



CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS OF A YEARLONG COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

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1. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

A yearlong study of the local food system has provided opportunities to discuss not only challenges, but to identify many opportunities to improve the food system. By examining local food production, distribution and consumption, new possibilities were discovered for La Plata County residents to work together to create a food system that is more equitable and self-reliant.

The following is a summary of what was learned through the course of completing the La Plata County Food Assessment. It provides conclusions about the state of the current local food supply, community food projects and programs, the local school food system, health and nutrition and food security in La Plata County.

ABOUT AGRICULTURE IN LA PLATA COUNTY

To discuss the regional state of agriculture, agricultural experts and farmers were asked to discuss the present challenges and opportunities of the current agricultural system. Themes that emerged via the assessment indicate that people feel there are deeply entrenched cultural, climatic and economic challenges that make agricultural operations difficult in the region. There are, however, many suggestions for creating a system to work within the current parameters to make agricultural ventures more successful. And, there is great optimism for the future of agriculture in the region.

The decline of large-scale production agriculture and local food production, the rising cost of land from population and development pressures, a marginal growing season, water allocation policy and the growing oil and gas industry have been identified as the most pressing contemporary issues affecting agriculture in the region.

Despite the fact that large-scale farming and ranching appears to be declining in the region, some of the children of family farms have chosen to stay in the business, and are doing quite well. La Plata County, once an area known for land and cattle companies, has lost many of the large ranches it once supported, mostly due to development pressure and a lack of youth interested in taking over the family farm.

Creating an economically viable large-scale farm operation in the area is difficult. Large land payments, taxes and the inherent costs involved in getting a large-scale farm operation off the ground are some of the challenges a new farmer must overcome to make an operation profitable. Depending on its location and water availability, land in La Plata County costs anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 per acre. With agricultural commodity prices that have changed very little over the past fifty years, all of this becomes more challenging.

It is widely recognized that variances in elevation and temperature make it hard to grow crops in the area. Having a three-month growing season also limits the types of crops that can be grown. The local climate is seen as being both a benefit and a hindrance. While the cold winter temperatures kill most plant and soil-borne pests, they also make growing year-round extremely challenging. There are, however, current examples of season extension using greenhouses and cold frames, which make food production a possibility in the cold winter months.

In addition to a short growing season, the region is also known for complicated water issues. The Fort Lewis Mesa Planning Group has spent vast amounts of time tackling this issue. Because the Fort Lewis Mesa District is located on the “dry-side” of the county and is predominantly zoned agricultural, they face many water allocation and need issues. And the oil and gas industry, which provides an off-farm income, affects agriculture due to the amount of time a farmer or rancher can devote to produce row crops for food production while still working full-time off the farm.

The demand for local food exists and is on the rise. Demand for local food has been expressed by schools, restaurants, consumers and by retail stores. Current supplies, however, cannot meet the demand. Census of Agriculture data documents 28,000 bushels of apples, 24,000 bushels of potatoes and 2.2 million gallons of milk produced in the county in former times, far more than is produced today. This information documents the potential for what *can* be grown in La Plata County by indicating that agricultural production in the Southwest was once more varied, and that there were simply more people raising food.

ABOUT COMMUNITY FOOD RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS

For the purposes of the assessment, profiles of local food resources were compiled including farmers’ markets, charitable food programs, grocery and retail outlets, community gardens, restaurants, CSAs and gleaning programs. In addition, gathered data was used to produce

educational materials for a harvest calendar, local foods menu, Farm-to-School product list and farm tours booklet.

FARMERS' MARKETS

The San Juan Basin is home to several markets, and following national trends, many new markets keep appearing. In 2006, eight were identified in the region. Each of the markets profiled in the assessment is unique in its own right.

There is a demand for more local food. However, in order to expand markets of all types (farmers' markets and others) there must be enough local supply to support the expansion. On the consumer end, there have been requests for one more market per week held in a variety of locations and venues. For this to occur there must be producer interest and willingness to participate in more markets and to simply grow more food.

Each market hosts a slightly different clientele. In Durango the patrons are mostly Anglo, which is something the DFM Director would like to change to increase access of fresh, local foods to the low-income, Latino/a and Native American sectors of the regional population.

CHARITABLE FOOD PROGRAMS

"There needs to be communication between agencies so resources are pooled, not abused."
Angie Raulston, First United Methodist Church

The need for an accessible list of charitable food programs was expressed by two agencies serving low-income individuals and their families in La Plata and Archuleta counties. They wanted a guide to serve low-income program recipients and agencies, leading these people to further available food resources.

There are over 100 non-profit and public service agencies in La Plata County. Many of these agencies, while it is not their primary mission, offer food related programming and services. Included in the assessment report is a list of agencies and some of the food-related programs they offer. Through connecting agencies that offer food related programs a stronger, more diverse network is created to better meet the food needs of the entire community.

GROCERY AND RETAIL FOOD OUTLETS

A survey of grocery stores and other retail food outlets was completed to assess availability and affordability of various foods in rural and urban parts of the county. Thirteen supermarkets, local markets, convenience stores and one buying club were surveyed to compare the availability and price of certain products.

This data shows price differences in La Plata County versus a national average. Because affordability of local and organic foods is a common concern for support of a locally based food economy, this data also compares the cost of commercial foods, including locally produced and processed foods and organic options.

There is a commitment from rural communities to increase local and organic food options and from the Latino community to address the lack of culturally appropriate food choices.

The data provides a good jumping off point to discuss local, organic, and culturally appropriate food options and availability by showing all of the options available to consumers in a retail setting. It also illustrates there is a commitment and interest from rural communities to increase local and organic food options, and from the Latino/a community to address the lack of culturally appropriate food options.

The data does not, however, make any correlation between the cost of food and its retail setting. Things such as fresh produce seem to be less expensive in rural stores, whereas other processed foods seem to cost less in urban stores. What is clear is that there is greater availability of food choices in urban stores, and this may be what causes rural community members to purchase more of their food in an urban setting.

RESTAURANTS

There are already a number of restaurants in La Plata County working directly with farmers and ranchers to serve local products. Some of these items are advertised on menus and recognized by customers. In fact, at times they directly contribute to customer patronage. For chefs who utilize locally grown ingredients, the benefits of freshness, quality of the product and social responsibility outweigh the challenges they encounter in obtaining and using the ingredients.

There are, however, issues that exist when making farmer-chef connections. Obstacles such as availability, delivery and price make the idea of working with local suppliers prohibitive to some restaurateurs. Projects such as an organized Farm-to-Chef Program, restaurant gardens, restaurant CSA, and a consumer educational campaign would help remove barriers between chefs and farmers and make this connection more of a reality.

OFF-CAMPUS SCHOOL LUNCH

A list of the top 20 lunch spots for Durango youth was provided in Chapter V: *The Local School Food System*. Included were the top three menu items ordered and the price per meal. Several of the high-volume restaurants fill their entire capacity during the school lunch hour and their proximity to the high school is a significant factor in how many students eat there. Freshman often can only go where they can walk, and older students often try to eat somewhere where there are no freshman, avoiding the restaurants closest to the school.

After reviewing the list of Durango restaurants visited by students, it was evident that students were not choosing to eat off-campus because of money or the quality of food. Off-campus eating is a social choice; it is about finding a place to gather with friends outside the school. The high school offers a salad bar, several menu choices (many the same items they are choosing outside the school) and a very low meal charge of \$2.25, yet only 20% of Durango youth eat at the school cafeteria.

The amount of money local teens spend on school lunch daily was also noteworthy. Some of the most popular dining spots stated they charge anywhere from \$5.00 to \$7.00 for a meal. Choices range from double-cheeseburgers to pizza buffets, deep-fried sushi rolls and the popular Serious Texas Barbecue Texas Taco.

COMMUNITY GARDENS

Community gardens are known to increase food security and self-reliance by providing the opportunity for more people learn to and have space to grow their own food.

Assessment data collected indicates community gardens are a priority to La Plata County residents. In the consumer survey, 17% of all respondents (the second most common food project of interest) indicated the desire to have more garden space allocated with affordable growing plots for all community members. As a means to address their population's food needs, respondents who filled out the agency survey also noted a strong interest for community gardens.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) PROGRAMS

The CSA model has many benefits for the farmer, for the consumer and for the community. Using this model, 100 percent of a consumers' food dollar is in the hands of the person who produces the food, rather than in the hands of the truck drivers, packing and processing warehouses or the grocery stores that typically connect consumers to their food supply. In 2006 there were only three active CSAs in the Durango area.

GLEANING

Gleaning is the practice of harvesting and utilizing food within the community when it would otherwise go to waste. Local foods commonly gleaned in the region are from fruit trees such as apples, pears, apricots, plums, cherries, crabapples and walnuts. Currently Turtle Lake Refuge and a few other individual community members have established informal gleaning projects. There are however, a great number of fruit trees and other food sources that are not harvested.

ABOUT LOCAL SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS AND FOOD-RELATED PROGRAMS

As part of the assessment, the SW Colorado Farm-to-School Working Group contributed to the development of the school surveys in hopes of drawing valuable information that would not only inform the community on general information regarding the school food programs but would offer the group insight on how to incorporate farm to school programs into existing efforts.

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Understanding the ins and outs of the school meal programs can offer the community and its schools insight into ways to enrich and enhance the current programs. Storage capacity, facility capabilities, cafeteria atmosphere, the time allotted for school meals, nutritional guidelines, distribution and budget all contribute to the overall program, and an examination of these factors will reveal ways to implement new programs and enrich the current programs.

The food assessment described these contributing factors for each of the public school districts in La Plata County: Bayfield, Ignacio and Durango School District. In each of the interviews with the food service directors, it was evident that each director puts a great amount of time and care into each program. Food service directors create menus by

weighing budget restrictions, nutritional guidelines, staff time and the diversity of the population they serve with their desire to offer enjoyable meals to the students. According to Marion Kalb and Kristen Markley, “Critics charge that school meals are high in fat, saturated fat and sodium, are nutrient poor, and provide too few fruit and vegetable servings. In many cases, schools are simply trying to meet the USDA nutritional criteria within budget limits,”¹ Some private local school food programs showed ways in which smaller schools were incorporating local, organic, and other quality food into their school meals with reasonable expense.

As indicated by other states’ programs, farm-to-school has proven to be a program that carries benefits to the entire community. The farmer, the school district, the economy, the environment, and the health and education of the students can all be positively impacted when farm-to-school is integrated into the food system.

As seen in the Durango school district, the salad bar can be a great first step in introducing local produce into a school’s lunch menu. It is easier to incorporate local produce into the salad bar, because it does not affect the entire school lunch menu and changes can easily be made. There is more flexibility with quantity and availability, which also allows for smaller farms to participate even if they cannot supply the entire district with food for school lunch meals.

Sprouts from Turtle Lake Refuge can now be found in nine of the local school salad bars. The Farm-to-School Working Group hopes to eventually highlight a new local product each month in the salad bar. Meetings are being held with local farmers to identify interested buyers and possible produce for the salad bar and bring both buyers and farmers to the table.

FOOD RELATED PROGRAMS

Aside from bringing the farm to the cafeteria, farm-to-school programs can include farmer and rancher presentations, farm tours, community and parent education, curriculum integration and school gardens.

The assessment provided a brief profile of the ways in which local schools are currently participating in various food related programs. Responses from school administrators demonstrated some of the advantages as well as the obstacles to incorporating agriculture, nutrition and other food-related issues into the program. The surveys indicated that nutritional education not only can be incorporated into a variety of programming, but can be taught by a variety of staff and outside resources. Public schools also identified the ways nutritional education is incorporated into the school day. In addition to the required school curriculum on health and nutrition, school administrators noted incorporating nutritional education through family nutrition nights, physical education units on health and wellness, cooking classes and snack programs.

Some of the agricultural education activities listed on the survey included: greenhouse activities, classroom lessons on plants, lessons on water properties and its connection to

¹ Kalb, Marion and Markley, Kristen. Feeding Young Minds: Hands-on Farm to School Education Programs. “Healthier Options for School Food Services. March 2005.

agriculture in the southwest, science fairs with agricultural elements and water conservation, farmers and producers in agricultural presentations in the classroom, student participation in the county 4-H Program and farm tours.

A farm tours booklet, presented in the chapter, showed five area farms, nurseries and programs that are open to offering their land to area schools. This booklet can be used as a tool for schools, youth groups and other agencies to identify farms and other programs that could enhance program or curriculum objectives. An in-depth profile and county map showed 16 schools which already have gardens and/or greenhouses at their schools. Their descriptions were compiled as guidelines and incentives for other schools in hopes that there will one day be a garden in every school in La Plata County.

It was clear from the beginning of the food assessment that the school meal program was of great interest to the community. School lunch is a hot topic for many school administrators, parents, youth and the general community. Equally, in the consumer survey, farm-to-school was listed as the number one community food program people would like to see available in La Plata County. The hope is that the food assessment, as well as the relationships built through this process, will pave the way for these programs to succeed.

ABOUT HEALTH AND NUTRITION IN LA PLATA COUNTY

EATING WELL IN LA PLATA COUNTY

In over 200 surveys of both adults and youths, participants were asked what it means to *eat well*. Responses included, “eating whole foods,” “foods without chemicals,” “local,” “organic,” “whole grains,” and “eating a little bit of everything from the food pyramid.” Responses were open-ended and implied that most of the community had a clear sense of what eating well could be. However, these same responses were not always met with healthy choices. According to assessment Consumer and Youth Surveys, many respondents, although able to recite a clear educated message about nutrition and what it means to *eat well*, did not connect these principals with their everyday actions. For example, when asked about their food choices and which restaurants they frequent, some people chose fast food as their top restaurant choice.

HEALTH DISPARITIES IN OUR REGION

When comparing providers who served the general population with people working specifically with the low-income populations, the different perspectives drew attention to the fact that La Plata County is a divided community, with food needs that are population specific. The view of health and the community’s nutritional knowledge varied between health providers serving diverse populations. Half of the experts interviewed described La Plata County as a very nutritionally-educated and food savvy community, describing their interest in local and organic foods and their desire to be active. The other half described the lack of interest and apathy about nutritional food programs and education. They spoke about their reliance on fast, convenient, and often junk-food diets. Lower income populations may have access to food through charitable food programs, but this access does not often include a lot of healthy, fresh foods that are typically more expensive. According to Whitney Vaughn, a family center advocate in Durango, “There is a lot of missing education on nutrition and on (how to shop for) bulk foods. There is a culture of food in low-income families, a junk food circuit. They have lost the taste for healthy food. The

cooked foods they buy are microwaveable pastas, (like) hot pockets. They cook based on convenience, not nutrition. Their (lower-income families) greatest food need is in the health and quality of the food they eat.”

DIABETES AND OBESITY

United States data on obesity says that 127 million American adults are overweight; 60 million (22.2%) are obese. 300,000 deaths in the US each year are associated with obesity. And, according to the data, “people living below the federal poverty level are twice as likely to be obese.”² Due to the alarming increases in diabetes and obesity in this county, and particularly in low-income communities, questions were asked about some of the possible solutions to fight these concerns. Practitioners noted that some of the common approaches found in food marketing, which are designed to fight diabetes and obesity, may not be solving the problem. For example, products labeled sugar free, fat free, or cholesterol free used alone will not change the factors behind diabetes or obesity. Emphasis was instead placed on individual diets, whole foods and exercise.

NUTRITION EDUCATION

“Everyone needs nutritional education. Healthy choices and education need to not only be focused on lower income, but wealthier families as well. Everyone needs to see the worth of eating well. Families with more money don’t necessarily make healthier eating choices; they need to see that nutritional programs are not just charitable programs for low-income populations.” **Pakhi Chaudhuri**

The food assessment team sought advice from health providers for ways community food advocates could assist in nutritional education campaigns. Advice included reaching out to first-time parents and integrating all classes into education so that

nutritional education would be viewed as a community issue, not just a class issue. Other recommendations included providing the community with affordable and nutritious cooking classes that were incorporated with shopping, cultural considerations, and individualized.

THERE ARE VARIOUS QUALITY AND QUANTITY ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOOD WE EAT

As addressed in other chapters, the issue of quality and quantity was referred to by several of the health experts. Low-income families and charitable food program recipients often are lacking in fresh, nutritious whole foods. Not only is access to quality foods limited, the understanding of food may also be lacking. Zane Baranowski, a certified nutritionist, noted that current nutritional education is not working. “If our primary focus has been that it is best to get all the nutrients from food, then we all need to come to a very good understanding of what food actually is. The knowledge the general public has been given by governmental agencies about what *is* food is inadequate.”

² Statistics were presented by the COPAN (Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition Program), Comprehensive Community Project, and Planning Workshop in Durango in August 2006.

A CONNECTION BETWEEN AYURVEDIC MEDICINE, NUTRITION, AND THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

A common theme emerged regarding ayurvedic medicine. A pediatrician, a tribal health director, and an ayurvedic practitioner each spoke about the benefits of using ayurvedic knowledge in regards to food and nutrition.

Because ayurvedic medicine is focused on prevention and takes an individualized approach, it is seen as being very different than most Western medicine attitudes towards health and nutrition. According to Pakhi Chaudhuri, a Durango pediatrician, Western medicine has a “rudimentary understanding of nutrition. Ayurvedic medicine addresses the issue much better and the study of genetics is finally catching up with it.”

Elise Redd, Tribal Health Services Director, stated in her interview that the Southern Ute Tribe was in the process of hiring an ayurvedic nutritionist based on the fact that an ayurvedic approach better deals with their health and nutritional issues. We are choosing “to go with an ayurvedic nutrition program. The principles are friendlier to Tribal traditions. They constitute a very individualized approach.”

Amita Nathwani, an ayurvedic practitioner, is currently working with women from the Southern Ute Tribe on diabetes, obesity and other digestive issues. She is incorporating local wild and cultivated foods as part of her nutritional program. As part of her research, she looks into what grows in the area to help determine what she and her patients should be eating. Community food projects, such as the harvest calendar, can assist programs such as Amita’s by providing medical practitioners with a list of the available local and wild foods in our area.

ABOUT FOOD SECURITY IN LA PLATA COUNTY

La Plata County residents have defined community food security as a situation ***in which all people at all times have access to healthy, local, affordable, and culturally appropriate food, produced in ways that are sustainable.***

ISOLATION AND A LACK OF LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

La Plata County is and has always been an isolated community, which historically is what made the region more self-sufficient. As shown in Chapter III: *A Regional Profile of Agriculture*, La Plata County once supported great food crop diversity. In fact, the 1945 U.S. Census of Agriculture reports 28,000 bushels of apples, 24,000 bushels of potatoes and 2.2 million gallons of milk were produced in the county. In 2002, however, the items under “selected crops harvested” for all Colorado counties are not milk, apples, and potatoes, as they were in 1945. Today they are recorded as corn for grain, corn for silage or green-chop and wheat for grain (including winter wheat and spring wheat, both for grain).

In 2002 the Census of Agriculture reports the top crop items³ in La Plata County as forage⁴, oats, corn for silage and apples. Since the early 1900s the area has remained focused on

³ Planted acreage

⁴ Land used for all hay and haylage, grass silage, and green-chop

livestock production.⁵ In fact, the total number of cattle and calves raised in La Plata County hasn't changed much in over 60 years. What has changed, however, is the amount and diversity of food that is being produced.

Once an area that had to be more self-reliant for food and other goods, the region is now supplied by trucks from the closest industrial centers, Denver and Albuquerque, which are six and four hours away respectively, and from other areas such as Texas, California, and Arizona. Today, without these suppliers, the area would have severe food shortages.

Throughout the course of the assessment, when pressed to confront the issues of isolation and lack of food production, many people began to realize the potential significance of these issues. The information also provides the basis for discussion on the benefits of improving the food system in a language most community members can understand and relate to. And as more community members become informed and understand the fragility of their local food system, they may feel empowered to change it.

FOOD SECURITY ISSUES WITHIN SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

As mentioned in Chapter II: *A Profile of La Plata County*, the region is culturally and economically diverse. Many populations in the area have been defined as “underserved,” meaning that because of poverty or discrimination, or lack of transportation, these people do not have access to the same services as others in a given community. This section addresses the way food security plays out in a variety of cultural and economic groups.

LATINO

The information gleaned from the Latino population in the county draws interesting parallels, illustrating that specific cultural food issues exist apart from the issues affected by income level, education and gender. According to surveys and interviews, Latinos in La Plata County are concerned about a lack of access to culturally appropriate foods. As mentioned in the grocery store surveys,⁶ there are plans to open a Mexican foods grocery store in Durango, which may begin to address some of these food access issues.

In addition, there is information about cultural differences in diet – some Latinos feeling foods are more processed in the U.S. compared to foods they had access to in their countries of origin, and there is little access to healthy, fresh foods. People are used to coming from countries where open-air, farmers' markets are commonplace. As Eddie Soto (Director of Los Compañeros) mentioned, creating greater access for Latinos at existing farmers' markets could help to address this issue.

Food related concerns among the Latino population surveyed were heavily tied to their income. As most survey participants reported having income levels below \$30,000, they shared the feeling that typical household earnings are not enough to cover family necessities, citing the high cost of food. Some suggestions to overcome this issue were offering higher wages, more job opportunities and reducing the overall cost of food.

⁵ According to Jerry Zink, owner of SunnySide Meats Processing Facility in Durango, “In the early 1900's there were vast numbers of sheep in the area. Since the 1960's, however, many cow-calf and sheep operations were replaced by horse operations.”

⁶ See Chapter 4: *Food Resources* - Grocery Store Survey, for a complete section on culturally appropriate food choices in La Plata County.

NATIVE AMERICAN

During the 1930's, 40's and 50's, because of U.S. Government pressure to turn the Southern Utes into farmers, the area at that time was home to more subsistence agriculture than it has ever known. Currently, however, Dave Sanford, who runs Custom Farm Services in Ignacio, could only think of two full-time farmer/ranchers on the reservation, and they are Anglos. The rest are a few people with gardens and minimal livestock. Dave feels these families continue to ranch out of habit and tradition, but not because of the necessity for food as they did in the past.

In an interview with Elise Redd, Director of SUI Tribal Health Services, access to affordable fruits and vegetables and healthy affordable food were noted as some Tribal members' most pressing food needs. "If you are going to cook healthy, many of those foods are more expensive. I think (for this reason) a lot of people will not purchase fresh, perishable foods; they will purchase cans."

The Utes no longer fulfill their dietary needs by living off the land. They used to live off the land because they had to, but now they have a choice about where they get their food."

Steve Whiteman, Tribal Division of Wildlife

OLDER ADULTS

Food security concerns are a reality for a significant portion of La Plata County's older adult population. Pressing issues are affordability, access to the foods they want, transportation difficulties and lack of knowledge of available services. Additionally, a high percentage of older adults remain physically active and participate in hobbies. This may be indicative of their future interest in community food projects, which would incorporate both hobby gardening and physical activity.

The majority of the food served to seniors comes from distributors or grocery stores. None of the specific grocery stores were natural food stores. In the case of senior centers, the menus are dictated at a state level. Of the programs surveyed, some programs are offered that relate to food, nutrition, and farming, gardening and/or cooking. These could be enhanced with further education for staff on the importance of nutrition and the role of local and fresh foods, horticultural therapy and the variety of other community food projects. There is also a need for more education and publicity on the food related services that are currently available, specifically emergency food assistance programs.

Fortunately, agencies recognize that community food projects would allow them to better serve their intended populations in regards to issues of health and nutrition. Interest and enthusiasm was expressed from a number of the surveyed agencies for the development of local community food projects such as senior community gardens, farmers' market outreach programs, improved and new transportation services, and horticultural therapy activities. These projects could easily be geared towards the older adult and physically and/or mentally limited populations thus enabling local agencies to not only offer better service but also contribute to efforts to strengthen local food security.

LOW-INCOME

Information from agencies offering food related programming and services illustrates there are many food resources already available to the low-income sector of La Plata County.

What it also shows is there are opportunities to improve charitable food offerings by including certain foods, by increasing the amount of nutritional information and education provided, by offering transportation services to improve food access, by improving access to growing spaces and offering cooking classes focused on healthy and affordable food purchasing.

RURAL RESIDENTS

Although rural communities often look for internal solutions to handle food insecurity, Growing Partners views rural food security as an issue that warrants widespread community attention. Lack of access, due to transportation constraints or distance to agencies and services, is something the county must address to increase food security in rural areas. Whether services come to them, or access is better facilitated with transportation services, it is clear that rural residents do not have the same access to food programs and services as do residents in urban areas.

2. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Key Themes Regarding Food Security in La Plata County & Recommendations for Future Food Projects

The following are themes regarding the overall situation of food security in La Plata County. They are addressed with recommendations for future food projects, which have been identified from each of the populations, agencies and services surveyed during the food assessment. They are separated by recommendations regarding local food supply (production) and local food consumption (access).

REGARDING THE LOCAL FOOD SUPPLY (PRODUCTION)

To increase the amount of local food available greater support is needed for those interested in growing food. Such support should address the following obstacles and needs:

- **IMPROVE ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL LAND AND GROWING SPACES**
- **SUPPORT FOR ALTERNATIVE AND EXISTING PRODUCTION SYSTEMS**
- **SUPPORT FOR THE PROCESSING, MARKETING, STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL FARM PRODUCTS**
- **PROVIDE CONSUMER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT LOCAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**

IMPROVE ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL LAND AND GROWING SPACES

To improve access to agricultural land and growing spaces, we need to address the high cost of land for large-scale agricultural operations, the difficulty in “splitting off” affordable small parcels of land that may be used for intensive food production and the lack of access to capital for those that are interested in growing food.

Programs that may improve access to agricultural land and growing spaces include:

PROJECT: ***education programs and greater access to resources for more backyard and small-scale agricultural production*** to promote gardening and the concept of “growing your own,” key strategies for strengthening the food system that will have wide-ranging effects. The effects include popular elements such as: community reliance, self-reliance, community education, research, public-private partnerships (especially with community gardens), school education and meals, policy improvements, healthy lifestyles (i.e. physical activity), culturally appropriate foods and affordability of high quality food.

PROJECT: ***a land-link opportunity*** network that is created between landowners and non-landowners (or small-landowner producers who want to grow more food) to make use of experience, land, production, and water that is needed to grow more food. Such a system could help connect those with agricultural resources to those without resources and are interested in growing food.

PROJECT: ***farmland preservation initiatives*** to utilize the myriad number of land conservation programs that give incentives to landowners who desire to keep their land as agricultural in perpetuity.

PROJECT: ***advocacy/policy for allocation of water rights/use to arable lands*** to create a more efficient system of allocating agricultural water towards production of agricultural products would help preserve a critical resource.

SUPPORT FOR ALTERNATIVE AND EXISTING PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

More technical training for new and inexperienced farmers is needed to create a bridge between agricultural development and the need to foster new farmers. Such programs might include:

PROJECT: ***new producer & continued training/education***, including direct-marketing opportunities for producers, ideas for creating a profitable agricultural enterprise, farming techniques for a high-desert climate, irrigation techniques, and season extension techniques.

PROJECT: ***field classes*** such as hands-on education experience for young/potential farmers (*i.e.* through the Fort Lewis Agricultural Experiment Station).

PROJECT: ***educational/paid internship program*** for interested/potential new farmers.

PROJECT: ***dairy project*** to reestablish local production and processing

PROJECT: ***bio-diesel fuel project, Dove Creek, Colorado***, using the fuel bi-product, meal, as potential feed for area livestock.

PROJECT: ***providing farmers with volunteer or locally sourced labor*** for labor crunch times such as harvesting and planting.

SUPPORT FOR THE PROCESSING, MARKETING, STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL FARM PRODUCTS

Many farmers and retailers expressed the need for an efficient, locally based distribution system. This project could address a lack of dependable delivery systems for receiving or delivering local products and could offer support to farmers who do not have the time to complete their own deliveries.

PROJECT: ***distribution, marketing, & storage facility/system*** for local agricultural products.

PROJECT: ***community/incubator kitchen*** for educating people on how to utilize local foods and for developing value-added products from locally produced food.

PROJECT: ***greater producer wholesale opportunities*** for retail outlets, schools, restaurants, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and worksite CSAs.

PROJECT: ***development of local small-scale specialty markets*** to improve local distribution.

PROJECT: ***more farmers' markets*** to increase distribution and outlets for locally produced food.

PROJECT: ***a website*** to help link farmers and retailers.

CONSUMER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT LOCAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

It is clear from farmers that there is the desire for an educational campaign that would increase community awareness on the benefits of buying local. Such education could build on existing momentum and help increase the support for local agriculture.

PROJECT: ***a buy-local marketing/education program*** that promotes the benefits of buying local food from health, economic and sustainable community perspectives.

PROJECT: ***farm tours*** that increase awareness of local food production and the food system in general.

PROJECT: ***consumer education at farmers' markets*** that promotes the benefits of buying locally produced food.

PROJECT: ***youth education*** that increases awareness of the food system.

REGARDING LOCAL FOOD CONSUMPTION (ACCESS)

Fundamental differences exist in La Plata County. These differences must be considered to effectively and equitably improve our local food system:

- **RURAL VERSUS URBAN FOOD NEEDS AND RESOURCES**

- **INCOME AND FINANCIAL ASSET DISPARITIES**
- **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**
- **NEEDS AND RESOURCES OF SCHOOLS**

RURAL VERSUS URBAN FOOD NEEDS AND RESOURCES

A lack of access, especially to healthy and culturally appropriate foods, exist due to costs, transportation constraints or distance to agencies and services and is a need the county must address to increase food security, especially in rural areas. Programs such as:

PROJECT: ***development of rural farmers' markets*** in the outlying, small farm towns.

PROJECT: ***the creation of a rural food exchange program*** between neighbors that produce food and those that do not.

PROJECT: ***rural community garden plots*** where people may go to gain knowledge and support from more experienced gardeners.

PROJECT: ***a rural transportation system*** for seniors and low-income persons that improves access to culturally appropriate and healthy foods.

PROJECT: ***rural charitable food programs*** that can distribute foods to those in rural areas in need.

INCOME AND FINANCIAL ASSET DISPARITIES

La Plata County is an economically disparate community. The health, food needs and resources of these varying socioeconomic groups are extremely different.

PROJECT: ***affordable food purchasing and cooking program*** for those that do not have the knowledge or skills necessary to purchase inexpensive, healthy foods.

PROJECT: ***a WIC farmers' market nutrition program*** to improve access to local foods to WIC program participants.

PROJECT: ***a central warehouse facility to house all of the charitable food programs*** so participants have a wider selection of food items and easier access.

PROJECT: ***a guide to charitable food programs*** for people unaware of such programs but are in need of them.

PROJECT: ***bulk buying program for charitable food programs*** to purchase food (especially healthy foods) collectively at reduced prices.

PROJECT: ***individual and/or family food buying clubs*** to obtain more buying power, reduce costs and share information.

PROJECT: ***greenhouse and/or garden projects*** as alternative food sources for charitable food programs.

PROJECT: ***Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT food stamp) Farmers' Market Program*** to accept Food Stamps at area farmers' markets.

PROJECT: ***horticultural therapy*** to improve health and promote production of food.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There is a need for greater culturally appropriate food choices for Latino/as and Native Americans in La Plata County.

For Latinos/as

PROJECT: ***more culturally appropriate food choices*** that increase access to preferred foods.

PROJECT: an ***affordable food purchasing and cooking program*** available in Spanish, for youth and adults.

PROJECT: ***bi-lingual advertising and on site support*** at farmers' markets and health food stores.

For Native Americans

PROJECT: ***community events*** with native foods.

PROJECT: ***a tribal extension agent*** to help educate and promote local food choices.

PROJECT: ***linking programs*** to native agriculture and hunting.

PROJECT: ***more healthy/fresh/local food choices*** by development of more roadside farm stands and a farmers' market in Ignacio.

PROJECT: ***a collective food buying club*** for Native Americans.

PROJECT: ***community garden plots*** that lend support and land to those that want to grow food.

PROJECT: ***transportation to healthy food outlets*** for those who need better access.

PROJECT: ***tribal cooking classes at the Sun Ute Recreational Center*** using commercial kitchen facilities to demonstrate ways to cook traditional foods.

NEEDS AND RESOURCES OF SCHOOLS

La Plata County encompasses three school districts and numerous private schools. Each of these has different economic resources and needs which affect their interest and capability to participate in various food programs.

PROJECT: ***a farm-to-school program in each school district*** because farm-to-school is a concept that resonates with the public and effectively “frames” many of the overall food system issues including access to healthy food choices, the importance of food quality over price, a need for system-wide policy changes and the importance of local foods.

PROJECT: ***youth community gardens*** to educate and promote agriculture and local foods.

PROJECT: ***farm tours*** that promotes agriculture as a lifestyle and career choice.

SUMMARY

The availability and affordability of safe, healthy, sustainable, local and culturally appropriate foods is an issue that must be addressed when redeveloping our local food system. Although efforts and interest to improve access to nutritious, safe food exist in La Plata County, there is much work to be done. The recommendations listed for future community food projects are designed to address gaps in already existing food programs and/or create new programs, make way for food and agricultural policy change and involve and empower the community to address food security in a more equitable and effective fashion.

By completing the La Plata County Food Assessment, information has been compiled regarding the resources and needs of the local food system, underserved populations, Farm-to-School programs and key stakeholders. The process has also strengthened links between existing food system groups, promoted community learning and participation around the local food system and food security and generated results to plan effective community food projects.

3. WHAT'S NEXT?

SHARING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

The next steps in the process of building a stronger local food system are to publicly share the findings and recommendations of the La Plata County Food Assessment, to prioritize the assessment recommendations and to develop a series of action plans to implement future food projects.

Findings and recommendations were shared at the last of three public food forums and through various educational food projects such as the harvest calendar, regional maps of agriculture and food resources, farmers' market and charitable food program directories, and a local food versus conventional food cost comparison menu.

MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY

HOMEGROWN: A LOCAL FOODS CONFERENCE – *The Unveiling of the Food Assessment*

The third community food forum took place on February 9th and 10th 2007 in Durango. The event was sponsored by the Environmental Center at Fort Lewis College and Growing Partners. All of the participants who were contacted or interviewed throughout the course of the assessment were invited to hear the results and recommendations of the food assessment and to learn how to use the information in their own organization's or agency's work or as part of a greater community network. Through greater and more widespread awareness, the findings and recommendations of the La Plata County Food Assessment can now be used to lay the foundation for action and to create positive local food system change.

The forum included breakout sessions on community gardens; farm-to-school programs; production, marketing, and distribution; and the role of higher education in supporting the local food system. Specific workshops looked at ways to conserve land for local food production, facilitate networking between local suppliers and restaurants, schools and other community institutions.

Because this assessment has been the work of so many and is truly representative of the county's food-related needs, this forum initiated the planning process for these recommended future food projects, and encouraged more people to join in the effort towards creating greater community food self-reliance and sustainability.