

Fostering Rural/Urban Connections in Southeastern Wisconsin

Food, Faith and Farming Network Listening/Networking Sessions

Introduction

The Food, Faith and Farming Network held a series of five Listening and Networking Sessions in SE Wisconsin in the fall of 2022 with a focus on “rural/urban connections.” This report summarizes the ideas that were gleaned from the Listening/Networking Sessions as part of a “Fostering Rural/Urban Connections in Southeastern Wisconsin” project funded by Bader Philanthropies, Inc.

Our Network had sponsored a series of Rural Listening Sessions in Southwestern Wisconsin in the spring of 2018 and since then provided Seed Money Grants to fund innovative community-building projects in response to the issues raised in these sessions. This initiative was so successful, we decided to initiate a similar two-phase project involving Listening/Networking Sessions followed by Seed Money Grants in Southeastern Wisconsin. Yet, the SE Wisconsin project would have the unique focus of rural/urban connections to counteract the divide that currently exists between rural and urban parts of our state. We approached Bader Philanthropies, Inc. about this initiative, and they provided funding for the two-phase project. We are most appreciative of this support.

Details related to Phase I of this project are outlined below and in the balance of this report. Where do we go from here? We will be disseminating this report to everyone that participated in our Listening/Networking Sessions and to several other groups: Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, area UW-Extension offices, farm organizations, food programs, newspapers and policy makers at the local, state and national level. We will also be sending applications for Seed Money projects that address the issues outlined in this report...that is Phase II of this project. Seed Money applications will be due in late January 2023, grant awards will be made in March and we will celebrate the successes of projects in late 2023.

The Listening/Networking Sessions and Process

Five Listening/Networking Sessions were planned in locations designed to be accessible to persons throughout nine SE Wisconsin counties: Milwaukee, Kenosha, Racine, Walworth, Waukesha, Jefferson, Dodge, Washington, and Ozaukee counties. The locations, venues and dates for the sessions were as follows:

Racine	Siena Retreat Center	Wednesday, October 19
Neosho	Catholic Ecology Center	Tuesday, October 25
East Troy	Michael Fields Agricultural Institute	Thursday, October 27
Saukville	Riveredge Nature Center	Tuesday, November 1
Milwaukee	The Table	Thursday, November 3

Each session began with a meal, designed to help people network with each other from the start. Our Network welcomed participants and shared goals for the Listening/Networking Sessions. This was followed by welcoming comments from the host site about their facility and work; also comments from the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission about their work on a Regional Food System Plan. Participants were asked to provide brief introductions, then were asked to join us in a process of identifying issues in SE Wisconsin and exploring solutions to the issues viewed as most important to each group. These discussions were led by Steve Chmielewski and Ann Wied, Community Development Educator and Community Development Outreach Specialist, respectively, with UW- Extension in southeast Wisconsin. Issues were jotted down on flip chart sheets and posted at the front of the room in response to the following question:

What do you see as significant issues in SE Wisconsin related to local foods, sustainable farming, food security and rural/urban connections?

Once issues were identified, participants were asked to “vote” on the most important issues, then form small groups to explore solutions to the issues viewed as having the greatest interest, using a four-step process:

- 1) *What is the issue?*
- 2) *What are some challenges/barriers that may impede resolving the issue?*
- 3) *What are some ideas/strategies that address these challenges/barriers?*
- 4) *What is your best solution for the issue?*

The “solutions” of the small groups were shared in the larger group and there was a chance for participants to add their comments. Participants were then thanked for their involvement in the process and told that a summary of the five Listening/Networking Sessions would be sent to them. They were also informed that there would be a call for proposals for Seed Money Grants and were provided with a summary of Seed Money Grants from SW Wisconsin to trigger thoughts about innovative solutions to community-based problems. We emphasized that the Seed Money proposals should focus on rural/urban connections, local foods, sustainable farming, and food security. And we emphasized that four criteria would be used in making decisions about Seed Money proposals:

- 1) Does it address a significant community issue?
- 2) Does it outline an innovative solution for confronting the issue?
- 3) Does it build a network of individuals/groups to collaborate on the issue?
- 4) Does it demonstrate energy and commitment to achieve the stated goals?

Participants in the Listening/Networking Sessions could choose which of the sessions to attend. We had expected that there would be fairly even numbers of people participating in the five sessions, but there were considerably more people attending the Milwaukee session. Attendance was as follows: Racine-13; Neosho-11; East Troy-16; Saukville-10; Milwaukee-27.

Sessions were attended by a wide range of people: farmers, crop managers, community garden reps, religious leaders, UW-Extension, Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission,

Eco-Justice Center staff, Catholic Ecology Center director, Waukesha County Green Team, Gathering Waters Conservancy staff, Wellspring Center Founder, Riveredge Nature Center staff, Racine Mayor, Feeding America, Food Right, landscapers, market gardeners, vocational agriculture teacher, conservation planners, family service staff, nutrition site staff, food pantry staff, regional representatives for Senator Tammy Baldwin and our project manager from Bader Philanthropies, Claudia Martinez.

“Central Themes” from the Listening/Networking Sessions are outlined below, then we provide a “Summary of Issues” and a “Summary of Workgroup Reports” from the five sessions. We were pleased with the engagement and exciting ideas generated in these sessions...we hope you agree!

Central Themes from Listening/Networking Sessions

Providing Rural and Urban Education

- Provide education to rural & urban consumers about where their food comes from
- Inform consumers about the benefits of local and sustainably produced food
- Involve urban youth in urban agriculture and food preparation programs
- Create directories to connect producers and consumers of local food

Fostering Rural and Urban Food Security

- Connect farmers with rural and urban food deserts
- Initiate food gleaning and distribution programs
- Identify and provide quality, culturally appropriate foods for urban consumers
- Address the nutritional needs of school age youth, seniors and economically disadvantaged, and connect local farms to meet those needs

Supporting New and Small Farmers

- Mentor and provide educational resources for new/beginning farmers
- Support affordable access to land and equipment for new/beginning farmers
- Initiate/support slaughtering facilities for small scale meat animal farmers
- Address issue of disappearing farms and competition from industrial farms

Addressing Food System Issues

- Provide fair wages to food producers and affordable prices for consumers
- Reduce the environmental impacts of pesticides and monoculture farming
- Reduce food waste through education and creation of composting programs
- Create a shared forum for discussing and addressing food system issues
- Foster a trusting “We are all in this together” attitude with rural and urban people

Summary of Issues from Listening/Networking Sessions

The items with greatest interest are listed first for each of the five sessions.

Racine, Siena Retreat Center: Wednesday, October 19, 2022

1. **Education:** Building a bridge between rural producers and urban consumers; Rural farms connecting with urban youth; Childcare centers purchasing from farmers
2. **Developing Trust:** Fostering trust between rural producers and urban consumers; Building trust with store owners that healthier foods will sell
3. **Sustainable farming:** Shared definition; Linking food deserts with local farm producers; Food gleaning and distribution to connect with need; Financial awards for donations
4. **Food security:** Bureaucracy and infrastructure issues; Farm to table distribution models; How urban farms can compete beyond vegetable production
5. **Economics of farming:** An economic struggle for both rural and urban people; Creating sustainable vocations for farmers; Helping people and the planet profit from farming
6. **School lunch/nutrition programs:** Linking local farms with school lunch and senior nutrition programs; Providing markets for quality local foods
7. **Loss of farm legacy:** When giant farms take over small, multi-generational farms, there is a loss of the family legacy
8. **Ecological impact of farming:** The impact of farming on the environment; How to build value without having a negative impact on the environment

Neosho, Catholic Ecology Center: Tuesday, October 25, 2022

1. **Disappearing farms:** Land access issues; Competition from industrial farms; Future of agriculture in Wisconsin
2. **Pesticide use/disappearing pollinators:** Monocropping and use of Roundup Ready crops; Groundwater quality; Soil quality
3. **People are not connected to food:** Education of youth related to the land and food; Need to make local food accessible to more people
4. **Not enough youth getting into farming:** Need succession planning to foster the next generation of farmers
5. **Quality of food:** Need for education about the quality of food and the benefits of locally produced food
6. **Challenges of power generation:** Alternate power sources need to be explored and implemented on farms; Need to be aware of wildlife issues and permits
7. **Farm to table food system issues:** Need to address unwillingness to pay for local foods; Help people understand the importance of farm to table food systems
8. **Wealth disparity and social justice challenges:** Wealth disparities make local food purchases difficult for some people; Need to focus on racial and cultural awareness
9. **Cost of equipment to run small-scale farms:** The profit margins on small-scale farms make equipment purchases difficult
10. **Helping people find local farms:** Need for directories of local farms and education to help people find local foods

East Troy, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute: Thursday, October 27, 2022

1. **Education about where to find local/sustainable foods:** Education about what sustainable foods are; Need of directories for farmers and consumers
2. **Need for slaughter facilities in local communities:** Meat producers face long waits for slaughter and a dearth of slaughter options currently
3. **Local foods are hard to obtain:** Healthy, nutritional, local foods that provide for food security are difficult to obtain; How to support rural and urban farmers
4. **Educating youth about where their food comes from:** Need to create a closer link between youth and the land/people that produce their food
5. **Develop a data base that connects farmers with consumers:** Need a closer link between farmers and consumers
6. **Local foods are not accessible or affordable:** Need to find ways of making local foods more accessible and affordable
7. **Government regulations limit the sale of local foods:** Regulations also limit the donation of local foods
8. **Food voucher recipients can't use vouchers at some farmers markets:** Need to find ways of making vouchers more universally accepted
9. **The cost of doing sustainable farming:** Need to find ways of leveling the playing field by providing subsidies to farmers
10. **Transportation of local foods for consumers and farmers:** Rising transportation costs create barriers for use of local foods
11. **Need good, healthy foods for seniors at meal sites and for purchase**
12. **People in the U.S. don't know how to cook or are too lazy to do so**

Saukville, Riveredge Nature Center: Tuesday, November 1, 2022

1. **Need better connection with inner city urban folks and youth:** City folks lack understanding of where their food comes from; Involve youth in urban gardens
2. **Vertical integration of agriculture:** Growing scale of agriculture makes it difficult for small farms to compete
3. **Availability of land for agricultural production:** The cost of land is prohibitive for young farmers; Need government and business as partners
4. **Need for local slaughtering facilities for all animals:** Meat producers experience long waits for slaughter and a lack of slaughter options currently
5. **Lack of advice/consultation on starting a farm or new enterprise:** Cutbacks in UW-Extension create limitations; Need knowledge of where to go for help
6. **Inequities in land ownership:** Small and medium-sized farms are dropping out and large farms are increasingly the norm for Wisconsin agriculture
7. **National organic standards are not being enforced:** Large corporations buying up small organic organizations; Farmers considering organic don't trust organic enforcement
8. **Lack of a shared social framework for discussing issues:** Need a forum for issues related to local foods, sustainable farming, food security and rural/urban connections

9. **Concern about food additives:** Sugar and salt added to enhance flavor and preservatives added to lengthen the shelf life of foods
10. **Retail merchandising decisions:** The cost for shelf space in grocery stores makes it difficult for small farmers to market their products
11. **Need for cover cropping in winter to reduce erosion:** Cover crops are especially important on highly erodible land
12. **Help people understand the importance of manure runoff and management**
13. **Help volunteer organizations survive pandemic and other economic crises**
14. **Help people know they can find and count on local foods**

Milwaukee, The Table: Thursday, November 3, 2022

1. **Education on how to garden and cook:** Include information on post-harvest processing (canning, pickling, fermenting); Bring rural skills to urban areas
2. **Food security with nutrient-dense foods:** Create policies that support easy access to nutritious foods and foster food security
3. **Local food movement discriminates against people without land access:** Need to find ways of providing land access to more people
4. **Linking surplus food with community needs:** Need to reduce food loss and food waste while responding to needs in the community
5. **Student access to land and gardens:** Youth are disconnected from the land; Need education and exposure to land and gardens
6. **Commodity-based farm incentives don't encourage production of local foods:** There are no incentives to address local issues or respond to specific cultural needs
7. **Provide fair wages for growers and affordable prices for consumers:** Need to consider equity and justice issues in food production/consumption
8. **Soil quality affects the quality of food produced:** Need education about soil quality and organic farming methods
9. **Lack of diversity in agricultural practices:** Monoculture makes it hard to help each other if we don't know each other and each other's needs; Lack of community
10. **How to scale local food to meet local demands:** Need better feedback loops between producers and consumers; Access to good quality food
11. **Local rules limit urban farming such as chicken growing:** Need citizen advocacy to change local rules related to food production
12. **Change term "sustainable farming" to "resilient farming:"** Resilient is a more dynamic phrase and allows for change over time
13. **Water access issues:** Water will become an increasingly precious commodity and we will need to develop policies related to water utilization
14. **Environmental impacts with changes in climate/weather:** We need to become more resilient in our farming methods with climate changes
15. **Price competitiveness for local foods vs. conventional foods**
16. **Supply chain issues for farmers and food availability for consumers**

Summary of Workgroup Reports from Listening/Networking Sessions

Racine, Siena Retreat Center: October 19, 2022

Issue 1: Education-Building a bridge between rural producers and urban consumers; Rural farms connecting with urban youth; Childcare centers purchasing from farmers

Challenges/Barriers: A lot of blame, bureaucracy and protection of self and ego; Schools are not cooking their own food (it's easier to just heat processed food; There is a great wall created by the Interstate Highway with east and west "silos;" Who can give up 9 evenings for an education program with 9 lessons?

Ideas/Solution: All first graders are taken out to the Eco Justice Center for education; Nutrition education is done with fifth graders in Racine through UW-Extension; Need a program that builds over time (not just 1st or 5th grade); Need a Kid's Hero that repeats the message over time with an energizing person or animal; Develop sister churches that foster trust and work together to address this issue; Foster trust between rural and urban people through exposure to each other; Need to get schools, UW-Extension, the Eco Justice Center and parents to work together on a pilot program

Issue 2: Developing Trust-Fostering trust between rural producers and urban consumers; Building trust with store owners that healthier, local foods will sell

Challenges/Barriers: There is mistrust of authority, a lot of siloed work and territorial working relationships; There is redundancy in roles and a lack of consensus around goals; It's hard to get people in the same room; How do we develop trust and how do we know when we have trust...when there is intimacy and sharing?

Ideas/Solutions: Initiate a survey to collect more data on producers and consumers; Workers in community-facing roles need to truly represent the community; Connect with faith-based institutions to foster credibility; Reach out to possible partners across demographics and identity groups

Neosho, Catholic Ecology Center: October 25, 2022

Issue 1: Disappearing farms-Land access issues; Competition from large, industrial farms; Future of agriculture in Wisconsin

Challenges/Barriers: High price of land, fueled by aggressive realtors and large groups gobbling up land; Low interest rates in the past enabled non-farm people to buy land but higher interest rates now make it difficult for farmers to afford credit for their operations; A farming livelihood is no longer desirable for farmers and their kids; The attitude "It's my land and I can do what I want with it;" This is a systemic problem and we need to look at the big picture to solve it

Ideas/Solutions: Encourage cooperative ownership of land, equipment, and renewable power generation; Grant small plots of land to new farmers (young people and Hmong farmers); Provide education about the importance of agriculture in schools and offer local farm tours for

education of the public; Provide education on the significance and integral role of small, rural farms in our society and culture as a whole; Have communities revisit land use and zoning plans

Issue 2: Pesticide use/disappearing pollinators-Monocropping and use of Roundup Ready crops; Groundwater quality and soil quality issues

Challenges/Barriers: Convenience of eating fast, cheap food produced by mega farms; Pesticide use is “standard procedure,” with decades of “business as usual;” Political lobbying plus funding/advertising by large chemical companies; Economics of using chemicals to control weeds and pests; Our addiction to cheap foods and over consumption

Ideas/Solutions: Start small by finding connections between people...what concerns people have about food and sustainable agriculture; Focus on the health benefits of local foods and regenerative agriculture; Foster community awareness, outreach, and education in schools; Promote more classes in agriculture and farming

East Troy, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute: October 27, 2022

Issue 1: Education about where to find local/sustainable foods-Education about what sustainable foods are; Need for directories for farmers and consumers

Challenges/Barriers: An assumption that people don’t know where to find local, sustainable foods and that greater awareness will increase demand for these foods; Perceptions are part of the problem: high cost of sustainable foods, cooking is “hard,” why should I care?; There is competition from other foods that are marketed well; Local, sustainable foods may not be close-by or easily accessible so people who want to purchase them can’t do so or don’t prioritize it; Not all schools have agriculture, family and consumer education or nutrition education classes; Who should provide the education and, if resource directories were developed, who would maintain them?

Ideas/Solutions: Need more education in schools, teaching where food comes from and how to cook or prepare it; Build networks of local farmers and offer local events to bring people in on a regular or consistent basis; Need better messaging about why to buy local, sustainable foods and how to make purchases from local producers; Find models of success and replicate their efforts; Seek commitments from local medical clinics to ask patients about food insecurity and also make referrals to food pantries, WIC, and sources of local foods; Encourage cultural groups to do their own gardening and, thus, teach their children/grandchildren about growing their own food and cooking traditional meals as families

Issue 2: Need for slaughter facilities in local communities-Meat producers face long waits for slaughter and there is a dearth of slaughter options currently

Challenges/Barriers: Need additional slaughtering facilities for all meat animals (Example: there are only 1-2 poultry facilities in Wisconsin); There is a shortage of meat inspectors and meat slaughtering personnel; Communities are often resistant to having slaughtering facilities in or near them; Direct marketers of meat need high quality processors and high quality packaging (a

farmer in the group has to go to Indiana to meet this need); Today's consumers want highly-processed foods...they have lost interest in cooking or don't know how to cook

Ideas/Solutions: The Southwestern Wisconsin Meat Cooperative (MeatSmith) is developing a mobile slaughtering and local processing facility in the Argyle area (they will begin with hogs, then expand to include beef and sheep); Local meat processors lack slaughter capabilities and need mobile units to meet this need; Mobile slaughtering units must be inspected and are in need of trained slaughtering staff; Tech colleges are developing programs to train meat processors; Grasslands 2.0 is working on a system of linking farmers with slaughtering facilities; DATCP is granting funds for training of high school and tech college students in meat processing; Farmers need to collaborate in getting a mobile slaughtering unit and link this with existing meat processors

Saukville, Riveredge Nature Center: November 1, 2022

Issue 1: Need better connection with inner city urban folks and youth-City folks lack understanding of where their food comes from; Need to involve youth in urban gardens

Challenges/Barriers: Historic racial inequities in land ownership are at the heart of this problem; Racial trauma makes it difficult for urban kids to visualize a future of land ownership; The pandemic and George Floyd changed attitudes about receiving education from white educators; Food deserts make it difficult to create connections with food and food producers; Involvement in agricultural education comes too late; A lack of leadership and parental involvement in this issue

Ideas/Solutions: Bring kids to farms and Victory Gardens; Meet folks where they are, including container gardening; Increase use of local foods through Farm to School programs; Provide food for culturally-relevant recipes and meals; Add agricultural education in public schools; Promote agricultural production closer to schools and cities; Encourage Black folks to get involved in agriculture; Create and fund engaging, representative and culturally relevant educational programs for youth and adults through public schools, non-profit groups and community organizations; Use Crowdsourcing and community support to fund these initiatives

Issue 2: Vertical integration of agriculture-The growing scale of agriculture makes it difficult for small farms to compete

Challenges/Barriers: Availability of agricultural supplies locally; Increasingly must buy from large suppliers that are some distance away from local farms; Farmers increasingly feel economically redundant: "Do people need me and my food?" and "If I fail, people will get their food from somewhere else;" People vote with their food dollar and may not know about the nutrition in local foods or know how to find them or prepare them

Ideas/Solutions: Need to create alternative markets, including CSAs and other direct marketing approaches; Encourage community integration rather than vertical integration; Host more open-door events to bring people in; Need to change the minds of consumers through education; Support public policies that maintain small family farms and cooperatives

Milwaukee, The Table: November 3, 2022

Issue 1: Education on how to garden and cook-Include information on post-harvest processing (canning, pickling, fermenting); Bring rural skills to urban areas

Challenges/Barriers: Need to remove technical barriers like language and foster diverse, inclusive education experiences; Finding volunteers and resources to support long-term programs

Ideas/Solutions: Connect with untapped resources like UW-Extension; Offer immersive, experiential trainings with in-class growing strategies; Focus on container gardening and simple, inexpensive strategies for growing microgreens; Need to recognize the importance of partner buy-in; Need collaboration with organizations and resources; Find ways of transforming soft money into hard money for long term programs

Issue 2: Food security with nutrient-dense foods-Create policies that support easy access to nutritious foods and foster food security

Challenges/Barriers: Current policies support ready access to calorie-dense junk food (the Farm Bill provides support for commodity crops which are primarily turned into junk foods); Zoning often fosters many fast-food restaurants in a given area; Much of our advertising is focused on fast foods; The price of fresh, quality foods can discourage their use; Mega factory farms are not accountable for paying their fair share of societal costs

Ideas/Solutions: Offer incentives for supporting fresh food providers; Need to support the infrastructure that supports storage of healthy food (Example: support small, corner stores to purchase refrigeration for fruits and vegetables); Advocate for changes in policies related to advertising of foods; Advocate for changes in the Farm Bill that revamp what foods are subsidized

Issue 3: Local food movement discriminates against people without land access-Need to find ways of providing land access to more people

Challenges/Barriers: Lack of funding for urban agriculture; Prohibitive city policies and barriers; Lack of collaboration; Misinformation on the availability of land in urban settings

Ideas/Solutions: Encourage innovation and experimentation as urban agriculture re-emerges; Find creative ways to access land ownership; Support the capacity of local corner grocery stores to handle healthy produce; Provide funding for large-scale composting; Encourage community-scale agriculture where fresh foods are grown in cities and neighborhoods

Issue 4: Linking surplus food with community needs-Need to reduce food loss and food waste while responding to needs in the community

Challenges/Barriers: Lack of education about varieties of produce which leads to food waste; Not every piece of local food looks perfect; No resources for composting and high cost of composting; Logistics and technology to get food where it needs to go; Pressures to preserve

relationships with food suppliers involve risks of losing agreements; Government incentives to overproduce food; Garbage donations to food banks that result in tossed food

Ideas/Solutions: Encourage farm to table relationships between food producers and consumers; Find ways to make large-scale composting available; Collaboration between government, voluntary organizations, and food pantries to pay for composting