

Comments for Joint Public Hearing by Public Health Committee and Human Services Committee of
the Texas House of Representatives on Food Security/Access/Food Assistance Programs

May 22, 2012

Paula J. McDermott

Chairperson, Austin/Travis County Sustainable Food Policy Board

The City of Austin and County of Travis officially established a joint food policy advisory board to city council and the county commissioners court in November 2008, which has been seated and working for approximately three years.

It's creating ordinance charges the Austin/Travis County Sustainable Food Policy Board (SFPB) with advising policy makers in order 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 non-profit organizations, and food and farming businesses."

To that end, the board recently recommended that local governments invest in an extensive and accessible outreach campaign to facilitate enrollment in federal food assistance programs – in particular, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Specific suggestions were made to ensure the initiative have a bilingual emphasis and provide technical support where people who are potentially eligible already live and work (e.g., libraries, flea markets, schools) building on the state's effort to enroll via computers and to utilize social media and effective outreach methods. Additionally, the SFPB recommended that the local government put resources into incentive programs that increase the value of SNAP dollars spent on locally produced nutritious food at farmers markets and for fresh produce sold via other local retailers.

The State can enact policies that effectively raise awareness of eligibility for food assistance programs while increasing efforts to streamline enrollment AND re-enrollment in these programs. Likewise, the state can help incentivize use of SNAP and WIC for purchasing nutritious and, as much as possible, locally and sustainably produced food, thereby strengthening not only the health of those living in our state, but also the environmental and economic health of our communities.

Policies should include incorporating appropriate metrics into state (and local) planning processes and clarifying rules and language in related state documents to make it easier for producers to get the nutritious food they raise directly to consumers. Texas farmers and ranchers and sustainably-guided processors, distributors and retailers (including coops, markets, schools, cafes, restaurants, trailers, etc.) have a difficult time making a living. State tax laws, policies and related regulations need to be interpreted and modified to facilitate economic development and stability in all five sectors of the regional food system (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste recovery).

Thank you for your attention to these issues. They are critical to the health of our communities.