Oases in the Food Desert

Overcoming systemic obstacles, numerous groups are working to bring locally grown, healthy food into the region's urban communities

By Amy Halloran

Meaning, perhaps, that the market was not tragically depressed like the city. A new feature in this, its 11th season, makes the market resemble the city more: a machine that accepts credit, debit and EBT cards, or food stamps. The typical farmers-market customer is stereotyped as an overinformed food snob with extra money for fancy goods. As interest in eating locally grows more popular, however, there are lots of average kinds of customers.

The local-foods movement is gaining momentum, as is evident in the growing number of farmers markets in the Capital Region. Weekly markets in Brunswick, Cohoes, Colonie and Watervliet, to name a few, offer produce and locally produced goods through the growing season; markets in Troy and Schenectady, and stocking practices at a few retail outlets, like the Honest Weight Food Coop, extend the local-food shopping season to the full year.

Exactly how is the movement to eat local trickling down to lower-income populations? Given economic facts and challenged urban infrastructures, the question may seem absurd. Poverty rates in Albany, Schenectady and Troy are upwards of 20 percent, and each city has multiple "food deserts," where residents lack access to standard grocery stores and are more likely to rely on fast-food restaurants and convenience stores. Grocery shopping at corner stores is expensive, and selection is limited. First Lady Michelle Obama targeted this shortage of options as problematic when declaring her war on the childhood obesity this spring. One of the aims of the multi-agency program called Move It! is getting better, fresher choices into the country's many food deserts.

Farmers markets are already a part of the solution. As some folks dive fully into sourcing foods from a tight geographic radius, the less-well-heeled are also putting energy into making similar choices. Although percentages of people of any economic means buying local are hard to establish, certain dollars spent at farmers markets leave a trail. Looking at food-stamp dollars spent at farmers markets makes it easy to read the vote low-income people are casting for local foods.

"This past year it was $883,000, which jumped from $278,000 in 2008, and about $90,000 in 2007. Although we won't have figures from 2010 until the end of the calendar year, I would anticipate that we will not grow a [mere] few percent," says Jonathon Thomson, economic development specialist at the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, predicting that the amount could eclipse $1 million this year. The total number of food stamps spent in New York State in 2009 was $4.3 billion, so there's plenty of room for expansion.

The system for food stamps transitioned to paperless Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) in New York in 2000, and farmers were left out of the food-stamp loop for a while. The Department of Agriculture and Markets began a trial program in 2002, offering wireless machines to individual farmers. The program has since morphed into a market-based one, and this year 190 markets have machines that allow food stamp users to swipe their cards at market in return for wooden coins. Vendors accept these tokens and are reimbursed by the market management.

Ten farmers markets in Albany, Rensselaer and Schenectady counties now accept EBT. (These machines also allow shoppers to use credit or debit cards.) One of them is the Schenectady

Greenmarket, a Sunday market that began in November 2008. In January of this year, vendors offered a discount to draw shoppers using food stamps. The Schenectady market's Community Access committee is active in its outreach efforts and sent notices to food-stamp providers earlier this season about the program that allowed people to purchase starts for vegetable plants with their cards. Since the market moved outdoors the first Sunday in May, they have averaged $190 a week in EBT sales.

"This is allowing us to purchase local foods. We bought milk and eggs, raw honey, fruit, vegetables, bread," says a customer, asking not to be identified, of having access to EBT at a farmers market. The woman was shopping for the week with her husband and their two sons. The family sought a farmers market where they could use their benefits, and shopped here last year as well.

In other words, this family found the market because they were savvy about local foods. The market didn't find them. And yet, markets are strategically placed in areas where people don't have access to any fresh foods.

"The hardest thing is to get a market going in a low-income neighborhood because some of the products are higher-end," says Tom Gallagher, agriculture issue leader for Cornell Cooperative Extension in Albany County. Gallagher specializes in agricultural economic development, helping new farms assess properties to see what might grow. He also helps develop farmers markets so farmers have a place to sell.

When Gallagher was helping to start the farmers market at Capital District Physicians Helath Plan in Albany, the fledgling market's board chose not to have an EBT machine—which requires staffing to operate—onsite. The lunchtime market is not near a residential neighborhood and primarily serves workers in office buildings, employees who presumably earn enough that they don't use food stamps.

The Saturday market established on Central Avenue in Albany, however, in the parking lot for WAMC's the Linda, is meant to draw on foot traffic from the neighborhood. The Central Avenue BID is temporarily running this market, and reports that the market usually sees about five EBT transactions per week. The BID does outreach at church and neighborhood meetings, and places ads on TV and posters at bus stops to try to make sure people know about the market.

Food stamps are not the only currency that the lower-income population can use to purchase locally sourced foods. The New York State Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) distributed checks in June to families enrolled in WIC and also through the Senior Nutrition Programs. People use these checks for fruits and vegetables at farmers markets.

"Sometimes people think farmers markets are expensive, but they actually are not, especially at this time of year," says Debbie Forester at Schenectady's Greenmarket.

The FMNP checks can allow people to comparison shop and see that for themselves, but unfortunately, the redemption rate is poor. Only 50 percent of the coupons were redeemed last year in Albany County. Numbers were better for the senior citizens, however, who redeemed closer to 85 percent. Why there is such a difference in rates is a guessing game. Perhaps seniors know more about farmers markets in general, some of

them having grown up knowing them firsthand, before supermarkets assumed control of the food landscape.

Last year, a new program began distributing vegetable and fruit checks to WIC families as part of a federal directive. The WIC ration, when established in the 1970s, was protein-heavy, and in 2007 the USDA mandated a revision of programs at the state level. Monthly rations of fresh, frozen or canned vegetables and fruits are now included in WIC, and this new program hopes to direct WIC money to New York state farmers.

“We always have two goals in mind,” says Thomson of Agriculture and Markets. “One is to provide access to people that wouldn’t have access to this fresh, locally grown food, but the other part is to be able to support our local farmers—and that’s a message that has also gotten a good deal of emphasis from other agencies. The Health Department, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, or food stamps, [and the] Office for the Aging, they’re all very much on board with those goals,” notes Thomson, underscoring that the idea of living locally has teeth on many levels.

Going straight to farmers markets is not the only way to get local food on your plate. There are a lot of efforts in the region funneling locally grown produce to consumers for free. Farmers donate leftover produce at the end of the Delmar and Troy Waterfront farmers markets through a program begun in 2004 by Capital District Community Gardens (CDCG) called Squash Hunger. Squash Hunger has drop-off sites at a couple of Hannaford supermarkets and at Honest Weight. Produce is collected by volunteers and distributed to a variety of food pantries, soup kitchens, and other outlets that get food to people in need. Home gardeners give regularly to this program as well, and CDCG estimates it has gathered more than 70,000 pounds of produce in the six years the program has been running. Last year the program expanded to include gleaning from local farms, which upped the amount collected significantly.

The Schenectady Greenmarket collects weekly from its vendors, and different groups pick up the donations on a rotating basis. Volunteer Dinnie Shanley has been gathering boxes of produce from vendors since the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market’s early days, and bringing the food to pantries. Farmers are very generous with their surplus, happy to see the food they’ve put so much effort into growing reach a mouth rather than a compost pile.

Generosity also plays a role at CSAs. Community Supported Agriculture is a practice where people buy into the farming enterprise with the farmer, purchasing a share of the farm’s future yields up front. The idea is to ease the farmer’s spring investments in equipment, seeds and labor, and share the farmer’s potential bounty and losses. While paying a chunk of money up front is hard to manage on a limited income, some CSA farms have payment plans, and also offer subsidized or charity shares. When purchasing their shares, members often have the option to donate money to a fund to subsidize other shares. Denison Farms, which has been running a CSA from Schaghticoke since 2004, taking over Janet Britt’s long- standing CSA, reports that since the economic downturn, those donations have increased.

When people miss their CSA pickup, other members generally get the extra produce to food pantries or to Squash Hunger, which takes care of the transfer.

The Regional Food Bank has a farm to grow food for its needs and runs a CSA to help pay for the farm. Pauline Williman established the Patroon Land Trust in 1997 to keep family farmlands in agricultural use while producing food for people in need and offering opportunities for youth to gain farm experiences. Williman and volunteers grew vegetables on the land in Knox for the Food Bank from 2001 to 2005, and in 2006, the Regional Food Bank began to run the farm.

“This year we expect our yield will be over 100,000 lbs of produce, and it will all be distributed by the food bank to the kitchens and other agencies,” says Mark Quandt, director of the Regional Food Bank.

The farm manager, Mark Weinheimer, works year-round on the project, which cultivates almost 13 of the farm’s 162 acres. He is assisted by four full-time workers during the growing season.

The farm is planted with Swiss chard, kale, collards and lettuces, winter squash and melons. Onions and potatoes, peppers and tomatoes are growing, too. Weinheimer is transitioning to organic practices, finding it necessary to amend the soil after many years of heavy use. A raised bed machine, which props beds up above significant drainage ditches, is a boon to this year’s efforts, as the soil is very clay-like and wet.

The farm continues to be a real community project, with groups from churches and schools, as well as families and individuals, coming out to work the fields on a regular basis. Bales of hay donated by a local farmer sit on the land waiting to be used as mulch or dug into the ground for fortification. Foundations and individuals have donated money for equipment and improvements, such as a new barn. The Eastern Contractors Association is donating all of the labor necessary to construct the barn, the skeleton framework of which stands sentinel over machinery, starts and rows of growing plants.

In Coxsackie, a food pantry that purchases much of its stock from the Regional Food Bank also sources from the surrounding community. Charlotte Carter has been involved with the Community Food Pantry for almost 15 years and now directs it. The pantry serves roughly 60 families per month, or around 200 people, and Carter is creative about integrating the farmers in the area into the process of feeding those people.

“I have some people who donate on the understanding that the funds that they donate will be part of the local-food system. That supports the farmer. It’s kind of a collaborative thing,” says Carter, who buys a portion of the pantry’s meat from Pathfinder Farms at a discounted rate. She says the local orchard is very generous, as are hunters and sportsman clubs, who donate venison to the Regional Food Bank, which stores the meat. When the pantry needs it, they pay the small handling fee the food bank charges.

Fresh vegetables come to the pantry through gardeners and CSA shares. Carter has a plan to connect clients directly with farmers. Using some of the money that’s designated for local foods, she will invite a farmer to set up at the pantry, which operates for a single hour twice a week, and sell vegetables.

“I could let people choose what vegetables they wanted, and I would reimburse the producer. This is just an idea we’re beginning to work on, but then you have the connection with the person. Someone can tell you what to do with those greens,” says Carter.

Word of mouth is the best advertisement for any phenomenon, as EJ Krans, project director of Capital District Community Garden’s Veggie Mobile is discovering. The vegetable-oil-powered, brightly painted box truck stops at 23 sites a week, offering fruits and vegetables for sale at cost. Customers walk into the back of the truck and pick out what they’d like to buy, and pay for their food with FMNP checks, EBT cards, credit or debit cards and plain old cash. The staff takes the trouble to source locally as much as possible, and labels those origins on the truck. These labels quickly became a talking point with customers.

“We talk about it a lot, and just by talking about it, it becomes an interest,” says Krans. “People come to expect to know where it’s from. The more we talk about it, the more people are interested.”

People also ask questions about organics, the term having filtered into the national food vocabulary so deeply that even Wal-Mart is in on the game. Now that the term local is circulating on the Veggie Mobile, people ask about that, too. The difference is visual and obvious, especially when people see fresh greens.

Talking has served the sourcing end of the equation, as well. Last year, for instance, Krans and other workers kept asking the distributors they buy from at the Menands Market—where they also shop directly from producers—for locally grown cherries. A distributor was able to get some from Buffalo, and this year, the distributors had local cherries. Supply can meet demand.

“We can never have local lemons, limes and bananas, but when we come into peak season, which we are now, we get up to 70 percent locally grown,” says Krans.

Talk alone won’t make a perfect food system. However, there is plenty of action happening around here toward change. Strategically located farmers markets, roving vegetable vans and charitable efforts are all funneling great local fruits and vegetables to lots of people. Educational gardening initiatives geared at youth like Roots & Wisdom in Schenectady, Youth Organics (YO!) in Albany, and the Youth Powered Farm run by CDCG in Troy, are another piece of the puzzle, as are backyard and community gardeners.

Nutritional trends come and go. Remember the no-carb craze? And Olestra? These dietary “solutions” didn’t last. Local food, which is targeting something broader than our waistlines or the lining of our arteries—planetary health as well as personal health—just might have some staying power.

July 8, 2010

ONLINE Metroland
THE ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLY OF NEW YORK'S CAPITAL REGION.