

Multnomah County begins David-and-Goliath food fight

By [Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian](#)

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Amber Meyer picks tomatoes while her son, Joshua, 6, holds some of the bounty. Meyer and her four sons work in their garden at Snow-Cap Community Charities to supplement their diet.

Amber Meyer doesn't need university studies or proclamations from experts to tell her something's wrong with the U.S. food system.

The reality hits the Portland resident in the gut every time she tries to figure out how to feed her family of six on the \$500 a month in food stamps that supplements her husband's income from a print shop.

That comes to less than \$1 per meal per family member.

And that means Meyer must decide whether to pay now for healthful food that won't stretch to the end of the month. Or pay later if the cheaper but processed, fattening foods affect their health in the future.

"It's really hard, but I have to choose filler foods -- it's like Hamburger Helper constantly and loads of Top Ramen," Meyer said. "Fresh produce is out. Meals from scratch are out. If you put enough mac and cheese on their plates it'll fill them up, but I know it's not healthy."

Food is more abundant than ever, researchers say, but it's often the wrong kind of food.

In the face of a growing obesity epidemic that coincides with large numbers of Oregonians who still go hungry, Multnomah County has decided it's time for a food fight.

The county has launched a 15-year food initiative. The idea: Locally grow a significant amount of the food that county residents eat, make it more affordable and accessible and move away from processed foods by teaching people what to do with food that comes from the ground and not a can.

The thinking is that in a region that plans for nearly everything it values -- climate, transportation, land-use, ending homelessness -- food is the next frontier.

"We have a crisis and many people consider our food system broken," said Kat West, the county's sustainability manager.

"It's a very big, daunting task ... but somebody has got to lead and we think we are up to the challenge. "

The county, of course, can't eliminate junk food from its borders, but it already has begun maneuvering to become a leader on food and health issues. It successfully passed a menu labeling law in February, introduced a health equity initiative last year and this spring started a farm on unused county land that has provided several area food pantries with produce for the first time in years.

[Organizers have pulled together people](#) from the county, the city of Portland, Metro, Portland Public Schools, Portland State University, the Oregon State University Extension Service, Kaiser Permanente, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Oregon Food Bank, Community Food Security Coalition, Ecotrust, Growing Gardens, New Seasons Market and Burgerville to serve on a steering committee. They will meet for this first time this month and host a food summit early next year.

Local brands and more

West wants the group to start with producing a state of food report for Multnomah County that will look at who has access to healthful fare, how much food people consume locally and how much land is available for farming or gardening in the county.

For example, Atlanta's local food initiative launched last year found that 1.2 million acres of developable land sits vacant in the metro area but that it would take just 23,000 acres to grow enough vegetables to feed the city's residents.

Establishing a massive grow-your-own movement here will be a major thrust of the county's initiative. Garden plots and small-scale farms could produce food for county residents. Schools and parks own acres of unused land, allowing schoolchildren to help grow the food they'd eat at school and parks to open more gardens. Excess county and city land could go to people with no yards of their own and the county could push a foods-not-lawns program for homeowners.

There's talk of a local brand, where products grown within a certain radius would receive a special label so someone buying apples at the store knows if they came on a boat from New Zealand or on a truck from Hood River.

And a key to the initiative, West said, would be driving development to ensure every neighborhood has access

to a full-service grocery store and possibly the creation of the "healthy corner store," which stocks fresh food instead of junk food.

Entrenched food system

Local and national experts laud the county's initiative, but also warn that it will encounter an entrenched food system.

It's a story of big industry and \$50 billion a year in advertising. Of industrialization that has concentrated farming into a handful of companies and a handful of crops. Of controversial federal farm subsidies that have turned certain foods into commodities -- mainly corn and soybeans -- so cut-rate that the industry used them to create more food than we could consume, then came up with a plan to make us eat more. And we did.

Put simply, our food system has become a bit perverse. The further the food is from nature, the less it costs. The more we struggle to make ends meet, the more likely we are to be overweight.

"The food system permeates every aspect of our society, yet the question of is it good for your health ends up being at the bottom of the list as opposed to is it cheap, is it easy, is it profitable," said Lawrence Wallack, dean of Portland State University's College of Urban and Public Affairs.

The price of fruits and vegetables has increased between 40 percent and 50 percent in the last 10 years while the price of junk food has declined about that much, said New York University nutrition and food studies professor Marion Nestle, who studies how the American food system went awry.

For a county to try to tackle the food system is like David and Goliath, she suggested. But David picked up a pebble and won -- and Nestle said pebbles to toss at the giant abound.

The obesity explosion has caught the country off-guard, she said, and now we're wondering what's in our food, where it came from and why we're eating this instead of that. Concerns over climate change have us questioning things such as why -- as a recent documentary pointed out -- garlic is shipped from China on a cargo ship with flip-flops and sex toys when it can be grown abundantly here. And there's the sticky subject of healthcare reform with obesity-related diseases feeding costs.

It appears the time for change is, well, ripe.

"Multnomah County is absolutely asking the right questions," said Beth Emshoff, a metro specialist for OSU's extension service. "It's very difficult for a state or a city to say we are going to buck the system. Having said that, there are many things we can do and if anybody can do it, it would be a place like Portland. And if we can do it here it will have implications across the country."

Learning to garden

Amber Meyer sees the potential. Earlier this month, her 20-month-old boy sat with a crusty mac-and-cheese mustache and munched on a green bean Meyer had just snapped from her small garden at SnowCap Community Charities. The food pantry has offered plots to low-income people for more than six years, asking only they donate a small portion of the harvest to the pantry.

Meyer had never gardened in her life -- the family stays in a second-floor apartment -- and it kind of scared her.

But this summer for the first time in memory, her family devoured fresh vegetables nearly every day.

Now when she drives around Portland, Meyer wonders why more people can't share her experience. "I see empty plots and say, 'Man, that could totally be a community garden.'"

-- Nikole Hannah-Jones