

**The Athens Food Policy Council:
From Concept to Case Study**

Center for Farmland Policy Innovation

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I. Introduction

“Start with who you know personally... then ask them who they know... it’s about network building... sectors of stakeholders.”

-Michelle Ajamian, Project Manager

The Athens Food Policy Council Developed and Addressed the Following Objectives to Improve Food Security in Athens City and County:

1. Garden-Friendly City Code – Clarify and reorient the city code to support and regulate citizen produce gardening
2. More Community Gardens – Designate more city and county-owned land for community gardening and farming
3. Staple Grain, Bean, and Seed Crops on Public Agricultural Land – Assess policy and infrastructure to make publicly owned and managed agricultural land available to grow high nutrition staple seed, grain, and beans
4. City Goes Local! – Encourage institutional procurement of foods from within the City of Athens to prioritize the purchase of locally produced foods

In March 2009 the Appalachian Staple Foods Collaborative (ASFC), a group serving Appalachian Ohio, spearheaded the formation and development of the Athens Food Policy Council (AFPC). They created the council to address issues of food security in Athens County as well as the City of Athens, OH, and **examine the ways in which local policy could support the use of publicly-owned land and water well fields for food production.** ASFC hoped that improved agricultural access to these public lands, and the subsequent production of staple food crops on them, would help reinvigorate the farm economy and increase food security in the region. Ultimately, the Athens Food Policy Council proved invaluable as a mechanism to connect public concerns and solutions with decision-makers and policy action. It also encouraged unprecedented collaboration on food system issues, and helped the stakeholders translate their broad mandate into an achievable, sequential, policy-based effort to improve food security. In the effort to develop the AFPC, ASFC received both funding and guidance from the Center for

Center for Farmland Policy Innovation. The Center, established in 2006, resides in the Department of Agricultural, Environmental and Development Economics at Ohio State University, and is associated with the OSU Extension Services. Our mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming. We work to spread local seeds of invention. Further, we work at the state and federal levels to encourage viable local agricultural environments.

Farmland Policy Innovation (Center) at The Ohio State University. The Center administered this funding through its Farmland Protection Partnership Program (FPPP), a grant program that supports innovative policy and programming projects to promote the viability of farming and agriculture in Ohio communities. Michelle Ajamian of the Appalachian Staple Foods Collaborative served as the project manager. Rural Action served as the fiscal agent.

The Farmland Protection Partnership Program (FPPP) is a grant program of the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation. Its objective is to pioneer innovative projects that promote agricultural economic development in Ohio communities and enhance the viability of farming and farmland. More information is available at <http://cffpi.osu.edu/program.htm>.

II. Athens Overview

Athens County, OH is an Appalachian county in Southeastern Ohio and home to a community of approximately 63,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau). Athens County is also home to high rates of poverty and unemployment. As such, the Appalachian Regional Commission, a multi-state economic development agency focused on improving the economic infrastructure throughout Appalachia, counts it as one of its most “distressed” counties, based on an index-based economic classification system (Appalachian Regional Commission).

The Appalachian Staple Foods Collaborative points to food insecurity, low rates of farming, and local examples of the nationwide obesity and diabetes epidemics as evidence of the strong need for food policy analysis and food system improvement in Athens County and City. Athens County indicates a particularly high rate of poverty at 32.8 percent, which is over twice that of the rest of the state, and an unemployment rate of 11.2 percent, compared to the statewide average of 8.4 percent (U.S. Census Bureau). AFSC believes food security is directly correlated with the Athens area poverty and unemployment rates. Corroborating this conclusion, David Holben, a professor at Athens-based Ohio University, conducted a study of Athens County families enrolled in Head Start, a program for preschool children from low-income families (2004). He found that **48.8 percent were food insecure, and 30.3 percent had experienced hunger within the last year (Holben, 2004). Further, he found rates of child hunger that were more than 20 times the national average, at 13.8 percent (Holben, 2004).**

One of the primary contributing factors to AFSC’s decision to spearhead the formation of the food policy council was the recognition that Athens County and City owned a considerable amount of agriculturally viable land that could be used to grow staple food crops. It believed that there was also considerable potential to process and distribute locally-grown crops to low-income households within the county, and thus combat the high rates of food insecurity. Despite the availability of land however, the amount of Athens County agricultural land in farms has consistently declined in recent years (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007). **The U.S. Census of Agriculture reports that between 2002 and 2007, the county lost 22 percent of its land in farms** (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007). As such, the food policy council began with the need to identify which and how much of the county and city owned land could be used for farming. Moreover, it also recognized the necessity for further research in areas on food systems issues and the identification of the contributing factors and options for reversing the recent trends of farmland decline in the county. To address these

issues, **the Appalachian Staple Foods Collaborative outlined five guiding objectives for the food policy council:**

1. Study how staple foods can contribute to local agricultural endeavors
2. Assess how these crops can be grown on public land and water well fields
3. Assess how food banks can be employed to process the harvest into high nutrition cereals and bars to reach the most food insecure
4. Assess opportunities for workforce development programs in the agriculture and food sectors
5. Analyze how these objectives can work together to increase community resiliency

III. Athens Food Policy Council Development

The Athens Food Policy Council first convened in March 2009. Established after an Athens Town Hall Meeting, it featured broad-based support and participation from a wide range of community members. Inaugural members included residents, city officials, local business and organizational leaders, and professors and researchers interested in combining efforts in land use policy, food system improvement, and economic development to increase Athens's overall food security and economic health. Council members serve year-long terms, with options to renew membership at the end of each year. The council meets every other month, and utilizes www.ohiofoodshed.org as a web-based platform to provide support materials, facilitate communication, and post meeting notes and council documents.

During the first food policy council meeting, members agreed upon the following five key priorities that would guide their future work:

1. The City of Athens and Athens County increase access to arable green space
2. The City of Athens and Athens County set an example to their citizenry that supporting locally produced food is important
3. Citizens have access to community garden space on public lands, fostering more food production in the community
4. Athens Farmers Market secures a permanent site on public property
5. City of Athens provides its citizenry with a guide to businesses that produce and support locally grown food

These priorities set the framework for the designation of five key projects that the council believed would help define potential work, and accomplish the council's goal of utilizing county and city owned land to produce staple food products that could be processed and distributed to reduce food insecurity. Moreover, as part of their role on the council, all members were asked to either lead or serve on a working group dedicated to defining and making progress on one of the key projects. The working groups and projects included the following:

The Food Policy Council. A food policy council is a local or statewide advisory group composed of various stakeholders in the agricultural community. Food policy councils can achieve success by fostering information sharing, by serving as local repositories of knowledge about food policy, and by identifying and implementing food system improvements. The essential function of the food policy council however, is the connection of community needs and potential solutions with the institutional capacity to initiate action and achieve results. Read more about food policy councils here: <http://www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/>

- Garden-Friendly City Code – Clarify and reorient the city code to support and regulate citizen produce gardening
- More Community Gardens – designate more city and county-owned land for community gardening and farming
- Staple Grain, Bean, and Seed Crops on Public Agricultural Land – Assess policy and infrastructure to make publicly owned and managed agricultural land available to grow high nutrition staple seed, grain, and beans
- City Goes Local! – Encourage institutional procurement of foods from within the City of Athens to prioritize the purchase of locally produced foods

IV. Policy Council Results

In only its first year of operation, the Athens Food Policy Council made significant headway in achieving its goal of improving food security in Athens County and City. The council succeeded in bringing together many previously disparate food system and policy actors to make progress on community improvement. Further, it started the conversation amongst key stakeholders and capitalized on the skill sets and capabilities of its members to not only assess the institutional framework of food policy in Athens, but identify and advance implementable goals. **Moreover, the council facilitated the essential role of bringing citizen needs and potential solutions into contact with those people and institutions most capable of action in both the public and private sectors.** The council convened residents, educators, researchers, community agencies, and government staffs to address common concerns and produce tangible results including the following:

Value for Local Communities. The complex and interwoven nature of the various organizations and governments that combine to define local food policy often make it difficult to understand. The policy council provides a forum in which concerned citizens, business and organizational leaders, and governmental officials can collaborate to unravel the web of policy ramifications, allowing communities to better understand the tools at their disposal to improve food security.

1. Garden-Friendly City Code

- a. The policy council produced research on residential ordinances nationwide, and used this information to draft a revision of the City of Athens lawn restrictions. Subsequently, it met with a city council committee to draft an ordinance on garden restrictions. Within the year, the city council passed an ordinance allowing front yard gardens. Further, the city committed to develop a flyer to educate its constituents on the implications of the measure. These changes can be found in the Athens City Code.

2. More Community Gardens: This effort yielded three contributions to community food production capacity:

- a. Several large institutions, including the City of Athens, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Ohio University each initiated either efforts or direct funding for community garden construction and citizen education on the details of their operation.
- b. Students at Ohio University produced mapping of fruit tree locations within Athens, and identified locations for twenty new trees.
- c. The initial identification of potential city land for agricultural use informed work by the City of Athens on a joint Ohio University and Good Works, Inc. project called Walking Harvest.

This project maintains community gardens across the city and offers produce to neighborhood residents.

3. **Staple Grain, Bean, and Seed Crops on Public Agricultural Land.** The policy council investigated the viability of farming on wellhead fields. After consultation with an EPA water specialist, it concluded that at least some of this land was eligible, as long as no nitrates were applied and the agricultural operations were conducted according to organic standards. The council also worked with Athens County and City, as well as the local water district (Le-Ax Water District), to identify areas where projects could advance. They succeeded in each case, but as they move forward must work around limitations on a case-by-case basis, as several sites require further evaluation.
4. **City Goes Local!.** In this regard, the policy council successfully promoted local institutional procurement. Project manager Michelle Ajamian believes that increases in local procurement by Ohio University and local restaurants contributed significantly to a 25 percent increase in sales to restaurants and institutions at the Morgan County-based Chesterville Produce Auction.

As stated, the Athens Food Policy Council made considerable strides in its first year of operation, in part because of the strong leadership of the ASFC. Of equal importance however, according to project manager Michelle Ajamian, was ability to transition from short-term grant-funded operation, to long-term, sustainable operation. Following the term of the grant funding provided by the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation, the Athens Food Policy Council convened a strategic visioning session to explore possibilities for continuation. Within six months, the Athens City-County Health Department assumed responsibility for coordinating the functions of the Athens Food Policy Council. Importantly, the Health Department was tasked with facilitation rather than outright control, and has been able to maintain broad-based support as the sponsor organization of the Athens Food Policy Council.

V. Peer-to-Peer Advice

Offering advice to other potential food policy councils, program manager Michelle Ajamian stresses the importance of having a coordinator to lead, organize, and communicate. This person must be willing to identify the interest, and leverage the support of a coalition of interested parties to garner the community-based buy-in that is essential to the operation of a food policy council. The policy council must bring in people from the non-profit community, from the economic development and business community, and from universities if they exist in the area. As she states, “figure out who the people are in your area who have an interest in good health, good farming, and the local food economy,” and move forward with their interests.

Once local interest and commitment is established, Ajamian says, it is important for the coordinator to be sensitive to the interests of the council members. Allowing the agenda to adjust to stakeholder interests will lay the groundwork for addressing bigger issues that the coordinator may have had in mind for the beginning.

In considering a food policy council, therefore, it is essential to engage in organization building, continuous agenda building, and then find a way to maintain stakeholder interest and commitment. Furthermore, the successful continuation of food policy council will depend on the group’s ability to garner support from stakeholders (e.g. the Athens City-County Health Department) who are willing to commit to the its future.

VI. Conclusions

The information above describes how the policy council started off with a broad mandate, but through communication amongst a wide range of stakeholders and thorough research on food system needs, was able to hone its focus to concentrate on the identification and implementation of the most achievable aspects of its goals. In this, the food policy council had success in identifying opportunity for farming on city, county, and water-district land; for researching and implementing necessary changes in the city regulatory structure; and for growing, buying, and selling food locally. These efforts contributed to increased food security through greater capacity for local and self-provisioning, and economic development by helping to drive demand for local commerce. In addition, the policy council played an essential role in evaluating policy, assessing existing regulations, prioritizing work, and formulating a sequential approach to implementation.

As a groundbreaking effort to galvanize community and stakeholder support for a prominent issue in Appalachian Ohio, the Athens Food Policy Council retains significant potential for a continued role in community leadership. It has the opportunity to help define and drive the agenda on food security issues by continuing its effort to find farmers to grow staple crops on public land, as well as to further assess how food banks and institutions can help process and distribute the crops for low income community members. Further, it can continue its research and collaboration to meet new challenges as they appear on the horizon of food security in the region. More than anything, the Athens Food Policy Council stands as an example to other Ohio and Appalachian communities by demonstrating that concerned citizens and attuned policymakers can collaborate to address even the toughest community issues.

VII. Resources

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