

Austin/Travis County Sustainable Food Policy BoardAnnual Report – Initial Year**Background and Purpose:**

The Sustainable Food Policy Board (SFPB) serves in the unique capacity of directly advising both the Austin City Council and the Travis County Commissioners' Court to improve the availability of safe, nutritious, locally, and sustainably-grown food at reasonable prices for all residents, particularly those in need, by coordinating the relevant activities of city government, as well as nonprofit organizations, and food and farming businesses.

On November 20, 2008 the City of Austin passed and approved ordinance no. 20081120-058, which added to the city code section 2-1-170 Sustainable Food Policy Board. The creating ordinance describes the findings that led to the need for the board, as well as the composition, workings and goals of the board. The County of Travis supports all aspects of the creating ordinance and the board holds a unique position as a joint City of Austin/Travis County working board. The SFPB had its initial organizational meeting on March 30, 2009.

The scope of the Board's charge is far-reaching, encompassing the assessment and strengthening of Austin and Travis County food systems as well as the accessibility and affordability of fresh food, and the effectiveness of outreach and education. In short, the board advises policymakers about two intersecting areas – local food systems and food security.

*Local Food Systems*

The local food systems piece of the SFPB's work supports a collaborative effort to strengthen locally-based, self-reliant food economies - integrating sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption to enhance the economic, environmental and overall health of Austin and Travis County.

As written in its creating ordinance, the SFPB specifically wishes to:

- recognize that increasing the amount of fresh, nutritious and sustainably-grown food in our region will have a positive impact on our local economy and the region's efforts to reduce energy consumption and its production of greenhouse gases;
- ensure that the price of food in the city and the county remains reasonably close to the average price existing in the balance of the region and stable as compared to the median family income;
- ensure that the region maintains the natural resources, land base, infrastructure and skill sets necessary to produce fresh, nutritious and sustainably and locally grown food, including organic, pasture-based, and humane farming products.
- recognize the importance of providing education to its residents to support a healthy, local food system by promoting environmental, nutritional, cultural, culinary, and horticultural awareness; and
- ensure that the region preserves its unique food culture, traditions, and heritage.

### *Food Security*

*The SFPB believes nutritious and affordable food provided in a respectful manner is a human right and that there is no excuse for hunger. The SFPB's work in this area includes assessing hunger in Austin and Travis County and advising policymakers to ensure access to fresh and affordable food.*

*As per its creating ordinance, the SFPB specifically wishes to:*

- ensure that a wide variety of safe, nutritious and sustainably-grown food is available to city and county residents and is not limited by economic status, location, or other factors beyond a resident's control;
- monitor the availability, price and quality of food throughout the Austin and Travis County area;
- collect data on the food security (i.e., access to an affordable, diversified local food supply) and the nutritional status of city residents;
- monitor and analyze the administration of city and county food and nutrition programs; and
- inform city and county policy makers, administrators, and the public at-large about the status of the region's food system and food security;

### **Accomplishments This Year:**

A central mission of the Sustainable Food Policy Board is to increase the local production of fresh food. In pursuit of that goal, the SFPB initiated two City Council resolutions directly aimed at local production. On October 15, 2009, City Council passed resolution 20091015-023, sponsored by council member Chris Reily, which asked the city manager to work with the SFPB and other stakeholders to examine the feasibility of new agricultural water and wastewater rates and other measures for ensuring that responsible urban agriculture and farms have affordable access to water.

Local production of fresh food was given another boost by the SFPB on November 19, 2009, when the City Council adopted resolution 20091110-065, sponsored by council members Mike Martinez and Chris Riley, to promote urban farms and community gardens. The resolution will make it easier for community gardeners and urban farmers to find appropriate lands, implement sustainability strategies, manage pest populations, and protect water quality. The resolution seeks to streamline the process of applying for an urban farm or community garden, while also directing city staff to identify empty lots owned by the City that could serve as land for sustainable community gardens and urban farms. Thus far city staff has identified over 100 potential sites for community gardens on city property. Travis County staff also worked with the SFPB in identifying similar land suitable for farming that is owned by the County.

Another key mission of the SFPB is improving the local food economy. So the SFPB worked closely with city staff and stakeholders on two additional measures aimed at increasing community access to fresh food by supporting the recent growth of our local farmers' markets. On April 29, 2010, the City Council passed an ordinance giving vendors at farmers'

markets the right to pass out free samples under a new food handlers permit. This ordinance recognizes that allowing customers to taste food strengthens ties between producers and consumers, educates citizens, and helps markets thrive. A follow-up resolution, sponsored by council members Sheryl Cole, Mike Martinez and Chris Riley, was passed on March 25th and directed the city manager and staff to research how other markets around the state are serving hot or cooked food and to create a solution that will work within existing state and local regulations.

Sometimes improving the local food environment means defeating ordinances instead of passing them. Earlier this year, the SFPB successfully lobbied the Planning Commission and City Council to reject a proposed amendment to the City Code that would have banned backyard roosters. The SFPB surveyed rooster owners, local farmers, and other stakeholders and concluded that roosters did indeed serve a practical purpose and that rooster noise could be controlled by responsible owners. The SFPB's recommendation, which was adopted by policymakers, suggested that rooster noise be addressed under the City's existing noise ordinance.

One of the SFPB's continuing missions is to monitor the price, availability, and quality of food throughout the Austin and Travis County area. We have made steady progress on that front. Working with Karen Banks at the University of Texas, the SFPB is eagerly awaiting the results of Ms. Banks's foodshed assessment, which will evaluate farm capacity and food access in Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson counties. The resulting market basket surveys will be overlaid on maps of the local public transportation system, giving policymakers a view of the accessibility of fresh food throughout our community.

### **The Board's Ongoing Work:**

The SFPB was established to advise City and County policymakers, but we'll ride our bikes to the State Capitol if necessary. Along with pursuing local permitting options for serving hot food at farmers' markets, the SFPB also has been lobbying the State of Texas for regulatory changes to accommodate our community's needs. The State agency responsible for food-service regulations is currently considering a proposal, on which the SFPB is providing input, to add a new subchapter to the Texas Food Establishment Rules that would provide comprehensive regulations tailored to the needs of farmers' markets, including hot-food permits.

Perhaps the easiest way for local government to increase local food production is to buy more of it. So the SFPB is currently working with city and county staff on ensuring that food purchased with government money is local food where possible.

Public schools are critical governmental consumer of food. They are also a vital source of nutrition---sometimes the only source---for thousands of central Texas children. The Capital Area Food Bank is providing an inspired service to our community by linking local farmers to these public schools. The Food Bank will begin purchasing fresh food from local farmers and community gardeners, transporting and warehousing the food, and then distributing that food to area schools, all for a price lower than charged by factory farms. The SFPB is committed to working closely with the Food Bank on this project, reaching out to area farmers, schools,

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and policymakers to ensure its success.