

## Food Forward MI: Food Innovation Districts

“A food innovation district is a geographic concentration of food-oriented businesses, services and community activities that local governments support through planning and economic development initiatives in order to promote a positive business environment, spur regional food system development and increase access to local food” according to Patty Cantrell of Regional Food Systems Solutions, LLC. The idea of a food innovation district comes out of the Michigan Good Food Charter (see April 2016’s Food Policy blog) a statewide policy platform laying a roadmap to source 20 percent of Michigan’s food from Michigan markets by 2020, thereby increasing residents’ access to locally grown healthy foods. Why is this important? Michigan has tremendous opportunity to grow our health and economy while maintaining ecological diversity and cultural heritage.

Across Michigan, several food innovation districts are already in full swing having semi-organically developed and in other municipalities local government is actively working with and across grassroots organizations, food retail and supporting organizations as well as academic and philanthropic agencies to plan and implement a designated space to cultivate such food aggregation, distribution, processing and retail operations. Within Michigan these areas are represented across: Eastside Neighborhood, Lansing, MI; Eastern Market, Detroit, MI; Grand Traverse Regional Market, Traverse City, MI; Marquette Food Co-op and Hub, Marquette MI, and; Grand Rapids Downtown Market, Grand Rapids MI. What is unique across each of these areas is the origins and anchoring partners. For example, on the eastside of Lansing the local non-profit Allen Neighborhood Center has led the push forward with local health, academic and governmental partners. In Grand Rapids, the City is actively seeking more opportunity for water and waste water clientele with potential for food business innovation district overlap. Further west, the City of Muskegon is in discussion about using such a planning tool to help connect diverse populations.

Supporting this work across the state, Michigan State University Center Regional Food Systems (MSUCRFS) has worked extensively to congregate tools and supporting resources for innovation district development. Perhaps the best example of work to date on this type of urban planning tool comes from the 2012 publication *Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool* created in partnership with Regional Food Solutions, LLC, MSU CRFS, Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, and the MSU School of Planning, Design and Construction. While no study has been conducted (as of yet) on the overall impact of such a clustering of related food business, it should be noted that among economic benefits, a “breaking down of silos” and facilitation of new relationships and partnering has taken place from grassroots to government, public and private entities.

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