

NEW ORLEANS FOOD & FARM NETWORK

Knocking down barriers to healthy food access

Formalized in January 2005, *New Orleans Food & Farm Network* (NOFFN) was a small organization with an educational, project-based approach to their work. But that approach changed after Hurricane Katrina.

The storm brought stark inequities and racism within New Orleans into sharp relief. That disparity now informs NOFFN's commitment to food justice: the idea that everyone, regardless of race or income—and especially the most vulnerable—deserves dignified and ongoing access to healthy, safe, and culturally-appropriate food.

Marnie Genre and Max Elliot were the first NOFFN staff to return in the Hurricane's aftermath. Having been displaced, they traveled through city neighborhoods surveying the situation. "We saw a lot of opportunities and we thought, now is the time to grow into a larger organization and have a deeper impact in the community," says Genre. As many were leaving the city for good, Marnie and Max saw an opportunity to stay and rebuild the city's food system into one that met the needs of growers and residents alike.

We know that together we can rebuild our city's food system so that everyone has a place at the table.

New Orleans Food & Farm Network

In order to have that deeper impact, NOFFN knew they would need a new strategy that expanded beyond their project-based approach. "Our specific goals changed after Katrina. We were dealing with a different city, and the residents had different issues. We

QUICK FACTS

LOCATION New Orleans, LA

POLICY JURISDICTION

■ Local □ State □ Federal

POLICY ORIENTATION

■ Policy □ Poised □ Education

APPROACH

■ Environmental/Institutional □ Services/Programs

EQUITY FOCUS Strong

ISSUE AREAS . . . Nutrition

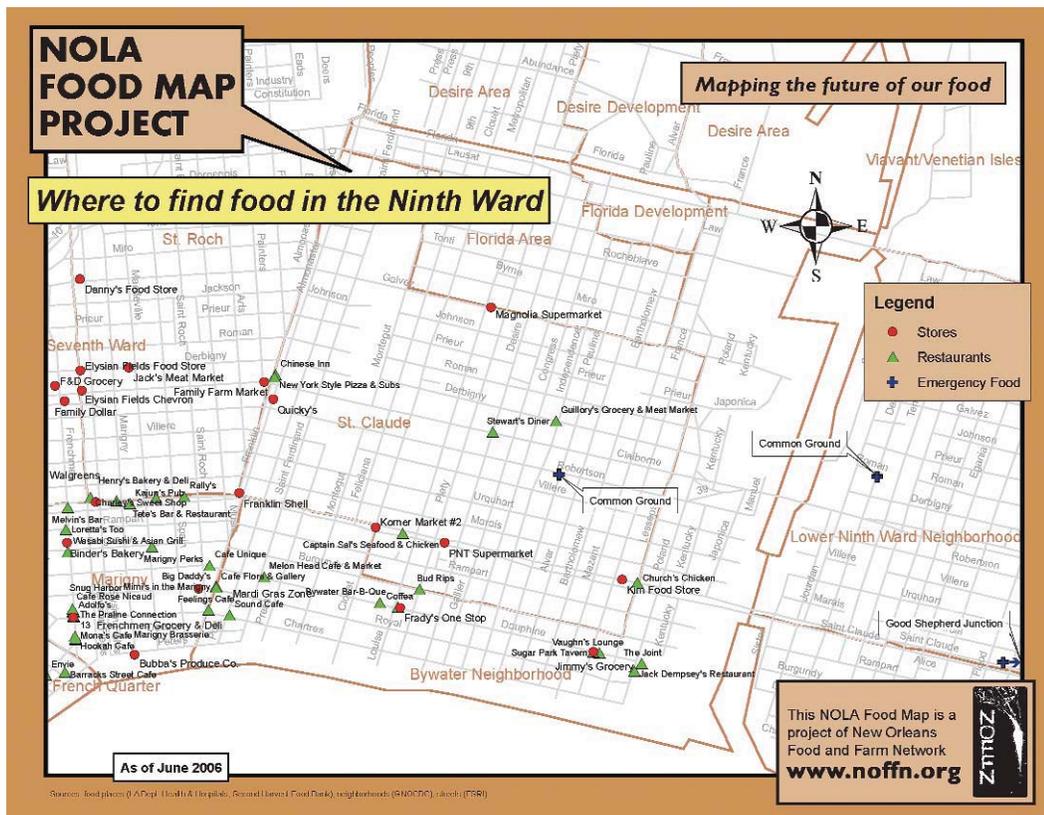
POLICY DOMAINS

■ Food Access/Anti-Hunger
■ Land Use/Planning/Zoning

WEBSITE www.noffn.org

knew that a lot of the changes would need to happen through government and policy channels—and we couldn't ignore that."

Realizing that the stakes were too high to waste time duplicating the efforts of other organizations, NOFFN started to band together with other local groups who had expertise in food security, public health, and sustainable agriculture to determine the city's unmet food security needs and the best policy approaches to address them. The result is a new collaborative: *Grow New Orleans Network*. The Network meets seasonally—four times a year—to share resources, develop collaborations, and focus attention on the need for a healthy and sustainable food system for New Orleans. In addition, NOFFN assisted in assembling a Food Policy Advisory Council to advise



AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA, MAPS LIKE THIS ONE WERE DISTRIBUTED TO RESIDENTS THROUGHOUT NEW ORLEANS TO HELP THEM LOCATE FOOD PANTRIES, FOOD STORES AND RESTAURANTS

the city council on how to improve the local food system. Marilyn Yank, NOFFN’s Executive Director, notes that, besides being a panel of experts, the Advisory Council is intended to be a voice for the community.

To guide the work of the Advisory Council, NOFFN and the Grow New Orleans Network created the New Orleans Community Food Charter. The Charter reflects NOFFN’s equity focus stating that strategies to develop a secure and healthy local food system must “remove barriers to fresh, healthy food access for all our citizens. Some of these barriers include lack of transportation, inadequate wages, and the unequal distribution of outlets which offer fresh healthy foods.” The Charter also prioritizes setting aside abandoned land within the city for farming. NOFFN has sought media coverage on the Charter to raise public awareness of its existence. “We feel that the Charter has a much stronger chance of getting formally adopted if the public is aware of its existence and importance,” says Yank.

Though they see this policy work as integral to their mission, NOFFN has not completely left behind

its roots in service delivery. Immediately following the hurricane, many food retailers around the city weren’t operating and food availability was low, but certain neighborhoods were harder hit than others. NOFFN decided to create maps of the most impacted neighborhoods that delineated food-retailer locations for residents to use. Through this work, NOFFN conceived a new Mapping project.

The Mapping project will go neighborhood-by-neighborhood, plotting community access to fresh produce and creating a plan to increase it. The process begins with a detailed map of neighborhood food assets including current food retail locations, potential growing sites, and WIC and Electronic Benefit Transfer services. Using the map as a starting point, NOFFN has started utilizing a participatory process to strategize with residents and neighborhood leaders about how to increase fresh food availability. Once each neighborhood plan is created, NOFFN will use existing community food project funding to implement them.

NOFFN is piloting the project in the Algiers neighborhood. Algiers—a neighborhood with many low-

“While we are partial to urban agriculture projects, we know that interests of the community are primary. Looking at existing strengths and resources and listening to local wisdom before and during project work is so important. That’s why we offer support on a variety of neighborhood food projects—so we fit the work to the neighborhood and not the other way around.”

Marnie Genre
New Orleans Food & Farm Network

income residents—remained largely unflooded following the hurricane. NOFFN felt it was a good place to pilot the project because residents, for the most part, weren’t preoccupied with trying to find a place to live. Furthermore, the neighborhood had a small group of active gardeners and an agricultural heritage.

NOFFN recognized that building a foundational relationship with the community and communicating that its intentions were genuine would be crucial for the success of its work. A large part of its work goes into cultivating those relationships. For example, NOFFN hosts community dinners to celebrate the neighborhood through the sharing of food—which is a real unifier in New Orleans. In addition, it brings in community members to assist in the work whenever possible, and pays them fairly for their time. The group also asks for community input and feedback at every step along the way.

Because the project is community guided, the plan really doesn’t take shape until the residents weigh in. “While we at Food and Farm are partial to urban agriculture projects, we know that interests of the community are primary. Looking at existing strengths and resources and listening to local wisdom before and during project work is so important. That’s why we offer support on a variety of neighborhood food projects—so we fit the work to the neighborhood and not the other way around,” says Genre.

Creating two arms of the organization—one that focuses on networking and policy and one that is committed to community work—has positioned NOFFN to play a key role in the rebuilding of New Orleans’ food system. But for a staff of four, “working in these two worlds is also a challenge.” Luckily, their board and staff are made up of people who are passionate about food systems and community work and who bring different skill sets that support both policy and community work to the table.

NOFFN plans to continue its support and guidance of the Food Policy Advisory Council and its active membership in the Grow New Orleans Network. The Mapping project will also continue, as NOFFN makes its way through the city’s neighborhoods.

Recently, the group received a six-month grant to explore the challenges faced by growers who are farming within the city for a profit. “We want to know what problems they face, what are their training or informational needs, what infrastructure they need.” The intent is to take the assessment and create a tool-kit for growers who would like to start farming within the city. The project also aims to increase demand for locally grown food. NOFFN is working with city chefs to connect them up with growers. “Ultimately, we would like to develop our own urban farm that could be our research and training site and where the community could see what urban farming is like,” says Genre.

New Orleans Food & Farm Network envisions a rebuilt New Orleans with a local food system that is equitable and reflects the priorities of all the city’s residents. The Community Food Charter lays out that vision, and the Mapping project, Grow New Orleans Network, and Food Policy Advisory Council all tie in to support it. Walking the line between policy and community work is a challenge, but NOFFN is strategically laying the groundwork for a better New Orleans—one that supports the health of the whole community.