

# Farm talk with the Mayors Innovation Project

## The urban agenda now includes local agriculture

[Marc Eisen](#) on Friday 08/15/2008

When Mayor Dave Cieslewicz convened a meeting of the Mayors Innovation Project recently in Madison, the topic of local food was high on the agenda for the gathering of progressive-minded city officials from across the country. Even Cieslewicz, who served on the steering committee that put together the program for the two-day meeting at the Pyle Center on campus, was surprised at how often his fellow mayors told him they wanted to discuss local food systems.

"Urban local agriculture and the food movement have gone from a boutique Whole Foods experience to something that's become integrated into the mainstream," Cieslewicz observes. "It's really become something almost everyone is into."

Still, it seems funny to talk about America's cities having farm policies. Almost a joke. But the mayors have good reasons for seeing farming as an urban issue.

Visiting officials got Saturday tours of two of Madison's "best practices" efforts — the always impressive Dane County Farmers' Market and Troy Gardens, the jewel of Madison's extensive neighborhood garden offerings.

At the Pyle Center, they heard Stella Chao, from Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods, talk about her city's greening efforts and Joan Reilly of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society discuss Philadelphia's well-developed efforts to bring gardening programs to the central city.

But most impressive was Will Allen, the former professional basketball player who runs a mix of urban agriculture programs in the Milwaukee area and, increasingly, in other American cities.

Allen, whose parents were African American farmers outside of Washington, D.C., has done eye-opening work in bringing fresh food to inner-city neighborhoods and involving kids in urban agriculture. In 2005, Allen won a Leadership for a Changing World award from the Ford Foundation.

His nonprofit, called Growing Power, operates urban farms in Milwaukee and Chicago, including beekeeping, chicken raising and fish farming. It also sponsors the Rainbow Farmers Cooperative for 300 small family farmers, many of whom are Hmong, Latino, Amish or African American.

Hearing Allen speak of Growing Power, I thought of how similar it was to Madison's Operation Fresh Start, which also builds community as it helps at-risk kids. Fresh Start teaches teenagers construction skills as they refurbish older homes in challenged neighborhoods. Allen works the same double-play. He brings good, locally grown food into impoverished neighborhoods where fast food and poor nutrition dominate the landscape. His kids, meanwhile, learn about gardening, nutrition, sustainable agriculture and commerce.

I think Allen understands one of the essential pleasures of gardening: It subtly changes your relationship to the world. Suddenly you have a tiny degree of food self-sufficiency.

Satya Rhodes-Conway, a senior associate with the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, which does policy work for the mayors group, had her own doubts about local food as an urban issue when she began research for the conference.

"The biggest thing for me was learning about the multiple benefits of urban agriculture," she says. "I had just thought about it from the food production angle, but urban agriculture also is about greening neighborhoods, building community, providing job training and working with vulnerable populations."

Madison has been an early adopter in this effort. The city has an extensive network of 33 community gardens, serving more than 1,700 families, according to Chris Brockel of the Community Action Coalition.

The commission, which is largely federally funded, has its roots in the long-ago (and much derided) War on Poverty. It runs 18 of the gardens, leasing 20-by-20-foot plots and providing the infrastructure — plowing and water primarily — for the neighborhood-run gardens.

"Community development is the number-one reason we offer the gardens," says Brockel. "The fact that people can grow their own food is wonderful, but it's secondary for us."

The same big-picture thinking is at work at the 31-acre Troy Gardens on the city's north side. It mixes 184 community gardeners with a small farm and 30 units of co-housing sponsored by the Madison Area Land Trust. Sustainable living and environmental preservation are at the heart of the enterprise.

Part and parcel are the leadership programs offered in gardening and environmental work for teenagers and an award-winning garden for younger children. Will Allen would approve.

Programs like these have been quietly operating for years in Madison. What's interesting now is how increasingly they are seen as part of a larger movement embracing organic farming, family farmers, local food systems, neighborhood enhancement and food security. The mayors conference helped strengthen those links.