



**FoodWorks: A Vision of NYC's Food System
City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Monday, November 22, 2010**

One billion dollars.

That's how much money New York City loses every year to grocery stores in New Jersey, Connecticut, Westchester and Long Island.

Six billion dollars.

That's the amount we spend each year on obesity-related medical expenses in New York State. And 80 percent of those bills are paid by your taxpayer dollars through Medicare and Medicaid.

9 dollars.

That's the amount of food stamps the average family is expected to make last for a full day.

There are some who think that food is a fringe issue, one that doesn't matter to average New Yorkers. There are those who say we can't afford to talk about food when we're still reeling from a recession.

To that I say, we can't afford not to talk about food right now.

For far too long, we've ignored a growing crisis in our city and across the nation.

We're a city of more than 20,000 restaurants, yet 1.4 million New Yorkers struggle to put food on the table. One out of every four children in New York City is overweight or obese.

New York State farmers like Cheryl only make half as much per acre as farmers in other parts of the country. Meanwhile, the food system is responsible for nearly 80% of our increased energy use in recent years.

Now this may sound like a bleak picture – but there’s plenty of good news. The good news is that we already have the resources we need to begin transforming our food system.

The New York City food market consists of over 30 billion dollars in spending. We have a budget for institutional meals second only to the United States military.

We’re in a unique and powerful position to influence our food system - locally, nationally, and even globally.

And the good news is that New Yorkers are paying more attention to their food than ever before. We have countless advocates, experts, and service providers – many of whom are in the audience today.

Together they’re working around the clock to feed hungry New Yorkers, improve public health, and strengthen both our economy and our environment.

Now it’s up to us to unite all of these efforts into one coordinated plan – the first of its kind in our city’s history.

The 59 proposals in our FoodWorks report outline a vision for a healthier, greener, and more economically vibrant city.

We'll build upon efforts already in place – efforts not just by the City Council, but by Mayor Bloomberg, Public Advocate de Blasio, Borough President Stringer, and so many others.

We'll invest in our infrastructure, create good jobs, and keep more of our local food dollars in the local economy.

We'll fight diet related conditions like obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. And we'll reduce the impact of our food system on the environment.

Right here at Food and Finance High School, students like Lazarus are learning how to build careers and improve our city by working with food.

They're learning how to grow vegetables in an urban environment, how to cook healthy meals, and how to market and sell their products.

In the coming months they'll even begin composting some of their food scraps. They'll send that compost to the High School for Public Service in East Flatbush.

In exchange, students there will send back produce from their 10,000 square foot garden.

These young New Yorkers understand the tremendous potential of our food system. The proposals outlined in FoodWorks today will help our city follow their great example.

So where do we begin? We begin where our food begins.

New York State is home to over 36,000 farms and 7 million acres of farmland.

We rank 2rd in the nation for apple production – growing more than enough to meet our local demand. Yet we still import apples from Washington State and apple juice from China.

Instead we could be getting more apples from places like Red Jacket Orchards. Our food dollars could be helping them create jobs at their farm up in Geneva, or at their warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

So how can we better support these regional farmers? First we can harness the immense purchasing power of our City government.

Each year, agencies spend over \$175 million on food for senior centers, student meals, and other programs.

Just by identifying regional sources for products they already needed, the Department of Education was able to buy an additional \$4.5 million in regional food since 2006.

That's the equivalent of what 180 farm workers make in a year.

Now, Council Member Gale Brewer is going to introduce legislation to require this same kind of effort at other City agencies.

DOE found ways to buy more locally without any additional costs. So why can't everyone?

We can also create more places for farmers to sell their products. We should capitalize on the growing popularity of community supported agriculture programs – or CSAs.

They allow New Yorkers to buy a share of a local farmer's crops, and then get deliveries of fresh produce every week.

The city already has over 100 CSAs, but many communities have been left out. So we'll work with DFTA and NYCHA to try to bring CSAs to senior centers and public housing.

We'll encourage large companies to start workplace CSAs for their employees. And to lead by example, we'll be starting our own CSA at City Hall.

We can also build on the city's farmers markets. They provide a place for farmers to sell healthy food at affordable prices - often in neighborhoods without other healthy options.

In 2005 we helped greenmarkets start taking food stamps and other government benefits.

Thanks to this program, food stamp sales have increased from a few hundred dollars in 2005 to nearly a quarter of a million dollars last year.

This year we've expanded the program to 40 markets – and we won't stop until we reach every farmers market in the city.

These are some of the important steps we can take on a local level. But large scale change will require action on the state and federal level as well.

New York State ranks 29th in the country for farm subsidies, even though we rank 5th when it comes to vegetable production.

That's because most subsidies go to commodity crops, instead of the healthy crops grown here in New York State.

The next Federal Farm Bill should be up for vote in 2013, but we're not going to wait three years. We'll start now, working with Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, and the whole New York delegation.

We'll push Congress to focus on healthy food, and direct more subsidies to fruit and vegetable farmers. If we can get even an additional 1 percent of national subsidies, it would be the equivalent of what 6300 farm workers make in a year.

Now I've talked a lot about how to support farms in the region. But you might not realize there's a small but substantial amount of food grown right here in the five boroughs.

New York City has 20 farms recognized by the USDA, and thousands of urban farmers growing food in community gardens and back yards, on rooftops, or even inside buildings.

This kind of urban agriculture may not be able to compete with traditional farms in terms of price or output.

But don't be too quick to write them off - 40% of all fruits and vegetables consumed during World War 2 were grown in backyard "victory gardens".

So let's help a new generation of urban farmers get the space they need to start growing.

Towards that end, we'll pass Assistant Majority Leader Lew Fidler's legislation to create a searchable database of all city-owned and leased properties. It'll help farmers identify possible places to grow.

And even though we already scored a major victory in the fight to protect our community gardens, we'll continue to work with Council Member Melissa Mark Viverito to get them the permanent protections they need.

In addition, we're working with Council Members Gale Brewer and Oliver Koppell on a whole package of initiatives to incentivize rooftop farms and greenhouses.

We're looking at ways to waive zoning restrictions, expand a state tax credit, reduce water rates, and streamline the inspection process.

And while urban farming may not be a major economic engine right now, we have the opportunity to become a leader in the development of new technologies.

And we're not just talking vegetables - right here at Food and Finance, students are working with Cornell scientists to raise thousands of Tilapia in indoor tanks, using a space the size of a normal classroom.

As the global population increases, and countries like India and China continue to industrialize, we'll need new ways to grow food outside of traditional farms.

Throughout history, New Yorkers have invented technologies that changed the way people eat – everything from quick freezing to the Chop-O-Matic.

So why couldn't we discover the next big breakthrough that helps feed people around the world?

Now once our food leaves the farm, it doesn't always head straight to the store. In fact, between 80 and 90 percent of all food purchased in the US goes through some form of processing.

This could be as simple as slicing and bagging an apple, or as complicated as turning it into apple juice or apple pie.

We usually think of processed foods as being high in fat and sugar, but plenty are made from fresh, healthy ingredients. And when those products get made, we want to make sure they're creating jobs here, instead of somewhere else.

This kind of food processing is one of the few manufacturing sectors still thriving in the five boroughs.

It's a 5 billion dollar industry that employs over 14,000 New Yorkers. And even in a bad economy, it has the potential to grow and add more jobs.

Damascus Bakeries is a third generation food manufacturer – they make pitas and wraps at a factory in downtown Brooklyn.

Damascus was started by a Syrian Immigrant back in 1930. Today they employ 125 New Yorkers, and they're looking to expand.

We've identified 70 companies like Damascus. They want to stay here in New York, but they're worried they won't be able to find affordable space that fits their growing needs.

Well let me be clear – we are going to fight to keep all those businesses and all those jobs right here in the five boroughs.

We've set aside funding to create more food processing space – its part of a \$10 million Small Manufacturing Investment Fund we created with Council Member Diana Reyna.

And we're working with EDC to identify existing spaces, and match them with growing businesses.

As we work to help these food manufacturers expand, we're also helping the next generation get started. But many talented cooks can't afford to rent their own industrial kitchen.

That's where we can help. As you may have heard me mention before, the City Council is building a brand new shared commercial kitchen at La Marqueta in East Harlem - again working with EDC, and thanks in large part to the efforts of Council Member Melissa Mark Viverito.

When it opens in the next few months, it will serve as an incubator for dozens of new businesses, creating hundreds of new jobs.

Now remember, the city owns La Marqueta, and for years it sat vacant while we paid for maintenance and security. That's just throwing money away.

Instead, by investing \$1.5 million dollars in our kitchen incubator, we're putting people to work. And it's beginning to revitalize the whole of La Marqueta - attracting retail tenants, and possibly developing other areas for existing food processors.

Another way that government can help is by creating new links between businesses. Damascus Bakery makes garlic and onion flavored pitas.

Maybe they could be getting their onions and garlic from Cheryl's farm. And we want both of them selling their products in your corner store.

You might think these folks would already know each other – but you'd be amazed at how busy you can get running a farm or a bakery.

So our job is to make the connections. That's why the Council will be organizing a business-to-business conference for regional producers, local processors, and local retailers.

And we'll show all these businesses how to compete for city contracts. We'll create opportunities for new and emerging entrepreneurs, and help existing firms grow and add new jobs.

The next phase of our food system is perhaps the most complicated – distribution.

In order for food to get from the farm to your table, it has to move through a complex network of warehouses and markets, highways and train stations. During that time, a lot of our food has crisscrossed the country or circled the globe.

Clearly, getting more food from local farmers like Cheryl can help reduce the negative effects of all this shipping back and forth. But we also need to look at how our food arrives in the five boroughs, and how we can improve our infrastructure and supply routes.

And we have to begin by looking at the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx – the beating heart of our city's food system.

Hunts Point is the largest food distribution center in the world, home to more than 200 businesses and 12,000 jobs.

Every year it takes in more than two and a half billion pounds of produce. If you eat something in New York City, there's a good chance it passed through Hunts Point.

The Hunts Point market has served us well – but it first opened in 1967. You know what else opened in 1967? The Graduate.

I think we might be due for an upgrade.

Hunts Point faces three separate but connected problems. Its way over capacity – it's an environmental nightmare – and its missing out on major economic opportunities.

These problems make Hunts Point less competitive. They put us at risk of losing money – and jobs – to large national corporations – or worse, to a new produce market that Philadelphia just built.

Now to their credit, the City has already committed to redevelop Hunts Point. But so far, they haven't thought much beyond the kinds of services that have been there for years.

Instead we should be shooting for the moon, and creating a vision for what Hunts Point could be. This is one of the biggest infrastructure projects in a generation. If we only get one thing right in our whole plan, this needs to be it.

Look, I don't have all the answers today. But I can tell you some of the ingredients that we'll need if we really want to improve Hunt's Point.

The Hunts Point produce market is so far over capacity, businesses have to use overflow storage in diesel trucks. These trucks run constantly, wasting fuel and releasing toxic fumes into the air.

It's no wonder the Hunts Point community has the highest asthma rate in the city.

We need a greatly expanded produce market, to keep those storage trucks from polluting our air, and keep our businesses from losing money.

And think about it – how are we going to get more healthy food into our neighborhoods if we can't even get it into the city.

Almost all our food comes into Hunts Point on trucks – trucks that clog our roadways and pump even more exhaust fumes into our air.

We can do better. We need to build new rail terminals, to help bring in more products by train instead of truck.

Increasing rail service to just 6 percent would eliminate 58 million truck miles every year. That's the equivalent of a single truck making over 2,400 trips around the globe.

Business owners have told us they want more regional foods - some estimates show roughly 600 million dollars in unmet demand. We need a permanent wholesale farmers market, so we can connect them with regional producers.

Right now the closest thing we have is a dozen determined farmers selling in a parking lot behind the fish market - without electricity, running water, or any basic amenities.

That's no way to do business in the greatest city in the world.

We also need to create opportunities for other kinds of businesses. We should build new manufacturing space – after all, what better place for a food processor than right next door to local, farm fresh ingredients.

And we're going to work with Council Member Maria del Carmen Arroyo, to make sure the needs of the Hunt's Point community are reflected in the new markets.

For decades they've dealt with the traffic, noise and air pollution. It's high time they reaped more of the benefits.

When the original Hunts point was designed, it only tried to address the needs of its day. By the time it opened in 1967, it was already obsolete.

We can't afford to make the same mistake again. We need to create a new Hunts point that doesn't just serve the needs of 2010, but of 2030 and beyond.

Now we move to consumption - the phase of the food system that defines what and where we eat, and how those choices affect our health, our economy, and our environment.

In part, this comes down to personal choices. It's up to each of us to choose between food grown locally, and food trucked in from across the country.

To choose between an apple and a Twinkie, a double cheeseburger and a garden salad.

Now I'm not going to pretend that I always pick the garden salad myself. But if we want New Yorkers to make better choices, we need to give New Yorkers better options.

Some New York neighborhoods have high end supermarkets on every corner. Other neighborhoods – like Jamaica, Central Brooklyn, or the South Bronx – have such little access to healthy food, they're known as food deserts.

That's why we're going to get more companies to take advantage of the FRESH program, which provides financial benefits and zoning incentives to create grocery stores in these communities.

In the program's first year, it's helped bring three new grocery stores to New York City, creating 93 new jobs and preserving an additional 90 jobs.

And let me be blunt – this program would have never happened without the work of a lot of folks in this room today, as well as Council Majority Leader Joel Rivera and our Deputy Majority Leader Leroy Comrie.

Now speaking of creating jobs, grocery stores provide a tremendous opportunity to get New Yorkers back to work. That's why I'm proud to announce that the Council has partnered with the Hope Program to pilot a new initiative called GroceryWorks.

In its first year, GroceryWorks will train and place 100 unemployed New Yorkers. We'll help get them on a career track towards store management, purchasing, and other good jobs.

These and other initiatives will help New Yorkers make better choices about what to eat, and get them back to work so they can afford to eat.

But what about the more than 1 million New Yorkers who struggle to put food on the table, even in the best of times? We need to take action on both the local and federal level to strengthen the hunger and nutrition programs in our city.

For example, the food stamp program – it brings in federal dollars that feed hungry New Yorkers, and get spent at local stores.

But believe it or not, the City actually discourages many New Yorkers from signing up - by requiring that food stamp applicants be fingerprinted.

They argue that it saves the city money by reducing fraud - but there's no compelling evidence to support that.

Maybe that's why New York City is one of only four places in the country that still requires this archaic practice.

In reality, research indicates that fingerprinting deters nearly 30,000 eligible New Yorkers from signing up.

We're losing out on over \$54 million a year in federal benefits - dollars that could be helping food businesses stay open.

Now – is the time for us – to decriminalize hunger.

Requiring fingerprinting for food stamp applicants is a harmful and destructive policy – and I call on the Bloomberg Administration to abandon it immediately. It's simply the right thing to do.

While food stamps help feed New Yorkers at home, our schools provide meals to many students during the day.

But less than 30 percent of low income students take advantage of free breakfast – that puts us second to last in the nation.

No wonder so many students are struggling in class – they're too hungry to think straight.

Compare this to Newark, New Jersey, where nearly 95 percent of students get free breakfast. What's the difference?

In Newark, students get breakfast in their classrooms, instead of the cafeteria. The evidence is clear - we need to start requiring all high-need schools to offer breakfast in the classroom.

The last phase of our food system is Post-Consumption. This phase has the pleasure of dealing with the byproducts of every other phase.

Everything from apple cores to food packaging - not to mention those leftovers that have been sitting in the fridge for the last two weeks.

All of this food related waste has to go somewhere. And right now, the majority of it goes right in the trash.

So what can we do about it? First, we can decrease waste throughout the food system. This is the reduce part of the three R's you might remember – reduce, reuse and recycle.

Here again, City government can take the lead. That's why Council Member Annabel Palma is introducing legislation that will develop packaging guidelines for the food that City Agencies procure.

These guidelines will encourage businesses competing for City contracts to minimize their packaging.

And remember – we're the second largest food buyer in the country. When we say we want something, businesses tend to listen.

Now packaging is part of the problem. But food itself accounts for more than a fifth of all our garbage. Right now we spend millions dollars to ship it out of the five boroughs, mostly to incinerators or landfills.

So let's talk about the other two R's – reusing and recycling. We need to stop thinking of our food scraps as garbage, and start thinking of them as resources that can be used for fertilizer, or even as renewable energy.

Every year, New Yorkers bring more than 300 tons of food scraps to the Union Square Green Market for composting.

And I'm proud to announce that this year, the City Council will be expanding that program to all five boroughs. In its first year, our program will increase composting by 225 tons.

This is a great first step – but 225 tons is still just a drop in the garbage bucket. That's why this summer – thanks to the leadership of Council Members Debi Rose and Tish James - we passed a law to begin the work of bringing citywide composting to the five boroughs.

But compost isn't the only way we can use food waste as a resource. How about grease and oil? And no, I'm not talking about the cast of the Jersey Shore.

I'm talking about the grease and oil produced by restaurants. It can be turned into a biofuel that heats buildings and runs vehicles.

And since we've got more than 20,000 restaurants, biofuel companies want to locate here. It's not just good for the environment, it's good for our economy too.

Already one plant is opening in the city to process our grease. And to give a boost to the industry, we just passed a law - sponsored by Council Member Jim Genarro - that requires heating oil sold in the city to contain at least two percent biofuel.

Now we're looking at other ways to attract this growing industry, and bring those biofuel jobs right here.

And there are other cutting edge technologies that transform organic waste into renewable energy.

Anaerobic digestion and thermal processing are new techniques that could convert a lot of our waste into a gas that can be used to generate electricity.

This used to be the stuff of science fiction – the fuel that ran the DeLorean in Back to the Future.

But now these techniques are the future of food waste management. We need to start exploring and investing in them today.

These are just some of the 59 proposals included in our FoodWorks report.

Taken individually, each idea has the power to create jobs, improve our health, or protect our environment. But together they represent something even greater.

They represent a shared vision for a more sustainable food system – a ground to garbage approach unprecedented in the history of our city.

They represent the beginning of a deeper conversation with New Yorkers about our food.

And they represent a simple belief that we can do better.

That in a city where hundreds of thousands of people go to bed hungry, and billions of dollars go to waste, we have to do better.

This Thursday is Thanksgiving – a day first celebrated by the Pilgrims to show their gratitude for the food that sustained them.

They would never have survived their first winter if not for Native Americans who shared generously of their harvest, and taught settlers how to farm a new land.

Our ancestors knew that food is our most valuable resource. They treated it with reverence. And that spirit is still alive today.

It's alive in farmers like Cheryl, getting good food to low income New Yorkers, and teaching new immigrants how to start their own farms.

And it's alive in students like Lazarus, following their dreams, and working to help a new generation of New Yorkers connect with their food.

It can be alive in all of us. We can take small steps every day.

To teach our children healthy eating habits. To help a hungry neighbor get a hot meal.

To avoid products that damage our environment. To support a local business.

To waste less, share more, and think carefully about all the choices we make – individually and as a city.

It's through that kind of personal action that we'll see real and lasting change, not just on paper, but on our streets and at our tables.

So I ask you all to join with me. Working together, starting today, we can build a better food system here in New York City.

Thank you.