

2014

# Suffolk County Food Policy Council



**The steps and actions taken by the  
Suffolk County Food Policy Council in  
2013 and an evaluation of next steps.**

1/31/2014

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## **I. NOMINATIONS AND VOTING FOR POSITIONS:**

- **August Ruckdeschel was nominated by Amy Engel and seconded by Randi Shubin Dresner to be the Chair of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council. The vote was taken and unanimously passed.**
- **August Ruckdeschel made the motion to appoint Alyssa Turano as the Food Policy Council Secretary and the motion was seconded by John King. The vote was taken and unanimously passed.**
- **August Ruckdeschel made the motion to appoint Erin Thoresen as the Chair of the Food Equity Sub-Committee and the motion was seconded by Bhavani Jaroff. The vote was taken and unanimously passed.**

## **II. MISSION AND GOALS**

- **August Ruckdeschel made the motion to approve the new Mission Statement and the motion was seconded by Kara Hahn. The vote was taken and unanimously passed.**
  - **The Mission of the Food Policy Council:**
    - **Promote the production, distribution, and awareness of locally grown food.**
    - **Strengthen and prioritize policies that will improve food access, health, and nutrition.**
    - **Enhance the regional food system by utilizing local agriculture and farming.**

### III. MEMBERSHIP

Name	Organization	Representing	Subcommittee
Gregson Pigott	SC Department of Health Services	SCDHS	Food Equity
August Ruckdeschel	SC Department of Economic Development & Planning	SCEDP	Why Buy Local?*
Stephen Kramarcik	SC Department of Social Services	SCDSS	Food Equity
Joe Gergela	Long Island Farm Bureau	LIFB	Why Buy Local?
Paule Pachter	Long Island Cares	Food Equity Advocate	Why Buy Local?
Randi Shubin-Dresner	Island Harvest	Food Equity Advocate	Food Equity
Vacant		Food Retailers	
Robert Schaefer	Divine Brine	Food Processor	Why Buy Local?
John King	J. Kings	Food Distributor	Why Buy Local?
Erin Thoresen	Sustainable Long Island	Community-Based	Food Equity*
Gwen O'Shea	Health & Welfare Council of Long Island	Community-Based	Food Equity
John Woods	UFCW Local 1500	Local Food Workers	Food Equity
Vacant		School Administration	
Iman Marghoob	Stony Brook Medicine	Presiding Officer Designee	Community Gardens*
Kara Hahn	Suffolk County Legislature	EPA Chair	Community Gardens
Vacant		Regional Planning Council	
Zahrine Bajwa	Cornell Cooperative Extension	County Executive Designee	Community Gardens

\* Designates Subcommittee Chairperson

## Community Garden Subcommittee

The community garden subcommittee of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council aims to help the people of Suffolk County learn to grow and gain access to foods that will help them lead healthier lives. The subcommittee is tasked to identify the means and resources necessary to build, grow, and support community gardens across Suffolk County and to help foster an appreciation and knowledge of growing one's own food.

### Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:

- **Access to water at community gardens** –the subcommittee has looked into how they can persuade or convince municipalities to pay for the gardens to be hooked up to the Suffolk County Water Authority (SCWA). The initial payment is usually approximately \$1,600-\$1,800 to get access to water, an absolute necessity for a community garden. It is understood that the SCWA cannot waive fees or charge discounted rates – it has been suggested that government partnerships could consider ways to offset or cover the costs of the initial hook-up and/or waive the first year of water fees as a way to incentivize development of community gardens.
- **Liability insurance for community gardens** – one of the hurdles associated with community gardens is securing liability insurance for the gardens, as well as securing the funds to cover the cost of that insurance. Recently, the American Community garden Association began offering liability insurance for community gardens. The subcommittee hopes to promote these opportunities and create a community garden association similar to the “Green Thumb” model in New York City.
- **Sites to grow seedlings** – committee members have speculated on the availability of greenhouse sites that could be used to purchase or grow seedlings for community gardens. Further investigation is needed, particularly the exploration of facilities through Cornell Cooperative Extension, BOCES, and other school programs.

### Accomplishments to-date:

- The subcommittee created a “How to Guide” describing the process of beginning a community garden. The Suffolk County Water Authority has offered to post the link to the brochure on their website. Other agencies and partner organizations are encouraged to share the brochure on their websites and in their educational and promotional materials.
- In 2010, the Long Island Victory Garden Task Force identified parcels of County-owned land that could potentially be used for community gardens. Those maps have been updated to reflect ownership changes. Maps have been provided to all committee members.
- The grant that has funded the New York State Department of Health’s (NYSDOH) “Healthy Hearts Program,” which had funded many community garden projects, will expire on March 31, 2014. The NYSDOH is expanding funding towards food policy work and is collaborating with Stony Brook Medicine’s Nutrition Division.

**Next steps (subject to change per subcommittee guidance):**

- Work with Suffolk County Parks Department with funds from the NYSDOH to change nutrition standards at Suffolk County government buildings, vending machines, and concession stands at parks and beaches. The NYC “Green Carts” model is also being explored as a potential model at Suffolk County parks.
- Stony Brook Medicine’s Nutrition Division and Sustainable Long Island are working on developing a community gardens website. Dietetic interns from Stony Brook will develop the website with funding from Sustainable Long Island. The website is still under construction but it will serve as a comprehensive resource for people and organizations that want to begin or participate in community gardens on Long Island, including information on how to organize, how to grow or start a garden, possible funding opportunities, a calendar of events coordinated or hosted by local gardens, and more. The website is slated for completion in early 2014. The following screenshots are available:



## Food Equity Subcommittee

The food equity subcommittee of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council aims to identify actionable steps to achieve greater equity within the regional food system and to make recommendations to the entire Food Policy Council as well as the Legislature, and to identify or offer suggestions on legislation or policy to achieve those steps.

Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:

- **Healthy corner stores** – improving the offerings and customer purchases of those healthier offerings at local corner stores through a demonstration project at one corner store involving reconfiguring products offered and display space, and distributing educational materials.
- **Increase SNAP usage at farmers’ markets** – increase the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and Electronic Benefits Transactions (EBT) at farmers’ markets throughout Suffolk County by raising awareness among markets, program clients, and customers as well as ensuring the availability of timely information about markets accepting SNAP/EBT at the start of each new season.
- **Increasing availability of healthy, affordable food options in schools** – raise awareness about the issues and challenges facing school food systems by including a representative from Eastern Suffolk BOCES on the subcommittee, researching current issues, and exploring potential programs, such as providing fresh, healthy food for students to take home on a semi-regular basis to ensure better nutrition throughout the day.
- **Encouraging use of cooking demonstrations as nutrition education tool** - by promoting better understanding of regulations and exploring ways to relax current regulations, the subcommittee hopes to encourage farmers’ markets, community gardens, and others to utilize cooking demonstrations as a powerful tool to educate communities about the benefits of healthy eating, simple ways to prepare healthy, affordable meals, and simultaneously promote the purchase of locally-grown products when possible.

### Accomplishments to-date:

- Identify a corner store in a community representative of a typical “food desert” in Gordon Heights, NY – Weir’s Deli – and held initial meetings with the store owner to assess the layout and offerings of the store, as well as discuss next steps for demonstration project.
- Facilitated follow-up meeting with Island Harvest and Cornell Cooperative Extension to discuss low-cost options to make produce display more appealing, and to further the partnership in improving the food choices and the health of this community.
- Research and share information about SNAP usage at Suffolk farmers’ markets in recent years.
- Cornell Cooperative Extension maintains a list of farmers’ markets that accept SNAP and EBT. We must aid them in their efforts to prominently display these lists at locations such as the Suffolk County

Department of Social Services. We must also continue to ensure the lists are made available to, and promoted by, our partner non-profit organizations, hospitals, universities, etc.

- Research County and New York State guidance and policy on distribution of food samples and performing cooking demonstrations at public and private events and discuss with food policy council. Explore ways to share this information with the public at large, particularly the farmers' market community.
- Research successful farm-to-school programs and the USDA's Farm-to-School Program and share information about barriers to wider implementation of such programs on Long Island.

**Next steps (subject to change per subcommittee guidance):**

- Continue to promote SNAP at farmers' markets through distribution of up-to-date listings of markets that accept SNAP/EBT through a variety of Suffolk County outlets, possibly including, but not limited to: Suffolk County Legislature, County employees, and the County Public Relations department.
- Work with Weir's Deli to identify and implement subtle, low-cost changes to store layout and display to accommodate fresh, healthy options and to encourage customers to purchase them.
  - Facilitate event at Weir's Deli with educational materials and displays, food sampling and demonstration, and information about and opportunities to enroll in SNAP. Hope to launch the event in March.
- Assemble and distribute information about state and local regulations for cooking demonstrations and food sampling, and identify and explore possible changes in policy to encourage more use of cooking demonstrations as educational tools at farmers markets in safe, appropriate manner.
- Continue to research food equity issues in schools and identify one or more pressing programs or policies to recommend to the Food Policy Council for consideration.
- Explore additional policy changes and recommendations, possibly including, but not limited to the following (recommendations from Sustainable Long Island's Food System Report Card):
  - Those that would encourage renewable energy usage on farms to potentially reduce expenditures and generate income;
  - Explore new targets and financing for land preservation to achieve goals sought by the County;
  - Encourage training and preparation of young people to enter the agriculture industry, as well as explore possible incentives to encourage and attract new farmers or farm workers;
  - Explore legislation to incentivize institutional purchasing of locally-produced foods; and
  - Advocate standardization of data on food waste and disseminate across Long Island.

**Additional information:**

- Sustainable Long Island, which chairs the food equity subcommittee, also gave a presentation about the recently released Long Island Food System Report Card, prepared in collaboration with Adelphi University's Vital Signs, touching on issues especially important to food equity.
- Sustainable Long Island has prepared a report on local government policy and code as it pertains to the Long Island food system, and has commissioned a food retail market leakage analysis (economic study) and will be seeking to make a presentation before the Food Policy Council on one or both of these studies.

## **“Why Buy Local?” Subcommittee**

The “Why Buy Local?” subcommittee of the Suffolk County Food Policy Council serves to promote the production, distribution and accessibility of locally grown food. The subcommittee aims to expand access to quality local food, enhance food security, promote sustainability, and expand economic opportunities for local agricultural producers, processors, and distributors.

### **Initiatives the subcommittee is currently exploring:**

- **Agritourism Visitor’s Center** – members of this subcommittee are exploring opportunities to create an agritourism visitor’s center at the Suffolk County Farm in Yaphank. This tourism center would offer information to tourists about Suffolk County agritourism options including, but not limited to, vineyard tasting rooms, agricultural educational tours, seasonal special events, fresh baked produce, farmers markets, petting zoos, and “pick-your-own” operations.
- **Online web presence** - Now that a logo has been chosen and approved by the Council, the Council is looking to create an online presence. The first step is a social media presence through facebook and twitter. Editorial authority needs to be established for these efforts. Ultimately, a web presence should be created and maintained. The nature and structure of this web presence, including hosting responsibilities, also needs to be determined.
- **NY Food Metrics Bill** – The subcommittee intends to monitor the effectiveness of the 2013 Food Metrics Bill, signed into law last year. This bill establishes guidelines to help state agencies purchase more local food and requires them to report the geographic origin of any food they buy. The reporting requirement of this bill is important because once we understand how much local food state agencies buy, we can set concrete targets and sustainability standards for state purchases of local food. This state law, if effective, could serve as a model for Suffolk County legislation.
- **Farm-to-School** – the Council has invited representatives from the educational arena to join our meetings and is looking for a formal appointment to the Food Policy Council for someone with an educational background, preferably with a purchasing background. The Council needs access to individuals who can facilitate farm-to-school lunch programs.

### **Accomplishments to-date:**

- Legislation was signed by the County Executive on July 15, 2013 creating an official position on the Suffolk County Food Policy Council for a “local public school district administrator, to be selected by the Legislature” (IR 13-1421).
- The third annual “Celebrate Grown on Long Island Day’ was successfully held at the Suffolk County farm in Yaphank. The Food Policy Council will continue to seek ways to market and promote this special event.
- With endorsement and support from the Suffolk County Food Policy Council, the latest round of changes to Chapter 8 of the Suffolk County Administrative Code was passed unanimously (with one abstention) by the Suffolk County legislature and signed into law by County Executive Steve Bellone. The law is

intended to improve the attractiveness of Suffolk County's "Purchase of Development Rights" program and to update the legislation to reflect a changing agricultural climate. The law allows limited agritourism activities and onsite processing on preserved Suffolk County farmland. It also creates the mandate that preserved farmland is used for agricultural purposes, and requires currently fallow land to be cultivated and brought into agricultural production.

- A report summarizing the attitudes of 143 Suffolk County agricultural producers was authored by the Suffolk County Department of Economic Development & Planning and presented to the Food Policy Council.
- The Suffolk County Food Policy Council endorsed and signed a letter authored by the American Farmland Trust asking Governor Andrew Cuomo to allocate \$25 million in 2014 from the environmental Protection Fund to the state's Farmland Protection Program. The 2031 fund was allocated at \$13 million.

**Next steps (subject to change per subcommittee guidance):**

- Explore programs such as Michigan's "Double Up Food Bucks" program which allows SNAP benefit enrollees to "double up" their benefits on fresh, local healthy foods at places like farmers markets. Can we find the funds and political will to support similar efforts locally?
- Other models to investigate - NYC "Health Bucks". "Health Bucks" are paper vouchers, worth \$2 each, developed and distributed by the NYC Health Department which can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at participating farmers' markets. For every \$5 a customer spends using SNAP, s/he receives a \$2 Health Buck coupon, leveraging the food stamp budget by 40% and encouraging additional consumption of fresh, local produce.
- Formal designation of an appointment to the Council of an individual with a school administration background in order to more capably help propose and design "farm-to-school" lunch programs.
- Trends such as "buying local," "organic," and "slow food" continue to advantage the local Suffolk County food industry. However, as demands increase, producers must be technologically prepared to date and label their produce to satisfy consumer demand. Consumers want to know where and how their produce is grown or raised. We must continue to work with producers, processors, and distributors to meet these expectations.
- Food Hubs – keep an eye of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) hubs in Wyandanch and Ronkonkoma. Can these hubs serve as "food hubs" and alleviate food deserts?
- The Council would like to explore the development of an agricultural mentorship program affiliated with either high school level institutions (such as BOCES) or 2-4 year colleges. Such mentorship programs could cross disciplines, practices and agricultural commodities including viticulture, vegetable farming, aquaculture, greenhouse and horticulture, aquaculture, direct marketing, agritourism, and organic farming.

## Other Issues and Recommendations

- **Vacant Positions** – The Committee, with aid and assistance from the legislature, must fill Council vacancies and replace members who a) are no longer interested in serving and b) have not committed to attending further Council meetings.
- **Rethink Your Drink** is a non-profit coalition that helps work sites, schools, public libraries, child care centers, PTAs, parks and public places in Suffolk County create healthier environments by improving beverage options. **Rethink Your Drink @ Work** is a free program that helps create healthier work environments across Suffolk County. The program includes a 15 minute presentation at the worksite, hosted by a registered dietitian. Feedback from employees is then collected using a quick survey. After reviewing the feedback the program director is then able to provide assistance (and items such as water pitchers and water coolers) to help the site create a healthier beverage environment. The program also offers technical assistance to hospitals that are implementing the New York State Department of Health food and beverage standards for hospitals. The Suffolk County Food Policy Council is working with Mather Hospital to promote this program and expand its outreach efforts.
- **Nutritional Curriculum at Local Schools** – Initial conversations have been held with a large Suffolk County school district that would investigate taking a comprehensive nutritional approach to the school curriculum. There has been some early research on “calorie counts on menus” that suggest that listing the calorie counts on a menu alone do not significantly impact food choice decisions in adults. These early findings are a frustrating because there was hope that calorie counts would begin to nudge individuals into making healthier food choices. In fact, the concept was so highly regarded that calorie counts are now mandated on the menus of restaurants and food chains with 25 or more franchises as per the Affordable Care Act (frequently referred to as Obamacare).

However, more encouragingly, a recent research project conducted by The University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill School of Medicine (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=labels-that-translate-calories-into-walking-distance>) found that individuals DID change their menu decisions when those calories counts were instead translated into walking distance. As we know, kids and adults alike can make better personal choices when decisions are translated into meaningful terms. This early research suggests that forcing individuals to confront the reality of these eating decisions could potentially impact their nutritionally decisions in meaningful ways.

This strikes the Council as an opportunity to get our kids to start thinking about food in different frames. How many jumping jacks would a child need to do to "burn-off" a slice of pizza? How many minutes of basketball would you need to "burn-off" a 12 oz. soda? These thought experiments lend themselves easily to a multi-disciplinary approach. Healthy eating habits can be taught in Health classes and carried over into the cafeteria. Food choices made in the cafeteria can be worked off in physical education classes. Calculating calorie counts and translating those totals into physical activities (“miles-to-run” for example) can be carried over into math classes. Art classes can design the posters to be displayed in cafeterias. Business and computer classes can create marketing and social media campaigns. Hopefully, this comprehensive approach can convince children to make healthier eating choices. And we can measure that effectiveness in cafeteria sales and purchasing needs.