

News Release

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New Guidebook Helps Communities Support Farm and Food Businesses

TRAVERSE CITY, MI— The Northwest Michigan Council of Governments (NWMCOG) is pleased to announce the release of a guidebook that communities statewide can use to recognize and support farm and food business collaboration and innovation. "Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool" is a package of how-to information and examples that can help local governments and other stakeholders step into and benefit from the growing market and community demand for local and regional food.

A food innovation district is a geographic concentration of food-oriented businesses, services, and community activities. Districts like these, when supported through local planning and economic development initiatives, can promote positive business environments, spur regional food system development, and increase access to local food.

"When these food related businesses are located in close proximity to one another, business owners and entrepreneurs can easily share resources, information, and ideas, which can support and create opportunities for new enterprise. What's more, businesses located in a food innovation district can be mutually supportive, providing the reliable customer base, product outlets, and resources that other businesses in the district may need," said Kathryn Colasanti, Academic Specialist at the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems.

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Food innovation districts often include services such as food business incubators and facilities for common storage, packing, and distribution needs, and provide important opportunities for sharing information and partnering on events and retail promotion. They provide fertile ground for regional food hubs to grow, and for related food and farm ventures and market channels to emerge in both rural and urban environments.

One example of a food innovation district is Eastern Market in Detroit, which features a number of food processing, distribution, and retail businesses focused around an historic regional farm market. Another example is emerging at the Village at Grand Traverse Commons in Traverse City, where local food-based businesses such as wineries, bakeries, and a farm market are building on the synergies of a growing local food-based business cluster.

NWMCOG and project partners worked with stakeholders in Michigan and nationally to define food innovation districts, research examples nationwide, and identify and explain implementation steps. The guidebook identifies a process for developing food innovation districts that support economic gardening concepts through the co-location and collaboration of food businesses of different types. The guide focuses on the roles that planners, economic developers, elected officials, and community champions have in food innovation district development and the steps they can take. Resources, including a how-to worksheet and zoning guidance, are included in the guide to help communities take the first steps towards food innovation district planning.

"Our hope is that communities will use the guide to identify food innovation assets in their communities, and that new ideas or projects that can leverage those assets will grow out of these discussions around food innovation districts," said NMMCOG Regional Planner Sarah Lucas.

"Food Innovation Districts: An Economic Gardening Tool" was developed with funding from USDA-Rural Development, and was prepared by NWMCOG and project partners; the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, and Regional Food Solutions, LLC. The guidebook is available online at nwm.org/food-innovation-districts. Hard copies can also be obtained by contacting NWMCOG at 231-929-5000.

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NOTE to Media: Images are oftentimes available upon request by e-mailing Tom White at tomwhite@nwm.cog.mi.us and stating preferences for resolution (300 dpi?), file format (.tif? .jpg?) and file size (1MB or less?). Or, phone (231) 929-5044. Check our online Media Room at: nwm.org/media

Founded in 1974, the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments (NWMCOG) facilitates and manages various programs and services for the 10 county region. These programs include Northwest Michigan Works, YouthBuild, Small Business & Technology Development Center, Procurement Technical Assistance Center, various business services, and many different regional planning initiatives in response to our communities' requests and needs. You will see the broad spectrum of workforce, business and community services NWMCOG offers if you visit our web site, nwm.org

NWMCOG's member counties are: Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, and Wexford.