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Creating a Community Food System: The Intervale Center (<http://www.intervale.org>)

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Society of the Quarter

Creating a Community Food System: The Intervale Center

(<http://www.intervale.org>)

Introduction/Background

In the early 1900s, over 40 percent of Americans worked in agriculture (Dimitri, Efland, & Conklin, 2005, fig. 1) and local and regional food production was common (Pirog, 2009). During the last half of the twentieth century, the agricultural system strongly trended towards an industrialized food supply. Due in part to increasing centralization in production and processing operations, and corporate control over marketing and labor (Welsh, 1997), less than two percent of the American population worked on farms as of 2000 (Dimitri et al., 2005, fig. 1). This shift has a significant and lasting impact – rural communities deteriorate socially and economically, inner cities lack access to fresh, locally produced food, and consumers no longer know of the origins of their meals.

One reaction to these changes is a growing interest in local foods in the United States. The Slow Food movement encourages traditional ways of growing, producing and preparing food, in response and in contrast to an homogenous, mass-produced industrial food system (Petrini, 2007). The “locavore” movement promotes support of local farms and better consumer understanding of food production (Pirog, 2009). The environmental movement urges people to consider geographical distance and food miles when making food choices

(Pirog, van Pelt, Enshayan & Cook, 2001). The community food-security movement seeks to enhance access to safe and healthy food for everyone (Guptill & Wilkins, 2002).

Collectively, the local foods movement attempts to establish local or community food systems “in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, and social and nutritional health of a particular place” (Garrett & Feenstra, 1999, p. 2). Manifestations include farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), and consumer cooperatives. Local foods account for a small but growing share of total agricultural sales in the United States, increasing from \$812 million in 2002 to \$1.2 billion in 2007 (United State Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Services [NASS], 2007, table 2). Programs across the country are beginning to tackle the questions that surround establishing a community food system, including the United States Department of Agriculture, who launched their “Know Your Farmers, Know Your Food Campaign” in 2009 (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2010). However, many of these programs address a single aspect of the local food system, be it sustainable agriculture, food security, or health and nutrition in school lunch programs. The Intervale Center is one organization that stands out because it integrates the various aspects of the local foods movement into its mission, approaching community food systems as an environmental, social, economic and nutritional issue.

The Intervale Center (<http://www.intervale.org>), a non-profit organization based in Burlington, Vermont, seeks to “nurture and sustain farms, land and people” (Intervale Center, 2010, “Intervale Center-Burlington, VT”) by serving as a successful model of a

community food system. An early motto for the Intervale Center was “food to waste to compost to food to...” (Jackson, 1993, p. 6), speaking to the center’s programs in organic and sustainable agriculture and land conservation. But beyond this, the Intervale Center actively practices civic agriculture, the concept that agriculture not only meets consumer demand for fresh, safe, and locally produced foods, but also creates jobs, encourages entrepreneurship, and strengthens community identity (Lyson, 2004, p. 2) through a variety of programs, events, and educational opportunities.

History

The term “intervale” is distinctly New England, literally meaning “bottomland” or “land between hills or mountains.” Early colonists used the term to describe the flat and fertile land found in river valleys, but today, it refers specifically to the Intervale, a 700-acre green space located within the city of Burlington, Vermont, on the shores of the Winooski River. Continental glaciers carved out this parcel of land roughly 10,000 years ago. With regular flooding, the soil continues to be highly fertile.

Farming of the Intervale dates back to circa 750 AD, with archaeological evidence suggesting Abenaki Indians grew corn and squash in abundance. Europeans settled in the Intervale in 1775, and tenant farmers cultivated the land throughout the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries (Jackson, 1993).

Following significant flooding in 1927, many landowners abandoned their farming endeavors, and by the 1940s, the Intervale became an official city dump. With the growth of

the environmental movement in the late 1960s, Vermonters became more aware of the Intervale as a valuable open-space area. In 1970, community gardeners in the Intervale participated in the Gardens for All program, and in 1984, it became the site of the woodchip-burning McNeil Generating Station, opened to reduce local dependency on oil. By the late 1980s, the City of Burlington mandated a clean up of the junkyard.

In 1988, Will Raap, owner of the locally-based Gardener's Supply Company, recognized that the rich floodplains of the Intervale had the potential to grow at least 10% of Burlington's fresh food. Working with the City of Burlington, Raap leased the land to establish the Intervale Center, formerly known as the Intervale Foundation, as a vehicle to reinvigorate urban agriculture and to create a sustainable, local food system.

Mission & Activities

The Intervale Center is a non-profit organization whose stated mission extends beyond promoting sustainable agriculture and local foods to strengthening community food systems. The Center accomplishes these goals by "preserving and managing 350 acres of land, supporting viable farms, increasing access to local and organic food, improving soil fertility, protecting water quality through stream bank restoration, and educating young people about agriculture and healthy food" (Intervale Center, 2010, "Intervale Center-Burlington, VT").

To achieve its success, the Intervale Center supports a network of programs designed to strengthen the growth of local food systems, including a dozen farms, community

supported agriculture (CSA) programs, a conservation nursery, produce and farm product marketing, distribution and storage enterprises, and farm consulting services. By the numbers, in 2009, the Intervale Center:

- gleaned 30,000 pounds of produce for the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf;
- supported 150 community gardens;
- assisted 48 refugee families who grew food for themselves and local markets through the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) program;
- grew 41,718 native trees in the Intervale Conservation Nursery for planting projects to protect Vermont streams and rivers;
- managed 350 acres of urban land for farming conservation and recreation; and
- assisted 22 Vermont farms with business planning (Intervale Center, 2010, “Programs”).

Highlighted below are some of their successful programs.:

Intervale Farms Program

This farmer “incubator” program, started in 1990, helps to remove barriers that can challenge new farmers, including access to training, land, capital and markets, knowledge of equipment, and business planning. The Farms Program creates job opportunities and training for agricultural workers and ownership opportunities for agricultural entrepreneurs.

There are three phases to the farms program: incubator (1-3 years), enterprise (3-5 years), and mentor (5+ years). During the incubator phase, the center covers 20% of the fees,

including land leases, equipment and greenhouse space, and utilities and water costs. After three years, incubator farmers can continue to farm and to share resources as enterprise farmers, where they pay 100% of the fees. After five years, these mature farmers become mentor farmers, and complete the circle by mentoring those on incubator farms (Intervale Center, 2010, "Independent Farms in the Intervale").

According to Glenn McRae, executive director of the Intervale Center, "The Intervale is an incredible platform for young aspiring farmers to take a risk and launch an enterprise... It has proven to be a great model for establishing viable sustainable organic farm enterprises" (as quoted in Shuman, Barron & Wasserman, 2009, p. 69). Through the years, the Intervale Center incubated more than 30 farms; in 2004, participating farms grew over 500,000 pounds of produce for the local market, or about 6% of the annual total of produce consumed in Chittenden County (Neuman & Sokolofski, 2004, p. 3).

Success on Farms

This two-year program works one-on-one with farms throughout the state to improve their long-term viability. Between 2002 and 2008, 50 Vermont farms and producers received assistance to expand their markets and increase revenues through business plan development, strategic planning, farm financial planning, bookkeeping and accounting, and refinement of production systems (Intervale Center, 2010, "Success on Farms"). This program's objective is to enhance not only the profitability of farms, but also their social and environmental sustainability.

During the first year of the program, Success on Farms works with farmers to conduct comprehensive farm self-assessments, improve basic operational systems, and develop a

business plan and associated financial analyses. In the second year, the program evaluates the effectiveness of the business plan, implements key aspects of the plan, and refines the plan as necessary. After the second year, the Intervale Center remains available as a resource for support as farms implement specific projects, including loan and grant applications, construction and capitalization projects, and value-added opportunities.

The Food Hub

Started in 2007, the Food Hub creates a farmer collaborative that aggregates, markets, and distributes local foods to the community (Intervale Center, 2010, “Intervale Food Hub”). It establishes a “connection channel” through which local food can travel directly to consumers with minimal packaging, while securing a fair price for both consumers and farmers.

At the heart of the Food Hub is the multi-farm community supported agriculture (CSA) program, which boasts participation from 24 farms offering a diversity of local products, from fruits and vegetables to meat and cheese, bread, flowers, and maple syrup. Entering into this collaboration, farmers benefit by being able to focus on specialty crops, while allowing participants to take advantage of increased crop diversity. One unique aspect of this model is the program’s close relationship with local business – currently 27 local businesses serve as CSA drop-off points for the Food Hub, which provides employees with access to fresh food, and gives employers the means to promote healthy lifestyles.

This partnership also allows for more effective wholesale of local produce. Local producers often face barriers to entering the local food-market that include “capacity constraints for small farms and lack of distribution systems for moving local food into mainstream

markets... [and] limited research, education, and training for marketing of local food” (Martinez et al., 2010, p. iv). The Food Hub’s wholesale marketing and distribution service makes it easier for restaurants, caterers, grocers, and institutions to access high quality, locally grown products through a single distribution point. Additionally, multiple farmers working together benefit from economies of scale in both marketing and distribution, allowing them to spend more time focusing on production.

Other Activities

There are a number of additional programs and activities through which the Intervale Center promotes its model of a community food system.

- The **Intervale Conservation Nursery**, started in 2002, grows native trees and shrubs in order to restore vegetation to streams and riverbanks. This vegetation is used to create riparian buffers, which are critical to providing streambank stabilization to reduce the effects of erosion while filtering sediments and pollutants out of surface runoff to protect water quality.
- The **Intervale Community Farm**, launched in 1990 as an incubator farm, is one of the largest and oldest models of CSA in New England, supporting over 500 member households on approximately 20 acres of cultivated land.
- The **Intervale Gleaning Project** partners the Intervale Center and the Vermont Foodbank to glean area farms and collect produce donations for distribution to Burlington area non-profits, the Vermont Foodbank, and the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf.

- **Thursdays at the Intervale** is a series of summer events that bring community together at the Intervale Center to celebrate the bounty of the season, with music, local foods sampling, children's activities and educational programs.
- The **Intervale Compost Project**, started in 1987, sustains farming in the Intervale by restoring soil health through a large-scale composting operation. The compost combines food scraps, leaves, grass clippings, and manure to create a rich organic material that Intervale farmers (and others) use. Chittenden Solid Waste District assumed management of the operation in 2008, once it grew too large for the Intervale Center to maintain.
- **Healthy City Youth Program** is a response to the community's need for job- and life-skills training for at-risk youths, the need for better food education in local schools, and the access to fresh produce for low-income families. The Intervale Center ran this program from 2002 through 2009, assisting teens to grow healthy food for themselves, their families, and their community. In 2009, the Friends of Burlington Gardens became the administrators of the effort, in order to affect more local youth and broaden current farm-to-school initiatives.

Conclusion

The Intervale Center serves as an excellent example of how mindful uses of vacant urban/rural fringe farmland can benefit and support the community food system. Intervale farmers, engaged in sustainable organic agriculture, produce more than a million dollars of organically grown food for local consumption each year (Shuman et al., 2009, p. 68).

However, the center's practical mission is to provide access to locally grown food while strengthening the community's social and economic development and protecting the environment. "Our conservation nursery works to provide farms with appropriate ecological services to become more sustainable in their communities. The Intervale farmers give back to the community in many ways. They participate in programs with local youth and volunteers that provide fresh food to local food pantries. It is a great cycle of mutual benefit when it is all seen together" (Glenn McRae, as quoted in Shuman et al., 2009, p. 69).

The Intervale Center has a national and international reputation as a model of successful community food systems development. It is one of 24 international "community food enterprises" that have transformed the economic, social, and environmental impact of local foods (Wallace Center at Winrock International, 2009). While the Intervale Center is part of the unique geography of Vermont's Intervale region, its model is applicable to any underutilized parcel of urban land. In fact, county governments, non-profit organizations, university extension services, and private sector organizations from all over the world come to visit, study, and replicate the community food systems model established so successfully by the Intervale Center.

The holistic approach of the Intervale Center is creating its own revolution within the community food systems movement. "Following the example of the Burlington Intervale... socially inclusive local agriculture that seeks to be just as well as sustainable should include programs that promote food equality, foster social integration, and provide the conditions that allow for the generous creation of natural human capital" (Machias, 2008, p. 1098).

Glenn McRae (as quoted in Shuman et al., 2009, p. 68) agrees: "The Intervale at its most

fundamental level is about sustainable community development... Farms and food are the vehicles we employ to build better communities.”

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Additional Resources

Farm Incubator Programs and Consulting Services

- PLANT Farm Enterprise Incubator, W.C. Breeze Family Farm Agricultural Extension and Research Center (<http://www.orangecountyfarms.org/PLANTatBreeze.asp>)
- Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) (<http://www.albafarmers.org/index.html>)
- The New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI) (<http://www.smallfarm.org/>)
- The New American Sustainable Agriculture Project (<http://www.ceimaine.org/content/view/115/164/>)
- Connecticut FarmLink (<http://www.farmlink.uconn.edu/pages/newfarmers.html>)
- FarmStart (<http://www.farmstart.ca/programs/new-canadians-new-farmers/>)

Multi-Farm Community Supported Agriculture

- LocalHarvest (<http://www.localharvest.org/>)
- Oklahoma Food Cooperative (<http://www.oklahomafood.coop/welcome.php>)
- Whole Farm Coop (<http://www.wholefarmcoop.com/>)
- Common Wealth CSA (<http://www.redfirefarm.com/CSA/commonwealth.html>)
- Wabago Peace Center (<http://www.localharvest.org/farms/M200>)
- Lancaster Fresh Farm (<http://www.lancasterfarmfresh.com/static/controls/>)
- Grow Alabama (<http://growalabama.com/>)

Local Produce Wholesale/Produce Brokering/Marketing

- Farm Fresh Connection (<http://www.farmfreshconnection.org/>)
- The Growers Collaborative (<http://www.growerscollaborative.org/>)
- The Red Tomato (<http://www.redtomato.org/>)
- Eastern Carolina Organics (<http://www.easterncarolinaorganics.com/>)
- Southwest Marketing Network (<http://www.swmarketingnetwork.org/>)

Conservation and Preservation

- American Farmland Trust (<http://www.farmland.org/>)
- Farmland Information Center (<http://www.farmlandinfo.org/>)
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
(<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/FRPP/>)
- USDA Forest Services Forest Legacy Program
(<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa/flp.shtml>)
- Land Trust Alliance (<http://www.landtrustalliance.org/>)
- The Trust for Public Land (<http://www.tpl.org/>)