration when the product is locally sourced.

[The store] has consumer education items including signage and food demos. They are beginning to implement a 1-100 nutritional rating system called NuVal^{TM3} as a simple and straightforward way to educate consumers on the healthfulness of their food choices.

1. What factors affect which products you sell in your store? (ask specifically for each type of operation)

A lot has to do with space, accessibility of products to Coborn's, a competitive environment. Wal-Mart opened up in Sauk Rapids and will compete with store there, customer requests are important as well.

2. Do these factors vary from one season to another?

Not much. Produces will pull in locally grown foods during the summer. We provide more local options in the summer, more typically seasonal stuff for the holiday.

3. Do you stock certain fresh fruits and vegetables to meet the demand of specific cultural or ethnic groups? How about other food products? If so, has this changed over the past few years?

Our produce buyer has said they've tried to increase the Hispanic produce. This has increased a lot in the past year. There has also been an increase in Hispanic products in our grocery section. We have an aisle dedicated to Hispanics. The store really tries to cater to customer requests.

4. Would you like to carry certain fresh fruits and vegetables in your store that you do not now carry? If so, what prevents you from carrying those fruits and vegetables? How about other foods? (check in about local foods)

Nothing really right now. He (produce buyer) may think he is bringing a lot in but they are open to suggestions. We haven't seen the consumer push yet for organic certification, correct procedures to sell organic correctly.

5. What factors influence how and where you place fresh fruits and vegetables in your store? How about healthy meats, dairy products, and eggs?

There is a merchandising plan but it really depends on the condition of a product, does it need to be chilled, etc? If they want to promote it, they will pull it to the front of the store. Not much in the way of meats and eggs but if they were to be highlighted, they'd be put in a littler bunker and it would be pulled out in the aisle. A downfall for something perceived as healthier can be the whole food safety limitation that could put healthier things at the bottom (EX: ground chicken at bottom vs. ground beef at top).

6. Does your store provide any educational resources related to the preparation and/or consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables?

³ <http://www.nuval.com/>

Not right now but currently trying to develop some thing. The demo coordinator gives recipes that help make food such as an apple salad, handing out samples and demonstrating it. The store will have easels that say something like, “Peaches are in season and provide vitamin C...” The meat section also provides a little display with different meat recipes. Our Sauk Rapids store installed a learning center, a kitchen set up buy our store deli. Their chief is there on a weekly basis doing demos on things like knife safety and food preservation, pasta etc. they do call in local chefs to do this. They seem to be well attended.

7. What challenges do you face in obtaining and selling fresh fruits and vegetables in your store? Meats, eggs, and dairy products? How about locally produced foods?

The produce manager said he really didn’t seem to have many challenges; there is also a short time frame for local produce. Some local producers don’t give the quality the store wants (example: Fennel).

8. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell more healthy foods? What about selling more locally produced foods?

In the interviewee’s assessment, the store has always been good about buying local for each community. There is a lot more marketing in ads to show that food is local, taking pictures of farmers and their farms and publicizing it (ex: Golden Plump).

9. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell healthy foods at a lower price?

They try to keep prices competitive, they keep trying to make profit but stay competitive.

10. Do you have any other comments about selling healthy foods in your store or in stores generally?

NuVal, nutritional quality type tool. The store will soon be offering this. It assesses the nutritional quality on a 1-100 scale, the higher the score, the better nutritional quality it has. They will be tagging all foods in store with this. The hope is that “you trade up for health”. Say you used to snack on Little Debbie’s, which get a 1 on the scale, you might stop eating them. It gives people a tool to use when they are shopping. They are hoping people will use this to make healthier choices. It’s very exciting, we have partnered with BCBS and Blend (health advocates) on this project to do consumer education. Cheerios used to get a 32, they adjusted their sodium content and now they get a 37.

11. What do you think it will take to change the purchasing behaviors of consumers toward more healthful options?

Education and offering easier steps to make more healthful options. Hopefully this guides people. Blend is working to do this through Central Minnesota. It’s nice to have them in our community because they provide educational help.

Farmers' Market Vendor – Declined to Participate

Beef Production

If you produce more food than you can sell, what do you do with the excess? Are you satisfied with that way of handling the excess?

- a. *At capacity: sells everything he produces*
-

Farmers' Market and Roadside Stands Vendor

No Response to repeated contact attempts

Diversified Crops Farmer

1. Describe your farming operation in general—size, years in business, what you grow/produce, where you sell, number of family members or others involved in the operation.

He's knee deep in pumpkins and mud right now.

Wife, he, and son work the farm. His father started the business in 1974 - a St. Cloud retail store, interviewee took over the biz about 9-10 years ago.

100% wholesale now, 9 or 10 years

Peas, potatoes, green beans, sweet corn, squash, pumpkins, fall stuff, a little of tomato cucumbers

(His wife) does work some farmers markets

540 acres

78-80 of soybeans

2. How do you decide what to grow or produce?

Based on what is marketable – majority goes to cub foods in TC, also Coborn's in St. Cloud

Meet with them in January, put in mostly the same crops, tell him when they're going to run ads, he tries to meet that

Also supply Russ Davis, Nash Finch, Supervalu, Target account for pumpkins

3. How do you decide how and where to sell your products?

Built up enough relationships with people over the years

4. How do you decide what to charge for your products?

Markets are pretty well set; grocery stores want to sell things at or below what they sold them at in previous years. They don't take into account his increased costs.

5. If you produce more food than you can sell, what do you do with the excess? Are you satisfied with that way of handling the excess?

a. Excess is not typically used or consumed. Occasionally have too much, disc some of it under.

6. What challenges do you face related to growing and selling the food you raise?

Timing, weather, pricing, labor

9 varieties and 11 plantings

Sweet corn seed price has really gone up

7. What changes in the food system would you like to see, especially as those changes relate to the growing and selling of healthy food to local customers?

Shipment of pumpkins to Texas were just rejected because they were stained on the bottom
Thinking about planting on rye, to avoid discolored bases
Plant for flavor

8. What would encourage farmers to (a) expand the types of foods they grow, (b) lower the price of locally produced foods, and (c) increase the outlets for selling fresh local food?

He wonders why he isn't just doing beans and corn sometimes; he would get a better price for products (at least this year). Beans are tons of cash, less effort to plant, grow and harvest and get a check in only two weeks. His operation is much more complex because of multiple planting times, harvest times, multiple management issues, and more labor costs (he has to make \$30,000 for payroll this week)

Diversified Crops Farmer, Roadside Stand Vendor

1. Describe your farming operation in general—size, years in business, what you grow/produce, where you sell, number of family members or others involved in the operation.
 - 7 acres
 - Sell potatoes, onions, bean, kohlrabi, pickles, cucumbers, squash, melons, corn
 - 1st year
 - Makes his own pickles, zucchini bread and salsa
 - He is the only employee
 - Sells at a stand in the parking lot of a Short Stop – gas station, 3-6pm, every day M-F, Saturdays 8-11, between St. Cloud and Foley. Across from the river.
2. How do you decide what to grow or produce?
 - What people buy, what people ask for, how it sells
 - next year will plant more potatoes, peas, beans, and less tomatoes and beets
 - Needs more kohlrabi next year
3. How do you decide how and where to sell your products?
 - a. Sort of forced into it, state wouldn't let him put signs up on the highway by his farm – he originally wanted to sell from his farm, talking to the owner of the short-stop who said he could set up there. (He used to work with him.)
4. To what extent are you trying to meet the demand of certain cultural or ethnic groups?
 - a. Not really,
 - b. If somebody asked for something I would try it
5. How do you decide what to charge for your products?
 - a. Checked local grocery stores a couple of times per week
 - b. His prices may be a little cheaper than other farmers' market
6. If you produce more food than you can sell, what do you do with the excess? Are you satisfied with that way of handling the excess?
 - a. Too many tomatoes (300 plants) this year, made salsa, remaining went to waste

- b. He will adjust how much he plants of each to align with customer wants
 7. What challenges do you face related to growing and selling the food you raise?
 - a. Not as many customers as he would like, that will grow hopefully
 - b. Might do farmers' market next year, but he's only one person and would need to hire someone.
 - c. Timing so the stand can work is tricky, keeping stocked – summer produce was done before fall stuff was ready, so he lost some momentum by having the stand close for a bit
 - d. People think he isn't open every day even though the sign says he is....
 - e. Space is free this year, not sure if that will continue
 8. What changes in the food system would you like to see, especially as those changes relate to the growing and selling of healthy food to local customers?
 - a. In the country, not much walk-in traffic, different bus service
 - b. What would encourage farmers to (a)expand the types of foods they grow, (b) lower the price of locally produced foods, and (c) increase the outlets for selling fresh local food?
 - c. Demand, market, need, if you can sell it.
 9. Do you have any other comments related to our conversation today?
 - a. Wishes there were fewer restrictions on signage. The inability to put up signs at his farm site kept him from establishing a stand at the end of his road, where he originally wanted to put it.
-

Non-Produce Producer

- What factors affect which products you sell in your store? (ask specifically for each type of operation) 2. Do these factors vary from one season to another?

The fresh produce we get is only a summer time thing. We'll put fresh, local sweet corn up and similar produce when in season. Everything we get has to be federally inspected. We do make custom sausage and dress wild game if people bring it in; we get things from all over the nation and world. We do a lot of custom meats for people. The availability of products is an important factor, wholesalers no longer have a reserve of product, you have to special order it and wait weeks for it to come in, EX: Flat-iron stake.

- Do you stock certain meat or dairy products to meet the demand of specific cultural or ethnic groups? How about other food products? If so, has this changed over the past few years? Do you think there are potential products that you could carry for new cultural populations? What might those be?

Yes, tripe, beef feet, tongue, heart, etc., chorizo, Spanish and Portuguese sausage, kielbasa, German and Polish sausages, Swedish potato sausage, taso ham (Panama). We have increased our Mexican specific foods. Younger kids are crossing food boundaries and trying new food but they are also harder to get to eat things like head cheese etc. I'm sure there is potential for new products; people come in and ask for new things all the time, from Spain, Africa... We are very anxious and open to try different products.

- Would you like to carry or manufacture products made from locally-raised material in your store that you do not now carry? If so, what prevents you from making or carrying these items? How much of what you process or sell is locally raised?

Most of the meat I get is from IBP (Iowa Beef Processors), MN, Kansas, Iowa, Midwest. All of the meat I get has to be choice meat. A lot of people are grass fed, but you can't get choice meat out of a grass fed animal, it's tougher, the taste is different. We carry buffalo and naturally raised beef, but then you need to look at what naturally raised means. Some people come in looking for meat straight from the farmer but then they don't want to pay the high price for the federal inspection needed to get into my market.

- What factors influence how and where you place locally produced products in your store?

N/A, we started a bakery, everything is made here but I don't know where the products used for them come from.

- Does your store provide any educational resources related to the preparation and/or consumption of the products you sell, like nutritional information, recipes or advice from your salespeople?

We do that quite often, how to cook meat, how to season it. You would be surprised about how many people don't know how to cook. Our biggest one is how to cook a prime rib.

- What challenges do you face in obtaining and selling locally raised meats, eggs, or dairy products?

N/A, as a joke he said, "The property taxes of this place".

- What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell more healthy foods? What about selling more locally produced foods?

None of our meat has fillers, cereals, dried milk in it to preserve and tenderize. We use a curing salt in smoked food. We steam cook and flash freeze for non smoked products. Normal salt content in brat and sausage is about 260/280 mgs, our sausages and brats have 80 mgs per link. We have no skins bones in our products. We try to make stuff every week to 10 days to keep it fresh. We make custom products, getting local and federally inspected beef that is good quality is very hard.

- What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell healthy foods at a lower price

Our competitor here is Byerly's and Sam's bulk meat. I stay about \$2/lb lower than Byerly's. We do a pretty good job at keeping our prices low; you also have to stay open.

- Do you have any other comments about selling healthy foods/QUALITY MEATS in your store or in stores generally

We always put out the best quality product as if its good people will come back. People can always make it cheaper but not better.

- What do you think it will take to change the purchasing behaviors of consumers toward more healthful options?

Education and taste buds. If they taste it and like it, people will come back.

Non-Produce Producer

1. What factors affect which products you sell in your store? (ask specifically for each type of operation) Do these factors vary from one season to another?

There are really no specific factors; we like to sell specialty cheese. There are some seasonal factors, for example, during Christmas we like to sell meat and cheese boxes and we have a butter deal for June Dairy Month. We focus our market on specialty cheeses and dairy products.

2. Do you stock certain meat or dairy products to meet the demand of specific cultural or ethnic groups? How about other food products? If so, has this changed over the past few years? Do you think there are potential products that you could carry for new cultural populations? What might those be?

No, this has not been an issue. Yes, there is potential, different flavor cheese for different groups depending on ethnicity. But we have special ordered specialty cheese from a wholesaler when asked for it. He was not very specific with this answer; he said they have never really discussed it because there wasn't much need.

3. Would you like to carry or manufacture products made from locally-raised material in your store that you do not now carry? If so, what prevents you from making or carrying these items? How much of what you process or sell is locally raised?

Everything we handle is made local, from cheese to butter. All of it is local. "Local is a broad word".

What factors influence how and where you place locally produced products in your store?

We place our products when we can sell it, within sight of customers. The creamery is the only store we sell in.

4. Does your store provide any educational resources related to the preparation and/or consumption of the products you sell, like nutritional information, recipes or advice from your salespeople?

No.

5. What challenges do you face in obtaining and selling locally raised meats, eggs, or dairy products?

Our # 1 challenge is competition, even though we sell a niche market, it's still tough. Especially in this economy, sometimes people sacrifice quality for price.

6. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell more healthy foods? What about selling more locally produced foods?

N/A, He said, "Is cheese healthy?" and all their products are local already.

7. What changes would have to take place in order for you to sell healthy foods at a lower price

There is not much flexibility with our prices, how much money will farmers get if we lower the price anymore? With the way it's been the last 16-18 months, price can't get lower and keep our farmers afloat.

8. Do you have any other comments about selling healthy foods in your store or in stores generally?

No.

9. What do you think it will take to change the purchasing behaviors of consumers toward more healthful options?

He thinks that there is a great need for more consumers and community education about healthy foods and local foods. I don't know if the Midwest Dairy Association is doing enough education for consumers. The farmers are paying the Association to educate, but it isn't doing enough.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUPS AND GROUP MEETINGS

FOLEY COMMUNITY MEETING FINDINGS

WHAT ARE GREATEST CONCERNS THAT BENTON COUNTY SHOULD ADDRESS?

Family food knowledge

- Improve food preparation, gardening and preservation knowledge; family mealtime frequency; healthfulness of food choices by Benton County families
- Ensure adequate access throughout County to community garden plots

Affordability and Accessibility of Food

- Address lack of grocery option east of Highway 10 (transit route? Safe pedestrian access? Additional grocery store?)
- Pedestrian safety to Cashwise store in East St. Cloud
- More community garden plots in low income communities (including Foley and St. Cloud)
- Transportation is an issue for some people. You need a car to get most affordable food
- We need solutions to address the high cost of healthy food
- We need additional consumer education on healthy, low-cost food choices
- Explore connection between adequate paying jobs and ability to purchase healthy food

Continue to improve school meals

Offer fresh foods at local retailers

Affordability of healthy food

Access issue to Cashwise (or locating a grocery store across Highway 10)

Community nutrition knowledge (food preparation)

Community garden in Foley

Consumer education on the cost of healthy food

Economic issues – adequate jobs available

Education of kids, families and consumers

Concerns

Culture of family

Food served at home

Store produce could be fresher

Transportation (on the East Side of St. Cloud)

Income prohibitive

Availability versus access

School meals (more fresh fruits and veggies; salads, baking from scratch more and using whole grains; kids enjoy; reduce processed foods or increase their healthfulness)

Facts

80% of meat is own, many rural Benton County families hunt or raise their own meat

WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT BENTON COUNTY'S FOOD ENVIRONMENT?

- Grocery trips are not daily

- People still preserve food – grow, can and freeze
- Differences are not as much geographic, but more about lifestyle
- Get stuff from farmer (eggs, chicken, produce, roadside stands)
- Opportunities to buy directly from farmers
- Full -service grocery store in Foley with friendly staff

WAYS FOOD IS PROCURED

- Gifts
- Trading
- Growing (livestock and gardens/crops)
- Cooking, canning, freezing
- Roadside stands
- Meat – local meat locker, hunting (self-processed or processed at locker), buy or trade directly with farmer (processing done by farmer, self, or locker), raise own meat (self-processed or processed at locker)
- Dining options in some small towns
- Shopping is once – twice a week due to distance
- Families eat together
- Use own transportation
- Seasonal eating
- Some trips to St. Cloud bi monthly
- Folks divide their diet up into going to St. Cloud (30 miles) to get food
- Growing some (10%)
- Going into Foley to purchase food
- Most people use cars to get food

FOLEY FOODSHELF USERS

For users of the Foley foodshelf, families had multiple strategies for obtaining, preserving and preparing food. Local grocery stores in nearby communities were an important resource, with an emphasis on using coupons, buying items on special (including family sized packs). Trips to larger ‘discount’ stores like Wal-Mart or Target were planned, given limited access to vehicles and money for gas. Foodshelf clients preferred fresh, high quality food, including fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products.

Savvy shopping is part of the strategy for obtaining healthy foods, including stocking up on canned fruits and vegetables when they’re on sale; buying fresh fruits and vegetables when they’re in season and less expensive; switching to canned items when the fresh items become too expensive. Clients say they would eat significantly more fresh fruits and vegetables if they were affordable.

Foodshelf clients interviewed used a variety of strategies to prepare and preserve food. They reported hunting and processing their own meat, significant cooking knowledge, in depth insight into nutrition, canning and freezing items, and gardening. In all cases, mothers were responsible for food purchasing, meal planning and shopping, gardening and food preservation. One client suggested that through gardening and donated produce, she was able to freeze and can enough vegetables to last her family for the entire winter. They reported limiting food of poor nutritional value for their children

These clients learned some of these skills from family members growing up, but also learned a significant amount about healthy diets as a result of health issues, including gastric bypass surgery and subsequent nutrition coaching and a nearly terminal cancer experience as a child. WIC nutrition classes and television were also identified as sources of information about cooking. One client and her family had dental issues, due to poor access to dental care throughout their lifetimes, which has resulted in poor teeth and difficulty with consuming crunchy produce.

Transportation is an issue for food procurement for foodshelf users. Access to a functional automobile with adequate amount of gas money is critical – both for food shopping and for visits to the foodshelf. Clients sometimes rely on family members for transportation, and will also walk, use a mobility scooter or a van service.

Foodshelf clients made the following recommendations to improve Benton County’s food environment:

- The cost of healthy, fresh food should be affordable.
- Change date of grocery store specials to align with “date of benefits” that may not begin at the beginning of the month when the specials are available.
- Make foods affordable that are organically produced or do not have hormones or additives, including high quality milk

CITY/COUNTY EMPLOYEES FOCUS GROUP

Participants were 11 representatives, including:

WIC coordinator, community development, public health nursing, GIS, planning and zoning, sustainability coordinator, city planning, public health

For these employees, healthy foods are understood as a balance of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and high quality protein in appropriate quantity. Some felt foods that were produced using sustainable methods meant higher quality food. They felt that there could be a higher consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, including among those with good food access. Cultural values around ‘meat and potatoes’ translates into limited consumption of produce. A short growing season also limits the amount of fresh produce consumed – both due to cost and prevalence.

As eaters, they felt that food was relatively accessible in Benton County with a lot of choices and high convenience, including good local grocery stores and things like roadside stands. Geography matters for food access in Benton County. The more rural the area, the more difficult food access becomes with increasingly limited choices and proximity to stores. There are, however, a greater number of gardens in these locations. Furthermore, the number of families gardening, canning, freezing and cooking has decreased substantially. Transportation is also key – for low-income families, access to a vehicle is difficult and is needed by many for food purchasing.

As employees, this diverse group expressed a variety of ideas and concerns. Those working with clients who have food access issues indicated that fresh, healthy food is too costly and the low-cost, easy choices are processed, pre-packaged foods. Many expressed concern about the low level of community knowledge around gardening, cooking and preserving and the need for educational programs to address this issue. Several participants expressed great

enthusiasm for the integration of food concerns into long-range planning and systemically-oriented strategies to improve the Benton County food environment. With the emergence of food systems as an important new domain in community planning and development, focus group members suggested that learning, training and development of city and county staff could not only influence future programs and initiatives, it could also begin to change attitudes and the knowledge base of elected officials.

Finally, participants expressed the need to preserve the agricultural heritage of the County with a shift toward increased provision of food by these farmers to local communities, preservation of small dairy farms, and expansion of food production using sustainable production methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Means to educate community on gardening, cooking, and preserving food and nutrition to increase number of family food self-sufficiency
- Develop land access plan as part of comprehensive plan to provide opportunities for gardening (e.g. provide access to land near or on lots with apartment buildings, Section 8 housing, and low income communities, composting sites near these gardens); review zoning and ordinances to ensure no roadblocks exist that prohibit food self-sufficiency (like chicken coops or fruit trees in yards); incentivizing green space for gardening in design review process
- Launch dialogue about comprehensive food planning throughout city and county government, including ongoing training and learning opportunities for city and county staff to learn about planning and service options associated with comprehensive food planning (e.g. 3 county review process on food)
- Provide access to canning equipment and community kitchens for food preservation
- Increase availability of fresh produce at foodshelf
- Increase number of families using Fare for All, expand number of FFA sites, and include products from local farmers in FFA shares
- Ensure county-subsidized food programs are not subject to budget cuts
- Address limited access to fresh, healthy food for rural poor, including elderly (e.g. mobile fresh fruit and vegetable truck)
- Develop policies and processes for ensuring rural food culture and small family farms are preserved, including an increase in small, organic farms and preservation of family-owned small dairy farms.
- Increase number of local farms growing food for the region
- Work with school district to increase healthfulness of school food, like vending machines, birthday policies, low glycemic meals, afterschool programs, and concessions
- Address presence of unhealthy options in local stores, including convenience stores

“It is not feasible for low-income people to eat well.”

For focus group participants, there was a range of opinions about what constituted a healthy diet, but in general abundant fresh produce; regular, adequate meals; quality meat, eggs and cheeses; and whole grains combined with healthy fats and adequate calories constituted a well-rounded diet.

Residents at this shelter may stay for 30 days and are not allowed to eat in their rooms, keep food in their rooms, or prepare any food on-site. Prior and during this residency, shelter clients purchase food at the local Aldi’s, Cub, Wal-Mart, Holiday, as well as farmers markets, local foodshelves and church food programs. Many indicated that the healthy, high quality foods in grocery stores are expensive. They also receive donated foods from friends or acquaintances.

The quality of the food at the shelter is poor. Breakfast consists of highly refined, processed foods. There are no fresh fruits or vegetables available; all produce served is canned. The servings are small. For these individuals, who must walk a lot due to a lack of vehicle and who may have temporary, physically strenuous jobs, they are frequently hungry.

Participants indicate that food is extremely costly, particularly healthy food. Because they are unable to buy food that requires preparation, they are forced to buy more expensive, prepared foods. For things like pre-sliced fruits, the cost is extremely high, particularly given their current incomes. They appreciate the high quality, flavor and freshness of foods sold at farmers markets, but felt that the food was expensive and required preparation. Eating out is expensive; no focus group members reported doing so. They would like to have affordable, healthy options that require preparation or are ready-made available in a variety of settings.

Cooking knowledge was extensive among group members. Only one of this large group did not know how to cook at all. People learned about nutrition and cooking from a variety of sources, including parents, school, spouses, classes, television, cookbooks, the internet, jobs, dieting, and health conditions that required new eating habits. Some reported a lifetime of unhealthy food, due to poverty and poor access, or a broader food culture that offered limited healthy options.

Transportation plays a key role for low income residents of Benton County. Some participants reported that the bus system worked extremely well – buses ran frequently, stopped at grocery stores, offered friendly service, others felt that there was inadequate bus service. Participants reported using a variety of transportation options, including walking, carpools, buses, and taxis. The location of the shelter presents a serious challenge, as it is located on the edge of town away from many food access options.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- EBT use and ‘market bucks’ vouchers at farmers markets
- Rideshare options to venues that provide or sell fresh, healthy foods
- Food access options (stores, farmers markets, foodshelves, etc) offer affordable, healthy, fresh food
- Increased availability in many contexts of fresh, affordable, healthy food grown by local farmers
- Junk food would be a rarity
- Access to land to have a garden or access to existing gardens, including establishment of garden at Salvation Army
- Cooking and gardening education programs for adults and children in a variety of contexts
- Foodshelves and meals programs offer fresh, healthy foods including fruits and vegetables

APPENDIX C: DESIGN AND PROCESS OF THE BENTON COUNTY CFA

GOALS:

- Establish detailed understanding of the food environment for Benton County residents
- Determine concrete opportunities for improvement in food environment for Benton County residents

OUTCOMES:

- Strengthened and improved local food environment, including access to culturally relevant, local, and fresh food; affordable transportation; community gardening plots; and broad array of healthy food sources
- Connected, engaged group of citizens concerned about and mobilized around food issues in Benton County
- Enhanced public knowledge about the area's food environment and potential opportunities to improve it

IMPACTS:

- Fresh, minimally processed, locally grown foods available in retail food outlets and farmers markets
- Sustainable, well run community gardens available in East St. Cloud, Foley, Sauk Rapids, Rice and Sartell
- Increased public dialogue around role of local agricultural production and community food security

OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What barriers exist to food security for Benton County residents?
- How do issues of transportation, affordability, and diversity of food sources limit or enhance food security for Benton County residents?

TWO COMPONENTS

The proposed community food assessment will have two components: (1) *Research* and (2) *Citizen Engagement*. The *Research* element of the CFA will focus on providing a clear and detailed picture of the food access infrastructure and local agricultural infrastructure. The *Citizen Engagement* component will focus on coalescing and mobilizing a group of local citizens interested and committed to improving food environments.

RESEARCH

The research component of the CFA will focus on gathering data that provides a clear picture of the accessibility, variety, availability and affordability of healthy foods for Benton County residents. This data will include the existing infrastructure for food access as well as the local agricultural infrastructure (and how much food it provides locally).

EXISTING FOOD ACCESS INFRASTRUCTURE

- Retail Food Outlets
 - Location of all food stores in Benton, Sherburne and Stearns Counties, with level of differentiation about types and prices
 - Availability of ethnic foods in retail stores
 - Diversity of consumers at various food outlets
- Locally Produced Foods/Farmer Direct Sales
 - Location of farmers markets, numbers of vendors, types of products
 - CSA drop sites
 - CSA farms in surrounding counties
 - Local farmers selling in local co=ops
- Community Gardens
 - Location, size, management and assets (soft and hard) of all community gardens in Benton County (e.g. insurance, water source, ownership, location, management, lease, cost, participants)
 - Location of water lines and fire hydrants
 - Inventory of public lands in Benton County (park and recreational land)
- Foodshelf/food pantry/soup kitchen locations
- Population and Public Infrastructure
 - Community kitchens
 - Location of all transportation lines
 - Sidewalks/accessibility
 - Low-income housing
 - Population density
 - Ethnic distribution

EXISTING AGRICULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Farms within Benton County and neighboring counties that produce food, including types of crops
- Location of processing and distribution facilities
- Long range plans for county land use
- Current county land use - how is it zoned, what is being produced, what is potential acreage within cities and in rural Benton County for food production

Some of these data will be spatially mapped and subsequently analyzed using GIS. Other data will be analyzed and presented in narrative form.

Another critical element of the research for this CFA involves hearing from citizens who have a stake in improving the food environment. This will provide a picture of barriers to food access, ideas for improving food access, and unique perspectives that contribute to a fuller understanding of the food environment. The CFA researchers will develop the format and content for the proposed interviews, focus groups and surveys, with oversight and involvement from the CFA Advisory Group.

The proposed community members who can provide useful insights into Benton County's food environment are listed below, including the method of data collection.

Once the data are analyzed from the focus groups, surveys, and individual interviews, the findings will be incorporated into a broader analysis that includes the infrastructure mapping and assessment.

Stakeholder Group	Categories	Individual Contacts	Method of Data Collection
New immigrants	Somali, Latino, Southeast Asian, International students		Focus group
Low income residents	Public housing, mobile home communities		Focus group
Community Gardeners	Members of community garden network		Key informant interview
Food-related business owners	Distributors and processors		GIS Mapping
Farmers/growers	Local growers (which kinds?)		Focus group
Anti-hunger advocates	Foodshelf managers, faith community leaders working on hunger issues		Key informant interview
Farmers markets	Managers, vendors		Key informant interview
Institutional foodservice			Key informant interview
Retail grocers	Produce managers and meat managers at larger stores; owners of ethnic markets		Survey and/or key informant interviews

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

A core goal of this Community Food Assessment involves the mobilization and network development of citizens interested in improving Benton County’s food environment. Therefore, this CFA will undertake a two-pronged strategy of citizen engagement, involving a multi-sector, multicultural core leadership group and a broader public effort to engage citizens at critical points during the community food assessment to provide input, feedback and direction.

Leadership Group

The proposed leadership group will meet four times throughout the data collection process to provide direction, review preliminary findings, determine the most appropriate opportunities for actions and interventions based on the findings, and to build a sustained core network of citizens interested in working on Benton County food environment issues over the long-term. The Leadership Group will

include existing networks and relationships involved with food environments in Benton County, including diverse cultural communities, the faith community, universities, healthcare organizations and public agencies, the agricultural and retail grocery community, and non profit organizations.

Sector	Role	Location	Name
Local government	City council, county commissioner, mayor, city planner or parks & rec		City of St. Cloud mayor – best person in charge of city sustainability plan;
Large retail grocer	Owner of Coborn's – or recommended agent		
Community Leadership Team member	BLEND	School interventions – nutrition/physical activity	Jodi Rohe
Higher education	SCSU? St. Johns?	St. Cloud	Tracy Ore
Community garden	Gardener	Community gardens	Patricia Hackett
Grower	Someone who sells at farmers markets, local grocers and nearby	Sustainable Farming Association – Benton County Farmer	
Healthcare		Good Shepherd senior care facility	
Community sustainability		Regional	Rick Miller
Faith Community		Regional	GRIP Task Force;
Anti-hunger/foodshelf director	United Way		
Small-scale retail grocer	Ethnic grocer	4 – 5 Halal markets in area; owners – mainly one person	

The leadership group will have scheduled two and a half hour meetings, which will be designed and facilitated by the CFA consultant.

Stakeholder Meetings

The proposed Community Food Assessment will also include two public meetings at the beginning and end of the CFA process, to gather perspectives, ideas and feedback. A broad group of stakeholders will be invited, including retail grocers throughout Benton County, church gardens, healthcare organizations, K-12 schools, local colleges and universities, Boys and Girls Club, members of the Sustainable Farming Association and the Central Minnesota Sustainability Project, new immigrant-serving organizations and civic groups, Great River Interfaith Partnerships, public agencies focusing on land use and zoning, farmers, local distributors and processors, public officials and leadership, and others interested in participating.

Final Findings and Dissemination

The final findings from the CFA will be prepared into a report and executive summary. The consultant will work with the project leads and leadership team to develop a dissemination strategy, based on the findings of the report and the anticipated next steps.