

Life in the Balance: Forum focuses on sustainable food systems

By Cheryl Leceese, cleceese@cnc.com, *The Concord Journal*, p. 4 (November 26, 2009)

Coordinating with the school system to offer healthier school lunches and developing education resources for residents who want to grow their own food were among action items resulting from “Food for Thought,” a community discussion on sustainable food sources.

The panel discussion and brainstorming session Nov. 20 was the second in the “Life in the Balance” public forum series, focused on climate change and living sustainable lives. Friday’s discussion followed a public showing of “Food, Inc.,” a film that examined the food industry.

Setting the frame for the discussion, keynote speaker Brian Donahue, associate professor of American environmental studies at Brandeis University said three things need to happen in order for a sustainable food system to thrive in New England: massive production of forests and farmland; more personal involvement in agriculture, either through Community Supported Agriculture programs or community farms; and good farm-to-school programs, so sustainable food can be seen in cafeterias, classrooms and the community.

“It’s about linking what makes sense locally with sustainable farming that makes sense everywhere,” he said. “It should be about producing healthy food in beautiful, sustainable ways that reengages as many as people as possible with the land.” [sic]

On the community level, Jim Catterton of the Concord Agriculture Committee said the town may have lost about 10 percent of its farmland in the past 25 years, but it has a thriving Community Gardens program that is outgrowing its space. He listed the various events the group has sponsored, including an annual farmers market in the town center and a fall harvest supper at which Concord chefs prepare a meal made with ingredients from the town’s farms.

For the everyman, however, cooking locally grown vegetables properly doesn’t come easy.

“You can buy these fabulous vegetables in Concord now and not know what to do with them,” Catterton said.

Willow Blish of Slow Food Boston, a nonprofit that promotes support of local farmers and consumption of locally grown foods, said, while eating seasonally is possible in New England, it takes time, planning and money. Food grown locally costs more. Schools don’t always have the extra money to spend on local or organic food—and children who do get local food in school don’t always get it at home. People’s taste buds have adapted to having access to fruits and vegetables that don’t naturally grow in the United States.

“On top of that you have the corporate connections,” she said.

Charlotte Vallaeyes, farm and food policy analyst for the Cornucopia Institute, a national watchdog organization for agricultural issues, said consumers should be aware of what they see and read on some products' labels.

“Consumers want to buy food that they feel connected to, that they know was locally grown and will pay more for it,” she said.

Some corporations recognize this, and found loopholes in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s regulations. She held up an image of the green, circle-shaped USDA certified organic label, and said if an item doesn’t have this label, regardless of whether the word “organic” is on it, it’s not federally certified as such.

Vallaeyes said buying organic is more important than buying food whose label said it was grown locally, because federal regulations control pesticide and chemical use on certified organic food. But buying food directly from the farm is ideal.

“If you can go to the farm and talk to the farmer, that’s better than any seal,” she said.

Jen Hashley, co-owner of Pete and Jen’s Backyard Birds and director of Tufts University’s New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, works with immigrants who come to the United States with a farming background to help them get started in agriculture here. Hands-on training and agriculture courses prepare these farmers for an opportunity to lease and eventually buy farmland. The program is focused on the Lowell area, setting participants up on land in Dracut.

“Our goal is to transition people to independence,” Hashley said, adding that the program provides farmers with technical assistance, as well as a Community Supported Agriculture program as a way for them to build a customer base, selling subscriptions to their annual crops.

As a local farmer herself, Hashley encouraged the audience to look into planting their own gardens, and freezing, canning or otherwise preserving local fruits, vegetables and meats.

“Anyone can grow something somewhere,” she said.

For more information about the forum series, visit <http://lwvcc.com/lifeinthebalance.html>.

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