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Foundations Collaborate to Promote Easy Access to Fresh Food

By Debra Blum

The Lumpkin Family Foundation, in rural Illinois, wants to improve the local economy of the farm communities in the east central part of the state.

Chicago's Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, with a special interest in land conservation, wants to cut down on the suburban sprawl that is taking over farmland across Illinois.

And the Chicago Community Trust, which has long supported local food pantries, wants to improve the health of low-income city dwellers who have limited access to fresh, nutritious food.

Last year, the three foundations, along with a few other private and public grant makers, joined together to create the Fresh Taste Initiative, a project to promote the production, distribution, and consumption of local food.

"You can't solve access to fresh produce with food stamps alone," says Bruce Karmazin, the Lumpkin foundation's executive director. "You have to make sure there are farmers growing the produce, with farms to grow it on, and ways to get their goods to market."

Collaborative Effort

The Illinois project is among other efforts around the country bringing together grant makers to support projects related to developing or bolstering local food systems.

The efforts are based on the notion that shrinking the distance that food travels from soil to table is a key factor in reaching other goals enunciated by a variety of foundations, such as increasing access to healthy food, preserving open space, strengthening local economies, and saving energy.

Roots of Change, in California, became the first foundation collaboration to promote local food when it was formed in 2002. Officials from two San Francisco foundations, the Clarence E. Heller Charitable Foundation and the Columbia Foundation, started the group with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Mich.

In 2005, Kellogg joined with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in Princeton, N.J., and the health-care provider Kaiser Permanente to create the Healthy Eating-Active Living Convergence Project, which last year wrote a strategic plan that centers on the availability and promotion of fresh, healthy local food.

In the northeast, the New England Food System Funders, organized by the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, in New York, has met a few times in the last two years to identify common goals and share grant ideas. And a number of less-formal efforts to pool ideas, if not money, too, are said to be cropping up elsewhere.

"Many of us are coming to the realization that the ideas and issues around food are huge and complex and we'd all be better off if we could coordinate our resources, leverage investments, promote public and private partnerships, look at the big picture together," says Linda Jo Doctor, a program director in health at the Kellogg foundation. "There are some issues that beg for this kind of collaborative work — what we eat and where our food comes from are among them."

The Healthy Eating-Active Living project now also includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the California Endowment, and Nemours Health & Prevention Services, a nonprofit health provider in Delaware. In the next few months, the group expects to identify an organization to manage the project — coordinating the work of the members, studying the issues, and identifying potential grants. Grant making, officials at the member organizations say, will eventually be done both individually and through a pot of money to which member groups will contribute. There are no guesses yet on how much might be committed, but the members say financial commitments to the project and related efforts will be substantial.

Susan R. Clark, executive director of the Columbia Foundation, says it is impossible to put a price tag on the goal Roots of Change has set out: to create a sustainable food system within the state by 2030.

Roots of Change has so far made awards totaling nearly \$3-million, and it is planning to raise at least \$10-million more to give away over the next five years. But Ms. Clark says that money will mostly be aimed at recruiting other groups, individuals, government agencies, and businesses to get involved in local-food matters and promoting other investments.

"The re-localization of the food system is not something implemented by a handful of foundations, or even the entire nonprofit sector alone," she says. "Roots of Change is leading the way for a whole class of entrepreneurs, farmers, processors, store and restaurant owners, chefs, people in the farm sector, small businesses, government, public policy, and the nonprofit sector to make the changes that need to be made."

Among its grants, for example, Roots of Change has given about \$260,000 to the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group in New York that has gathered environmental, agricultural, labor, and governmental groups in California to learn from

one another and advocate on issues of common interest, such as the promotion of nonpolluting farming practices.

The Illinois Fresh Taste Initiative has a budget of \$800,000, which is meant to cover the administrative costs of the project for the next three years. The group expects to hire at least one full-time staff member, who will act as sort of a joint program officer for the participating foundations, each of which will make its own grants.

"The circles of our interests all have common ground," Mr. Karmazin says. "And we realized that until we come together and look at food systems with all their connecting pieces, from all our different perspectives and areas of expertise, we won't solve anything."