# Food System Assessment of Allen County, Ohio

*Prepared by Activate Allen County in partnership with the Allen County Food Council, January 2015*

## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 1: What Do We Mean By “Local Food”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2: The Benefits of Local Food</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Benefits</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen County Food Desert Map</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmland Preservation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3: The Current Situation: Producers</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4: The Current Situation: Processors/Distributors</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Transportation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 5: The Current Situation: Consumers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 6: Resources</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 7: Barriers/Challenges</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Awareness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Ahead</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

Food access and nutrition are growing challenges in Allen County, Ohio – exacerbated by economic stagnation in recent years. Activate Allen County and the regional food council it convened in 2014 studied whether it was possible to improve healthy eating habits while also strengthening the local economy. The council’s *Food System Assessment of Allen County Ohio* identifies factors that suggest the area could:

- Ensure that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels at local markets, grocery stores, restaurants, schools and other institutions.
- Strengthen the region’s economy; create local jobs in the food production, processing and distribution industries and coordinate energy-efficient distribution that provides a secure supply of many foods to people of the region.
- Preserve valuable farmland by making agriculture more profitable, and by showing planners and policymakers that farmland is important to local economies.
- Encourage policies that allow agriculture on vacant and underused land in cities and towns throughout the region, and promote the health benefits and availability of local food.
- Coordinate local-food efforts in Allen County with those of other counties in the region, and with other Ohio locales in an emerging statewide network of local food councils.

Lima and Allen County once produced a large portion of the food their residents ate. The county’s rich and expansive farmland yielded a stunning variety of crops and other food – processed by local dairies, meatpackers, and canneries. But, as with communities around the state and across the country, that local-food infrastructure has shrunk, and what remains is more specialized. Over the last 30 years, as residential development spread over a broader area, the county lost 14,000 acres of farmland. In the same period, corn and soybean production grew from 59 percent of total county agricultural sales to 75 percent; vegetables dropped from 1.4 percent to 0.06 percent.

Corn and soy production remains important to the local economy, and pork production continues to grow. But much of the processing – the added value that boosts economies – takes place elsewhere. Interest in local food, which appears to be much more than a passing fad, has the potential to boost the Lima economy as well as the rural economy. Fortunately, Allen County has retained enough of its food processing and distribution infrastructure to create a good foundation for growth. Kewpee, in many ways, is a microcosm of a regional food system. Keystone Meats is a federally-inspected plant that serves local farmers and distributes products around the state. Kettle Creations was a startup that, in just a few years, became a successful Bob Evans plant that produces packaged mashed potatoes. These are just a few of the food processors and distributors in the region.

The Allen County Food Council wants to build on the momentum of Activate Allen County and discuss new opportunities for growth. The council wants to develop partnerships to enhance what is taking place and coordinate efforts to form a stronger local food system. We also want to encourage new partners to come to the table and explore how an improved local food system may benefit businesses and the local economy. The more community members that are willing to be included, the better the goals, strategies and outcomes will be.
FOOD SYSTEM ASSESSMENT OF ALLEN COUNTY, OHIO

INTRODUCTION

The Allen County Local Food Council is a multi-faceted team of community leaders convened by Activate Allen County to promote a healthy community through the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food in the area. This countywide local food assessment and plan will promote efforts to:

- Ensure that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels at local markets, grocery stores, restaurants, schools and other institutions.
- Strengthen the region’s economy; create local jobs in the food production, processing and distribution industries and coordinate energy-efficient distribution that provides a secure supply of many foods to people of the region.
- Preserve valuable farmland by making agriculture more profitable, and by showing planners and policymakers that farmland is important to local economies.
- Encourage policies that allow agriculture on vacant and underused land in cities and towns throughout the region, and promote the health benefits and availability of local food.
- Coordinate local-food efforts in Allen County with those of other counties in the region, and with other Ohio locales in an emerging statewide network of local food councils.

The local-food assessment, conducted in the summer of 2014, is essential to the creation of a regional food plan. It provides a snapshot of existing local-food-system components in Allen County and West Central Ohio. There are many producers and marketers of local food; farmers markets; community gardens; businesses that process food; stores, restaurants and institutions that sell and serve local food; and groups that promote local food. By compiling this listing and overview of those efforts, we can now begin to make connections among them and develop a credible plan to increase their size and scope.

This assessment serves two functions. First, it is a tool that enables the Allen County Food Council to: collect and analyze regional agriculture and food data; determine what local-food assets the region has; pinpoint where those assets are; connect those dots; and develop a plan. Second, it will be a resource for public policymakers and business leaders to learn about the value of local food to the regional populace and economy. The council established two key focus areas to guide the assessment through various key topics:

- Health, nutrition, urban areas, gardens, and rural and urban food access;
- Agricultural production, economic development, farmland preservation, and the local-food processing and distribution infrastructure.
The first area, consistent with the goals of Activate Allen County, focused on food access, health, nutrition, and related topics. Those goals are a driving force in the effort, but are not necessarily tied to local food. However, Activate Allen County and The Food Trust, its partner in a neighborhood-store healthy food initiative, emphasized that if food access and better diets were linked to local production and processing of food, the efforts may become more ingrained in the local culture through the jobs and economic development that come with a local food system. The second area will explore how growers and businesses in the region can be better supported within the local food system and will explore policy, process and framework.

Each area had appointed members to be responsible for data collection on key topics identified by Activate Allen County when the planning process began. In each case, members were instructed to bring other potential community stakeholders to the table and share information on the current state of local food in the region. The 11 study areas were:

- Current conditions on community and backyard gardens, and “urban farms"
- “Healthy Food Zones” in and around schools
- Availability of healthy, fresh and local foods in neighborhood-based stores
- Transportation access – particularly public transportation and walking/biking – to stores with fresh, healthy options
- Fresh-food access for senior citizens
- Availability of healthy food options through donations to food banks and pantries
- The role of WIC and SNAP programs in helping low-income residents gain access to fresh local foods at farmers markets and other locations
- Current conditions on the availability of local food in wholesale and retail markets
- Current farm conditions for production and marketing of food for local consumption
- Food-related businesses that can provide marketing options for local farms
- Trends and consumer demand for local food

A wide range of individuals, organizations and agencies – some of them members of the Lima/Allen County Food Council and some of them helpful participants – gathered and provided information for this assessment. Key among them were: Activate Allen County; Allen County Public Health; Board of Allen County Commissioners; West Ohio Food Bank; Lima/Allen County Regional Planning Commission; OSU Lima; Allen Soil and Water Conservation District; Lima-Allen County Neighborhoods in Partnership; Allen County School Wellness Policy Council; Lima-Allen County Regional Transit Authority; Allen County Council on Aging; Lima-Allen County Chamber of Commerce; Ohio Northern University; Allen Economic Development Group; Health Partners of Western Ohio; Lima City Schools; Citizens National Bank; Suters Farms; and other valuable contributors.
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “LOCAL FOOD?”

Lima and Allen County are known traditionally as a manufacturing center, but the area has an equally rich food and agriculture heritage as a prosperous community that could go a long way toward feeding itself. As our food system evolved into a mostly national one, the area has retained some key components of the old way. Those could be the building blocks of a new, more-localized food system that learns lessons from the former model, adapts them to modern standards of safety and efficiency, and keeps our food dollars circulating in the local economy. Our goal is not keeping start to finish production, processing and distribution in our county alone, but enhancing businesses already in place and developing new ones as they are needed to encourage a more local overall food system. As this assessment mostly focuses on Allen County, this goal is one to keep in mind as we envision a future with more local food opportunities.

It won’t be easy. And it certainly can’t happen overnight, or even from one growing season to the next. But with thoughtful planning -- and commitment from community leaders, local institutions, businesses, farmers, and entrepreneurs -- the region can steadily increase its food processing and distribution capacity. This would create new markets for diversifying farms, good jobs for Lima and surrounding towns, and better access to fresh, healthful foods to all residents – especially those in need. The terms Regional Food System and “Food Hub” is not meant to say that all processing must be done close by, but for us to determine together what that system may look like and who are partners may be at a “regional” level as well as what could be supported on a local/county scale.

The question is how to make it happen. Part of the answer may rest with what is being done not so far away from Allen County as well as what is already taking place locally that we can model and build from.

In Detroit, Michigan the Eastern Market is working to not only offer a public market but develop business opportunities for retailers, wholesalers, distributors, processors and restaurants. Their goal is to make the Eastern Market the center for fresh and nutritious food in Southeast Michigan.
In Toledo, Ohio, many are focused on local food. Most recently, Sustainable Local Foods has been growing produce indoors using a hydroponic growing system. Most of what is grown in Toledo, stays in Toledo and local supermarkets and restaurants are buying these products. This is just one example in the Toledo area.

In Allen County, one example of using the local food system is Kewpee Hamburgers. Farmers in Allen and surrounding counties raise the cattle which in turn Keystone Meats, on Harding Highway east of the Lima, harvests the carcasses and supplies beef to Kewpee. Kewpee then uses a machine developed by Ohio Northern University students to fashion the beef into square burgers and that 120 employees sell to thousands of hungry local residents. When they are available, local tomatoes and onions garnish those burgers.

Also in Allen County, the Downtown Lima Farmers Market was revived last year and saw up to 20 vendors providing local produce, baked goods, honey, jams, etc. to the public one evening each week. These local vendors and producers may be an avenue to pursue and also to expand as we look at SNAP and produce perks as a future possibility.

These are just a few of the players involved in local foods, but of course we fall short of being an entire food system; however these are good places to start conversations. Activate Allen County and various community leaders looked at the food and nutrition initiatives in other communities around the state and nation, and used funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to start the effort here. These community members understand that a strong private sector – farms, the supply chain, and retailers – is a foundation for using local food to improve the lives and health of citizens.

Interest in “local food” has grown in recent decades in tandem with the growth of the organic-food industry. Many individuals and organizations promote both “organic” and “local” food. However, the local-food movement does not focus exclusively on certified organic production. It includes farms with organic practices but not certification. It also includes a broader group of advocates who focus not only on how food is grown, but also on providing healthy food access for all, creating a safer system by knowing the sources of our food, and leaving a smaller carbon footprint by reducing food-distribution distances.

The growth in interest can be seen locally in the increased number of farmers markets and the increased number of farms growing for local consumption. Locally, The Lima News has published articles on such topics as the Hirzel Canning Co. canning plant in Ottawa, which processes tomatoes from 32 counties in Northwest Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.

Nationally, the increased awareness can be seen in the success of bestselling books such as The Omnivore’s Dilemma and Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, and a greater U.S. Department of Agriculture focus on local food production, processing and distribution. National organizations, such as American Farmland Trust, are promoting local food production as a way to make farms more profitable and preserve valuable farmland. The Ohio State University has hosted the establishment of a statewide network of local food councils that represents some 20 councils in all corners of Ohio. OSU Extension is in the process of creating an “Ohio Food Hub Network.”
Despite this growing and widespread interest, the definition of “local food” is difficult to pin down, and many people, businesses and organizations may define it differently. Some may limit it to the immediate jurisdictions, while other “locavores” may define it as food from within a 100-mile radius or within the state. Many grocery chains may define local as anything within 500 miles, or a day’s drive. Many people fail to distinguish among the terms “local,” “natural” and “organic.”

It’s worth noting that the “organic” label on a product does not mean it is locally produced. In practice, many large farms and national brands have reshaped the organic market in a way that is less local than it used to be.

Organic products must have at least 95 percent organic ingredients, excluding water and salt, and organic farms must be certified by a federally approved organization. Products must be free of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or genetically modified organisms, although some synthetic chemicals can be used if they are not harmful. Animals must be fed organic food, allowed access to the outdoors and be free of antibiotics. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also has a “100 Percent Organic” designation. OEFFA is Ohio’s largest organic certifying agency and uses stricter standards than USDA.

The Natural label, as regulated by USDA, is applied only to meat and poultry. When used on other products, the definition of “natural” varies. In meat, it means no chemical preservatives or artificial ingredients -- but does not necessarily mean the animal is antibiotic-free, hormone-free or has had time outdoors. There also is a “Certified Naturally Grown” label with standard similar to but stricter than USDA organic certification. But the standards are privately created and not governed by USDA. Likewise, “naturally grown” does not necessarily mean local.

“Local food” does not have as clear a definition, and has no certification. But that can be an advantage as consumers can become acquainted with farmers and then make their own decisions about quality, local-orientation and farming practices.

In this assessment, we are focused primarily on food that is grown or raised in Allen County and in other parts of the region, and then processed, packaged, and distributed within the region. We realize this boundary is arbitrary, and that the regional economy does not recognize political jurisdictions. In the long run, we want Allen County and its neighbors all to embrace the opportunities of local food.

A local-food system is a cohesive way of producing food locally and making it readily available to all people in the region. The system includes not only producing food, but also aggregating, processing, storing, distributing, selling and consuming it. A local-food system need not be centrally controlled, but needs to include linkages among its many components. A resilient, sustainable local-food system improves the economy of the region as well as the health of its people. We are all part of the local-food system: We all eat.

It is important to stress that the definition of “local food” goes far beyond the seasonal farmers markets that many people identify with local food. Those markets are a vital, but tiny, part of Allen County’s local food network.
In this report, as with other initiatives in Ohio, much of the focus turned to the local food processing and distribution “infrastructure.” If all of the farmers in the region decided to raise food for local consumption and all Allen County consumers committed to buying local, we would have trouble getting the food from farm to family. Our retail and distribution practices are tooled for a national system. With the development of appropriate processing facilities, fresh, locally raised items could be introduced as shelf-stable products that we can eat year round. A multi-faceted infrastructure should include:

- The small and large processing facilities that turn raw milk into ice cream, cheese and the milk on our tables.
- The plants that turn hogs, cattle, sheep and chickens into dinner, or that turn Ohio produce into canned or flash-frozen vegetables that Ohioans can cook in January.
- The auction barns that bring together enough fruits and vegetables from small farms to meet the needs of local grocery chains.
- The trucks and warehouses that carry food from farms and processing plants to the stores where consumers buy them.
- The farmer co-ops, or other arrangements, that may emerge to aggregate a large enough supply of food products to meet the consumer demand.

Food “processing” refers to any step in changing a farm commodity into a food product for consumers. It can range from washing and bagging leafy greens to preparing and packaging a complete frozen dinner, or turning tomatoes and peppers into a canned sauce. It includes pasteurizing and bottling milk and making butter, cheese or ice cream; killing and butchering hogs, cattle, lambs, goats and poultry; flash freezing and packaging fresh produce; canning produce; sorting and bagging fresh fruit and vegetables; preparing and canning salsas and sauces; and more.

Some businesses, such as the Bob Evans plant that started as Kettle Creations, are local companies, but may not be considered purveyors of local food because they have national or multi-state markets and are not necessarily focused on buying Ohio-grown ingredients. National firms such as Heinz and Campbell’s use less Ohio-grown produce and more from California. Such companies are important to the Ohio economy, but are beyond the definition of local food in this assessment.

This report is primarily concerned with locally grown food that is packaged, sold and eaten in Allen County. Why? Because an intentional, well-planned local-food system will:

- Strengthen the local economy.
- Create processing and distribution jobs.
- Keep food dollars re-circulating locally.
- Get fresh, healthful local food into the hands, and mouths, of urban and rural families who lack easy access to good food.
- Preserve productive farmland by making local agriculture economically more viable.
This is not a new idea. Until the 1950s and 1960s, Ohioans routinely ate locally produced food. Many communities across the state had greenhouses and truck farms that produced the tomatoes, peppers and other fruits and vegetables that people ate. Even small communities had their own local dairy and meat-processing plants.

Lima and Allen County once were home to meat processors such as Lima Packing Co. and King & Day Pork, and canneries such as Faurot for corn and tomato canning in the Pandora area. While the county now has five dairy farms, it once was home to numerous dairy processors: Eldora, Farmers Equity, R.L. Graham, Kolter Buckeye; Lima Creamery & Cold Storage, White Mountain, Meadow Gold. Marketplaces such as Central Market on S. Main Street in Lima served retail and wholesale customers and spawned fruit vendors and butcher shops.

The growing number of farmers markets in Lima, Bluffton, and other communities in Allen and surrounding counties is a good trend, but falls short of the jobs and impact of the past food businesses. The more-localized marketing of food disappeared over the decades, the victim of energy costs in greenhouses, and consolidation and economies of scale in the processing industry. Meanwhile, consumers have grown accustomed to year-round access to all types of produce flown in from as far away as Chile or trucked from Mexico, Florida or California.

As a counter movement to this global food system, the organic movement began growing over the last two decades beyond what was perceived as blemished goods grown in low-yield fields. Production and quality improved, and a wider audience began to question the system of mass-market food. The slow but steady growth in organic foods has expanded to a more-mainstream local-foods movement – more mainstream in terms of people and interest, but not mainstream in market share.

**THE BENEFITS OF LOCAL FOOD**

The benefits of a local-food system are many, but the West Central Ohio effort is focused primarily on three: strengthening the local economy; ensuring that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels; and preserving farmland by making agriculture more viable to area farmers. But there are plenty of other benefits. Local food:

- Can include greater varieties of flavorful produce to be grown, rather than a few varieties that are bred more for stability for shipping across the country.
- Can save on energy because it is produced, processed and distributed in a given region, rather than shipped across the country.
- Is more comforting to consumers because they know where it comes from and because it offers more connections with others in the community.
- Can be part of a resilient system that provides a reliable supply of food regardless of economic conditions or weather in other parts of the country.
Agriculture is one of Ohio’s largest industries, and rebuilding our local and regional food systems could further increase the economic impact of farming, while providing a host of other benefits.

The precise economic impact of local food is hard to calculate for many reasons. Government agencies do not track how much of Ohioans’ food is locally produced, or the value of that food. Many agricultural products that are produced in Ohio are processed elsewhere, and there’s no way to know how much of that is returned to Ohio for retail sale. There are many variables in the production of different types of food, so a farmer’s net income may or may not increase if he switches from growing, say, commodity grains to local produce — although farming methods and management practices would see significant change. But the greatest local economic impact can come from food that is produced, processed and distributed in a local or regional system.

Ohioans spend over $50 billion per year on food. This is based on a USDA national estimate of $4,382 per person for home and restaurant consumption, multiplied by Ohio’s 11.54 million people. Neither the Ohio Department of Agriculture nor Ohio State University tracks what percentage of food Ohioans eat comes from Ohio, though both are now trying to gather such data. Using the same USDA spending estimate, the 105,000 people estimated in Allen County in 2012 spent $460 million per year on food. Farmers in the county, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, produced nearly $144 million in raw products in 2012, but about 75 percent of that was corn, soybeans and other grains not directly consumed by people.

Census data show that Allen County farmers in 2012 produced $55.3 million in products that are more-directly consumed by humans – fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs and milk. The farm-gate value of that production is about 12 percent of the total amount that people in Allen County spend annually on food – a percentage higher than that of many Ohio counties, largely because nearly half of those receipts, $26.7 million, were revenue from hogs and pigs produced at a greater quantity than local consumers could eat.

On one hand, that means Allen county farmers are profiting from pork eaten elsewhere. On the other hand, the consumer value added to most of those loins, chops, ham, and bacon is pocketed by butchers in other states because Ohio lacks meat processing facilities to slaughter what’s produced in the state. According to the Ohio Department of Agriculture, 90 percent of the cattle raised in Ohio are slaughtered elsewhere. Ohio raises livestock, sells it elsewhere, and buys the meat back at higher prices. Much of the profits remain in other states.

It is nearly impossible to precisely quantify the amount of food in Ohio or Allen County that is produced, processed and distributed here because of the way commodities are moved around for processing and redistribution. But even the more conservative and optimistic estimates in studies put the high end at about 10 percent. A 2010 assessment in Central Ohio put the figure at 4.5 percent. The vast majority of our local spending on food leaves the region.
If Northwest Ohio and Allen County increased its capacity to process food grown by farmers in the region, and local-food purchases in the county doubled from, say, the 4.5 percent estimate of Central Ohio, it could add almost $25 million in local economic activity. That does not include the local multiplier effect – the recirculation of those dollars on other goods and services in the local economy – or the job creation from food processing and distribution jobs or the tax dollars added to local coffers.

Total consumer spending on food would not necessarily change in the region, but the dollars that remain in Allen County would increase significantly. In producing food for local markets, local farmers’ gross receipts could increase (diversified vegetable production, according to OSU research, can yield up to $100,000 per acre in sales) but new equipment and more-intensive farm management would have an impact on their net income. Nonetheless, that would move toward the goal of keeping more of the consumer spending in the hands of Ohio farmers and processors. The processing is the key because that’s where many new jobs could be created.

Reliable food-related economic data and multiplier estimates are scarce in the state. But studies indicate that a new meat processor, or expansion of existing ones, not only would create good jobs, but would lead to other economic activity. An Ohio State University study of Knox County in 2009 projected that a meat processing plant of modest size – 20 employees – would have a $26 million impact on the county with $2.2 million in employee earnings, $401,000 in sales taxes, and could lead to the creation of 92 jobs.

Statewide, according to research by the Social Responsibility Initiative at the Ohio State University, Ohio produces less than 1 percent of the 4.65 billion pounds of vegetables and 3.08 billion pounds of fruit that Ohioans eat annually. The study estimated that Ohio farmers could meet 26 percent of the state’s vegetable needs and 5 percent of its fruit needs.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture notes that Ohio is extraordinarily diverse in the types of agriculture it can support: 200 different crops are grown in Ohio, and 50 percent of the agricultural land base is designated prime soils by the USDA. Ohio has the potential to supply a diverse diet locally.

It also is important to note that focusing on food is a good economic development strategy. Food spending is non-discretionary. People will continue to eat regardless of changing economic conditions. Investing in a relatively recession-proof industry can help buffer local and regional economies in difficult times – and do so with jobs that can’t be outsourced.

While some benefits of local food are not easily quantified, there are many qualitative benefits. Local food keeps jobs in the region and, done right, is good for the environment by keeping land in agriculture and by reducing the distance food travels from farm to fork. It can make our food supply more secure and less vulnerable to rising fuel costs, transportation strikes, and droughts in other major farm states and other possible disruptions in the national supply chain. A resilient local-food system can offer economic advantages and as well as social and ecological benefits.
HEALTH BENEFITS
Annually, the Trust for America’s Health ranks the nation’s obesity rates state-by-state. In 2008, Ohio ranked 10th worst in the nation, with an obesity rate of 28.6%; while, the 2014 study ranked Ohio 16th with an obesity rate of 30.4%. Even though the state-by-state ranking improved, the adult obesity rate actually increased. There was some good news, the obesity rate for young people aged 10 to 17 was 33.3% in 2008; while in 2014 the study reported a 17.4% obesity rate among that group. Notwithstanding, based on current overweight and obesity trends, one-third of children today will develop diabetes over their lifetime and the odds increase to one in two for African-American or Hispanic children. Allen County Health Commissioner Kathy Luhn likes to point out that, while “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” it’s easier in Allen County to buy a beer than an apple.

Allen ranked 35th overall in health outcomes among Ohio’s 88 counties, but 74th in health factors, which include such things as tobacco use, alcohol use, obesity, inactivity, access to care, socio-economic status, and environmental quality. In the maps below, you can see all Ohio counties and their rank range. The county is above state averages in percentage of adults who smoke (23) and percentage of adults who are obese (37). Allen County has the state’s second-highest obesity rate. In attrition, 10.9 percent of residents have diabetes. It is slightly above the state average in children in poverty and well above the state average in single-parent households and presence of violent crime.

Overweight children are at greater risk of suffering serious health problems as children and of growing up to be overweight or obese adults. For those young and in poor economic conditions, the data do not look much better. Left untreated, excess weight and obesity have a profound impact on health and are contributing factors to a number of chronic diseases, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.
A group of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that what's driving the obesity epidemic is "our national-scale system of food production and distribution, which surrounds children – especially lower-income children – with high-calorie products." According to Dr. Tenley Albright, director of MIT’s Collaborative Initiatives program, which uses systems analysis to study broad social issues, 90 percent of the food eaten in our country is processed, meaning it has been mixed with ingredients, often acting as preservatives that can make food fattening.

Increased access to fresh, healthful regional food could begin to reverse some of these trends. Moving to a more regional food system could lower the price and caloric content of food by lowering distances food must travel from the farm to the dinner table – which in turn could make healthful food more readily available in communities referred to as “food deserts.”

A food desert is a district with little or no access to foods needed to maintain a healthy diet, but often served by plenty of fast food restaurants. Physical access to food stores can be difficult if the shops are distant, the shopper is elderly or infirm, or if public transport links are poor and the consumer has no car. Financial resources can further complicate the situation for people who lack the money to buy healthful foods (generally more expensive, calorie for calorie, than less-healthy, sugary, and fatty “junk foods”), or for people who can't afford the bus fare to remote shops selling fresh foods and instead uses local fast food outlets. Finally, a lack of cooking knowledge or the idea that eating a healthy diet isn’t important can be another barrier to eating healthy foods. In 2013, within the City of Lima 21,832 persons (53%) resided in a food desert. The map on the next pages details the locations of these food deserts.

Lima is ahead of many cities its size in seeking solutions. Activate Allen County has teamed with the West Ohio Food Bank to establish the Mobile Produce Market in a repurposed bus. The mobile market is not a permanent solution to local food and nutrition challenges, but fills an important need as plans emerge for a local food system. Activate Allen County also teamed with The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based organization, to study food-access problems in the county and develop a pilot project and plan to make fresh, healthful food more readily available to underserved areas in corner stores.

These efforts were praised by the administrator of the USDA Food & Nutrition Service in a visit to Lima in April 2014. Each of these examples can make local food more available and affordable for impoverished urban neighborhoods – or rural areas – that lack grocery stores, decrease food miles and carbon footprint as well as create market opportunities for local farmers.
ALLEN COUNTY FOOD DESERTS 2014
FARMLAND PRESERVATION

Many people view farm fields as “vacant” land, ripe for development. This view is shortsighted and misguided. In reality, Ohio farmland already is developed. When the state was settled in the early 1800s, it was mostly woodland or prairie, then was cleared for economic development: agriculture.

Now, 200 years later, agriculture still should be viewed as economic development. In 2012, products raised on farms in Allen County sold for $144 million. That figure is just market value of raw products paid to farmers, and does not include processing or other added value. Nor does it include the spending of farmers, who use their receipts to buy tractors, harvesters, seeds, fertilizers or other goods sold by local businesses.

Building a regional food system would allow those figures to rise. Farmers could diversify and raise produce for local consumption on some on their land, or raise livestock for local markets, and sell either of those more profitably than corn or soybeans. In a system that includes local processing of those products, that added value stays in the local economy and creates jobs – jobs that will stay put.

Allen County lost 5,000 acres of farmland between the 2002 and the 2012 Census of Agriculture – from 188,000 to 183,000 acres in production. It’s is not certain how much of that was lost to development and how much was taken out of production for other reasons.

Agriculture also adds to the local tax base – even with the Current Agricultural Use Valuation (CAUV) factored in. CAUV is sometimes derided as a property-tax break for farmers. But it actually ensures that farmland is taxed on the basis of its use, rather than the use a developer might want to put it to. In Allen County, about 4,500 parcels totaling 195,000 acres – or 43 percent of all acreage -- is enrolled in CAUV. The value of the CAUV land is estimated at $656 million, plus another $168 million in land improvements.

Even with the CAUV advantage, farmland in Ohio typically generates more in taxes than it receives in services. The American Farmland Trust has conducted Cost of Community Services Studies in many communities across the country in the last 15 years, including studies in four Ohio locations. One of those, in Knox County, found that residential development in the county required $1.05 in services for every dollar it generated in taxes. Commercial and industrial land needed 38 cents in services for every $1 in taxes, and agricultural land received just 29 cents in services for every $1 in taxes – despite the CAUV break. In other studies, the numbers may vary, but the trend is the same: Residential areas, on average, do not pay their own way. Farmland (along with commercial and industrial land) help pay for the public infrastructure services to urban and suburban residential areas. In effect, farmland subsidizes the services received by residents of new subdivisions.
THE CURRENT SITUATION – PRODUCERS

Allen County agriculture is dominated by corn and soybean production, which accounted for almost 75 percent of the county’s $144 million market value of farm products and 78 percent of farm acreage in 2012. The diversity in local farming appears to be declining.

The number of farms producing vegetables, melons, potatoes and sweet potatoes in Allen County declined from 10 to six between the 2007 and 2012 Censuses of Agriculture. One of those six farms harvested for processing, and all six harvested for fresh markets. Among all the county’s 904 farms, just seven marketed directly to retail markets, six marketed through community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and six had on-farm packing facilities.

The county’s total number of farms engaged in orchards, fruits and nuts was likewise modest, with just 15 acres in orchards, spread among nine farms. Another six farms produced berries. Four farms are certified as organic, and their total sales are nearly $135,000. Nine farms, totaling 251 bee colonies, had honey production; two produced maple syrup. No aquaculture practice was reported in Allen County in 2012.

The number of Allen County dairy farms has dwindled to just five. These farms have had $901,000 in total sales, ranking 72 in the state. Nearby, Mercer County who is Ohio’s No. 2 dairy producer, had $60.8 million in sales in 2012. There are 29 farms in Allen County producing beef cattle, with two feedlots.

Hogs are the dominant livestock, with 32 farms generating $26.7 million in revenue – making pork the county’s third leading agricultural commodity. The hog and pig inventory in 2012 was over 80,000.

A 1983 study (Toward a Sustainable Ohio in Food, Farmers and Land, part of the Cornucopia Project of Rodale Press) described Ohio as a “food colony” that produced commodities that were shipped elsewhere for processing then re-purchased by Ohio consumers at higher prices. In subsequent years, the consolidation of Ohio farms and the commodification of Ohio agriculture continued. Ohio continued to lose large and small meat processing facilities. Acreage that once produced fruits and vegetables for Ohioans, and grazing land for hogs, cattle and dairy cows, increasingly made way for commodities such as corn, soybeans and, to a lesser extent, wheat.

As a result, much of the produce consumed in Ohio comes from California’s Central Valley and Florida, our beef comes from western feedlots and our pork comes from large-scale operations in Ohio and other states.

In recent years, Ohio has seen a slow and steady increase in small, often diversified and often organic, farms that produce food for a growing local market. Some of these farms are on the fringes of large urban areas, and more recently in urban neighborhoods. Community gardens, established by neighbors or local organizations, are becoming more common, with food produced for personal consumption, for public sale or donated to food pantries.
The total number of farms declined from 946 to 904 over the 5 year leading up to the 2012 Census. In general, farms are getting bigger in Allen County. The number of farms with sales below $10,000 (often so-called hobby farms) dropped from 434 in 2007 to 346 in 2012. Likewise, those in the $10,000 to $50,000 range fell from 223 to 185. But the number of farms with sales of $50,000 to $500,000 increased from 246 to 301 – those with sales over $500,000 jumped from 43 to 72. This is somewhat at odds with state trends, in which the number of small and large farms is increasing, while those in the $50,000 to $250,000 sales range are decreasing.

Establishing a network of regional food systems in Ohio could play a pivotal role in influencing the number of farms. A regional food network might also help the vulnerable mid-sized farms: By diversifying to grow for local markets, especially larger-scale sales to institutions, they may have a better chance of survival.

New movements in agriculture also present opportunities. The 2007 Census data do not include urban agriculture, but farms in cities are on the rise in Ohio and across the country. There also is an opportunity for new types of farming and farm products – aquaculture, for example. The Ohio Aquaculture Association is a resource for people who are interested.

THE CURRENT SITUATION – PROCESSORS/DISTRIBUTORS

In 1996, the extended Hartzler family in Wayne County opened a small dairy processing plant – Ohio’s first such plant after decades of losses of family dairies. It came at a time when the state was focused on large plants, and on increasing the size of Ohio livestock farms in order to attract large meat processors, and dairy processors, such as the large Dannon yogurt plant in Auglaize County. The Hartzler plant was an anomaly, but also the beginning of a trend. Snowville Creamery in Southeast Ohio started up more recently, as have many cheese-makers. But what’s more important in the state – and especially in Allen County, where dairy is not a major industry -- is meat processing. Only a few small state-inspected slaughter facilities exist in counties around Allen, along with a half dozen custom-exempt plants that allow processing only for personal use or direct sale.

While Ohio has lost many of its small plants over the years, it still has more than most states, and Ohio’s state inspection program is respected across the country. Most of these small plants are inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, but some are USDA-inspected and can sell their products across state lines. In Columbus, the Central Ohio Regional Food Council is reaching out to processors, producers and marketing channels to develop models that strengthen existing small slaughter facilities, with a focus on collaboration to increase cold-storage capacity to allow steady activity on the processing floor. Research indicates that if the slaughtering bottleneck is eased, farmers may produce more beef and pork for local consumption.

The Central Ohio group includes Marion County, where large pork producers in the area are collaborating on a plan to develop a processing plant. The defunct state council, as well as the active Central Ohio group, looked into the need for processing plants for other foods. These
could include canneries, flash-freezing facilities, high-pressure pasteurizing (a process that can preserve some foods in a way that preserve more nutrients than heat pasteurization), and other processes.

Facilities such as the Bob Evans mashed-potato plant, which started as Kettle Creations in 2009, clearly demonstrate the economic and job-creation potential of the food industry. In less than five years, the plant grew to over 100 workers, a figure that could almost double by 2015. The fact that it was successful as a “co-packer” even before the purchase by Bob Evans suggests there may still be a market for a facility that processes and packages food for private labels.

If such a facility can, at least in part, serve local food companies, it could create a new market for local farmers. Producers want – among other things – marketing simplicity. If grain farmers are going to diversify into fruit and vegetable production, they don’t want to have to sell small amounts of product to many different markets. A local facility that can use products in large quantity creates an opportunity for farmers.

The Center for Innovative Food Technology (CIFT), based in Toledo, Ohio is opening a facility that will freeze fresh produce for packaging. CIFT and the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in Athens, Ohio already have incubator kitchens.

Freezing and canning are important for several reasons. First, they make Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables available to consumers year-round. Second, they are an additional market for growers of Ohio produce, which could spur increased local-food production. Third, they provide a market for produce that is unsold at farmers markets and other venues. Ohio farmers report that, at times, some of what they grow is plowed under for lack of a market.

Community gardens and urban agriculture are not going to feed the world, or even the region. But these ventures are highly visible to large segments of the population and can draw attention to the issues of food and nutrition. They are a public service and a valuable supplement to the broader food supply. Detailed data do not exist, estimates show 14 community gardens and urban farms in Lima and Allen County – 7 Lima-Allen County Neighborhoods in Partnership (LACNIP) gardens, 1 4-H common garden, and 5 urban farms in Lima and 1 at Elida High School.
The LACNIP Toolshed makes gardening tools and equipment, including a rototiller, available for rent or loan. Technical assistance is available from garden clubs, LACNIP community garden meetings in the spring and fall, and an upcoming 50-hour class offered by Master Gardeners of Allen County that is being planned.

**FOOD AND TRANSPORTATION**

The oft-repeated conventional wisdom is that the ingredients of a typical meal travel 2,000 miles from the farm to your plate, and that tomatoes from California are not sustainable because of the carbon footprint they leave while being trucked to the Midwest. The reality is that the business and logistics experts are very cost-conscious and have developed highly efficient ways to truck very large loads at great distances.

A second reality is that local food can have a large carbon footprint. If 20 farmers bring 20 small loads in 20 small trucks from different directions to one location, they don’t have a fuel-efficient distribution system.

But a third reality is that those small loads of local tomatoes will be fresher, juicer, tastier and more nutritious than the gas-ripened green tomatoes from across the country.

The challenge is to learn the logistics lessons of the national retailers and distributors and apply them to local and regional systems to keep food affordable and keep food dollars in the Ohio economy.

A 2001 study done in Iowa showed that the average distance for food arriving at a Chicago terminal warehouse by truck was 1,518 miles. It is apparently the source of the 2,000-mile-meal myth. A 2008 study done by the Michigan Department of Agriculture found that 90 percent of the U.S. food supply is transported by truck, and that truck traffic was expected to double by 2020. Travel distances are increasing – the average distance has increased by about 25 percent since 1980.

There are two main components to food transportation: farm to market, and wholesaler to retailer. Currently, Allen County has gaps in both. A well-planned local-food infrastructure would ensure market access to even small farms. At the other end, it would ensure affordable access to fresh local food even to people in underserved neighborhoods.

The Food Trust’s 2013 analysis of Allen County food access and neighborhood stores addressed both of these components. On the farm-to-market side, it noted (1) that most farmland is used for commodity grains rather than fruits, vegetables, meat and poultry; (2) that the area lacks the season extending high tunnels and greenhouses and the processing capacity to make local food available year-round; (3) that there are no “food hubs” for the efficient aggregation, cleaning, sorting, and packing to prepare local food for wholesale distribution.
In addition, the report noted that many convenience stores and neighborhood corner stores are small enough that conventional food distributors won’t serve them. Those distributors prefer to deliver by the pallet, rather than by the box. As Cleveland worked on a corner-store initiative, store owners in recent years found it cheaper to buy food at supermarkets and sell it in their shops than to pick it up wholesale themselves.

In Central Ohio, food planners are trying to develop a distribution network that includes a subsidiary focused on small deliveries to smaller markets.

While distances from farm to market are often great, distances from market to home have significance as well. In recent years the term “food desert” has come into vogue, and refers to areas, typically in the central city, where large supermarkets have either pulled out or never located in the first place. Compounding this problem is the fact that low income households are 6 to 7 times more likely than other U.S. households to not own cars.

There also are rural food deserts, in which people sometimes must drive for miles and miles between fields of corn and soybeans in order to buy meat or vegetables produced in another state. Allen County’s rural residents also suffer from issues of access to fresh, healthy food.

**THE CURRENT SITUATION – CONSUMERS**

Allen County Public Health and Activate Allen County are just two of the local entities trying to improve access to fresh and nutritious food and make residents aware of the importance of healthy food preparation and eating. The growth of farmers markets in the region is testimony to early success of those messages. But there is still a long way to go.
As encouraging and well-intentioned as these programs are, they address a small portion of the food market during the parts of the year when local food is most readily available. A greater challenge is getting locally grown and processed foods into conventional stores throughout the year.

Wal-Mart stores across the country have made efforts in recent years to put local food on their shelves and in their cases. But, like other national or large regional grocers, they have in-house national distribution systems that leave less flexibility for local decisions by stores in individual communities. Regional chains, such as Chief Markets, have greater flexibility and often provide more local products. Still, they typically need large and consistent quantities that are not currently grown or aggregated in the Lima area.

Independent corner stores typically are focused on convenience, packaged foods, soft drinks, beer and tobacco. Often, they lack the space to add fruits, vegetables and other local options. Or, as the Food Trust report noted, even if they have enough space, they may lack the proper refrigeration, shelving or baskets. Meanwhile, chain-owned or franchised gas stations and convenience stores often have their own distribution networks that are not conducive to local sourcing options.

Nonetheless, interest in local food is strong. Research by the Social Responsibility Initiative at The Ohio State University finds that Ohio consumers consistently support local food and are willing to pay more for it. Its survey found that:

- 98 percent of Ohioans said it is “very important” (64 percent) or “somewhat important” (34 percent) for state and local governments to develop food systems throughout Ohio.
- Over 75 percent of Ohioans say they bought food directly from a farmer; the median amount spent on such direct sales in 2007 was $68 per household.
- 23 percent of Ohioans reported “frequently” purchasing local food in 2008, and median household spending among this group was $200.

The urban and rural food deserts have one other thing in common: the nearest food retailers tend to be served by convenience stores that have plenty of soft drinks, potato chips and snack cakes, but not much in the way of healthful, wholesome food.
Many people not only lack access to fresh fruit, vegetables and meat, but also suffer health problems related to improper diet. Health departments and local non-profits at the state and local levels try to address this in a variety of ways: public education, farmers markets and promotion of community gardens and urban farms. But even when fresh produce is available, advocates have found that the need to educate people who are accustomed to fast food or packaged food about how to prepare fresh, nutritious foods is equally important. Another challenge is to demonstrate how limited resources can be used to buy local food and maintain a healthy diet.

There are also different trends in consumer demand. The mass market that has emerged with large-scale processors over the last 50 years has been built on consistency. There are fewer breeds of commercial livestock and poultry, and they are bred and raised to be a consistent size so consumers can get the same thing every week. But another trend, driven by local-food advocates, restaurants and celebrity chefs, has made many people hungry for diversity, for different breeds of livestock and more eclectic species of fruits and vegetables grown in a more sustainable manner.

This diversity may come at a cost, because specialized products cannot be produced as cheaply as those grown through economies of scale. However, it allows local food advocates to point to the “externalities” of the current food system that are not accounted for in the shelf price of goods but are paid by taxpayers nonetheless. An example would be the pollution generated by transporting food that is not paid for by the trucking company in the price of the fuel nor by the consumer in the purchase price of the item.

A potential model for a local food supply chain is Kewpee Hamburgers, which uses locally produced beef at its three Lima locations and local tomatoes and other toppings when they are available. In many parts of Ohio, and around the country, the new local-food movement has been driven by high-end restaurants and prominent chefs. Lima may be unique in that it also has restaurants with basic and affordable food from local sources. Managers of the Kewpee chain could be valuable additions to a local food council.

In Central Ohio, hospitals in Newark and Lancaster have been driving forces in local food councils and are promoting local, healthful food throughout the communities, not just on hospital trays. Kenyon College, in Knox County, made a commitment to local food in 2002, and now gets 35 percent of the food that students eat from surrounding communities. Denison University is heading in the same direction, as is the Granville school district.

Consumers are hungry for diversity in products as well as growing of produce in a more sustainable manner.
In Allen County, school districts have shown interest in using local food, and all have District Wellness Plans – but have different levels of emphasis and activity. Nutrition education is incorporated into the curriculum through such programs as the 3rd Grade Veggie U and a ½-credit high school course called “Healthy Living.” In addition, most have restricted the availability of unhealthy snacks in schools.

A critical local resource is the West Ohio Food Bank. The growing institution has a new, larger warehouse with room to grow, plus a fleet of trucks and logistics expertise. On the consumer side, it does more than simply make purchases, accept donations, and deliver fresh food to local food pantries throughout the region. It also works with pantries to engage consumers and make sure they get food they can use. Nearly three-fourths of the pantries served by the Food Bank are “choice” pantries where users can shop – they can pick and choose from available goods, rather than the old model of a pre-packed bag or carton. The Food Bank also is a driving force literally, in Activate Allen County’s Mobile Produce Market – driving the repurposed bus to senior centers and low-income locations. The photo on the right shows the inside of the Allen County Mobile Produce Bus.

There is a clear need for these services. Reports show that 15.5 percent of Allen County residents – and 8.8 percent of children in the county – have had periods in recent years of “food insecurity” – which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as lacking steady access to food to the point of being forced to forego some meals. Over 40 percent of children in the county are eligible for the free-lunch program in the schools, and 15.4 percent of all county residents are eligible for SNAP benefits.

A lot of these challenges are concentrated in the core of the city. In Lima, nearly half of all households (46.3 percent) have annual incomes below $25,000; the countywide figure in 30 percent.

RESOURCES

The most important agricultural resource is gradually declining. In the last 10 years for which data are available, the number of Allen County acres in agricultural production has declined by 5,000 – but the five counties bordering Allen have lost a combined 97,000 acres, a figure that includes a 1,500-acre gain in Hardin County farmland.

The loss of farmland acres also requires some explanation. The 102,000 “lost” acres between 2001 and 2012 were not necessarily paved over or developed. The U.S. Census of Agriculture measures acres in agriculture every five years. Some of those acres may be fallow, but remain available for agriculture. Most of the total, however, is believed to have been developed. What’s worse is that a large percentage of the farmland in the region is classified by the USDA as "prime farmland" is now threatened by suburban subdivisions and related commercial strips.
as “prime farmland” – the richest and most productive land for producing food, but is now threatened by suburban subdivisions and related commercial strips.

The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) tracks land that is, in fact, converted from agricultural to developed uses. Between 1992 and 1997, Ohio lost 156,000 acres of prime farmland to development, and was second only to Texas in the number of prime acres that were converted. In the same time period, Ohio was 44th in the nation in rate of population growth.

The following state and federal programs help farmers and rural landowners keep their land in agriculture and help them conserve natural resources on their land:

State farmland-preservation resources:
- Agricultural Easement Purchase Program
- Agricultural Security Areas
- Agricultural Districts
- Current Agricultural Use Valuation
- Land Trusts and agricultural easements

Federal farmland-preservation and conservation resources:
- Farmland Protection Program
- Conservation Reserve Program
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
- Conservation Security Program
- Wetlands Reserve Program
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
- Forest Legacy Program
- Grassland Reserve Program

While it’s important to keep Ohio farmers on the land, it’s equally important to prepare the next generation of farmers. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has a new website to support beginning farmers, called beginfarmingohio.org.

Ohio not only has some of the richest soils in the country, it also has plentiful water. It is situated between the Great Lakes and a great river, the Ohio, and has a mild, temperate climate with ample rainfall in most years. Unlike California, where the great Central Valley depends on irrigation to produce so much of the nation’s fruit and vegetables, Ohio has plentiful water resources that are naturally available. The importance of our land and water resources is not always recognized.

Capital is an essential resource in building a regional food system. Farmers need financing for land, equipment, livestock, seeds and fertilizers. Processors and distributors need financing to build or expand their operations, and to buy equipment.

Ohio has the capital for these initiatives. It has many private lenders; Farm Credit Services of Mid-America, a federally created lender of last-resort for agriculture; USDA loans and programs; state programs (such as Linked Deposit in the Treasurer’s Office); and not-for-profit programs, such as Economic and Community Development Institute in Central Ohio. But these institutions are not always aware of or focused on local-food initiatives.
BARRIERS/CHALLENGES

There are many barriers to establishing a regional food system, but none was created with the deliberate intention of undermining local production of food, and none is insurmountable. We hope that by identifying barriers, and then making recommendations on ways to overcome them, the region can join in a coordinated effort. The barriers fall under the general categories of Infrastructure, Land, Farmers, Markets and Public Awareness.

Infrastructure

Probably the biggest barrier to developing a regional food system in Lima, Allen County, and West Central Ohio is the lack of processing and distribution. Small meat processors in and around Allen County – such as Ebel's in Grover Hill, Rodabaugh Brothers Pandora, and Mt. Victory meats in Hardin County – are an asset, but lack the capacity to serve the entire region.

Kettle Creations/Bob Evans shows the viability of food processing as a business, but is not focused on products that are produced locally or sold locally. A new facility, or new food companies that use co-packing services at an existing facility, could provide a market for food that local farmers could grow.

The once-easy availability of local food vanished as local groceries gave way to regional and national chains – which grew to rely on their own suppliers and to do their own food processing. In the same period, agricultural policies and practices grew to favor specialized and larger-scale farms that produced commodities for mass-processing elsewhere.

Fortunately, Ohio has retained enough of its food infrastructure to have a foundation for growth. These are some of the infrastructure-related challenges to building a local-food system:

- Lack of coordinated institutional buying.
- Lack of co-ops, brokers, other aggregators.
- Declining number of local distributors due to vertical integration of retail chains.
- Lack of capacity in existing meat processors, and lack of sufficient poultry processing.
- Lack of flash-freezing facility (other than the small Northern Ohio Community Kitchen plant in Bowling Green).
- Emerging federal food-safety regulations, leafy-green marketing agreements and milk marketing agreements that pose a threat to local food systems.
- Lack of aggregation points and kitchens for urban community gardens.
- Difficulties in finding capital to expand or create infrastructure businesses.
- Unmet needs for training a workforce for food-infrastructure jobs and devising plans to ensure the jobs are filled by current residents.
It will not be easy to build a local-food infrastructure. Existing distributors tend to be either part of vertically integrated corporations, as in the case of grocery chains, or independent businesses that are not inclined to build a network with competitors. Establishing aggregation or distribution centers could be expensive, at a time when the economy is slow and lenders are not eager to invest in new ventures. Farmers are independent-minded and show no eagerness to form cooperatives to jointly distribute their products.

A Columbus produce distributor insists that Ohio needs regional aggregation centers (often called “food hubs”) where farmers could take their produce and other goods to be chilled, sorted and packed for distribution. These could be private businesses, farmer co-ops or not-for-profit ventures, such as food banks. The Western Ohio Food Bank, for example, has a new distribution center designed beyond its needs, and has an interest in local-food systems.

One possible way to “jump start” the local-food infrastructure is through institutional buying. In Central Ohio some institutions already are committed to buying local when possible. St. Rita’s Medical Center, Lima Memorial Health System, OSU Lima, Rhodes State College, Bluffton University, and Ohio Northern University are a few of the region’s institutions that could spur investment in food processing and distribution if they committed to buying their food from local sources.

One challenge facing these institutional buyers is that they may be expected to pay local producers and distributors upon receipt of their products. This may require more flexible practices by institutions that usually deal with large companies and deal with large invoices over time.

As significant as these measures are, they are only a beginning. But a sustained effort by colleges and school districts throughout the region to buy local food would send ripples through the farming community and in business circles. Businesses and lenders would see a growing market, and they would be more inclined to invest in distribution efforts and in the expansion of processing facilities. Farmers, in turn, would be more likely to diversify their operations and grow produce and livestock for these local markets.

But even with clear markets for local food, those who are building the infrastructure need financing to build their businesses and a trained workforce to keep them going. Capital is a particular challenge in an economic climate that has lenders skittish about loans to new ventures. The workforce challenge includes not just finding workers who are prepared for the jobs, but a strategy to make the jobs available to current residents and avoid a race to the bottom that leads to low-wage jobs.

**Land**

While Ohio has some of the best farmland in the country – 11.6 million of the state’s 26.2 million total acres are classified as “prime” farmland by the National Resources Inventory – the state has no broad, large-scale policy to protect that land.
The barriers to preserving rich farmland include the following:

- Lack of innovative conservation and development (land-use) policies.
- Limitations of the Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP), which had a modest amount of dollars to spread across the entire state.
- Limitations of federal farmland-preservation programs, which are complex, with red tape.
- Lack of other tools, such as transfer of development rights by counties or townships, or across jurisdictions.

The Agricultural Easement Purchase Program is the state’s highest-profile effort and it has permanently saved 136 farms and over 30,000 acres since 2002, at a cost of $25 million from the Clean Ohio Bond Fund. The Ohio Department of Agriculture also oversees the Agricultural Security Area program, in which landowners and local governments agree to temporarily halt development for 10-year periods.

Still, farmland is often considered “undeveloped” land awaiting “higher” uses by officials of counties and townships across the state. Many counties in Ohio have no rural zoning, and many that do have zoning have weak regulations that do little to protect valuable farmland. Nor does the state encourage local communities to strengthen those policies. While the state calls on counties and townships to have a “comprehensive plan,” state code does not define such a plan. In the absence of a definition, some case law has suggested that a color-coded zoning map can serve as a comprehensive plan.

As a result, there is a patchwork of local policies that may vary wildly from county to county. Despite the lack of a clear state policy, changes are beginning to emerge with state resources supporting the balanced-growth initiative that originated with the Ohio Lake Erie Commission and now is expanding through the Ohio Water Resources Council. Some areas of Ohio have embraced “balanced growth” planning efforts that incorporate preservation of agricultural land as a driving force. Allen County townships have been slow to adopt regulations protecting farmland.

In addition to land preserved through government purchase of easements, hundreds of Ohio farmers have donated easements to permanently protect their land from development. Such donations may be made to local governments or state agencies, but are typically made to private, non-profit land trusts. Donors receive federal income-tax breaks for the donations. The West Central Ohio Land Conservancy is a local land trust interested in preserving local farmland and has recently undertaken efforts to support local foods policies. This is significant because a land trust exists to enforce the easement over the long haul.

**Farmers**

Allen County has just over 900 farmers, but only a few produce food commercially for local consumption. And just 43 percent of the principle operators of those farms considered farming their primary occupation. What’s more, creating a regional food system is not as simple as getting more people into agriculture or getting more farmers to raise fruits, vegetables and local...
meat and poultry. Existing farmers, and others getting into local markets, will need locally oriented distribution networks and may have to make changes in their operations in order to develop and maintain access to the system.

Here are some of the challenges facing local-market farmers and others who consider growing for local consumption:

- Producers often do not have the quantity or consistent quality that retailers demand, or labeling that traces food sources; they will need training and guidance to meet those demands.
- Cooperative businesses are one way for small farmers to get a large enough supply to satisfy distributors and retailers, but independent-minded farmers are reluctant to enter such ventures.
- Some farms will need to extend the growing season through such methods as high tunnels/hoop houses in order to make fresh local produce available longer.
- Farmers who diversify into local-food production may have new equipment needs, and will have to find financing.
- Newcomers to agriculture will need knowledge to get started and training to be ready for marketing.
- Advocates of local food systems will need to think like farmers – make their pitch to raise produce when corn prices are low, for example; make sure there are viable marketing options for farmers; etc.
- The state needs a program to link prospective new farmers with those who are retiring and don’t have heirs interested in the farm.
- Community colleges, vocational schools, and high school agriculture programs should see the potential for local food-related programs in production, meat cutting, business management, etc.
- Growing and processing food for local consumption will create jobs, but there are challenges in finding and training workers.

One of the biggest concerns of distributors and retailers that seek to buy and sell local food is getting consistent quality and sufficient quantity in order to cheaply and efficiently market those goods. One Columbus-area produce distributor, for example, said he could not buy a local farmer’s asparagus because it was not sorted by size; restaurant customers, he said, demand a uniform size in the cartons they buy.

Ohio State University Extension already offers guidance to producers of some products and is interested in developing an online curriculum that farmers could refer to if they are considering producing for wholesale markets. Other non-profits in the state offer similar guidance, but a centralized, authoritative source would be of great value to Ohio farmers.

Education for farmers also could include advice on business models and more technical advice on maximizing production and extending the growing season. On business models, some small farmers need to consider ways to join forces to aggregate a large enough supply to meet a
customer’s demand. A farmer cooperative is one model. Another is used by a pork supplier who has a contract with Ohio University in Athens: the producer buys hogs from other farmers in the area to supplement what he produces.

Produce growers can extend the growing season with the use of greenhouses or high tunnels – plastic, unheated greenhouses that capture enough of the sun’s energy to grow vegetables 9 or 10 months a year in Ohio. This method is common in places further north than Ohio. In late winter and early spring, many tomatoes in Ohio chain grocery stores carry labels from Michigan and Canada. There is no reason why Ohio cannot recapture that market. Small and specialty farms could benefit from research by OSU entomologist Joe Kovach that shows plots using integrated pest management and a mixture of vegetables can gross nearly $100,000 per acre.

These lessons could be important for farmers who already are experienced in growing for local consumption. They would be especially useful for newcomers to farming. Newcomers tend to be drawn to agriculture by an interest in local food. They also would be useful to conventional farmers who are interested in diversifying, growing livestock or produce to meet growing institutional needs and consumer demands. A farmer with 800 acres of corn and soybeans is unlikely to switch his whole operation to tomatoes. But if he grows 30 or 40 acres of tomatoes and peppers on a small part of this property, he could be a significant player in a local market.

Programs aimed at attracting new farmers need to look beyond finding the land. Even more critical is the capital they need to run the farm business. Land can be expensive. New farmers have additional expenses in equipment, seeds, fertilizers, and pest control. Even longtime farmers who want to grow local produce on some of their acreage may face the expense of new equipment for planting and harvesting. Other farmers might want to expand into on-farm processing of meat, dairy products or produce.

Funding for these endeavors is scarce at a time when many banks are cautious about lending. There are local, state and federal government programs to assist with entrepreneurial and innovative agricultural projects, but the region lacks a centralized source of information on all the programs.

Just as there are challenges in funding for farm operations, so are there challenges in finding and training farm workers. Most of the existing farms that grow produce locally are small. But if local food is to have mainstream availability, larger farms are likely. Growing fruits and vegetables is labor intensive, both in the cultivation and harvesting. The Ohio farms that grow produce on a large scale rely on migrant labor, and must provide housing for workers.
**Markets**

One of the biggest barriers to getting Ohio-grown food into the hands and mouths of all Ohioans is access to markets. For farmers, access means getting the fruits of their labor onto the shelves and into the coolers of grocery stores. For far too many consumers, access means getting to a store that has fresh local food. These are the market challenges for a regional food system:

- Not enough stores in urban and rural “food deserts.”
- Not enough fresh, local food in the small stores located in those deserts.
- Lack of local-producer access to large retail markets due to competition for shelf space, inflexible retail models, etc.
- Creating institutional markets (schools, colleges/universities, counties, state agencies) for locally-grown food — creating large, stable markets, jump-starting the growth of processing and distribution businesses.

The problem of urban and rural food deserts cannot be solved just by improving the local-food distribution system in the region. Having a network capable of delivering food to all neighborhoods is not good enough if those neighborhoods do not have grocery stores, or the corner stores do not stock fresh local foods. This glaring deficiency in our food distribution network is a disservice to people in a state and a nation that have obesity and health-care-delivery problems.

Even where there are ample supermarkets, it is sometimes difficult to find local food. Local products have trouble competing for shelf space in many grocery chains. Part of this is because some producers fail to meet the quality or quantity standards that grocery chains insist upon to meet their customers’ expectations. But some critics say part of the problem is inflexible policies on the part of the stores. From a grocery chain’s perspective, it is much easier to buy meat and produce in very large quantities from established suppliers and distribute them from a central location. Often they want products available throughout the chain, or a district of the chain. But that does not allow the manager of an individual store to buy fresh produce or local specialty products from a farm or business in the community.

**Public Awareness**

One of the most important parts of building a regional food system is building public awareness about the importance of local food — changing misperceptions about its cost, helping people understand the economic, social and health benefits of a local-food system, more-clearly defining “local food,” educating people about the preparation of fresh local food. Here are some of the challenges in promoting local food:

- Lack of reliable single source of information on local foods.
- Mistaken perception that local food costs more than non-local food.
- No marketing campaign to promote local food, or to define it and distinguish it from organic and natural.
- Many people would have problems preparing local meat and vegetables even if they were readily available; they need education on food preparation.
The local-food movement’s roots are linked to the growth in popularity of organic foods, which are often sold at a premium. Because of this, there is a perception that local foods, too, are more expensive. A 2009 study by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Iowa found that the price of in-season produce at farmers markets was competitive with, and often cheaper than, comparable grocery prices. Likewise, shoppers at summer farmers markets enjoy not only the camaraderie with shoppers and farmers, but also the bargains on good food. But as much as farmers markets have grown around the region, they still serve only a small portion of the population.

Some retailers lack information about the benefits of local food. A survey of Knox County food retailers showed that many did not perceive an interest among their customers in buying local food. Yet consumer surveys by Ohio State University consistently show strong support for local food systems. This suggests that, while consumers may not specifically ask for local products, they would respond if food retailers promoted local goods.

Local food has not yet gone mainstream, and it won’t until consumers, retailers and farmers all see the potential and benefits. One of the biggest benefits is healthy eating. But in a culture awash in fast food restaurants and convenience-store processed-snack packages, it is difficult not only to make people aware of healthful local food, but also to teach them to prepare fresh ingredients. Fast food franchisers have a 50-year head start on marketing. Fortunately, public health departments do a lot to promote better eating. Other programs take the message to schools, often getting the word to adults through their children.

The news media can help get the message out, too. But it is hard to coordinate the message without a single strong voice for local food. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has launched a “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” campaign to promote the idea of local food. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has the Ohio Proud label that Ohio-grown and processed foods can use in grocery stores. And while the program has made strides in recent years, it is still woefully underfunded.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

A local food system is nothing new in West Central Ohio. The Lima area used to have ample meatpackers, canneries, dairies and farms that produced local fruits, vegetables, meat and poultry. Though a variety of economic and social factors steered us away from the local sourcing that was common in the past, new economic and social forces make this a good time to look anew at local food. More farmers are growing for local markets; local processors are feeling pressure for growth; and, public interest clearly is on the rise.
There is great potential to build a regional food system that can make farms more viable; keep land in agriculture; create jobs on the farm, in food processing and distribution; reduce transportation costs and petroleum dependency; and keep consumers’ food dollars circulating, and recirculating, in the local economy. A regional food system also can lead to greater access to healthful food in urban and rural food deserts; promote healthful eating and living; strengthen rural and urban communities that grow and process food; and, create a resilient network of farms and food-related businesses that are not dependent on or vulnerable to circumstances in other states or countries.

The Lima/Allen County Food Council wants to work with the momentum surrounding Activate Allen County and discuss new opportunities for growth. The council recognizes that there are many established businesses in the county working in these areas already; we want to partner to enhance what is taking place and coordinate efforts to form a stronger local food system. We also want to encourage new partners to come to the table and explore how an improved local food system may benefit business moving forward. The more community members that are willing to be included, the better the goals, strategies and outcomes will be.

Strengthening the local-food sector has to make economic sense and create opportunities, but it also should improve the cultural and social climate – by making food a part of local culture as it becomes a more important part of the economy, and by creating educational and work opportunities for people with disadvantages.

We hope that this assessment and the strategies for change and data it has produced as outlined within our Allen County Food Action Plan, will encourage local governments to adopt regulatory and procurement policies that promote local food. In turn, we hope to encourage businesses both large and small to buy and sell local food and consumers in the region to learn more about the availability, benefits and preparation of fresh, healthful local foods. In the end, such efforts will make the community better informed and better fed, and give Allen County more hope and opportunity.
Acknowledgments

Prepared by Activate Allen County in partnership with the Allen County Food Council, January 2015

Allen County Food Council/Food Desert Workgroup Members

Jay Begg, County Commissioner, Co-Chair Lima/Allen County Food Council

Beth Seibert, Allen Soil and Water Conservation District, Co-Chair Lima/Allen County Food Council

Gary Bright, West Ohio Food Bank

Chastity Butterfield, Thin and Healthy’s Total Solution

Tim DeHaven, DeHaven Home and Garden

Monica Harnish, Allen County Public Health Department

Phil Hayne, United Way

Stephen Jenkins, Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen

Thom Mazur, Lima-Allen County Regional Planning Commission

Jed Metzger, Lima/Allen County Chamber

Cheri Mitchell, Activate Allen County

Kayla Monfort, Activate Allen County

Brett Porter, Lima-Allen County Regional Planning Commission

Dr. John Snyder, The Ohio State University Lima

Jerry Suter, Suter’s Produce

Carrie Woodruff, Lima City Schools

Brian Williams, Consultant, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
**Resources**

*2012 USDA Census of Agriculture*, data on value of agricultural products in Allen and surrounding counties; data on land in agriculture

*Plan for A Healthy Small Stores Initiative in Allen County, Ohio*, June 30, 2014, prepared by Activate Allen County in Partnership with The Food Trust

Allen County Public Health, countywide health data

Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District, assessment of local food production and marketing capacity in the county

*Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan–2010*, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

*Identifying and Measuring Food Deserts in Rural Ohio*, 2012, The Ohio State University,

Lima-Alle County Neighborhoods in Partnership, 2014 estimates on numbers of community gardens and urban agriculture locations

Lima/Allen County Regional Planning Commission, 2014 data on Allen County agricultural land, land registered in Current Agricultural Use Valuation program, etc.

*Lima News*, 2014 articles that provided background and case studies for food-related businesses in Northwest Ohio; article on Kewpee and Ohio Northern students

Ohio Department of Agriculture, 2014 listings of state-inspected meat-slaughter facilities in Allen and surrounding counties; data on Ohio beef processed out of state; diversity of Ohio agricultural products; data on Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program

Ohio Department of Health, 2013 data on obesity rates and other health factors in Allen County

Ohio State University College of Food, Agriculture and Environmental Science, survey data from Social Responsibility Initiative

Ohio State University John Glenn School of Public Affairs, information on state network of local food councils

*Planting The Seeds Of Sustainable Economic Development: Knox County’s Local Food System*

OSU Social Responsibility Initiative Topical Report 09-04, August 2009

School Wellness Policy Council, 2014 information on wellness programs in Allen County

*Toward a Sustainable Ohio in Food, Farmers and Land*, 1983, Cornucopia Project of Rodale Press

West Ohio Food Bank, information of Mobile Product Market; data on “choice” food pantries