

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit



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Extension Part of Team Working to Address Lack of Food Options in South Side of Peoria

Change brings new problems and new opportunities for society. Several University of Illinois Extension educators serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties have joined a team of city leaders, agencies, and organizations to address the serious need of the lack of adequate access to fresh foods for residents in Peoria's South Side. The "Local Foods, Local Places: Revitalizing Communities by Growing Local Food Economies" initiative is a great example of how difficult challenges can bring about positive outcomes.

In the 1950s, the South Side of Peoria boasted a population of 45,000 residents, today that number is 13,000. Reduction in population, coupled with a lack of transportation and a median household income of \$21,730 compared to the citywide median of \$47,697 add to the difficulty for residents of this area to have access to fresh foods. To make matters even more challenging, between 2014 and 2018, three South Side grocery stores closed their doors.

Through the Local Foods, Local Places program Peoria has been able to make progress towards its goal to establish a food hub that connects area farmers with urban Peoria, as well as provides additional education and services to the food hub shoppers. Local Foods, Local Places is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Northern Border Regional Commission. Peoria was one of 15 communities across the United States selected in 2019 to participate in the program.

U of I Extension Educators Margaret Cover, Expanded Food Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP); Kathie Brown, community and economic development (CED); and Kaitlyn Streitmatter, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—Education (SNAP-Ed) shared their expertise in the Local Foods, Local Places planning process.

"Peoria recognizes the challenges facing the South Side and other disadvantaged neighborhoods and has recently gathered several public and private entities to tackle them under the Building Healthy Communities Collective," explained Brown. "Our local Extension unit is pleased to be a partner in this group of local government officials, educational institutions, health care providers, and community organizations working to improve health outcomes through improvements to the buildings, infrastructure, and streets that constitute the built environment."

A study conducted by Oxford University Press found that increasing fresh food access alone would not always change food choices. "Lack of access to fresh foods in low-income areas leads to more diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes," explained Margaret Cover. One of Extension's roles in the food hub is to provide nutrition education and resources by helping the community link proper nutrition to hunger and health. Both EFNEP and SNAP-Ed are sources of community education offering basic nutrition, food-shopping tips, budgeting, and food safety education designed for low-income families.

During the Fall of 2019, organizers piloted a farmers market in the former Aldi building on Western Avenue. Current plans include the farmers market to reopen every Saturday 10am-2pm, August 22-October 10.

The Southside Farmers Market will not only address fresh food access issues on Peoria's South Side but plans to engage area residents in designing a Food Equity Center. The long-term goals for this center would include developing a brick-and-mortar food hub, grocery, and social services.

To learn more about the Local Foods, Local Places initiative visit www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/local-foods-local-places. Collaborations like this are just one example of the work Extension staff do to help make communities and people better. To get involved in Extension programs visit extension.illinois.edu/fmpt.