

A Tale of Two Cities



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Posted: June 15, 2009 02:58 PM

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/liz-neumark/a-tale-of-two-cities_b_215791.html

And The Council on Food Policy for New York State

June 12, the day of the Annual Summer Meeting for the Council on Food Policy, a 21-member body appointed in 2007 to advise the Governor on matters related to food security, justice and education in the State of New York. We are not the first state to have an advisory council - 13 states as well as 11 cities/regional groups have food policy councils as well. (www.statefoodpolicy.org) It is an appointed body, it is comprised primarily of key food system stake holders many of whom are from state agencies (ie Health, Human Services, Education) connected to the delivery of services that affect what, who and how New Yorkers eat. It is where the rubber meets the road. I am one of three representatives from the private sector.

Patrick Hooker, Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets, heads the commission ably supported by Deputy Commissioner Jerry Cosgrove. Ann McMahon keeps it all on track as Coordinator. (www.nyscfp.org) From the first meeting in Albany in October 2007 until today, the agenda has been to understand the range of issues surrounding the food system in our state and to break it down into tangible issues around which action plans can be built. The broad stroke issues include food production, processing, distribution, access, wholesale and retail sales and the concerns around local agriculture and hunger. The opportunity for positive impact is critical.

When we started nothing indicated that it was economic security not just food security that we should have been investigating as a barometer of our well being. Needless to say, a year later it was an altered world, additional problems with difficult solutions. For example, hunger has always been an issue; now it is of crisis proportions. And where funds and food were available, today both are scarce commodities. And who would have foreseen the meaning of the words Stimulus Plan or its impact on service and infrastructure solutions in the food system world.



The day began with a tour to Food Center Drive in the East Bronx guided by Bob Lewis, Special Assistant for Market Development for the Dept of Ag&Market. First stop, the New York City Food Bank Warehouse and distribution center housed within the Hunts Point Meat Market Cooperative. Greeted by Dr. Lucy Cabrera, President, we toured the warehouse and storage facility. Over 60

million tons of food pass through their hands annually. It is the largest food bank in New York State(www.foodbanknyc.org). Fellow council member and Executive Director of the Food Bank Association of NYS, John Evers combs the state from corner to corner, day after day, creating partnerships - cajoling, convincing manufacturers, farmers and producers to donate or sell (cheaply) to the food bank. He struggles with issues of storage, production and transportation as well as public awareness and education. (www.foodbankassocnys.org)



The giant warehouse was full, but not brimming. It carried the by-products of a mostly industrial food system - cereals, breakfast foods, canned vegetables, jars of apple sauce, drinks, root vegetables, grains - basic foodstuff. The priority at Food Bank has gone from the provision of mere calories to focus on nutritious food wherever possible. For many the meals that could be prepared from this larder might yield a feast.



From Food Bank, we were back on the yellow school bus and transported around the corner to the world famous Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market. It may have been a 5-minute journey, but it was a universe apart. Though the action was over hours before we arrived, the docks were still filled with trucks and the aisles bursting with produce of every variety and color, with both domestic and global origins. You don't have to try hard to imagine the enticing meals produced from these ingredients.

Here is the tale of two cities. The absolute bounty and the glaring hunger. There are neighborhoods where produce fills the stores and sidewalks in stark contrast to communities where fresh food choices are frightfully limited. Economics determine what is sold in your neighborhood and what ends up on your plate - a fact as old as there are markets - but the gulf between food quality and access has never been greater. Feeding the privileged and the under privileged; the growers and the eaters - and the systems that connect them; the work awaits.



I don't think the point of the tour was to necessarily highlight the discrepancy between the meals on the plates of New Yorkers last night. The Hunts Point Market presented the plans for their expansion, supported by the Economic Development Corporation of NYC, so that they could continue to provide New Yorkers with 30% of their fresh produce at affordable prices and with greater efficiency, a legitimate concern for a Council on Food Policy.



In the meeting that followed, a range of speakers presented updates on NYC based initiatives. Marcel Van Ooyen, Michael Hurwitz and Tom Strumolo, of the Council on Environment of NYC and Greenmarket, shared progress updates. And theirs is a good story, where urban dwellers and local farmers both win in a symbiotic relationship. A few of the programs, including Youth Markets, new farmer development, Health Bucks (with the food stamp program) and other interagency cooperative efforts, demonstrate steady advancement in providing farm fresh food to urban New Yorkers while supporting educational goals and food system development.

Ben Thomases, Food Policy Coordinator for The City of New York, talked about the launch of Green Carts, a plan that is putting 1000 mobile produce carts in underserved communities and a great example of a public-private initiative. His enormous task, of addressing issues of food insecurity, food related diseases while capturing more state and federal dollars is daunting. But within a few short years, there has been progress (in schools alone there are many small victories). (http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/html/programs/food_policy.shtml) We heard about the efforts of the supermarket commission, The Healthy Bodega initiative and more. We have split into 4 working groups, each group is tasked with agendas that contain the seeds of change.

Today's economic reality dictates that this is an uphill battle. And there are inherent conflicts; such as the absolute need to serve food comes before the desire to make it local, fresh and nutritious. But the commitment of the Council Members and the agencies they represent it to find ways to open doors, think creatively, find funds on a federal, state or private sector partnership basis inspires me to believe that change can - and is - happening.

It is a time of skepticism and fear. Yet this cynical New Yorker who has spent a career feeding the most privileged, is inspired to work harder to bring good food to the plates of all our neighbors.

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