

DENVER SEEDS

REPORT ON BEST PRACTICES FOR URBAN FOOD STRATEGIES

James Nixon, President, Global Urban Development (GUD)
December 2012

I. CONTEXT

Denver Seeds Task Force #3 has undertaken focused research to identify Best Practices for Urban Food Strategies as exemplified by cities and metropolitan areas that are national leaders.

In this process, Task Force #3 engaged the assistance from Global Urban Development (GUD), a non-profit organization that is a world expert on Metropolitan Economic Strategy and Sustainable Economic Development.

Task Force #3 undertook Internet research and interviews with leaders in relation to six cities with strong Urban Food Strategies, including:

- Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Boston, Massachusetts.
- Seattle, Washington.
- San Francisco, California.
- Atlanta, Georgia.
- Washington, DC.

These are all cities and metropolitan regions that are roughly comparable in size to the City of Denver and the Denver Metropolitan Region. Members of Task Force #3 have written profiles of the Urban Food Strategies in each of these cities and these are available upon request.

Task Force #3 engaged Global Urban Development to produce an interim report that summarizes the best practices that have emerged from the Task Force's research and from other research that GUD has completed. This interim report includes brief discussions of:

- A conceptual framework.
- 23 urban food strategy best practices.
- Principles to guide formation of a successful Denver Seeds Urban Food Strategy.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Planner's Guide to the Urban Food System, published by the University of Southern California Center for Sustainable Cities, presents a simple, straight forward conceptual framework that is helpful in understanding local/regional Urban Food Systems.

That conceptual framework focuses on six key elements:

1. Production – the growing and raising of food.
2. Processing – the manufacture of food products.
3. Distribution – the moving of food and food products.
4. Acquisition – the obtaining of food.
5. Consumption – the eating of food.
6. Waste/Resource Generation – the disposal of food and food products.

Denver Seeds can benefit from using such a conceptual framework in formulating its Urban Food Strategy and in assessing the role each individual strategic action plays in impacting the Denver Urban Food System as a whole as well as each of the individual components of that System.

III. BEST PRACTICES

Encouraging local/regional Urban Food Systems has become a significant and rapidly growing movement that is mature enough now to have evolved a number of widely utilized best practices. Cities with effective Urban Food Strategies use some and, in some cases, many of the best practices summarized in this report. Most of these best practices have been the subjects of research, documentation, and evaluation. In addition, most of them have significant design and implementation guidance available.

Denver Seeds can draw on the relatively comprehensive list of 23 best practices included in this summary as it assesses and builds on the Urban Food System that already exists in the City of Denver and the Denver Metropolitan Region and as it formulates a uniquely appropriate Urban Food Strategy for strengthening and evolving that System.

1) Mayor's Directive/City Council Resolution: Many Urban Food Strategies are launched through a Mayor's Directive or a City Council Resolution. This Directive or Resolution typically formulates the Urban Food Strategy, including: the goals for the Strategy; relevant public policies and pieces of legislation; an organizational structure; specific implementation actions; a timeline; and a system for monitoring and evaluation.

One typical goal is to establish a target percentage for the amount of food sourced locally or regionally within a square mile radius. Sometimes these Directives or Resolutions establish a special office or department with dedicated staffing in the Mayor's Office or in the city administration.

2) Food Policy: Food Policies may be incorporated in a city's General Plan, its Sustainability Plan, or adopted as a stand-alone policy. Food Policies typically include goals, strategies, and actions for strengthening the Urban Food System, incorporating a variety of best practices

depending on the specific city and its objectives. The American Planning Association has produced a variety of documents to assist in the development of Urban Agriculture and Food System Plans.

3) Zoning and Regulations: Many cities have adopted zoning regulations to encourage different locally/regionally oriented Urban Food System activities in specific locations, including: urban gardens; plant nurseries; greenhouses; roof-top gardens; animal husbandry; hydroponic and aquaculture facilities; food processing and distribution facilities; grocery stores; restaurants; and other food-related undertakings.

In some cases developments are awarded specific points in the city land use approval and permitting process for inclusion of appropriate Urban Food System facilities and activities. Sometimes objectives are set to bring a certain number of acres into food production or to ensure that all residents of a city are within some specified distance from a full service grocery store that features healthy locally/regionally sourced food or to establish integrated transportation programs to assist residents to reach stores with healthy locally/regionally sourced food.

4) Food System Initiatives: Frequently, cities integrate the existing Urban Food System activities and planned new activities into an integrated Urban Food System Initiative that outlines goals, strategies, specific actions, and organizational responsibilities. Policy guidance for these Initiatives can be provided by Regional Food Policy Councils or specially created advisory groups.

5) Networks and Coalitions: Many cities and regions have established Food System Networks or Coalitions to provide leadership and coordination for their evolving Urban Food Strategies. These Networks assist in: encouraging collaboration among groups; promoting business to be conducted among participants; mutual vetting of new projects and mutual problem solving; joint marketing; and provision of organizational, financial, and political support for different projects and actions.

The Networks may be made up of sub-networks of farmers, food businesses, neighborhoods with Urban Food Programs, advocacy groups, and government agencies. Often these Networks maintain a database with descriptions and contact information for all relevant Urban Food System organizations, businesses, agencies, and activities in the city or region.

6) Urban Agriculture: The Urban Food Strategies for most cities and regions contain programs for promoting Urban Agriculture, which can include encouragement for: backyard gardens; community gardens; gardens on vacant plots of land; greenhouses; living walls; school yard gardens; roof gardens; and hydroponics and aquaculture facilities. In some cases, the raising of farm animals is also allowed or encouraged.

Shared Back Yards programs can connect people who have space with people who want to garden. Sometimes community garden cooperatives are formed. Local Food Resource Hubs can provide common access to seeds, tools, materials, and education. Sometimes whole Urban Farms are constituted. Often this type of Urban Agriculture production is for personal consumption, but a number of cities have also established ways for the produce to be sold in Farmers Markets or Mini Farmers Markets, sold to commercial outlets or restaurants, or used by community institutions. Some cities have Urban Agriculture Clearinghouses to coordinate all Urban Agriculture activities. Sometimes targets are set for the number of acres under cultivation within the city's boundaries and inventories are undertaken to identify land that could be used for Urban Agriculture.

7) Organic Agriculture: Many, but certainly not all, Urban Food Strategies have a significant emphasis on Organic Agriculture, emphasizing plants and animals raised without the use of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics, etc. There is a strong and growing market for organically raised plants and animals, so any Urban Food Strategy needs to address this market. However, most Urban Food Strategies also engage with healthy locally/regionally produced food and food products that are not organic. Cooperation among everyone building the local/regional healthy Urban Food System usually leads to the most successful results.

8) Guides to Community Food Production: Some communities have published guides to community food production to encourage and assist community members in establishing a back yard or community gardens or small scale food production businesses.

9) Farmers Markets: The Urban Food Strategies of most cities and regions feature various types of Farmers Markets that sell food that is raised locally in the urban setting and also that is raised regionally on rural farms. These Farmers Markets are usually commercial ventures, organized by either for-profit companies or not-for-profit organizations. They may take the form of larger scale wholesale or retail Farmers Markets, Mini Farmers Markets, Mobile Farmers Markets, Farm Stands, and/or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organizations. Frequently they operate one or two days a week.

10) Public Markets: Some Urban Food Strategies incorporate large indoor public markets that are open every day and feature locally/regionally sourced healthy food products. They often include some central larger scale store facilities with a "Mercado" concept of many smaller stalls. Sometimes they are mixed-use facilities, including wholesale and retail products, restaurants, and event space.

11) Food Hubs: Food Hubs have become a central element in many Urban Food Strategies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food hub as "a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand." (*USDA Regional Food Hub Resource Guide*)

Food Hubs organize the supply side and the demand side of local/regional food marketplaces by offering a suite of services to producers, buyers, and the wider community, including:

- Producer services such as training in value-added product development, food handling, transportation, food safety, and business management.
- Distribution services such as aggregation, storage, processing/packaging, branding/marketing, brokering, and connecting sellers and buyers.
- Community services such as “buy local” campaigns, distributions to food deserts, food bank donations, employment opportunities, SNAP (food stamp) redemptions, cooking demonstrations, and recycling and composting.

12) Shared Kitchen Incubator/Accelerator: Many Urban Food Strategies include shared commercial kitchens that are connected to food-related business incubators, with office, production, and storage space, and business acceleration services that can help early stage food-related businesses get started, grow, and thrive.

13) Food Cluster-Based Economic Development: Some cities have incorporated a regionally sourced food production/food service business cluster in a multiple cluster-based economic development program or as a stand-alone food cluster program. These cluster-based programs can utilize the full range of cluster development strategies, including the organization of: food cluster networks; experienced food cluster-related business services; food cluster business incubation/acceleration services; connection to food-related university research and technology transfer; and angel, venture, and debt investment that is accessible for food-related business ventures.

14) Food Districts: Some cities have used planning, zoning, and economic development tools to establish Food Districts that encourage the emergence of robust locally/regionally sourced healthy food product and service businesses and organizations that locate in proximity with each other. Food Districts can include production, warehousing, distribution, wholesale sales, retail sales, and restaurants along with food business services, business incubators and business acceleration services.

15) Development of the Market for Locally/Regionally Produced Food: Various Urban Food Strategies include systematic organization and development of the market for local/regional healthy food production and distribution by outreach and campaigns to super stores, grocery stores, restaurants, and institutional food service providers to encourage them to source locally/regionally produced healthy food. Sometimes these efforts include some type of branding that the participants can use on site, in advertising, and in social media. Some cities have established food procurement policies for the city government and/or other institutions to source healthy food from local/regional sources.

16) Food Security: Many Urban Food Strategies include programs to enhance the food security of populations that are food in-secure, such as seniors, disabled individuals, and low-income residents. These programs often coordinate with SNAP (food stamp) programs and sometimes utilize Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Terminals. They can include: Food Banks; free lunch and dinner programs; central kitchen programs – which may incorporate availability of other social services; organized use of food surpluses; public and private food delivery programs; and other efforts.

17) Education Programs: Many K-12 schools have adopted programs to serve nutritious locally/regionally sourced lunches and provide systematic and engaging nutrition education. Sometimes these programs include school yard gardens and education about local/regional food production. A number of Community Colleges and Universities have established various types of agriculture and food service education, with an emphasis on local/regional production.

18) Financial Resources: Typically, Urban Food Strategies rely on a combination of government, corporate and philanthropic foundation funding as well as private investment. The most successful Strategies include strong businesses that fully engage the food marketplace and utilize the complete range of private financial resources, including angel, venture, debt, mezzanine, and venture debt.

Some Urban Food Strategies coordinate with land trusts and other systems of cooperative or public/private ownership of land used for Community Gardens and other elements of the Strategy. Many Urban Food Strategies include the encouraging the use of local currencies and barter systems and most attempt to facilitate utilization of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Terminals. Optimally, government and foundation funding is used as seed investment to launch a Strategy that eventually becomes self-supporting and, ultimately, profitable.

19) Employment Development: As an Urban Food Strategy becomes successful, it generates enterprises that produce a significant number of jobs. It is important for a city's Employment Development System to engage fully with these opportunities by organizing the appropriate job training programs that train the type of well-prepared agriculture and food service workforce needed by the food-related enterprises so that the trainees can get and keep good jobs with benefits and career pathways.

20) Communication, Branding, and Marketing: Most successful Urban Food Strategies include a strong communications, branding, and marketing dimension that: builds the market for local/regional products; brands the products that address that market; and educates consumers to make sound food decisions. These communications programs often target and engage specific populations such as seniors, youth, and low income residents. Sometimes these communication efforts include special food-related events, awards, and profiles of leading food personalities, organizations, and enterprises. Often they feature food with specific cultural orientations. Some cities put together calendars of events and other activities and undertake an Urban Food System Month or Year.

21) Resource Efficiency, Waste Reduction, and Recycling: Agriculture and food products and services have typically produced high levels of waste. Any waste is wasted money. The best Urban Food Strategies have a focus on resource efficiency, waste reduction, and recycling. Food waste can become compost. Used vegetable oils and animal fats can become bio-diesel fuels. Excess production can help meet the needs of food banks.

22) Crop, Product, and Policy Research and Technology Transfer: University and independent Food Institutes generate important research in the areas of food sheds, food crops, food production techniques, food products, food service, and food policy. It is important for Urban Food Strategies to engage with public and private research organizations both as a source for technology transfer and as a partner in evaluating the success of the Urban Food Strategies themselves.

23) Community Development: Some or all of these Urban Food Strategies can be incorporated in Community Development Strategies to address nutrition and health promotion, poverty reduction, job creation, and economic development for the low and moderate income neighborhoods in cities. Low income neighborhoods are sometimes “food deserts” and an Urban Food Strategy can include comprehensive programs to eliminate these food deserts. Also, cities can connect low and moderate income families with the various opportunities that emerge from successful regional Urban Food Strategies.

IV. STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES

As Denver Seeds proceeds, it will need to craft these best practices and, probably, others into a Denver Seeds Urban Food Strategy. In GUD’s experience, there are seven Strategic Principles that can help guide the development of a successful Denver Seeds Strategy:

1. Recognize that addressing the Urban Food System in Denver engages with a national/global Urban Food Movement that embraces the values of localism/regionalism and the 3 Es of sustainability: Economic prosperity, social Equity, and Environmental quality. Because of this, Denver Seeds can access many national resources from private organizations and governmental agencies.
2. Begin with an assessment of the current local/regional Denver Urban Food System reality, which includes food businesses, voluntary associations, advocacy organizations, and public agencies. Denver Seeds can and should build on and guide the evolution of this reality.
3. Formulate clear goals, objectives, criteria, measurements, and systems of evaluation to guide formulation and implementation of the Denver Seeds Strategy.
4. Understand that one or more effective Social Entrepreneurs/Entrepreneurial Teams are essential to the success of the Denver Seeds Strategy.

5. Embrace the opportunities that Networks of diverse individuals, businesses, organizations, and agencies offer for formulating and implementing the Denver Seeds Strategy, rather than relying solely on one organization, agency, or institution.
6. Appreciate market forces and use/guide the market to accomplish goals and objectives to the greatest degree possible, rather than relying solely on subsidies and government or foundation funding.
7. Keep evolving and making mid-course corrections, based on the evolution of the Urban Food System in Denver, around the nation, and around the world, as well as on the results obtained through monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the specific Denver Seeds Strategy.

By utilizing national Urban Food Strategy Best Practices and the Seven Strategic Principles, it should be possible to formulate and implement an Urban Food Strategy in Denver that will build the Denver Urban Food System in ways that make dramatic contributions to:

- The nourishment, health, and well-being of the people of Denver.
- Economic development, community development, job creation, and economic prosperity in Denver.
- The natural environment in the Denver region.
- The national Urban Food Movement.

That is the promise of Denver Seeds.