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All Systems Go

Connecting large food buyers like hospitals, hotels, and others in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors with local growers and producers of local foods is a step in the right direction

BY NANCY CHRISTY AND NEIL HEINEN



ILLUSTRATION BY WES MARTIN

We were talking recently with Rick Brooks, UW faculty member, health and education specialist, REAP co-founder, and buy-local advocate, ostensibly about the annual Dane Buy Local campaign. But what Brooks was interested in was this: Did we know Olivia Parry and did we know what she was working on and how successful it is? Actually it was more than a question. It was an invitation to see just how many more links have been added to the sustainable food chain. So we looked. And we liked what we saw.

More and more, genuine sustainability is planting its roots deepest in public-private partnerships. Born of

the marriage of necessity and vision, these collaborative enterprises at their best combine social and environmental values with effective business practices—like economies of scale—to create products and services that meet the demands of the customer while respecting the quality and fragility of the necessary resources.

While commonplace in other countries, the U.S. has typically viewed government and business as competitive, with antithetical management philosophies, despite ample evidence to the contrary. Witness Monona Terrace, the University of Wisconsin System and unemployment insurance to name but a few. Food systems, though, can prove stubborn to accommodating collaborative partnerships—as seen in antiquated farm subsidy and school-lunch policies. Stubborn, that is, in the absence of vision, leadership and follow-through. The results of all three can be seen weekly in a big barn about twenty-two miles south of Montello. It's one of four produce auctions in the state, and the one where Parry and the Dane County Institutional Food Market Coalition do their shopping.

The IFM is a Dane County-led effort linking large food buyers like hospitals, hotels, and others in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors with local growers and producers of local foods. Readers of this column know we've been critical of the snails pace with which large food service venues like Monona Terrace, Alliant Energy Center and Overture Center (to name just a few) have integrated and promoted their use of local foods. While we know the challenges and obstacles these places face, we saw other communities rise to the occasion. The Institutional Food Market Coalition is finally doing just that.

The coalition is the result of an Institutional Food Purchasing Resolution passed in March 2007 to explore options for Dane County to purchase locally produced foods and use them in food service. Dane County budgets about \$40,000 for staff to help coordinate the program, primarily Parry, the county's highly respected economic development planner. It is she who has pulled together the partners necessary to make this enterprise work by emphasizing the dual goals of economic development options for farmers and more local produce in institutional meals.

For the 2009 growing season, the coalition delivered more than one million pounds of food to forty-five public and private sector users—record numbers for the program and almost four times the amount of food delivered in 2008. Dane County's Consolidated Food Services alone purchased some 24,365 pounds of locally grown produce for use in the Badger Prairie Nursing Home, Dane County senior sites, the Dane County Jail and the café in the Dane County Courthouse. What we find especially encouraging is the new cost-benefit analysis. Typically fresh, local food—even purchased at auction—costs more. But St. Mary's Hospital food and nutrition director Sue Liebenstein told the *Wisconsin State Journal* recently the ten to fifteen percent additional cost was an acceptable trade-off for better taste and nutrition.

Part of Parry's approach, and we believe a key to her success, is IFM's commitment to outreach and education, developing the "infrastructure and programming necessary [to meet] the needs of institutional customers." In other words, combining the strengths of both public and private sectors to provide the genuine article, a sustainable food system

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