

Community Kitchen Policy Brief

Emily Minerath, Jessi Barber, Gabriel Goldthwaite, Ali Schneiderman

The Problem

In the current economic downturn and deepening environmental crisis, it is essential that local communities begin to address issues of poverty, unemployment, and health. Food access is an important component to community stability that can provide solutions for many issues residents may face. Various coalitions and projects can connect local producers with consumers, reducing fuel emissions, increasing food security, and improving access to nutritious and affordable food. Incorporating the idea of common community spaces into projects that address food access can also form social connections, provide opportunity for small businesses, empowering residents and strengthening the local economy.

The town of Oberlin is a small urban center located in the mostly rural Lorain County. Despite the rich agricultural land and acres of farmland surrounding the town, many of the 8,195 residents (according to the 2000 census) still face issues of access to healthy food. With 19.4% of the population living below the poverty line many residents have difficulty affording healthy food at stores in the center of town, may not live close to IGA near the outskirts on Route 511 and don't have vehicle to travel the few miles to the Super Wal-Mart where prices are lower. This problem was exacerbated by the closing of Missler's Grocery Store on South Main Street. The only full grocery store located in the low-income minority neighborhood, residents now have McDonalds, CVS, the Quick and Delicious restaurant and two gas stations as their nearest sources of food.

The local food movement in Oberlin has gained momentum as members of the college and town community have collaborated to address issues of health, local economy and access. The Oberlin College administration has the potential to be an active member of a renaissance that many of its students are already involved in. By supporting local food initiatives the College can increase and improve the town-college interaction and relationship, contribute to the city of Oberlin's economic and social renewal, and gain even greater access to local food thus reducing its carbon footprint and supporting sustainable practices of local farmers and businesses. One community initiative that is gaining ground and could greatly benefit from College investment and support is the Missler's Community Kitchen project.

Framework for Solution

The community has expressed interest in a community kitchen, and the empty grocery store space where Missler's used to be provides an ideal facility to make it happen. It is already equipped for food storage and its location is easily accessible by many Oberlin residents, especially those who currently lack easy access to a grocery. A community kitchen would do more than increase access to local food for Oberlin residents. Its location and supply of local produce and other foods would cut down on carbon emissions that come along with food shipped a great distance and promote the use of local foods year-round, even when they are not in season and cannot be found fresh. It would help counteract loss of farmland in the area. It would also stimulate the local economy by providing employment and opportunity for year-round local buying.

Previously, the Missler's project has been divided into phases of initiation of different projects for the community kitchen. At first, it would largely be a venue for selling fresh and frozen produce and other products. Later, it could include some prepared foods operations such as a bakery or catering service. Eventually, it would expand to be able to accommodate thermal processing (canning), allowing long-term preservation of local produce, making it available year round. (AceNET Facility Usage document).

We would also like to see some other additions to the project. The current parking lot is likely larger than would be necessary for the community kitchen, and one possibility is to partially convert it into a garden, which could be maintained by community members. Compost from the kitchen could be used in the maintenance of the garden, and produce could be sold and preserved at the kitchen. In collaboration with the Business Sourcing group, we thought it could be possible for the space to be used by local restaurant owners in addition to college and community members.

The next step is to involve Oberlin College more in the growth of the Misslers project. Financially, even a small donation would benefit the project. Incorporating Misslers as part of the larger Green Belt and Green Arts Project the college is involved in. The college is also in a position to benefit from a space such as the one proposed. The college's dining services might be able to use the space for food to be used in the dining halls and/or sold at DeCafe. A space used by members of both the college and the community also has the capacity to improve town-gown relations. It is also a great educational opportunity, both to show students how to make an idea a reality and incorporate local food systems and sustainable agriculture more fully into the Environmental Studies department.

Existing Incubator and Community Kitchens

There are a number of working examples of incubator and community kitchens around the country that we can study as helpful models. There are numerous successful community and incubator kitchen spaces often emphasizing local and traditional foods including La Cocina in San Francisco, California, Mi Kitchen es su Kitchen in New York, NY, and Creative Kitchen Works LLC in Renton, WA. Although many are successful, some people have voiced concern about the feasibility and long-term success of incubator kitchens, which we should take into account.

La Cocina in San Francisco is a recently started incubator kitchen (2005) that is designed to allow minority immigrant women to develop their culinary prowess into a legitimate and legal business. La Cocina provides low-income entrepreneurs with state of the art industrial kitchen facilities as well as technical assistance from experienced food industry veterans. The cultural and culinary diversity of San Francisco's mission district induced many unlicensed or illegal street food businesses and La Cocina has developed a way to bring the culinary traditions to a broader, city-wide market. The organizations Arriba Juntos, The Women's Initiative for Self-Employment, The Women's Foundation of California as well as individual donors came together for La Cocina's creations and it now operates under the Women's Foundation of California as a 501 (c) (3) organization. La Cocina demonstrates that incubator and community kitchens require grants and non-profit involvement to get started which is an important consideration for Oberlin's Missler's project.

Creative Kitchen Works in Renton, WA is a community kitchen that facilitates small food businesses and community involvement with top of the line equipment for baking, candy making, catering, prep, and seasonal work. The flexible scheduling on hourly and up to monthly bases makes for easy use by small scale or home food entrepreneurs.

In addition to the successful incubator start-ups, a 2007 Business Week article titled “Kitchen Incubators Get Food Businesses Cooking” draws attention to the more difficult aspects of incubator and community kitchens. The article quotes, “While shared kitchens are a steal for entrepreneurs starting food businesses, incubators are unwieldy, expensive projects that don't always survive”, which despite its negative connotations for our Missler’s project is a very important consideration. Where will the funding come from, how dedicated is the community, and will there be significant financial follow through are important questions. The article sites Nuestra Culinary Ventures in the Boston area that suffered from extremely high utility bills and inconvenient and frequent inspections which nearly pushed the community kitchen under except for significant additional unanticipated funding.

Interviews and Community Perspectives

A community kitchen in Oberlin could reach out to many different parts of the Oberlin community, and each part has a different perspective on how this project could be beneficial. A community kitchen is not intended to impose new ideas on the city of Oberlin, but instead it would stem from different needs and initiatives already present in the area. The Missler's project is the perfect opportunity to fuse the needs and ideas of people throughout the Oberlin community into one shared space.

Brad Masi, executive director of the New Agrarian Center and an organizer of this project, has the bigger picture in mind. He sees the project as a potential way to connect the community with local farmers year round. Also, being one of the organizers of the City Fresh project, which is currently limited to running during the growing season, a kitchen has the potential to improve access to quality local food for lower income Oberlin residents for a longer period of time. Also, representing the George Jones Farm, the community kitchen could provide a great source of compost and a space for storage and distribution of foods grown on the farm.

Oberlin College Student organizations could also benefit. OSCA properties views this as a potential place to extend their local foods program through out the year through canning operations that is already done on a smaller scale during summers. Gary Cohen who is on the board for OSCA properties and will be the Canning Coordinator this summer sees the Missler project as a way to extend their canning program. Also, the Recycling Assistants, students employed by the college to work on recycling and environmental issues on campus, see this project as a way to make a Free Store available to the whole community. Currently the Free Store is located in the Asia House basement which is not accessible to anyone who does not have an Oberlin College ID, therefore the Missler's space could make a Free Store available for community members that are not affiliated with college and may benefit access to free items more than students.

Individuals in the community can expand their own enterprises in this space. Glenn Gall, a certified Permaculture garden designer, views the roof and parking lot space as potential for gardens that would reduce storm water runoff, provide more food for the kitchen, insulate the building, community involvement/employment, and finally give people more control over their food. Also, Che Gonzolas, a local raw foods chef could use this space as a facility to enlarge her cooking operation. She is an example of an individual entrepreneur who could expand her business from access to this facility.

Oberlin College and the Oberlin College Dining Service, could also use this center to extend their local foods program throughout the year, decrease the carbon footprint of their food (which is always a good sell to prospective students), and provide a space for students to use an industrial kitchen for individual enterprises. It would also be a model and learning space for environmental studies students.

Tracie Haynes, who is also helping to organize this project, sees the space as far more than a community kitchen. The word "kitchen" narrowly describes Missler's potential for the community. The space can create a small local microeconomy including enterprises that are not related to food, where all community members can share information, mix with people from different parts of the community, and be a place for mutual aid. Lower income residents will be able to purchase fresh and local produce that is in their neighborhood, and possibly help with the production. This is a perfect opportunity for the privileged part of Oberlin to share resources with the town.

References

2000 US Census <<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>>

La Cocina: <<http://www.lacocinasf.org/>>

Creative Kitchen Works Llc.: <<http://www.creativekitchenworks.biz/index.html>>

Business Week:

<http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/dec2007/sb20071214_603976.htm>

AceNET Facility Usage and Feasibility Studies