

## **How Local Government Initiatives Can Support Local Farms**

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Consumers who want to support local farms can “vote with their dollars” and buy locally produced items at farmers’ markets, grocery stores and restaurants.

But did you know there’s another way the community can play a proactive role for local food system development? It’s through local government initiatives.

Many counties in Florida and other states have comprehensive plans to address economic development and resource management. Because agriculture is vital to so many communities, these plans may include provisions related to farmland.

County commissioners and planners typically oversee the comprehensive plans, but they rely on advisory boards for input on specific issues. This creates an opportunity for citizens and local farmers to voice concerns and, hopefully, influence policy.

One of the things these advisory boards can do is review existing or proposed comprehensive plans and look for items that need input regarding agricultural policy. Then they make recommendations, typically focusing on issues such as food security, preservation of agricultural land and tax incentives for sustainable farms.

Alachua and Sarasota counties have created advisory boards of this type. We’ll look briefly at each one.

In 2005, the Sarasota County Agriculture Policy Council was formed, facilitated by the county extension office. The council includes small and large farmers, ranchers, grower associations, environmental groups, consumers, food industry personnel, etc. It was formed to aid the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners in understanding the importance of sustainable farming. The council recommended amendments to the county comprehensive plan chapters on environment and future land use; the Board of County Commissioners accepted the majority of the recommendations. The group meets every other month and has a Web site, <http://sarasota.extension.ufl.edu/AG/agpolicy.shtml>.

In Alachua County, a group known as the Energy Conservation Strategies Commission was formed at the request of the Board of County Commissioners, to develop strategies to reduce the county’s environmental impact and promote long-term economic security. The group recommended a wide range of policies, which included strengthening local food production, encouraging residents to plant gardens, enhancing farmers’ markets and creating a mentorship program to assist young farmers. These recommendations form a “menu of options,” some of which may be implemented by the county government, some of which can be implemented by individuals. The group’s entire list of recommendations can be found at <https://govconnect.alachuacounty.us/committees/ECSC/Strategies/olgies/Shared%20Documents/ECSC%20Report.pdf>

Hillsborough and Palm Beach counties also have efforts under way, and there may be other Florida communities with agriculture policy groups.

If you're interested in being part of an advisory board, check with your local county commission and see what opportunities are available. Even if no agriculture-related advisory board exists now, you may be able to start one.

For those seeking more how-to information, there will be a session on policy and regulations at the Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers and members of the general public are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/floridasmallfarmsconference/index.htm>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or [bobhoch@ufl.edu](mailto:bobhoch@ufl.edu).