

October 11, 2007

Agriculture and Market Commissioner Patrick Hooker  
Chair, New York State Food Policy Council  
10 Airline Drive  
Albany NY 12235

Dear Commissioner Hooker:

We are excited that the New York State Food Policy Council will soon hold its first meeting. We believe that the Council can play a critical role in reducing hunger, promoting improved nutrition, and fostering sustainable agriculture systems.

Below are some suggestions for Council action in the new term.

We believe that a critical role for the Council is to help convene the multiple stakeholders in our food system, bringing together individuals and government agencies which do not typically work directly with each other nor are they asked to be involved when farm and agricultural policy is discussed. Such councils in other states have provided a mechanism to discuss emerging issues such as local foods, direct marketing, small and mid-sized farms and other "new agriculture" developments which fall outside traditional "farm" programs.

One step that should be taken short-term to involve more stakeholders is to establish advisory committee(s), ensuring that the diversity of the community food security movement in our state has a formal place in the Council's discussions. We believe it is important to bring in organizations and individuals who have a demonstrated track record of working on the interconnected issues of hunger, nutrition, and agriculture policy.

Additional mechanisms to obtain public input are to give organizations and individuals an opportunity to make short statements at the first council meetings, and to hold a series of regional listening tours / roundtables.

We suggest that the Council adopt the objectives for its work that were laid out in the Food Policy Council Legislation developed by Assemblymember Ortiz and Senator Young:

The significant reduction, as defined by specific numerical goals and timetables, and ultimate prevention of hunger and food insecurity by assuring that all citizens of New York state have access to high quality, safe, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and nutritious food, from local food producers whenever possible, through adequate purchasing power, including benefits provided by food assistance programs, and the necessary facilities to prepare food;

The adoption, by all New Yorkers, of a diet that promotes good health and prevents food- and diet-related diseases throughout their life spans, and includes, whenever possible, locally-produced foods;

Increased consumer and business demand for New York farm and food products;

A flourishing and profitable food-production system in New York State, which maximizes production of nutritious foods; preserves and protects open space and the environment; and, provides sufficient income for farm families and workers;

Economic viability for the state's food processing, marketing, and distribution industries that support the state's farms and food businesses; and,

Increased effectiveness of, and coordination among, federal, state, and local food, farm, and nutrition programs.

There is strong sentiment across the board in increasing the amount of locally grown food consumed by New York residents. We hope that the Council will both assess the extent to which this already occurs and establish a series of increasing goals for the state (e.g., 25%) as to the percentage of the state food supply that is locally grown. It would be helpful for the Council to document the barriers that would impede us from achieving an even higher goal. On a related issue, what can the state do to help train and support new farmers to meet the demands of local markets?

One barrier to increased consumption of locally grown food is distribution and transportation problems, particularly for smaller farmers. This also includes access to small scale food processing. What can the Council do to make it easier and more profitable for smaller farmers to diversify what they produce, which would assist in making more locally grown food available?

We look forward to the Council leadership in developing new state initiatives to reduce hunger in our state. As a society New York is too well off to continue to tolerate such high levels of food insecurity in our state. At the same time, we need to ensure that the food accessible to low-income consumers are high in nutrition values rather than calories.

Some issues that have been suggested by anti-hunger advocates are: state funding to help bodegas/convenience stores expand their refrigeration for more fresh fruits and vegetables in their stores (other states have done this); reviewing existing government procurement rules to make it easier to obtain locally grown, nutritional food; developing a user-friendly, cross-agency system (both online and on paper) for New Yorkers to apply jointly for food stamps, WIC, school meals, etc); and, providing increased resources to low-income consumers to utilize farmers markets and food stamps (e.g., California doubles the value of food stamps used at such outlets).

These programs would also benefit from increased interagency cooperation (e.g., WIC, Seniors and Farmers Markets). Increased interagency cooperation would particularly benefit the efforts to increase the use of locally grown produce in schools (i.e., Farm to School).

One issue that we had hoped the Governor and legislative leaders would have resolved by now is passage of the Healthy Schools Act. This would provide significant opportunities to improve the nutritional well-being of our children, including improving the nutritional quality of the meals served while promoting locally grown fruit and vegetables. This issue seems tailor made for leadership by the Food Policy Council.

Certainly the issue of how to develop more sources of fresh fruit and vegetables in inner city (and even rural) communities is an important one.

The Executive Order establishing the Council requires “a written report on the first day of December each year on: (a) the activities of the Council during the preceding year; (b) recommended food policies for the State; (c) recommended changes to the strategic plan; (d) an account of the progress made in achieving the goals of the Council; and (e) actions which are necessary to implement the recommendations of the Council and effectuate the purposes of this Order.”

While we realize that this is a very short time frame for 2007, we believe that transparency is critical in the work of the Council and that the key parts of the reports, such as the recommendation food policies and strategic plan, be shared before their submission for public input and comment. We believe that recommendations included in the 5 Year Plan developed by the prior Food Policy Council under Governor Cuomo would be an excellent starting point.

We look forward to working with the Council to achieve the goal of food security in New York. We hope that the Council will create a strong and diverse advisory committee and take other opportunities such as regional round tables to maximize public input. We recommend that the Council use both the 5 Year Plan develop during Governor Cuomo’s tenure and the legislation by Assemblymember Ortiz and Senator Young as starting points to guide its work.

Sincerely,

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