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New Tool to Spur Economic Development through Food Businesses Released

Communities interested in fostering economic development around local and regional food can find examples and how-to information in a resource released Monday. “Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool,” provides guidance to planners, developers, elected officials and community advocates on supporting farm and food business collaboration and innovation.

Funded through a U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development grant, the guidebook was released by the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments and developed in partnership with the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and Regional Food Solutions LLC. Project partners worked with stakeholders in Michigan and other states to define food innovation districts, research examples nationwide, and identify and explain implementation steps.

A food innovation district is a geographic concentration of food-oriented businesses, services, and community activities. This new land use concept is based on the economic benefits of business clusters. When supported through local planning and economic development initiatives, such districts can promote positive business environments, spur regional food system development, and increase access to local food.

“In Michigan and in other states, there’s a lot of interest in local food as well as in promoting entrepreneurship,” said CRFS specialist Laura Goddeeris. “We’re excited to introduce this concept as a way to grow regional economies through networks of food-related businesses.”

Food innovation districts often include services such as food business incubators and facilities for common storage, packing, and distribution needs. They also provide important opportunities to share information and partner on events and retail promotion. These districts offer fertile ground for regional food hubs to grow, and for related food and farm ventures and market channels to emerge in both rural and urban environments.

Establishing food innovation districts can foster the types of businesses needed to move toward a more regionally-based food system. Such shifts help advance one of the key priorities of the Michigan Good Food Charter, a policy platform that calls for 20 percent of foods purchased in Michigan to be produced in Michigan by 2020 and for alignment with social, environmental, and economic values.

“The guide is a valuable new resource that will help Michigan communities make this agenda priority from the charter a reality,” said CRFS specialist Kathryn Colasanti.

“Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool” is designed to help local governments and other stakeholders enter and benefit from the growing market and community demand for local and regional food. The guidebook identifies a process for developing food innovation districts that support economic gardening concepts, including roles for planners, economic developers, elected officials, and community champions. Resources, such as a how-to worksheet and zoning guidance, are provided to help communities take the first steps in planning their food innovation districts.

“Our hope is that communities will use the guide to identify food innovation assets in their communities, and that new ideas or projects that can leverage those assets will grow out of these discussions around food innovation districts,” says Sarah Lucas, a regional planner for the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments.

“Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool” is available online at www.nwm.org/food-innovation-districts. Hard copies can be obtained by contacting NWMCOG at 231-929-5000.

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems unites the applied research, education and outreach expertise of faculty and staff members at MSU to advance understanding of and engagement with regional food systems. CRFS organizers envision a thriving economy, equity and sustainability for Michigan, the country and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on food that is healthy, green, fair and affordable.

Founded in 1974, the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments facilitates and manages various programs and services for the 10 county region. These programs include Northwest Michigan Works, YouthBuild, Small Business & Technology Development Center, Procurement Technical Assistance Center, various business services, and many different regional planning initiatives in response to our communities’ requests and needs. You will see the broad spectrum of workforce, business and community services NWMCOG offers if you visit our web site, nwm.org. NWMCOG's member counties are: Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, and Wexford.

Regional Food Solutions LLC works with nonprofit and educational clients to communicate new food and farm business options and public policy directions.

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