

Letter to the Editor

Local Food is Good Medicine for Everyone

The Chippewa Valley Museum has an excellent exhibit titled “Farm Life” that tells of profound changes over the past century for farm families and rural communities. One caption near an interior photo of an abandoned barn notes, “Wisconsin lost almost 40% of its dairy farms during the 1990s.” A decade later, with the rising cost of fuel and food, local farms could be the very thing to help recession-proof our local economy.

Following its mission and Franciscan tradition, Sacred Heart Hospital invests in its community by purchasing local food to support local agriculture. Like other large organizations, however, we’ve encountered many challenges such as quantity, transportation, processing, delivery, pricing and seasonal production limits.

Hospital staff attended the recent Wisconsin Local Food Summit and met farmers and representatives from River Country RC&D Council, a local not-for-profit with a decade of experience in value added agriculture (helping farmers sell directly to customers). River Country helped us gather farmers and local food advocates to determine how to eliminate local sourcing barriers. Discussions led to planning and the idea of a Chippewa Valley Buy Local Consortium.

A kind of buying club, the Consortium will employ an experienced coordinator to facilitate buying and selling and reach out to farmers in Eau Claire, Chippewa, Barron, Dunn, Pepin, Trempealeau, Buffalo, Clark, Jackson, Polk, Pierce, and St. Croix counties.

River Country submitted a grant proposal for startup funds to a new state program called “Buy Local Buy Wisconsin,” but there was one last missing piece: an institutional buyer. I gladly pledged up to 10% of Sacred Heart Hospital’s \$2 million food budget in the first year to purchase local food. This commitment provides farmers a guaranteed market to sell products at a fair local price and provides local food to benefit our patients, visitors, employees and Meals on Wheels program.

The virtues of local food are well-known. Being fresher, it has a longer shelf life, is more nutritious, tastes better and requires less fuel for transport. Have you ever had a fresh apple from a local orchard—an apple without paraffin wax coating? Humanely raised meat or organic produce can be far better than preserved food trucked from hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

Local food is good medicine for everyone. It benefits our local economy by preserving and expanding family farm operations, providing jobs in production and processing, and keeping money in our community. By paving the way for other local buyers, we hope to build a whole new economic engine to benefit the local economy. Someday, with the participation of other regional hospitals, universities and even public schools, this Consortium can help create a region with a sustainable and healthy future.

On July 17, Governor Jim Doyle, Agriculture Secretary Rod Nilsestuen, River Country President Rich Purdy and I received a local food delivery for the hospital and met the farmers that produced it. It’s a privilege to personally know the people that grow your food and to be able to see their operations firsthand. We are honored to be the catalyst in an innovative startup with River Country and pleased that the Governor visited Sacred Heart Hospital to showcase this partnership as a model for other communities.

Steve Ronstrom, CEO
Sacred Heart Hospital
Eau Claire, Wisconsin
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