

12.07.09 FoodWorks New York

Suppose I told you that New York City had the opportunity to create thousands of new jobs – but we just weren't doing it. You'd probably be pretty upset.

Now suppose I went on to say that we've actually had that opportunity for years, we just weren't paying close enough attention. I bet you'd all have some choice words for me – the kind that shouldn't be repeated in polite company.

Alright, now suppose I told you that by taking steps to create those jobs, we could also improve public health and reduce our energy consumption. We could fight childhood obesity and asthma. We could keep millions of dollars in the local economy, instead of sending those dollars across the country or around the world. But we still weren't doing it.

Well the fact is, we have been ignoring those exact opportunities. For years, we've been missing a chance to create a greener, healthier, and more economically vibrant city.

How? By ignoring the enormous potential of our city's food system.

Too often, we allow food issues to get pushed to the fringes of public policy. Maybe folks assume that the only goal of food initiatives is to feed the hungry. Or they think that worrying about where your food comes from is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.

But the truth is, each step in the food cycle – from the farm all the way to the table – has a major impact on the lives of every New Yorker. And each step has the potential to create jobs, to improve public health, and to preserve our shared environment. Or – if we continue to ignore those opportunities – the potential to cost us jobs, increase obesity, and pollute our air.

Here's an example – outside of the US military, New York City is the largest institutional buyer of food in the country. The Department of Education alone serves over 860,000 meals a day. But way too much of that money is spent outside the city and outside the state.

In the last few years, the DOE has started offering salad bars at many public schools – a great initiative we hope to expand. To stock those salad bars they spend nearly 300,000 dollars a year to buy over half a million pounds of Romaine lettuce. But the lettuce they serve doesn't come from New York State. It comes from California or Maryland.

The problem isn't that we can't find lettuce in New York State. In fact we've identified a farmer in Orange County who grows Romaine lettuce, and would love to sell to the DOE. The problem is, there isn't a facility in the area to wash, cut and bag that lettuce so it can be served in schools.

We have the product. We have the demand. And we're already spending the money. All we need to do is to bring that kind of wash, cut and bag facility to the five boroughs. And

wouldn't that be a great way to put some of our now empty manufacturing space to work?

Doing this will create jobs in our City, keep money in our area, and prevent half a million pounds of food from being transported all the way across the country.

Here's another example – 97 percent of the food that comes into the Hunt's Point market is transported by truck. Only 3 percent comes in by rail. Now the City has already committed to redeveloping the Hunts Point market, and they deserve credit for that. But we need to make sure we do it right.

If we were simply to double the amount of food coming in by rail, it would eliminate 58 million truck miles every year. 58 million miles. To put it in perspective, that's the equivalent of a single truck making 23,000 trips around the globe.

Or let's look at it another way. Eliminating those trucks would prevent 76,000 tons of carbon dioxide from being pumped into the air every year. It would take over 29,000 acres of trees to eliminate that much carbon dioxide. That's the size of 35 Central Parks.

These are some of the reasons why we need to take a comprehensive look at our food system, and find ways to make it stronger. For too long we've taken a piecemeal approach to these issues, without any kind of long term planning.

Now make no mistake – there’s been a lot of great work done on food initiatives in the last few years. Work done by Council Members like Bill de Blasio, Leroy Comrie, Joel Rivera and Eric Gioia. Work done by Mayor Bloomberg; Borough President Scott Stringer; Former Health Commissioner Tom Frieden, and our Food Policy Coordinator Ben Thomases, along with so many others.

I’m especially proud of the work the City Council has done. Our Food Stamp Data Match with HRA has helped thousands of New Yorkers enroll for food stamps. We’ve restored millions of dollars to food pantries and meals on wheels. This year we more than doubled the amount of food stamps being spent at Greenmarkets. And working with EDC and Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito, we’re constructing a brand new kitchen incubator at the city’s La Marquetta building. This will help dozens of small food businesses create hundreds of new jobs.

Each of these initiatives is stimulating our economy, while helping people feed their families, and access more nutritious food. But it wasn’t until the FRESH program that we began to find a more forward thinking, soup to nuts approach.

As Bruce and Peggy mentioned earlier, the FRESH program grew out of our Supermarket Commission, which brought together government, industry and labor with food advocates and community representatives – meaning all stakeholders and all perspectives had input.

Their recommendations took into consideration the full scope of the food cycle, and the full range of potential benefits – from improving public health to strengthening the local economy.

What they came up with was the first of its kind in the nation – the use of both zoning and tax incentives to bring more grocery stores to underserved communities. And we should all be incredibly proud and excited that the FRESH zoning initiatives are about to be passed by the full City Council this week.

The FRESH program has become a critical part of our efforts to create jobs and promote nutrition in the city. But more importantly, it has given us a model for even larger efforts.

So today I am proud to announce a bold new initiative – one that will be a major focus of the City Council in the coming months, and inform all of our work throughout the next four years. Over the next six months, we will be developing a long term, comprehensive plan for our food system – one that is healthy, sustainable, and economically vibrant.

We're calling it FoodWorks New York, because it's about using food to put New Yorkers to work, and finding ways to make food work for us. We're going to reevaluate and redefine every step in New York City's food cycle – production, processing, transport, retail, consumption, and post-consumption.

To help us develop our plan, we'll be passing legislation that will require city agencies to report back on food related measures. This data will help us set ambitious but achievable goals, and better coordinate efforts across all levels of city government. At the same time, we're having conversations with a wide array of experts from the same sectors we tapped in our Supermarket Commission.

All of this work will culminate in the spring, when we'll present our final FoodWorks blueprint. That blueprint will help us achieve five clear and critical goals.

Goal number one: Improve our city's food infrastructure. Too much of that infrastructure is outdated and inefficient, which costs us jobs and damages our environment. That's why we need to begin making key, targeted investments – creating better links between the city and upstate producers, and supporting a smarter redevelopment of Hunts Point.

Our second goal: Create new and better jobs in the food industry. We need to attract more food industry companies to the city, like we're doing with the FRESH initiative. And we're going to find creative ways to expand local food manufacturing – like we're doing with our kitchen incubator, and like we could be doing with a brand new wash, cut, and bag facility for the Department of Education's lettuce. We talk a lot about getting people food, so they can feed their families. Now let's use food to get people jobs, so they can afford to feed their families.

Goal number three – keep more of our local food dollars in the local economy. Food sales and services in the five boroughs constitute a 30 billion dollar market, but only 2 percent of the fruits and vegetables coming through Hunts Point are produced in New York State. We can change that - through state legislation allowing the City to prioritize local producers. We can also expand our farmers markets and CSAs, and encourage more wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants to use regional products. And when we send more dollars to our local farms, we need to make sure they're being used to create good paying jobs. It's high time for the State of New York to protect the rights of farm workers.

Our fourth goal – reduce diet related diseases like obesity, heart disease and diabetes. 58 percent of all adults in New York City are overweight or obese, and more than half a million New Yorkers have been diagnosed with diabetes. We can fight this epidemic by bringing more healthy foods into low income neighborhoods and making sure that they're affordable. We can enroll more New Yorkers in Food Stamps and WIC, get more children taking advantage of free meals. We can invest in nutrition and cooking education for New York City families.

Now our final goal is one that's often overlooked when thinking about food policy in the city – we're going to reduce environmental damage from the production, transport, and consumption of food. We can help get more food transported into the city by rail instead of by truck. We can expand urban agriculture through community gardens, green roofs, and urban farms. We can create programs allowing restaurants and homeowners to more easily compost their food scraps.

These are just a few examples of the ways we can begin to meet our five goals – improve our infrastructure, create jobs, strengthen our food economy, reduce diet related disease, and protect our environment.

In the next six months, we'll be looking for even more ideas, and announcing new and exciting proposals in FoodWorks New York. We'll especially be looking for initiatives that can be done at little or no cost to taxpayers, and I believe in many cases, we'll actually save the City money. And we'll be counting on each of you to help us dramatically change the way our city looks at food.

With FoodWorks, we'll make sure that food works for our economy, that it works for our environment, and that it works for our health.

Because the next time I see one of you, I want to be able to say that we are creating thousands of new jobs. I want to be able to tell you that we are protecting the health of our children, that we are improving our air quality and supporting our local farmers.

I want to tell every New Yorker that we have a real vision for the future of food in this city. And I want to tell them that when we had the opportunity to use our food system to make their lives better, we took it for all it was worth.