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PRESS RELEASE

Greater Capital Region Food System Assessment Holds First Forum Stakeholders Gather to Discuss Equity in the Food System

TROY, N.Y. - More than 70 people gathered at Siena College's Snyder Hall on Thursday for the Greater Capital Region Food System Assessment Stakeholder Forum. The event was the first in a series of forums to be held over the next year.

The Greater Capital Region Food System Assessment is a comprehensive food system assessment aimed at increasing economic resilience and creating a more equitable food system with its results. Spearheaded by local food access nonprofit, Capital Roots, and guided by a steering committee of 20 key players from across the Capital Region's foodshed, the assessment launched in early 2016 and is projected to wrap up by the end of 2018.

The stakeholder forum brought together key players from the four sectors of the food system—consumption, production, processing, and distribution (all of which are being researched extensively in the assessment)—to share preliminary findings and workshop current challenges facing members of the foodshed.

Marissa Peck, Food Assessment Coordinator at Capital Roots, shared early findings with stakeholders during the morning session. In the beginning phase of research, Peck and her team conducted a Food Security Focus Group Pilot to identify barriers and opportunities to increasing food security and healthy food access in urban and rural communities in the region. The team is additionally working on a case study of NYC versus Upstate Farmers Markets to understand the true costs of regional producers selling predominantly to downstate markets.

“We’re finding that there are costs to our upstate farmers that aren’t being factored in to a lot of the conversation about meeting downstate market demand, and we hope to offer another perspective to address that,” Peck said regarding her upstate-downstate farmers market case study, adding, “And in relation to our consumers, we hope to go beyond just understanding the barriers of affordability and availability and dive deeper into the complex challenges facing healthy food access.”

Amy Klein, Capital Roots' CEO who is overseeing the project, said the forum was their opportunity to open the dialogue to help guide the next phase of the assessment.

"With the help of our steering committee, the team has worked hard to understand the state our economy is in right now, as it pertains to our food system," Klein said. "There is no other research being conducted on this scale in our region and quite frankly, we need this work to happen. We anticipate that the findings will help guide how farmers, nonprofits, funders, businesses, and political leaders will work and collaborate in the coming years."

After Peck released the early findings, attendees broke into groups to conduct case clinics—opportunities to share challenges faced and workshop with other key players on how best to solve them. Challenges included transportation for urban laborers to rural farms, managing the risks of small producers scaling up to wholesale markets, and increasing collaboration in local produce recovery efforts, among others.

Danielle Woodruff, from Adventure in Food Trading in Menands, was one of nine people who shared their challenges with the group. She discussed the challenge of chefs committing to being partners in local food production in authentic and impactful ways.

"For our table we had a varying mix of chefs, producers and educators. We found that the answer is actually making concrete relationships between chefs and farmers, which sounds so easy, but in reality is incredibly hard," Woodruff told the forum attendees in her recap of their case clinic. "[We found that] if you make that relationship with your producer, if you have that face to face interaction, you're making a partnership, it becomes someone you know and want to help support. This group really helped us answer this question of how can we make this work."

The next stakeholder forum will take place in November 2018, where assessment committee members will present more findings from the second year of research, which will focus on engaging directly with producers, processors, and distributors working in the Greater Capital Region Food System.

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Capital Roots is a 42-year-old nonprofit organization that nourishes healthy communities with more than 52 Community Gardens, the Veggie Mobile®, Healthy Stores, the Produce Project, Squash Hunger and more. Capital Roots is headquartered at the Urban Grow Center, a regional food hub focused on urban agriculture and produce distribution to four counties, enabling Capital Roots to triple our ability to deliver fresh food and services to underserved neighborhoods and low-income families. Learn more at www.capitalroots.org.

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