

A Brief History of Food Related Work on Lansing's Eastside and A Call for an Eastside Food Forum to Help Guide Future Initiatives

The purpose of this paper is to provide an historical perspective and a starting point for a facilitated conversation about our neighborhood food system scheduled for January 20, 6:30 pm at Foster Community Center. This Food Forum will focus on the health of the 'neighborhood food system' (everything from food production, processing, distribution to consumption). In the process, we hope to identify strengths, gaps, and strategies for how we can work together to meet the food needs of people in our neighborhood while forging partnerships and strategic alliances with others in the City and in the Region.

For thirty years, Eastside-based organizations have organized around 'food and flowers' to build community and beautify the neighborhood. Several of these organizations, and the food-related work they have done, are described below.

1970-1999

Eastside Neighborhood Organization

The organization that first took up the task of increasing food security among Eastside residents was the Eastside Neighborhood Organization (ENO). Founded in the early 70s, ENO is an all-volunteer, resident-driven umbrella organization, focusing on a broad range of concerns in the northeast quadrant of the City. ENO's early focus was on zoning, encroachment of commercial interests into the neighborhood, parking and traffic issues. The reputation of the ENO was cemented in 1975 when it played a critical role in responding to the Urbandale flood and in the clean-up that followed.

In the 80s, ENO launched a significant gardening initiative. Susan Christian, Jerry Estes and Rick Kibbey, long time ENO members, spent summers tilling gardens throughout the neighborhood. In addition to inexpensive tilling services, residents received seed, fertilizer and instruction in basic yard gardening. The effort embraced a 'bread and roses' approach—beautification via flower beds and increased food security via vegetable gardens.

Lansing Neighborhood Council (LNC)

Though LNC limited its gardening program to beautification, their 'Neighborhoods in Bloom' was a vibrant and popular program on the Eastside, and indeed, throughout the City from 1995 to 2004. Over the years, many smaller neighborhood organizations and watches organized beautification efforts either in conjunction with Neighborhoods in Bloom or independently.

The Garden Project

The Garden Project, established as a program of the Greater Lansing Food Bank in 1983, offers support to home & community gardeners in the Lansing area by providing land, plants, seeds, tools, educational opportunities and other gardening resources. As of 2009, The Garden Project supports over 50 community, group, and school gardens throughout the Lansing area. Several of the Project's community gardens are located on the Eastside, including Foster and Paradise Gardens, located just south of Foster Park, and the Armory Garden, situated between the new Pattengill Middle School and the Armory on Marshall Street. The Garden Project helps over 225 home gardeners grow healthy food in home gardens by providing supplies and garden

tilling if desired. Approximately 20% of The Projects home gardeners are Eastside Residents. The Garden Project's Resource Center is located in Foster Park, located on E. Kalamazoo St. where plants, seeds and tools are distributed and workshops and demonstrations are held.

Garden Project volunteers also harvest surplus fruits and vegetables from area farms for distribution to food pantries, human service organizations and residents of senior housing. A member of the Community Food Security Coalition and the American Community Gardening Association, the Project has collaborated with ANC since 2000 by providing gardening space for ANC's Youth Service Corps; donating gleaned produce to the ANC's Bread Basket program; making presentations to ANC's weekly Senior Coffee; and beginning in 2008, presenting gardening workshops at the Hunter Park Community GardenHouse (and receiving starter plants from the GardenHouse for Garden Project use).

Pantries – Salvation Army, Christ Lutheran Church, Calvary Church

The Eastside has benefitted from several pantries offering staples to people who have run out of food and money at the same time.

1999- Present

Allen Neighborhood Center (ANC)

In late 1999, the Ingham County Health Department approached Eastside organizations (ENO and the Eastside Neighborhood Summit Project) with an offer of start up support for a center that would 1) continue the Eastside Summit practice of engaging stakeholders for assessment and planning to address neighborhood improvement issues, and 2) provide a neighbor-friendly point of access to health, housing, human service resources to people living on the Eastside. Several veteran Eastside activists believed that creation of a 501-c-3 that could hire staff and accept and disperse funds would increase the capacity of the Eastside to build on its assets and respond to challenges. While acknowledging the critical importance of all-volunteer organizations and a commitment to building on this already existing infrastructure, these veterans felt that unless it was someone's job to do it, many of the goals and objectives identified in myriad neighborhood meetings and forums would not happen. This group of six veteran organizers accepted the offer of the Health Department, and the Eastside Neighborhood Summit Project morphed into Allen Neighborhood Center on June 24, 1999 to "serve as a hub for neighborhood revitalization and for activities that promote the health, safety, stability and economic well-being of Eastside residents and other stakeholders."

Almost immediately, ANC focused on food issues to address health and build community. ANC's first official food program began in 2000 with Food Movers, a program of the Greater Lansing Food Bank. Within two years, ANC parted company with Food Movers to form its own unaffiliated **Breadbasket**, a weekly food distribution program. **Breadbasket** currently serves roughly 85-100 families each week, providing several grain-based products and gleaned produce. Our Food Resource Project evolved in 2004 to include the popular neighborhood-based **Allen Street Farmers Market**, a partnership between our urban neighborhood and farmers on the perimeter of the City. ANC received the 2005 RED Team Award for excellence in regional and community service for creation of the Market, and that same year, became the first non-profit in Michigan authorized to accept EBT for our farmers. Our Market has grown dramatically over the last six years, drawing 16 farmers/vendors and over 16,000 patrons to our five hour Wednesday

afternoon Market during the 2008 and 2009 seasons. During the 2009 season, ANC also collaborated with Sparrow Health System to offer the once per month *Allen Street Farmers Market at Sparrow*. Held in the Sparrow Foundation parking lot on Michigan Ave., this satellite market provided easy access to purchase of local food to Sparrow employees, while introducing them to our farmers.

In the first half of 2008, ANC added the third major component of their Food Resources Project with the opening of the ***Hunter Park Community GardenHouse***, a hub for educational and entrepreneurial urban agriculture initiatives. The year-round, 95' X 30' greenhouse was funded by a Cool Cities Neighborhoods in Progress Grant, which was also used to install a perimeter path in Hunter Park. The Hunter Park Community GardenHouse had its grand opening in May '08, and has since engaged over 250 neighbors of all ages in gardening activities, raised bed gardening in the greenhouse, the first in the area '***Urban Gardener Certification Project***', and ***Garden-in-a-Box***, a scale appropriate introduction to yard gardening for neighbors with limited income, mobility and/or gardening skill. In 2010, the GardenHouse will host several gardening related workshops each month, a book club, film group, and more.

The Role of Youth in ANC's Food Projects and Other Programs

Allen Neighborhood Center's very first program in 1999 was the Youth Service Corps. This after school and summer program offers civic, job, and life skill training for middle and high school aged students. This now ten year old program has morphed over the last two years into a 'green corps', with members taking the lead in the building of all interior beds in the GardenHouse, planting and tending several of these for their booth at the Allen Street Farmers Market, and launching the Garden-in-a-Box project. Members of the group also serve as Student Farmers in the summer, working at the rural farms of the farmers that participate in our Market. Currently, they are growing food for several neighborhood restaurants in their year round GardenHouse beds. Of significance, youth are integrated into all of our food and gardening activities as well as other neighborhood improvement initiatives, such as litter patrol, newsletter delivery, clean up of public spaces, and simple patch and repair for neighborhood seniors.

Next Steps for ANC

The ANC strategic plan developed in 2008 by ANC board, staff, and key informants, outlines two new food-related projects to be developed over the next three years:

1. Combined PicNc Shelter/Outdoor and Gardening Education Classroom

ANC will partner with the City of Lansing Parks Department on the design and use of a Hunter Park-based structure that will serve as both a picnic shelter and outdoor classroom for nature and gardening education classes. A picnic shelter with grills was a top priority of residents involved in the 2004 Hunter Park Master Plan Update. Again in early 2008, in a door to door survey conducted by ANC outreach staff, the number one request of residents whose homes abut the park (approximately 65 households) was a picnic shelter with grills.

During the warmer months (May – September) when extended time in the Hunter Park GardenHouse is difficult due to high temperatures, the outdoor classroom will be utilized for workshops, classes, demonstrations and 'healthy grilling' instruction. The grills will be used for grilling vegetables harvested from the greenhouse to demonstrate

healthy additions to the usual grill fare. Special amenities (attachments for pull-down screens, etc.) will facilitate use of the structure as a classroom.

Neighborhood kids will also learn about Eastside biological and recreational reserves and connections in classes, workshops, and field trips to explore our rich blanket of habitat. Topics will include the relationship between the survival of the natural world and human survival, nature's food chain, wild gardens, the substantial street tree program in our area, the flow of 'natural' water, and the variety and layering of soil types (useful gardening knowledge).

2. *Food Resource Center*

ANC will determine the feasibility of establishing a Food Resource Center, including a commercial kitchen for use by 1) our Market farmers to create value-added product for sale through the winter months, and 2) neighbors interested in learning how to prepare and preserve food grown in our year round greenhouse or in their yard gardens, and 3) neighbors interested in developing their own value-added products i.e., micro-businesses. The Resource Center will increase our capacity to lead cooking/nutrition educational events and allow us to prepare food for the public (samples, etc) in a licensed kitchen for distribution at our Farmers Market, GardenHouse events, and other neighborhood based celebrations.

Other Initiatives:

Dr. Laura DeLind and Dr. Linda Anderson are working to launch the Lansing Urban Farms Project in spring of 2010. In the early planning stages, the two are meeting with institutional stakeholders at the City and County, and with neighbors in Urbandale, the proposed site of the first of a series of non-contiguous urban 'farms'.

The Food Forum on January 20

In the Eastside tradition of collaborative planning, ANC along with other organizations are hosting a conversation on January 20, facilitated by Vincent Delgado. Our intention is to invite neighbors, school staff and leadership, faith-based institutions, business and retail groups, non-profits, neighborhood activists, decision-makers, park professionals, gardening groups, youth groups, MSU advisors and others to participate in an assessment of the neighborhood food system, and to identify priorities and strategies for action. In addition, we hope to identify people interested in serving on an Eastside Food Advisory Group to guide ANC and other neighborhood-based organizations in developing programs tailored to meet the food, health, and economic development needs of Eastside stakeholders, while forging partnerships and strategic alliances with others in the City and in the Region.