

**A Sustainable, Localized Food Service Plan:  
Development Strategies for Lakewood Health System**

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



Central Regional Sustainable  
Development Partnership

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**Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like many institutional food facilities nationwide, Lakewood Health System (LHS) is developing a sustainable and local food-purchasing program as a means to provide fresher and healthier products while supporting sustainable agricultural systems and the local economy. In spite of the myriad of challenges that many institutions face in developing local purchasing programs, Lakewood is committed to the continuation of increasing amounts of sustainable local purchases.

This paper addresses several of the challenge areas involved with the development of a sustainable local food purchasing program. Research was conducted to identify strategies for overcoming these challenges, and the findings from this research are detailed below. From those identified strategies and additional research to determine resources specifically available to LHS, recommendations for the expansion of the local purchasing program are provided.

The challenge areas addressed in this report include 1) identifying and tracking sustainable purchases, 2) product availability and sourcing, 3) consistent supply and seasonality, 4) logistics with ordering, deliveries, and invoicing, 5) group purchasing organizations, 6) costs and budgeting, and 7) menu planning.

The research was conducted by gathering information from local and regional distributors, existing research, and interviews with food service directors at other institutional food facilities and individuals from organizations aiming to advance local food systems. Strategies were identified for each of the challenges addressed in this paper.

Based on the strategies identified and the general recommendations provided by other research, the final section of this paper was developed to recommend the next steps for increasing local and sustainable purchases. These steps are guidelines to ensure that while products are being sourced, that they are being appropriately “graded” and selected based on the following: A) their values in terms of sustainability issues addressed with product purchases, and B) the ease of integrating the local products into the food service program.

## BACKGROUND

Lakewood Health System (LHS), in Staples, MN, is an integrated rural health care system committed to providing quality, personalized health care. They run a self-operated food service, as opposed to outsourcing to a third party management group. Their food facilities include the Main Campus, which provides patient meals, and their Senior Campus, which hosts the cafeteria—together serving around 850 meals per day. In addition, the LHS food service staff operates the food facilities at the Central Lakes College located within a few miles of the Main Campus.

Like most other institutional food facilities, LHS is reliant on the industrialized food system, which provides large quantities and varieties of fresh and processed foods at an economical price, and purchase orders are efficiently processed with one delivery and one invoice. LHS is well adapted to this food system in terms of its food, labor and supply budgets, and physical design of the kitchen facility. However, common popular concerns with the industrialized food system, including harmful environmental impacts, toxins on and in our food, and negative effects on rural economies are influencing institutional food buyers. In reference to this food system, Jamie Harvie (2009) explains, it “supports and has accelerated a high technology industrialized agriculture, which is now out of control, critically affecting cultural, social, and ecological systems” (p. 425). According to Health Care without Harm, and the more than 300 healthcare facilities that have signed the Healthy food in Health Care Pledge (see Appendix A), this industrialized food system is out of alignment with the goals of health care. Food containing harmful chemicals is especially a concern for many hospital food buyers. LHS is not alone in wanting to readapt to

healthier food systems that provide fresher, more nutritious, better tasting foods produced from small and mid-scale growers within a close proximity, who utilize responsible agricultural practices.

The staff at LHS has committed to supporting healthier food systems. Their goals are to adopt more sustainable ways of operating, to support their local community, and to bring in healthier fresh foods. More specifically, they are committed to achieving the goal of purchasing a minimum of 15% local products, and to prioritize purchasing from growers within a 20-mile radius.

To reach these goals LHS has already taken several steps. They have been working directly with three local growers on an individual basis over the 2010 and 2011 growing seasons from whom they purchased cucumbers, green beans, broccoli, romaine lettuce, tomatoes, and other vegetables. The lettuce and tomatoes were grown in green houses and were offered throughout the winter. To better accommodate some of the products in their whole forms provided by the growers, LHS acquired a food processor (as products would otherwise need to come processed from their primary distributors). LHS has also supported the growers by offering their parking lot space as a location for their farmer's market. LHS markets these local products to consumers within the hospital, providing signage such as Minnesota Grown posters. Also, their internal marketing department has published an article about their efforts to bring in local products. Still, LHS staff would like to source more local products and develop the internal capacity to handle the increased volumes.



The Board of Directors of the Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership identified barriers and challenges faced by LHS in the development of their local procurement program, and thought a project assignment would be a helpful tool in overcoming some of these challenges. This project was funded through the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs' Community Assistantship Program.

The goals of this project were to 1) assess the local food pilot program over the 2011 growing season and identify the challenges in meeting the goals of their sustainable purchasing program, 2) analyze previous research and interview other institutional food service directors with local food programs to identify solutions to common challenges, and 3) make recommendations based on findings to further assist LHS in attaining their goals.

## IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

An initial meeting with the LHS staff and growers took place to develop a base understanding of the local food pilot program goals and challenges. A richer picture was later developed in follow-up conversations and interviews.. In determining best practices for overcoming challenges, interviews were conducted with food service directors in others areas of the Midwest including Mark Branovan from St. Luke’s Hospital in Duluth, MN; Christine Thomson from Sacred Hearts Hospital in Eau Clair, WI; Sue Liebenstein from St. Mary’s Hospital in Madison, WI; staff at Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community in Waverly, IA; and Jeanine Bowman at Benson and Morris Area Public Schools. The context of each food facility varied, and challenges were not always comparable to those met by LHS. Due to dissimilar contexts among food facilities each challenge below contains anecdotes from interviewees only when available and applicable.

During the initial meeting, the staff at LHS identified a need to find more growers to help fill supply. They preferred to prioritize business with growers within a 20-mile radius. They intended for things to be more systematic in the 2011 growing season than in the 2010 growing season (characterized by a “hit and miss cucumber”). Staff also suggested building flexibility into the menu-plan because of the inconsistent availabilities of products. There was interest in incorporating seasonality into the plan such as putting bison, wild rice, and salad greens on the menu in the winter. There was also the new challenge of accommodating local whole-form products, as they typically came cleaned, peeled and cut from their main distributor. The difference in hospital food safety regulations compared to other institutions, such as restaurants and schools would need to be taken into

consideration. There was interested in finding ways to promote and market local foods within the hospital and to the broader community. Ultimately, they expressed interest in finding ways to set clear goals for the initiative and to track their progress in achieving those goals.

The challenge areas that will be discussed in this section will be the tracking and measuring of sustainable purchases, product sourcing and availability, consistent supply and seasonality, logistics, group purchasing organizations (GPO's), costs and budgeting, and menu planning. Each challenge will be discussed in the following ways: context will be provided, it will be discussed in terms of its relevance specifically to LHS, and methods for overcoming these challenges will be included from research. The research consists of anecdotes from interviews with food service directors as part of this project, interviews and findings gleaned from previous research projects, and pertinent information derived from organizations working to facilitate the further development of local food infrastructures.

### *Identifying and Tracking Sustainable Purchases*

Food buyers committed to purchasing local, fresh and healthy products may find it beneficial to make their commitment part of their identity. The ability to increase staff and patient satisfaction and enhance the hospital's image may be achieved through the communication of efforts, goals, and achievements both internally and externally. Also, measuring progress and receiving positive feedback from the community enhances enthusiasm among food buyers, upon which the success of the program depends.

LHS has expressed interest in monitoring and tracking their local food purchases and marketing their efforts. They will need to clearly identify sustainable purchases, set goals, and measure progress. This information can be communicated within the hospital and marketed to the broader community.

Sustainable food purchases can potentially address a wide variety of issues including, but not limited to, labor, animal welfare, hormone and non-therapeutic antibiotics, genetic modifications of crops and livestock, toxicity, water conservation and quality, soil conservation and health, climate change, protection of wildlife, local economies, food quality and safety, and diet-related health concerns (Buck). Products that address these issues can be differentiated from their conventional counterparts and appropriately identified. By appropriately identifying sustainable products, buyers can align product purchases with their values and track purchases more effectively.

Products can be differentiated according to the location from which products originate (i.e. local as defined by institution), and by social, environmental, or product claims (i.e. organic or fair trade). To appropriately differentiate products based on claims, LHS buyers should familiarize themselves with industry definitions of claims, or lack thereof, to determine which sustainable products meet their standards. In addition to understanding definitions of claims, buyers should also consider what will verify compliance to the claims. As explained in *A Guide to Developing a Sustainable Food Purchasing Policy*, there are three ways in which compliance may be verified:

1. First-party claims—usually a statement made by the producer sometimes with a signed affidavit.

2. Second-party claims—often a statement by an industry association on behalf of a group of growers/manufacturers, or by a business intermediary on behalf of a sub-supplier.
3. Third-party certification—an independent inspection to verify product claims.

The third-party claims hold the highest degree of compliance verification. For helpful hints to appropriately verify compliance to claims from first- and second-parties, see the *Sustainable Food Purchasing Guide* put out by the Yale Sustainable Food Project (2008). This guide provides appropriate questions food buyers can ask growers to effectively discern the validity of first-party claims. This guide provides questions to discern compliance in the following product categories: fruits and vegetables; dairy; eggs; poultry; beef and lamb; pork; fish; dry goods, oils, and spices; and coffee, tea and chocolate.

The Guide also provides ways to track and measure purchasing goals. Purchasers should choose the degree of specificity to which products will be measured: by total food purchases, product categories (i.e. dairy), or by single products (i.e. milk). Also, measurements should be made in dollar amounts. This is because when measurements are made by other means, such as weight, cross comparisons among categories are more difficult to make.

For purchasers making decisions across categories such as geographical locations and growing practices, they may find it helpful to use a hierarchical system to rank product preferences from most to least desirable. The Yale Sustainable Food Project developed a model that ranks products across categories (see Figure 1 for an example for LHS). From

that ranking system, they further broke purchases down into a tiered system. For an example of a tiered system for LHS, see Table 1.

Another recommendation in *A Guide to Developing a Sustainable Food Purchasing Policy* is to measure performances across categories separately. This would mean to measure organic and local separately and to not measure the products that are both local and organic. This is because compounding goals can “limit progress on individual measures, and make year-to-year comparisons and comparisons between categories and products more difficult” (p. 11).

Figure 1. Example of a tiered ranking system for LHS

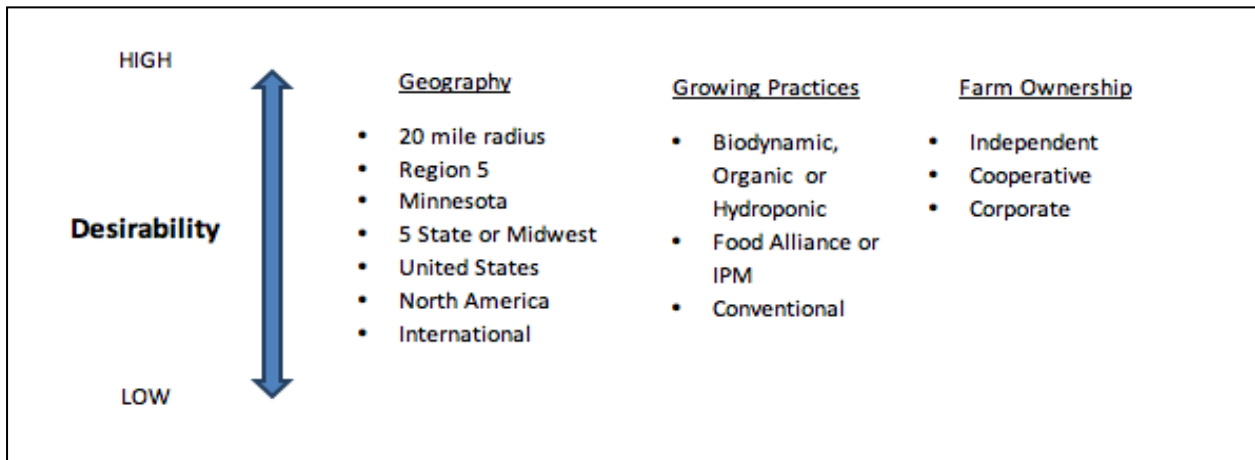


Table 1. Example of a further specified tiered system for LHS

First Tier (ranked in order of preference)	Second Tier (ranked in order of preference)
20-mile radius & Organic 20-mile & IPM	20-mile radius & Conventional 20-mile radius & Conventional
Minnesota & Organic Minnesota & IPM	Minnesota & Conventional Midwest & Conventional
Midwest & Organic Midwest & IPM	United States & Organic United States & IPM

*Product Availability and Sourcing*

The challenge of sourcing local products is common among institutional food buyers. Consumers and food buyers may not know where growers are located and contacting growers takes time. According to a recent article, food purchasers site the “lack of awareness of the existence of local food markets” as a top obstacle to purchasing local products (O’Hara, 2011, p. 7).

Lakewood’s concern is that in order to increase local purchases, they will likely need to source additional growers to get a wider selection of vegetables and eventually additional products such as meat, dairy, and fruit. LHS staff reported the need to know where their products will be coming from as their program further develops.

Food service directors of other institutions responded to the challenge of sourcing products in different ways. For example, Mark Branovan, from St. Luke’s Hospital, got in touch with his bison grower by word-of-mouth, who happened to be a family member of

one of the hospital staff. He also reported driving to the local farmers market to purchase vegetables. Universities may also offer assistance with sourcing products. For example, the University of Northern Iowa's Local Food Project helped set up relationships between Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community in Waverly, Iowa and local growers by sending out weekly local availability lists from growers via email. Auctions and distributors are other ways in which institutions have successfully sourced local products: St. Mary's Hospital gets products through an auction system, Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community gets local meats and other products from Hawkeye Distribution, and Branovan reported purchasing local products from Bix Produce Company Distributors in Minnesota.

Jamie Harvie, executive director at the Institute for a Sustainable Future in Duluth, MN, stressed the possibilities of sourcing local products through large distributors. He has been working with these distribution systems for several years and recognizes that large distributors claim to have a model that works and that there may not be enough customers in some regions to make a local or regional distribution systems available. However, he recognizes change in this arena: at one point, Sysco stated they would never source from local growers, but they now purchase and distribute some products locally. Harvie recommends that buyers express their interest in sourcing local products to their main distributors.

In Minnesota, food buyers can rely in part on the resources offered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Minnesota Grown program for sourcing local products. Minnesota Grown has recently developed a Wholesale Database, which has listings of local producers who are marketing products at wholesale prices directly to restaurants and



other institutions. There is no cost to buyers to use this database, which can be accessed at [www.minnesotagrown.com](http://www.minnesotagrown.com). Local products can be searched by product or location. This may not be a complete listing however as not all farmers have chosen to be listed or are aware of the service. In addition to the database, the Minnesota Grown program staff provides personalized assistance to buyers by sourcing specific products that may or may not be listed in the database. Buyers are encouraged to inquire directly to staff with sourcing questions.

Another option Lakewood has in sourcing local food is the Whole Farm Co-op in Long Prairie. Whole Farm operates as a regional distributor and serves as an intermediary between growers and buyers, taking on the responsibility of sourcing the local products. Robert Bromeling of Whole Farm Co-op explained that he would source additional individual products at a buyer's request if they did not already carry them. They currently source, aggregate, and deliver a variety of products including vegetables, fruits, grains, beans, dairy, and meat products. Through this distributor, LHS could source a variety of products grown within a local and regional proximity.

Purchasing through medium-sized distributors is the next best option for sourcing products if distributors available within a 20-mile radius or within region 5 of MN are untenable. According to Health Care without Harm's *Food Eco-Labels: A Purchasing Guide* (2007), a primary attribute of sustainable food is proximity, whereby "food is purchased from the closest practicable source with the intention, among others, of minimizing energy use in transportation" (p. 1). Medium-sized distributors, who carry locally and regionally sourced products within the Midwest region of the US, are also available to LHS. (See Appendix B)

### *Consistent Supply and Seasonality*

As a result of our temperate climate, local produce availability is greatly limited during the winter months. While the mainstream consolidated food system solves seasonality issues by taking advantage of economies of scale in transportation and distribution, and are thus able to source perishables from multiple regions and countries (King, 2010, p. 11), local and regional food systems rely on green houses and product storage for year-round production and use.

LHS has an abundance of local products available to them from mid to late summer, but during other parts of the year there is less variety of local produce. LHS is considering processing products when varieties and quantities are abundant, and then storing them for later use. They are looking for ways to overcome challenges associated with costs of labor and processing equipment. Lakewood has also expressed interest in eventually sourcing year-round products such as meats, dairy, grains and beans to increase local purchases.

Although LHS has seasonal challenges with many produce items, it does have some seasonal advantages. They have year-round and extended seasonal availability of some local perishable products. This is because their producer's use heated greenhouses for hydroponics to grow lettuce, and hoop houses for season extension and year-round production where hardy crops such as spinach and kale can be grown. In these greenhouses growers expect to increase production and offer an increasingly consistent supply of certain crops.

Some of the following strategies for year-round supply were discussed in interviews with institutional food buyers. Processing and freezing products for later use was done successfully by Jeanine Bowman, food service director of the Benson and Morris area Public Schools. They blanch products such as green beans, cabbage, and shredded zucchini, and carrots, and freeze for later use in meals such as hot dishes. Bowman learned how to preserve product through her childhood with a family that preserved much of their food and stated that some vegetables, such as green peppers, do not need to be blanched prior to freezing. She recommended a good source for determining which products to blanch and for other information about freezing on the UMN Extension Services website [www1.extension.umn.edu/food-safety/preserving/freezing/](http://www1.extension.umn.edu/food-safety/preserving/freezing/). She emphasized the important state rule that prohibits the addition of any product such as salt in their preservation process. It is absolutely necessary that they only preserve the vegetable alone, considering they are not licensed to do otherwise. She also stressed the use of a food processor that slices and dices as a huge time saver—especially an electric food processor.

Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community stressed their efficient use of labor hours as a means to their successful preservation program. The tasks involved in processing are divided among staff members. For example, in addition to the cooks given responsibilities within a shift, they are also responsible for processing small portions of the abundant product intended for preservation. Sometimes when there are large amounts of product, the food service director and her assistant buyer share the responsibility and take

processing shifts. Processing an abundant product typically occurs over the course of a few days.

In addition to extending the season with greenhouses and preserving fresh produce for consumption in the off-season, there are several products with year-round availability. “Buying Local Food for Food Service in Minnesota” recommends looking for the following products that are offered year-round from some Minnesota growers: milk, cheese, butter, eggs, honey, maple syrup, breads and dry beans. It also lists meats such as beef, pork, chicken, bison, elk, duck, veal, and rabbit. Other year-round products mentioned are flour, cornmeal, wheat berries, oats, flax, wild rice, and other grains. (p. 2)

#### *Logistics: Ordering, Delivery and Invoicing*

In general, institutional food buyers have limited time to work with multiple growers on the logistics involved with orders, deliveries and invoices. However, in some areas buyers have access to grower co-ops or regional distribution systems, where products are aggregated, distributed, and designed to facilitate purchases between buyers and area growers. These systems generally have one point person with whom buyers can place orders, which alleviates the logistical challenges buyers generally face when working with multiple growers.

The LHS food service director currently works with three growers, each on an individual basis. Communication with growers takes place through phone conversations where staff receives updates on product availabilities and places food orders. Lakewood is

at their maximum capacity of working with growers on an individual basis, but would like to find ways to procure more local products.

Some food service directors did not express ordering difficulties because their local food systems have been developed to meet the needs of buyers. For example, Sue Liebenstein of St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, WI, purchases products through an auction system. She gives her product wish list to one point person at the auction, who in turn bids for products at the auction house. The products are then delivered with only one invoice. In addition to the simplicity involved in this manner of product purchasing, products are generally less expensive than those on the conventional market.

Branovan, from St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth, MN, on the other hand, has been limited in his local purchases. He claims to get smaller than desired quantities of produce because he does not have access to a grower's co-op or a successful food hub. He visits the local farmer's market every Wednesday to pick up a box of produce from local grower Lois Haufbaur. Haufbaur attempted to cooperate with other farmers at the farmers market to better suit the needs of Branovan as an institutional food buyer but was the only grower willing to commit product to the hospital. Other growers were reluctant and preferred to use the hospital as a last resort for product sales. They valued direct marketing to consumers over selling wholesale to institutions at a lower price.

Bartels accommodates relationships with about eight different growers and gets a wide variety of products that span the growing season. They are able to work with this number of growers in part because they have an efficient ordering system and an assistant buyer. With their ordering system, growers call in every Monday with their product

availabilities. Once aware of availabilities, buyers take product inventory, determine product needs for the week, and determine product orders for each grower. On Tuesday they will place the orders. In an effort to support the growers equally, orders are divided up among growers. For example, they get corn from three different growers and they may stagger green bean orders on a weekly basis between two different growers. Whenever local growers have a gap in their supply, Bartels can supplement purchases from their distributors who sometimes offer a local option. After years of working closely with Bartels, growers have developed a good idea of the products and quantities that Bartels will purchase.

The importance of labor hours required to manage this system should not be overlooked. Working with multiple growers in this way was not possible during the beginning of the 2011-growing season due to staff changes. In the earlier part of the year, Bartels Lutheran Retirement Home had to temporarily cease ordering from the local growers due to the lack of labor resources. Their local purchases of this current year did not reflect their typical local buying capacity.

#### *Group Purchasing Organizations (GPO)*

Many hospitals join a Group Purchasing Organization (GPO) primarily for savings in their purchases. A GPO is defined by the Health Industry Group Purchasing Association as an “entity that helps healthcare providers—such as hospitals, nursing homes and home health agencies—realize savings and efficiencies by aggregating purchasing volume and using that leverage to negotiate discounts with manufacturers, distributors and other

vendors.” This provides members with the buying power of larger corporate organizations. When hospitals sign a contract with a GPO, it is typical for part of the agreement to entail purchasing 90-100% percent of their food through approved vendors (Kulick, 2005, p. 5). Agreements to purchase large percents of product through approved vendors can serve as a limiting factor to purchasing directly from local growers or from unapproved vendors.

LHS has not experienced any conflict with their GPO, Premier, regarding their local purchases, which make up less than 2% of their total purchases. Although GPO contracts have not yet presented an issue to the local purchasing program at LHS, research and interviews point out their potential limitations. Branovan is challenged by St. Luke’s Hospital’s GPO contract in his local purchasing. They are contracted with Novation/VHA, who negotiates for food and other products and services in the hospital. Their food contract requires 90 percent of everything to come from their approved vendors, such as US Foods. Branovan would sometimes prefer to order more local products but the GPO makes it difficult to opt out of product purchases because they offer pricing and rebate incentives. His rebates increase when his order sizes are larger and deliveries are less frequent. To avoid losing incentives Branovan chooses to purchase local products that makeup only a small percentage of total food purchases. For example, he does not purchase milk from a local dairy, because milk makes up a large percent of total food purchases, and would easily affect his rebates. However, he has chosen to purchase bison from a local grower, because bison makes up a much smaller percent of total food purchases.

On the positive side, GPO agreements are not entirely inflexible and can change to meet demand. When it comes to choosing healthy for his patients, Branovan has used his buying power to get GPOs to change their product offerings. He prioritizes the best healthy options for his patients and puts less priority on organic and local. To him, local food is a bonus. He used his desire for rBGH-free milk as an example. Originally, Land' O Lakes only bottled rBGH-free milk into large gallons. Branovan expressed his need for the milk to also be bottled in pints. Land' O Lakes would not agree because the cost was too high to convert their bottling lines. Branovan was not satisfied and took his business to a local dairy in southern Minnesota where the milk was actually less expensive. Two years later, Land O' Lakes came back with rBGH-free milk bottled in pints which could be purchased through the GPO.

According to the report *Healthy Food, Healthy Hospitals, Healthy Communities* (2005), food service companies have dealt with their GPOs in a number of ways which have allowed them to increase their portion of local products. Some of these strategies include: refusing to sign with a GPO, sourcing local products that may be available through a vendor, taking full advantage of food allowed to be purchased outside of the primary vendor, increasing the off-contract purchasing percentage during contract renewal, and encouraging contractors' preferences for local and sustainable grown products.

### *Costs and Budgeting*

Local and natural foods are frequently more expensive than their conventional counterparts. Lakewood has expressed their concerns with the higher costs of local and



natural products, additional labor, and new supplies. Their current budget does not reflect the additional labor involved in processing local products in their whole form, which would otherwise come processed, precut, chopped, or diced, from their main distributor. They are looking for budgeting strategies used by other institutions to manage the increased costs of their local food purchasing programs.

Several food service directors reported using strategies to maintain their local foods program within their budget. Local and natural food purchasing has affected Branovan's budget, but he has been successful in finding ways to cut costs and keep his budget balanced. His labor budget has been affected by locally purchased produce arriving in whole form, as this creates the need for a special "prep" position to prepare the products. However, their local produce makes up a small percentage of total produce and has minimally impacted the food budget.

Branovan has found some creative ways to save on costs. For example, St. Luke's has adopted a new way to offer patient meals. They now have a room service program, whereby the patient can call anytime to order a meal. With this system, patients place orders based on their degree of hunger at the moment. This system has replaced the old one where patients ordered their meals a day in advance which led to frequent over-ordering, because they could not accurately predict how much food they would need the following day. This system has saved St. Luke's large amounts of money because patients continue to pay the same rate for their stay, so income remains the same, but the amounts of food purchased and food wastes have gone down significantly. With this new system, they are not only saving money, but there is an increase in patient satisfaction.

Other strategies Branovan has used include: passing on additional costs of some products on to the customers in the cafeteria; negotiating with administration for an increased budget to implement healthier food items; arguing the value in patient satisfaction and the attribution of healthy meals to betterment of patients' healing processes; and through compliance with the hospital's GPO to receive large rebates while bringing in small amounts of local products.

Bartels saves on labor costs due to their processing and preservation strategy. The labor involved in processing food when abundant and preserving food for later use is divided among staff, and incorporated into regular shifts over the course of a few days.

Beth Jones, the executive chef of the Campus Club at the University of Minnesota, has implemented cost saving strategies as part of their local food program. She describes these strategies in an excerpt in the article "Buying Local Food for Food Service in Minnesota," which states:

We buy the best food but use every last scrap so it really does not end up being more expensive. For example, we freeze hundreds of pounds of tomatoes when they are in season. We core them, put them on sheet trays in the freezer, and then move them to large bins when they are solid. The past two years we have not bought canned tomatoes. We make all of our own stock from the chicken carcasses, veal bones, and veggie scraps that we collect each day. It saves so much money, not buying stock, soup base, and demi-glace. And it tastes so much better. (2010, p. 12)

She also recommends cross-training all staff. For example, her dishwashers cut-up whole chickens, chop veggies and makes stocks. She says that there is little wasted food or time in her kitchen. She also attests to local produce items often being less expensive or at a comparable price when they are in peak season.

Finally, Jeanine Bowman, Food Service Director at Benson and Morris Area Public Schools, saves on labor costs through the efficient use of an electric food processor to slice and dice vegetables.

*Menu Planning:*

With the procurement of local products come new items, frequent product changes with the seasons, and more frequent unexpected changes in product availabilities. LHS expressed the possibility of building more flexibility in their menu to accommodate local products.

The staff at Butter Café in Minneapolis provided advice for designing menus involving local products. He recommends making basic soup and quiche dishes because one can find relatively simple generic recipes into which local and seasonal vegetables can easily be incorporated and are adaptable to frequent changes in product availabilities.

Other sources recommended strategies for developing new recipes in large quantities. The food service staff at the Benson and Morris Public Schools develop recipes in different ways. They first choose the new vegetable item(s), and then experiment with recipes of small quantities. This experimentation will either happen in the school kitchen, in the department of home economics by the student body, or at the home of a staff member who enjoys cooking. Once a good recipe has been discovered, the kitchen staff will experiment with adjusting the recipe to work in a large batch. Bowman explains that ingredients cannot simply be evenly multiplied, because very large batches cook up differently than doubled and triple batches. Bowman is willing to share recipes with

interested institutional food facilities, which can be found on their website at [www.benson.k12.mn.us](http://www.benson.k12.mn.us). She has also found [www.allrecipes.com](http://www.allrecipes.com) to be a very useful website where recipes can be searched in different ways—such as by ingredients, side or main dishes, chicken or beef—and nutritional information is included.

Another example of working local products into menus is by using all parts of the products. When products arrive in their whole form, there are often ways the vegetable “scraps” can eventually make it into the menu. Animal carcasses and bones can also be used to make more delicious soup stocks. The chef at the Kitchen Club says that they have very little waste because they incorporate scraps into soup stocks, which makes the food taste better and saves on food costs.

This compilation of strategies pulled from other institutional food buyers and other organizations working in the arena of local food systems, may be useful to LHS in different ways. Some strategies may be applicable to the sustainable local food purchasing plan at LHS. Those not applicable to the plan may be insightful and used as a reference point from which LHS can compare their challenges and stages of development with other local food purchasing initiatives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The final recommendations are based on the strategies and solutions found in the previous section. The recommendations are presented as “next steps” and are specifically applicable to the local purchasing program at LHS. The next steps are broken down into three phases and are intended to address and overcome the challenges faced in increasing local and sustainable purchases.

### *Phase 1. Research: Source and Identify Products*

The first step is to determine which products are available locally and regionally. The following should be considered when checking for availability: 1) how product purchases will satisfy values, and 2) how easily products can be incorporated into the food service plan. When determining which products are available locally:

- Use the MN Grown wholesale database at [www.minnesotagrown.com](http://www.minnesotagrown.com), which can be searched by product or location. Since some growers are not listed, the staff at MN Grown welcomes product inquiries and will assist buyers with sourcing needs.
- Utilize the contact list of small and medium sized distributors carrying local or regional products (see Appendix B).
- Consider local products that are available through current distributors, US Foods and Apperts.
- Look for seasonal and year-round products, which can be sourced locally and regionally. Consider seasonal produce items found in the seasonality chart in Appendix C. Products that have year-round availability include the following:

- Dairy: milk, cheese, yogurt and butter.
- Meat products: beef, pork, chicken, bison, elk, duck, veal, rabbit, and others.
- Grains: cornmeal, wheat berries, oats, flax, wild rice, flour, and others.
- Others: eggs, honey, maple syrup, breads, and dry beans.

When searching for availabilities, products should be selected according to buyers' preferences for the sustainability issues that the product purchases will address to ensure product purchases are in alignment with the buyer's values. Refer to the following guides for information on sustainable purchases, claims, and claim verification:

- *Food Eco-Labels: A Purchasing Guide*. Hosts information on common sustainable food production issues addressed by eco-labels, label claims, and additional resources.
- *Sustainable Food Purchasing Guide*. Developed by the Sustainable Food Project at Yale, assists institutions in sustainable purchasing decisions. To ensure product purchases meet healthy and other sustainable criteria, the guide provides an outline of questions to ask growers and distributors. It will assist buyers in determining, best, good, and worst purchasing options for several product categories such as fruit, dairy, and poultry.

Also consider the challenges involved with incorporating new products into the current food service plan. Consider the following challenges to determine which products can be most easily incorporated into the program.

Costs of Products and Preparation: Local products that are less expensive or of a comparable price to their conventional counterparts will be less challenging to the

program in that the purchases will not affect the food budget. For procuring products that are at a higher cost or those requiring additional labor or supplies, strategies to balance the budget may be in order. Any strategy for reducing costs within the food service budget may be applied, such as mixing local wild rice with other less expensive rice varieties. Other example strategies for overcoming challenges can be found in the *Costs and Budgeting* section (p. 21 of this document).

Menu Incorporation: Products that are currently being used, or those that can be easily substituted into the current menus, will be the easiest to incorporate because there will not be changes in the menu. Also, local products that are available in the same form as those being currently purchased from conventional sources will be the least challenging to incorporate into the menu plan because there will not be a change in preparation. Products that require new recipes, additional preparation time, or supplies/equipment may be more challenging to incorporate into the program. For new recipes see [www.allrecipes.com](http://www.allrecipes.com), and consider strategies used by Bowman, which can be found in the Menu Planning section (p. 24 of this document). Also, access the Balanced Menus Toolkit by signing up for the Balanced Menu Challenge at [www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org/jointhechallenge](http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org/jointhechallenge). The tool kit provides technical assistance in helping hospitals serve the “healthiest food to benefit patients, the environment and the bottom line” (p. 1).

Distribution Logistics: Products that can be sourced through current distributors will be the least challenging to incorporate into the purchasing plan because this would not require additional relationships with growers or distributors. However, since it may be necessary to build new relationships to procure larger quantities of local products, choose

those with a wider selection of local sustainable products. Working with additional small-scale growers on an individual basis may pose an additional challenge and require future adaptations to the internal structure of the purchasing program.

Consider milk as an example of incorporating a new product into the food service plan. Because milk makes up a large percentage of total current food purchases, it has the potential to greatly impact total percentages of local sustainable food purchases.

Sustainable milk options in Minnesota include: certified organic, milk from grass fed cows, or milk claimed to be produced without the use of hormones. If products are not certified organic the *Sustainable Food Purchasing Guide* provides buyers with the following questions for dairy producers to determine how sustainable a product is.



<b>QUESTIONS TO ASK</b>			
	<b>Best</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Avoid</b>
<b>What do your cows eat?</b>	AGA grass-fed certified Pasture-raised (grasses) Pasture-raised (hay and grain silage in winter)	USDA-certified grass-fed*	Conventional grain-fed (contains antibiotics and animal by-products)
<b>What percentage of their diet comes from grazing on pasture?</b>	All Most (they are mostly pasture-raised, except in bad weather)	Some	None (feedlot livestock raised in confinement on grain)
<b>Are cattle given growth hormones or antibiotics?</b>	No growth hormones No antibiotics	Antibiotics only if animals are sick	Routine growth hormone usage
<b>How often are cows/goats milked?</b>	Once or twice a day, seasonally		
<b>Where is your farm located?</b>	Locally	Regional National	International
<b>What size is your farm? Who owns and operates it?</b>	Family farm Small/mid-sized farm Cooperative of small farms		Large corporate farm Monoculture/agribusiness
<b>What are your labor practices/policies?</b>	Livable wages Proper washing facilities Proper safety conditions and training (OSHA) Employee benefits/perks		Below minimum wage pay Unsafe work conditions Lack of washing facilities

Local sustainable milk options are available to LHS through different distributors. For example, rBGH free milk can be purchased from US Foods, which sources from Land O' Lakes; or it can be purchased from Bix Produce Company, which sources from Kemps. Other sustainable milk options are available through distributors such as Whole Farm Co-op (supplying organic milk) and Co-op Partners Warehouse (which supplies organic milk and milk from grass-fed cows). These other distributors source from, or cross-dock with, local, family size dairy operations, and have wide selections of other local, sustainable and/or organic products. New relationships with these distributors would provide access to an increased variety of local and sustainable food products including vegetables, fruits, meat, flour, grains, and maple syrup.

Sustainable milk options will need to be weighed against how easily they can be incorporated into the program. The costs of milk choices, milk packaging, and distribution options, will need to be considered. For example, US Foods supplies rBGH free milk sourced from Land O' Lakes which is less expensive than organic milk and may be sourced from LHS' current distributor. rBGH free milk is also offered in pint sizes, which was desirable by Mark Branovan and may also be desired by LHS.

Upon completing the search for available local products that best satisfy the values of LHS, and those that can be incorporated into the program with ease, products should be selected and identified so that purchasing goals may be set accordingly.

### *Phase 2. Set Goals*

This section provides recommendations to LHS on how to set realistic purchasing goals and to ensure purchases can be easily measured and tracked. Once products have been identified as those that can be implemented into the purchasing program with a relative degree of ease and immediacy, use the following strategies set forth in *A Guide for Developing a Sustainable Purchasing Policy* to set realistic goals:

- Choose the degree of specificity to which products will be measured—by total food purchases, product categories (i.e. dairy), or by single products (i.e. milk). Consider tracking romaine purchases individually, and any other individual products that are procured primarily from local sources, because a report of these purchases will display successes in some areas of the program.

- Make measurements in dollar amounts. This is because when measurements are made by other means, such as weight or volume, cross comparisons among categories will be more difficult to make.
- Measure performances across categories separately. This would mean to measure organic and local separately and to not measure the products that are both local and organic. This will make categorical and year-to-year comparisons easier.

### *Phase 3. Increase, Track and Market Local Sustainable Purchases*

Begin purchasing and tracking products identified in phase 1. To receive support and positive feedback, “be proactive in communicating your institution’s goals, efforts, and progress through signage, brochures, a website, newsletters, through the media and through celebratory events.” (Buck, p. 13) Make amendments to the purchasing plan where and when necessary. Finally, decipher ways to incorporate additional local sustainable products into the food service plan, and set new goals accordingly.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge

This pledge was signed by over 300 hospitals as of 2010. Pledge signatories agree to initiate steps to:

1. **Work** with local farmers, community-based organizations, and food suppliers to increase the availability of locally sourced food
2. **Encourage** vendors and/or food management companies to supply food that is, among other attributes, produced without synthetic pesticides and hormones or nontherapeutic antibiotics
3. **Implement** a stepwise program to identify and adopt sustainable food procurement. Health care institutions are encouraged to begin where fewer barriers exist and where immediate steps can be taken, such as the adoption of rBGH-free milk, Fair Trade coffee, or introduction of organic fresh fruit in the cafeteria
4. **Communicate** to GPO interest in foods that are identified as local and certified
5. **Educate** and communicate within the system and to patients and the community about nutritious, socially just, and ecologically sustainable healthy food practices and procedures
6. **Minimize** or beneficially reuse food waste and support the use of food packaging and products that are ecologically protective
7. **Develop** a program to promote and [to] source from producers and processors that uphold the dignity of family, farmers, workers and their communities, and support sustainable and humane agriculture systems.

## Appendix B

### Local Food Industry Contacts

**Apperts** (800) 225-3883

**Bergin Fruit and Nut** (651) 642-1234

**Bix Produce Company** (651) 487-8000

**Co-op Partners Warehouse** (651) 644-7000

**H Brooks and Company** (651) 635-0126

**J and J Distributing** (651) 221-0560

**Northwestern Fruits** (651) 224-4373

**Reinhart Foodservice** (800) 895-5766

**Sysco Minnesota** (763) 785-7329

**Upper Lake Foods** (800) 879-1265



## Appendix C

### Minnesota Crop Seasonality Chart

# A Seasonal Look at Fresh Produce

MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
ASPARAGUS	ASPARAGUS	ASPAR					
BEDDING PLANTS	BEDDING PLANTS	BEDDI					
GREEN ONIONS	GREEN ONIONS	GREEN ONIONS	GREEN ONIONS	GREEN			
RADISHES	RADISHES	RADISHES	RADISHES	RADISHES	RADISHES		
RHUBARB	RHUBARB						
SPINACH	SPINACH	S		SPINACH	SPINACH	SP	
	BROCCOLI	BROCCOLI	BROCCOLI	BROCCOLI	BROCCOLI		
	CABBAGE	CABBAGE	CABBAGE	CABBAGE	CABBAGE	C	
	GREENS	GREENS	GREENS	GREENS	GREENS		
	GREEN BEANS	GREEN BEANS	GREEN BEANS	GREEN BEANS			
	KOHLRABI	KOHLRABI	KOHLRABI	KOHLRABI			
	PEAS	PEAS	PEAS	PEA			
	STRAWBERRIES	STRA					
		BEETS	BEETS	BEETS	BEETS	BEETS	B
		BLUEBERRIES	BLUEBE				
		CARROTS	CARROTS	CARROTS	CARROTS	CARROTS	C
		CAULIFLOWER	CAULIFLOWER	CAULIFLOWER	CAULIFLOWER	CAULIF	
		CUCUMBERS	CUCUMBERS	CUC			
		HERBS	HERBS	HERBS	HERBS	H	
		PEPPERS	PEPPERS	PEPPERS	PEP		
		POTATOES	POTATOES	POTATOES	POTATOES	POTATOES	POTATO
		RASPBERR		IES	RASPB		
		SUMMER SQUASH	SUMMER SQU				
		SWEET CORN	SWEET CORN	SWE			
		TOMATOES	TOMATOES	TOMATO			
			APPLES	APPLES	APPLES	APPLES	APPLES
			EGGPLANT	EGGPLANT			
			MELONS	MELONS	ME		
			ONIONS	ONIONS	ONIONS	ONIONS	ONIONS
			BRUSSELS SPROUTS	B			
			PARSNIPS	PARSNIPS	PARSNIPS	PARSNIPS	P
			TURNIPS	TURNIPS	TURNIPS	TURNIPS	TUR
			WINTER SQUASH	WINTER SQUASH	WINTER		
				PUMPKINS	PUMPKINS		
						CHRISTMASTREES	CHRI



PEAK SEASON

Note. Courtesy of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Minnesota Grown Program



