



# A TASTE OF JUSTICE



**Conference Discussions and Opportunities for  
Future Action**

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Justice Conference**

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## Conference Discussions and Opportunities for Future Action

### A Report on the November 3, 2001 A Taste of Justice Conference

On November 3, 2001, nearly 200 social justice advocates, community gardeners, farmers, farmers' market advocates, teachers, parents, high school students, and food activists participated in A Taste of Justice conference. The conference, organized by the Center for Food and Justice and several other co-sponsoring organizations, was designed to facilitate networking as well as provide an opportunity to plan and strategize around food and justice issues in Los Angeles.

Morning speakers included Glen Dake of City Council member Eric Garcetti's office, Michelle Mascarenhas of the Center for Food and Justice, and the featured speaker, Debbie Fields of Food Share Toronto. In the afternoon, participants broke out into four different work groups: school food, community gardens, city-wide food policy, and farmers' markets and supermarkets. Each of these groups discussed a range of food-related issues and the opportunities and barriers for addressing those issues through campaigns and other strategies. This Report summarizes the discussions of the four work groups, including proposed future activities to develop a just food approach for Los Angeles and Southern California.



## Food Policy

The food policy breakout group included food activists, students, teachers, anti-hunger advocates, city council staff, state health department staff, and other community residents. The discussion focused on how to best impact policy in the city as well as the region since a number of food issues also involve county and regional jurisdictions. A just food policy, participants agreed, would need to improve food access and address other hunger, community food security, nutrition, and agriculture issues. The group also focused on the previous experiences and the value of Food Policy Councils and whether or not it made sense to try to create a new one in Los Angeles.

In 1996, the Los Angeles City Council authorized the development of a Food Policy Council (the Los Angeles Food Security and Hunger Partnership or LAFSHP). Several Taste of Justice Conference participants had either served on the LAFSHP board or had monitored its proceedings. The work group decided that while there were some positive outcomes from this process (e.g., funding for farmers' markets and assistance for anti-hunger activities), the appointed LAFSHP leadership significantly undermined opportunities for developing a more expansive and viable Council. As a result, there was a decline in interest and participation among diverse community food security and anti-hunger organizations and a potential opportunity for mobilizing support for food initiatives and policies at the city level was squandered. The LAFSHP essentially stopped functioning in late 1999 after its chair and appointed executive director failed to continue operations. The work group nevertheless decided that the Food Policy Council concept was still an important tool for a food and justice approach, but that any future food policy council required far stronger mechanisms for participation and monitoring by community organizations. In order to develop that capacity, the work group agreed that a Food and Justice community-based network first needed to be established.

Along those lines, two members of the work group shared experiences about their work on food issues with City of Los Angeles staff following the demise of LAFSHP as an illustration of the value of such a network. One involved efforts to expand the Summer Lunch Program to children attending year-round schools, as well as provide snacks to children attending city-operated after-school programs. Other examples included the ongoing work of the Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families to develop a child nutrition policy for City departments to reflect Senate Bill 19's proposals to reduce or eliminate access to unhealthy fast food. These examples highlighted the way in which organizations within a network could improve food access in Los Angeles, though perhaps not as quickly nor as comprehensively as a functioning Food Policy Council might be able to do.

The discussion then shifted to future actions and their timing. It was recognized that, due to the current city budget shortfall, it would be difficult at this moment to secure new city funding for a Food Policy Council. There was consensus that an appropriate first step would be to create, within the next six months, a network of organizations and individuals working on food policy issues. A network would allow for groups to present a unified



position on food and justice issues but also allow for differences regarding potentially controversial issues (e.g. genetically modified food). A network would also be able to identify important food and justice campaigns to support or initiate. In developing such campaigns, allies within city and county government would need to be cultivated. Those food and justice champions within the Council and/or county government could then become the leading advocates for the renewal of a more community and constituency-focused (and better-monitored) Food Policy Council. The Council, the workgroup agreed, would need to be structured to insure that regional issues could be addressed as well as changes in state and federal policies that impact Los Angeles residents. In sum, the work group envisioned a one to two year process that included establishing a food and justice network, developing and/or supporting specific campaigns, finding champions and supporters, and eventually moving to re-establish a regionally and city-oriented Food Policy Council.

### ***Next Steps on Food Policy:***

- Convene in the next six months a network of community organizations and advocacy groups that will:
  - Identify issues and campaigns for food and nutrition policy.
  - Develop or support food policy campaigns (e.g., a campaign to obtain city-based support mechanisms for community gardens)
- Cultivate allies within city and county governments
- Create a city/county food policy council

## **Community Gardens**

The Community Garden breakout group included both community gardeners and those interested in community garden activities but who were not themselves community gardeners. The session was facilitated by the Los Angeles Community Garden Council and focused on what actions city government could take to support existing community gardens and help facilitate the creation of new ones.

The session identified the multiple benefits of community gardens including how gardens serve as sources of fresh food (especially important in low-income areas) while also serving as a type of effective community building activity. Both sets of benefits help provide the rationale for the City to maintain and expand the number of community gardens on either vacant or redesigned private or city-owned land.

The work group focused on how to insure that the City would make a commitment and adopt comprehensive policies to protect existing community gardens and facilitate the creation of new ones. As discussed briefly in the Food Policy workgroup, one of the last actions of the Los Angeles Food Security and Hunger Partnership had been the development of a draft community garden policy for the City. This included the development of a Community Garden Mission statement, a community garden water policy, the development of policy instruments designed to insure the sustainability of existing gardens on vacant city properties, and support for research on the opportunities and barriers for developing gardens. The Community Garden workgroup elaborated on additional steps that the City could and should take beyond this initial draft policy statement. This included establishing a Community Garden Liaison position in city government. The Community Garden Liaison staff person could have a number of responsibilities including mapping existing community gardens, maintaining a list of land available for community garden use including vacant lots, conducting workshops on how to start a community garden and providing interested residents with support in starting community gardens, and helping to maintain communication between community gardeners and city government. The development of such a position would clearly facilitate making Los Angeles a friendlier environment for developing and sustaining community gardens.

In addition to hiring a staff person, a number of other possible steps were identified based on increasing the City's funding and other support mechanisms for community gardens, increasing the city's educational pro-

grams about community gardens, and realigning some specific city services to help community gardens by making gardens more of a priority. Specific support mechanisms identified included providing delivery of compost from the city's composting center as well as using stable waste in city compost. In addition, a resource guide for community gardens in the Los Angeles area could be created that would facilitate the development of new gardens, provide information about existing sites, and discuss the benefits and challenges in the development of gardens. School gardens were also discussed and the workgroup supported increased city funding as a way to expand and make more viable existing school garden programs. (A Center for Food and Justice Report on school gardens ([www.uepi.oxy.edu](http://www.uepi.oxy.edu)) provides a baseline of information on the state of school gardens in the Los Angeles Unified School District). The workgroup also advocated that the City work more closely with the Los Angeles Community Garden Council, and, following the recommendation of the LAFSHP draft garden policy, subsidize water rates for community gardens. In conclusion, the workgroup decided that the Los Angeles Community Garden Council could provide the organizational home in which these strategies and potential campaigns could be pursued.



#### *Next Steps on Community Gardens:*

- Work in conjunction with the Los Angeles Community Garden Council to:
  - Prioritize the most important issues affecting community gardens.
  - Launch delegations to city council members based on what issues are seen as most important
  - Develop a Campaign to Establish a Community Garden Liaison staff position in city government
- Work with non-profit sponsors to purchase land for more community gardens.

### **Farmers' Markets and Supermarkets**

This breakout group focused on the location of farmers' markets and supermarkets throughout Los Angeles and the staggering differences in access to healthy, high-quality, affordable food, especially fresh produce, related to the income-level of the community. In response to these disparities, the workgroup sought to strategize about ways to increase the number of both farmers' markets and supermarkets in low-income areas of Los Angeles.

The workgroup first focused on why it was so difficult to start new farmers' markets or supermarkets in low-income communities. A number of issues were discussed, including arguments about if and whether the lack of profitability for farmers' markets in low-income areas was responsible for limited start-ups as well as market failures such as those in Pico Union and at the Mercado la Paloma site. It was pointed out that there are examples of successful markets in low-income communities and that extensive organizing is needed prior to the opening of a market in order to develop the necessary customer base. The issue of prices at farmer's markets

was also discussed. Small farmers who constitute nearly all the vendors at farmers' markets are disadvantaged due to a range of government subsidies that allow large growers to sell at cheaper rates. Price becomes an issue both due to this competitive disadvantage and also due to the perception, sometimes inaccurate, that prices for produce at farmers' markets tend to be higher.

The group also focused on the barriers related to supermarket development in low-income communities. This includes the lengthy licensing process to open up a supermarket. Lack of competition was identified as another concern. Where there were once dozens of supermarket chains, there are now three. This can result in lack of pressure to develop new markets in low-income communities, while in those areas that do have supermarkets, higher prices and worse service may result.

The group identified a number of ways the City could encourage the development of supermarkets and farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods. Speeding-up and streamlining the process for creating and licensing both types of markets was one important focus for action. Creating a city commission to do research and make proposals or recommendations around issues of food access (similar to the conclusion of the food policy breakout group) was also proposed. The City, it was felt, should further encourage supermarket/community development corporation (CDC) joint ventures. In these types of ventures a CDC can facilitate the involvement and support of the local community for a proposed market. Community involvement in turn could contribute to more effective decision-making with respect to store layout, transportation issues, customer base, what is stocked at the store, etc. With respect to farmers' markets, the City could not only sponsor markets but also provide farmers who sell at those markets a baseline guaranteed income, thus ensuring continuing participation and sufficient available produce, an important factor particularly for markets in low-income neighborhoods.

There was also general agreement that organizing and community engagement was key to both types of development. In the case of supermarkets, community residents need to be mobilized in order to demand a local supermarket and to make sure that the standards are high for any supermarket that does locate in the neighborhood.



In the case of farmers' markets people must be organized not only to create the market but also to ensure that there is a sufficient customer base to make it successful. In sum, though a specific set of actions and a more strategic set of goals still need to be developed, the work group provided an important first step in linking various players (e.g., unions and community food access advocates) critical to the process.

#### *Next Steps on Farmers' Markets and Supermarkets:*

- Extend the dialogue between different advocates on farmers' market and supermarket issues, possibly through a Task Force or work group associated with the new Food and Justice Network.
- Work with or help facilitate the development of community institutions and organizations to organize residents to advocate for farmers' markets or supermarkets depending on specific community needs.
- Work to help create an entity to advocate on behalf of these issues within city government.
- Work to change regulations, through entities like the Food and Justice Network or a Food Policy Council to make it easier to initiate either type of market.

## School Food

This breakout session focused on the issues associated with school food in the Los Angeles Unified School District and in other school districts, and how parents, teachers, students and other concerned community members can help to improve access to fresh healthy food in schools. The session divided into two groups, the first focused on issues associated with school food and the need to educate communities about those issues, and the second focused on how to change food policy within the school district. The Healthy School Food Committee, a parent, teacher, and student advocacy group, facilitated each of the discussions.

A number of suggestions were made in both discussion groups, including how policy advocacy and educating community residents were linked. Both groups came to the conclusion that one of the primary ways to create change in schools was by adopting curriculum that emphasizes the importance of good nutrition and cultural history around food. The LAUSD Nutrition Network team has facilitated valuable work in this and other areas, notably in those schools where it has established team participants. The group agreed that these efforts needed to be extended to other schools as well and ultimately become available district-wide. Further, by developing curriculum around gardening, healthy eating and other food and nutrition issues, students could emerge as a critical healthy food constituency.

One of the major issues highlighted was the inability to prepare food on site for schools within Los Angeles Unified School District that do not have kitchens. In these situations, food preparation occurs at a central kitchen and the meals are then transported to the individual school sites. One suggestion was that school food service staffs could be trained in food preparation at a fairly low cost. Other suggestions included creating and expanding nutrition components of after-school programs and increasing local autonomy so that individual schools could have specific decision-making power regarding food issues

In conclusion, participants felt it was important to expand the Healthy School Food Committee as the primary organization working to change food policy in Los Angeles Unified School District and to help the LAUSD Nutrition Network expand its efforts at additional school sites.

### *Next Steps on School Food:*

- Expand the Healthy School Food Committee
- Work with parents, teachers, students and concerned community members through the Healthy School Food Committee to identify which issues are a priority
  - Place pressure on school board to implement necessary changes

At the conclusion of the breakout sessions, a plenary was held, with reports from each of the work groups. A continuation committee was established and there was enthusiastic support for the development of a Los Angeles Food and Justice Network. The Taste of Justice conference, participants agreed, provided an important first step in that direction.



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