

Extending organics' reach

Towns get creative to serve poor, urban areas

By Beth Wang

With the number of people suffering from obesity, diabetes and other chronic health conditions rising in the United States, awareness of the need to find ways to provide healthier foods, especially in communities where availability is sparse, is also increasing.

Cities like New York and Chicago have adopted different ways to bring healthier food options to neighborhoods that lack them.

A study conducted by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene revealed East and Central Harlem have few supermarkets. Most of the stores that did exist didn't carry low-fat milk or leafy greens. In March this year, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed the Green Cart Initiative. Green Cart is the term used to describe a pushcart from which people can buy fresh fruits and vegetables. The city has allocated 1,000 permits for the carts. This year, 500 full-term permits were made available. By 2009, officials expect to add 500 more.

The goal for officials is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption in neighborhoods by 75,000 people and save at least 50 lives a year, according to a city spokesperson. A 2006 study conducted by the Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group stated communities that have no or distant grocery stores but nearby fast food restaurants are more likely to have increased numbers of premature death, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic health conditions.

Mark Winne, director of the Community Food Security Coalitions' Food Policy Council Project and author of "Closing the Food Gap," has helped many cities throughout the country and in Canada develop food policy councils. The councils allow people in all sectors of a city, state or county's food system to convene and address food and agriculture needs. The councils also try to educate people on the benefits of fresh produce and growing food locally.

The idea of the councils is growing in popularity in the United States and the



Finding organic food in urban areas is not always easy. In Chicago, many people must shop at their farmers markets to get produce otherwise not offered at nearby stores. Photo by Joe Gallo.

number of councils have doubled in the last five years, Winne said. "For quite a while now there's been a growing awareness that the food in the country is not healthy food," Winne said. "It's produced in a way that's harmful to the environment, our bodies and communities."

Winne helped develop Chicago's Food Policy Advisory Council, which in 2002 started working with community and city government to promote community food systems. Lynn Teemoeller, one of three co-chairs for the group, says the council has come a long way in the past six years.

"The idea of a food policy council is becoming more common," Teemoeller says. "It's an idea that I think government is getting more comfortable with. In a lot of ways, there are still all the challenges. But I think our work is becoming more clear to us with what needs to be done."

The focus of the council is unity, says Teemoeller. Building community food systems and working with the government to support that is one of the main priorities. She says as a city, Chicago is slowly moving forward and admits some cities have more experience. On the other hand, Chicago is unique because of the availability of land for community gardens and urban agriculture.

"I come from New York City and land is a lot harder to access there than in Chicago," said Teemoeller, who helped the nonprofit Quad Communities Development Corporation start a farmers market in Bronzeville. The nonprofit conducted a survey of more than 200 area residents and found while 93 percent of respondents said that they prefer to purchase fresh produce, only 6 percent of them chose community area stores as their produce provider, said Executive Director Bernita Johnson-Gabriel.

Both Teemoeller and Johnson-Gabriel said that the Bronzeville market is unique not only because it is the only city-sponsored farmers market in Chicago, but also because it provides residents with the options they mentioned in the survey. The east side of Bronzeville does not have the land available to support farming so the farmers market is the only avenue currently available to bring fresh foods to the community, Johnson-Gabriel said.

"You have to be innovative and creative. Most importantly you have to go to the community to find out what they want," Johnson-Gabriel said. "We didn't sit in a vacuum to find out what should happen. We went out to the community." ■