

## **Abstract**

A localized food system is one where a greater proportion of food produced in a region stays in the region to be processed, distributed, sold and consumed. Southeastern Michigan, boasting a still-thriving agricultural base as well as a major urban center including the Detroit and Ann Arbor metropolitan areas, is ripe for the development of a more localized food system. In 2004, a master's project within the School of Natural Resources and Environment investigated the costs and benefits of conventional industrial farming versus local food systems and made a compelling argument for the viability of a local food system in Washtenaw County. Shortly after the release of the Local Food Master's Project report, a team of individuals from all aspects of the region's food system – which later became the leadership team of the Ann Arbor-based Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) – began identifying mechanisms for implementing the report's recommendations.

Building upon this previous study, the primary objective of this project was to help FSEP develop resources and tools in support of its mission to “catalyze change in the local food system.” The project team accomplished this by conducting research on the local food system within a five-county region of southeastern Michigan (Jackson, Lenawee, Monroe, Washtenaw and Wayne counties). Research included reviewing existing food system literature; compiling regional data; developing, implementing and analyzing a multi-sector food system survey; conducting interviews with food system stakeholders; and engaging in Participatory Action Research while working with FSEP's Leadership Team and committees. The outcomes of this research will support FSEP's work by informing the development of local, agricultural economic development opportunities, food system networks and collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships in southeastern Michigan.

The project team found that southeastern Michigan boasts both a strong agricultural base that includes many farmers who currently sell or desire to sell their products locally and a substantial urban population eager to consume more local foods. This makes the region well-poised for the development of an intentionally localized food system. Although formidable communication and infrastructural barriers exist within the current food system structure, cross-sector demand and the presence of active local food system advocates increase viable opportunities for bridging communication gaps and developing necessary infrastructure through networking, supporting agriculture entrepreneurship, and developing systems for local food distribution. Working together, organizations like FSEP, other food system-focused groups, new and existing entrepreneurs and local governments have the capacity to turn current barriers into future opportunities.