



Seattle Local Food Action Initiative,
Seattle, Washington

Seattle Changes the System



Mike Siegel / TheSeattleTimes

Michael Seliga (right) and his Cascadian Edible Landscapes partner Jake Harris plant a vegetable garden in a parking strip outside Jake's home in the University District, thanks to a Seattle ordinance that made it easier for residents to do so.

In 2007, Seattle City Councilmember Richard Conlin authored the Local Food Action Initiative, an ambitious piece of legislation that aims not just to encourage local food, but to change the entire food system of Seattle and surrounding areas.

"Our goal was to help transform the local food system, by increasing the amount of locally grown food and increasing people's access to that food," says Conlin. "We saw this as an opportunity to create a unified food policy around hunger, climate change, environmental stewardship, and local business."

The Council enacted the initiative in 2008, pledging by law to increase opportunities in Seattle for community gardens, CSAs, farmers' markets, and innovative programs to broaden the scope and diversity of sustainable, local food, particularly in areas without access to it.

"King County has developed a list of 25 crops that it has enough agricultural capacity to fully supply its consumption of," says Conlin. The Initiative aims to get Seattle well on the way toward achieving that county-wide goal—to increase community self-reliance and emergency preparedness, bolster local farmers, and help lessen the climate and environmental impacts of Seattle's food consumption.

For one thing, the Council has aimed to get more Seattle-ites to grow their own food. One creative law encouraged residents with small or nonexistent yards to plant vegetable gardens in the parking strips between the sidewalk and street in front of their homes, by eliminating fees and the need for a permit.

Michael Seliga, co-owner of Cascadian Edible Landscapes, says his business has benefitted from the law.

As part of their mission to transform "all common land into useful, edible landscapes," both Seliga and his business partner Jake Harris have planted parking-strip gardens all over Seattle, as well as community fruit trees, edible fences, and more for individuals and neighborhood groups.

"It makes sense to have food around us rather than being dependent on large-scale agricorps," he says. "Gardens can also fulfill a lot of needs for people: a sense of community, connection to the

Earth, and access to nutrients.”

The City Council also abolished a law that made it illegal to sell food grown in the city. And then it passed a land-use code to make it possible to farm on up to 4,000 square feet of urban land without having to go through the permit process or pay heavy fees.

“We wanted to open up the opportunity for low-income people in particular to grow their own food and to grow food for sale,” says Conlin.

Michael Seliga says the effort has paid off: “I’m a skeptic about government talk, but I support the action—like when the codes changed, it really inspired a lot of microfarms all over the city.”

But the work didn’t stop there. The Council also started encouraging as many community gardens as it could, in part by allocating \$2 million for four new gardens, in addition to the 73 the city already managed under its “P-Patch” program, established in 1973. And it enacted a pair of laws that allows them to have three pygmy goats and eight chickens.

In addition, the city has provided some much-needed stability to farmers’ markets that often sit on land that could be taken away by developers at a moment’s notice. “We committed that for any market that needed to be established, we would make sure there was a place for it,” says Conlin. “We would provide city land where possible and cut the fees required for using the city land.”

The city has also allocated \$300,000 to assist community-based organizations working to combat the “food desert” phenomenon (see p. 16). For example,

Clean Greens owns a farm outside of Seattle, where staff and volunteers grow organic produce to sell at local markets situated in front of local churches. The group also takes teens to the country to introduce them to the process of growing their own food. Much of the farming was done by hand, until the City gave them a grant to purchase a tractor.

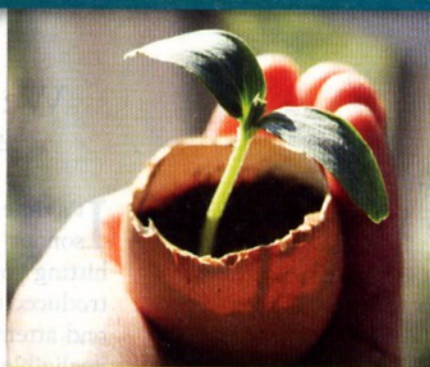
And, to close the loop, Seattle now has a robust composting program, to reduce the food waste that makes up about 30 percent of the household and commercial waste streams in the city.

Recycling single-family household food waste—including meat, dairy, and fish as well as fruit and vegetable waste—is now mandatory in the city, thanks to a law that went into effect three years ago. Homes can get exemptions if they have their own compost bin.

“As with any change, there were initially a few complaints, but surprisingly few. This went over really well, and it’s been extremely successful,” says Conlin.

The City Council has extended its efforts to the entire region. They’ve established a Regional Food Policy Council at the Puget Sound Regional Council, and they’re working to start a state Food Policy Interagency Team. They’re also working with King County to protect farms outside city limits that sell produce at Seattle farmers’ markets.

And they’re taking local, health-centered food-system change to the national level: Conlin and his allies have created some principles they hope to have included in the 2012 federal Farm Bill. The principles include a call for a commit-



A New Kind of CSA

Seattle-based Cascadian Edible Landscapes boasts an innovative “Community-Supported Plant Starts Program” (EatYourYard.com). It works much like a community-supported agriculture arrangement, except instead of ready-to-eat produce, members receive plant seedlings.

“It came out of seeing that stores were selling plants at the wrong time of the year for success, and the quality was really not up to snuff,” says co-owner Michael Seliga. “The whole point of starts is to give gardeners an advantage. That doesn’t happen if they get broccoli that’s all spindly and won’t grow at that time of year.”

Members can receive a new flat of plant starts one to four times per year, with planting instructions. The program has already been copied in Portland, and Seliga invites other cities to do so.

ment to “ecologically centered agriculture” that reduces chemical inputs and places an emphasis on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy foods. It calls for policies that strengthen small- and mid-size farms, processing facilities, and distribution and marketing centers. And it calls for steps to ensure more equal access for all to healthy food.

“By creating the vision and aligning the values and goals, we have ignited creativity and the possibility for a cultural shift around food,” says Conlin. “Seattle is exploding in opportunities: new businesses, new initiatives, volunteers, and more. The policies, programs, and funding included in the 2012 Farm Bill will affect how successful we can be.”

—Tracy Fernandez Rysavy

To sign on to the Seattle Farm Bill Principles, visit SeattleFarmBillPrinciples.org.

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