

Centre County Food System Needs Assessment

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David Costlow
Vanessa Rickenbrode
Casey Schneck
Blair Weikel

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Summary

We interviewed ten stakeholders in the Centre County food system, representing agricultural non-profits, government, food pantries, horticultural farmers, and food retailers. These stakeholders were identified as knowledgeable experts in their respective sectors of the food system. Our interviews revealed a high diversity of goals and opinions. The food system appears segmented into isolated stakeholder groups, with little coordination and understanding between them. Most interviewees voiced a need for more connections across the food system, and few had an understanding of sectors outside their personal role.

Analysis

Food Systems

When asked to define our “food system,” interviewees answered with varying degrees of depth and complexity. Most mentioned market interactions between producers and consumers, particularly locally. Some also talked about food grown in the local food system being sent to market both locally and globally. The second most commonly identified trait of our food system was a variety of options. The food system contains conventional and value added foods (e.g. organic), and serves a variety of different income levels. Interviewees also mentioned personal connections as an important part of the food system. They said that agriculture is a large part of the local economy, and felt that the current food system is somewhat uncoordinated.

Interviewees identified the following stakeholders in the food system: farmers (both small holders and large, industrial operations), farmer’s markets, grocers, restaurants, consumers, distributors, farm suppliers, politicians and regulators, government agencies, NGOs, community organizations (those with food drives or food fundraisers), and food banks. Farmers, retailers, and consumers were most commonly identified. Some identified particular power-players in the food system. While there was no general agreement on where power is held, it was always attributed to groups the interviewees were not a part of. Whether real or imagined, these interviewees felt limited power and agency in shaping the food system. It was common for interviewees to be most mindful of stakeholders in their own sectors; there seems to be a lack of understanding and awareness between stakeholder groups.

An optimal food system, according to our interviewees, is most importantly local, healthy, and accessible for all. Secondary criteria include a healthy farmer’s market network, fair income for farmers, and a diverse variety of food options. Other concerns include transparency and trust in producers, educated consumers, minimal waste, and sustainability. Sustainability was used to describe practices that do not reduce the capacity of the land, and that maintain health for both the environment and for people.

Characteristics of the Centre County Food System

Interviewees felt that Centre County has a variety of assets to help the future development of the food system. These are highlighted in figure 1 below. The relative size of each word indicates how frequently it was listed by interviewees.



Figure 1: Word map of assets in the Centre County Food System, identified by 10 key informant interviewees.

Chief among the strengths identified was the agricultural landscape of the county. The productive land, ties of family farming, and strong network of farmer’s markets are vitally important. Centre County’s food system also benefits from the presence of organizations like Penn State, Pennsylvania Certified Organic, and Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture. The community of Center County has a large base of educated and passionate people, as well as an interest in sustainability. The knowledge and drive needed to advance the food system are present here.

Despite its strengths, the Centre County food system has several needs to move forward. These are displayed in figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Word map of the needs within the Centre County Food System, identified by ten key informant interviewees.

The largest concern was affordability. Although several interviewees reported that the current food system provides food to all income levels, affordability, along with accessibility, were among the most common needs expressed, especially from stakeholders working on issues of food insecurity. As a related issue, several interviewees mentioned the importance of a fair wage for farmers. This is connected with concerns about the aging and shrinking population of farmers in the county, leading a few interviewees to suggest farming incentives as a need of the food system. Finally, unified leadership was a major concern. There are many organizations and initiatives operating independently in the food system, and many of the interviewees felt a strong need to bring these together under a central body.

Available Data Sets about Our Food System

Interviewees identified the following sources of data:

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|---------------------------|--|
| USDA NAS Organic Survey | Annie E Casey Foundation |
| Farmland Trust | Urban Institute |
| Census | Meals on Wheels America |
| Department of Agriculture | National Foundation to End Senior Hunger |
| Extension Service | Food for Thought |
| Central PA Food Bank | Mid Atlantic Gleaning Network |
| FeedingAmerica.org | County Land Use Data |

Interviewees voiced a need for data on the following subjects:

Economic impacts of farmers markets	Market research on local consumer demands
Local crop trends	
Farmers market Inventories across county	Food waste and location of excess food
Information on farms in the area: what's being grown, how much, and where is it going	Information on practices of local farms
	Gaps in the Ag Census

Actions to Take

Interviewees had diverse opinions on what collective actions would benefit the Centre County food system. The most common idea was building connections between stakeholders. Connecting stakeholders within the same groups, to share knowledge and expertise, and connecting between groups were both seen as valuable. Putting local producers in contact with consumers, farms with restaurants, and food banks with extra food holders all work to improve the state of the food system.

Also suggested in multiple interviews, stakeholders would like to see a resource sharing network, help and incentives for small holder farmers, and education for the community on the importance of local and healthy food. A central body of knowledge, with links and contacts for expert advice would help grow the food system. Some voiced concerns about the existing field of experts being well suited to industrial farming, but less knowledgeable about sustainable practices. Many consumers in the food system understand the benefits of local, healthy food, but some interviewees see the need to get that knowledge to more people, along with improved accessibility to better foods.

Additional actions, only brought up once, include creating a place for stakeholders to gather and connect, establishing a pool of food system volunteers, partnering growers with land owners, involving more young people in the food system, and creating a wholesale market for local foods.

Successful Outcomes for the Summit

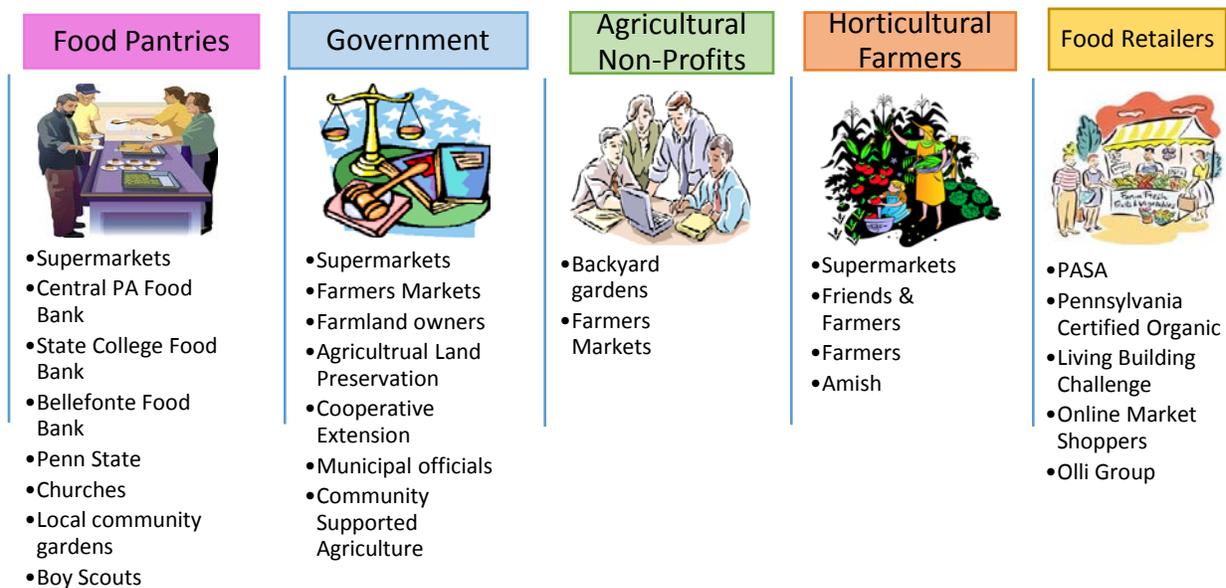
Expectations for the Food Systems Summit largely focused around identifying collective goals, understanding different perspectives, and beginning a larger conversation. Certain segments of the food system, some interviewees suggested, may be in conflict with each other.

The event could serve to ease tensions and find common ground, for example between small holder farmers and industrial agriculture.

Identification of key leaders and creating ways to continue the conversation beyond the event are also very important. A few interviewees identified specific goals of eliminating redundant efforts, identifying methods to reduce waste, developing a long term plan, and creating personal connections. Many want to hear everyone’s perspectives before deciding what success might look like.

Organizations

Interviewees were asked about their connections to food and agricultural organizations in the county. Figure 3 shows the connections found in each of the five stakeholder groups.



When considering existing organizations that could act as a backbone for work in the food system, PASA and Friends and Farmers Cooperative were identified multiple times. Cooperative Extension and Penn State were suggested to play a part of that role. Some expressed concerns that there may be too many different goals to have a central backbone. The current abundance of organizations has some opposed to creating any new ones.

Role for Penn State

Several interviewees see Penn State playing a large role in the food system as it moves forward, acting as a knowledge and awareness hub. Some expressed concern that they would prefer involvement of individuals from Penn State, but not the university as an institution. Those with reservations cite corporate influence holding Penn State back.