

MEETING MINUTES

Rhode Island Interagency Food & Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) Q3 Meeting

Chair, Director Terry Gray

Thursday, September 19, 2024 | 9:30 - 11:15am

RI Commerce Corporation

315 Iron Horse Way, Suite 101 (Narragansett Room)

[Council members must attend in person, per RI Open Meetings policy.](#)

Members of the public can attend in person or via zoom.

IFNPAC was established by the general assembly in 2012 to serve as a coordinating body between 8 state agencies to examine regulatory and policy barriers to developing a strong sustainable food economy and healthful nutrition practices. Since the launch of the 2017 State Food Strategy, Relish Rhody, the Council has served as a coordinating council to drive outcomes toward the Strategy which include: preserving and growing agriculture and fisheries; enhancing the climate for food and beverage businesses; ensuring food security for all Rhode Islanders and minimizing food waste in the waste stream.

Q3 Meeting Minutes

September 19, 2024

Location: RI Commerce Corporation

COUNCIL MEMBERS (present): Terry Gray, Terrence McNamara, Max Righter, Randi Belhumeur, Jessica Patroliia, Juli Stelmaszyk

Other attendees (present): Ken Ayars, Rachel Newman Greene, Alison Macbeth, Sarah Blau, Max Mason De Faria, Jesse Rye, Shanah Defelice, Jeanette Nessett, Lina Rowen, Jennifer Weston, Vernon Martin, Melody Weeks, Silvana Mecardo,

Guest Speakers:

Scott Richardson, Northbound Ventures

Sarah Blau, RI Department of Health

Rachel Newman Greene, RI Food Policy Council

Lina Rowen, CHWARI

1. Welcome and Introductions

Director Gray welcomed the Council and thanked attendees for being here. Noted there is full agenda and a lot of pre-reading. He asked the Council to review and comment on minutes.

2. Approve Q2 Meeting Minutes

Terry motioned to approved. Juli seconded motion. All approved.

3. Welcome DCYF to the Council

Welcomed Deputy Director Didino to the council.

4. Local food Counts presentation

This agenda item was moved up from the State Planning and Research Study updates agenda item due to a scheduling conflict. Scott Richardson was lead researcher on the Local Food Counts and shared the methodological approach to the study. Local was defined as grown, manufactured, significantly processed in the region. This follows Vermont's standard and provided a consistent definition of local. The research timeframe was calendar year 2022 and used 11 food categories. The research used 3 primary data sources – USDA Food Expenditures Series State Food Sales and Nominal food and alcohol expenditures. The team used the percentage of national spending to estimate the amount of spending by channel within the state. Then used a survey to determine purchases from lists compiled by research assistants. The survey was open from November through February. 360 entities were identified, 172 email contacts found, and 160 surveys sent. 15 responses provided purchase data, giving a low response rate at 8.8%. The researchers were able to use responses from other states to make some estimates. All the data was used to inform the local percentage. There will be a count coming up in 2025 – the state should consider growing the database to include independent restaurants; proactive outreach to grocers and retailers to build trust while collecting data; and conduct additional outreach to K-12 districts, hospitals and other institutions.

Rhode Island's estimate is 2.7% is total local food spending by channel.

Randi asked about the percentage in the last count. Scott shared that this is the first time Rhode Island has done this study.

Juli: this data has not been available. Vermont established methodology and this is the first time the region is doing this. Just like how the Act on Climate is the singular mission for the EC4. This local food count drives our understanding of the New England Food Vision.

Terry: The Act of Climate when it was passed it set up baselines, but it was set on 1990 data baseline. As we have improved the inventory we have new methodologies to ensure that we are comparing the correct information. The methodology will evolve, and new targets can be set.

Ken: Is the 2.7% is fairly comparable to other states?

Juli: Vermont had gotten to 17% in previous years, but it was adjusted to 10% this year with the new methodology.

Scott: Maine and NH in the 3% range. MA, RI and Ct are in the high 2% range. It's taken a decade for Vermont to get from 5% to 10%. For a state with limited agricultural production, 3% is not terrible.

Jessica: did the other NE states have low survey response?

Scott: Across the board, yes. Some Research Assistants had personal relationships which helped. We got good responses from colleges, including RI. We did get good responses from grocery chains, but those chains don't have a large presence in RI.

Juli: can you talked about how the methodology worked for regional spend?

Scott: We tried to get to a level of granularity of Rhode Island to Rhode Island. But retailers and distributors don't get to the level of RI to RI. It's all New England to RI.

Ken: Seafood would be landed in New England?

Scott: Yes, while we asked for specific categories of food. Responders did not have that specific data.

Juli: We will have more internal capacity when the next count happens. Commerce with DEM is hiring a local food value chain program manager through the RFSI funds. This person would help us with outreach and relationship building. Previously the contractor was funded through an EDA grant.

Jessica: To help this process, RIDE has been engaged in developing an electronic platform to help report with local food purchases in schools. We have launched the beta pilot. We are looking to expand in Jan 2025. The RI Farm to School Network is hosting a webinar on October 8th.

Terry led a quick round of introductions for new members.

5. Proposed Sub-committee on Local & Healthy State Food Procurement (Sarah Blau, RIDOH)

Sarah Blau from HEAL program, RIDOH presented updates. She gave an overview and update from the HETF Action Group recommendations provided last IFNPAC meeting. The first recommendation called for a landscape assessment and a pilot program for a statewide food delivery system. So far, the HEAL program has gathered existing resources, identified a timeline, convened partners for pilot initiatives, and started discussing opportunities and next steps. HEAL is engaging with JWU students for desk research. Cartwheel RI reached out to HEAL program to start conversations about a food delivery hub. Met with Cartwheel and others to identify bottlenecks and challenges. Another update: visited the RI Training School. Met with John Scott and Larome to get an in-depth overview of the school. The training school works with the URI Master Gardner program. Would like to coordinate a tour for IFNPAC members to see the work firsthand. Particularly pertinent as we welcome DCYF to the Council.

Sarah proposed an IFNPAC subcommittee on local and healthy state food procurement. The HEAL program is funded through CDC's SPAN grant. Sarah started to do preliminary research to identify best next steps to move work forward. The subcommittee's responsibilities outlined the charter sent to council members. Would include report writing and action steps for internal policy level changes. The suggested member list includes a broad representation including those who are directly involved with food purchasing and those directly impacted by food purchasing. Also would like to include academic partners.

Juli: this is the first time the Council has considered a subcommittee. This is a new territory and pilot. We have the capacity through the grant but are formalizing within the structure of IFNPAC. This will help us be action oriented. What support does the subcommittee need from the Council?

Sarah: have invited members or designees participate on committee and one member designee to co-author report.

Terry: This is something to try. Motion to approve.

Juli provided motioned. Jess seconded motion. All approved.

6. State Planning Updates

Alison Macbeth from RI Commerce food strategy updated the Council on the 2nd Stage Food Business study that is currently taking place. The consultant has engaged with over 30 entities through interviews and site visits. The advisory council is providing direct feedback to a report that will be published in November. This report will provide recommendations on how to better support the sector.

Additionally, the USDA funded Local Food Brands study is underway. This study is seeking to understand the economic impact of RI Grown and RI Seafood, and test marketing strategies to promote the brands. There will be an economic impact study being released in early October as well as a consumer awareness study. Over the winter and spring, marketing strategies will be deployed to promote the brands and toolkits and resources developed for food producers in Rhode Island to encourage the marketing of Rhode Island grown, raised, harvested or caught foods.

Juli Stelmaszyk, Director of Food Strategy at RI Commerce gave an update on the RI Food Systems Planning for 2030 process. In 2017 Gov Raimondo launched the state's food strategy – a 5 year plan to work towards a more just, resilient and equitable food economy. As we update the food strategy, we intend to be aligned with the Governor's 2030 plan and New England Feeding New England's 30 by 30 goal. The planning process takes a whole of government approach and IFNPAC has served as the accountability structure. It is meant to be dynamic and iterative. We are thinking about how we would do an annual convening. We are focusing on equity and climate as well as metrics – where are we, where are we going and how do we get there. The guiding principles are core to the approach. We started designing the process in April 2023. We are now drafting the plan. This project is funded by the Henry P Kendall Foundation, RI Foundation and RI Commerce.

We have looked at other state plans (VT, NH, Hawaii, San Diego), completed a 5 year retrospective, developed 23 briefs written by co-authors, and used 20+ pre-existing reports. The briefs are close to being done. They will be 2-3 pages. Our consultant has compiled the 120 recommendations from the briefs and we are in the process of prioritizing and understanding what the state can accomplish. We have engaged a 30 person advisory board, connected with 200+ SMEs, and held a forum this summer with 80 participants and 52 organizations.

What remains: conducting 3-4 more listening sessions to fill in the gaps. Will be coming to IFNPAC with a draft of the strategy to review. We hope to complete the plan early 2025. We are aligning this plan with other RI and regional planning efforts. Food is intersectional and cross-cutting. We are making an intentional effort how other plans call out food system efforts.

Juli asked: How might IFNPAC support implementation and monitor progress towards 2030 goals? Looking to understand what IFNPAC members want to do to review strategy and ownership.

Terry: We will better understand how to answer question when we see the briefs and understand what's at play. The short, very succinct topics of the briefs provide a great model.

Jessica: when you talk about monitoring progress, how are you consolidating broader overarching goals from 120 recommendations?

Juli: we will not have 120 goals. We need it to be memorable, motivating and straightforward. We want to focus on things we can do and measure.

Jessica: the recommendations would be tasks to achieve overarching goals. Understanding the need to keep a timeline and metrics, but we have heard from last plan that it lacked equity throughout. Will there be room to allow for adjustments? Have you considered adding additional briefs to give more of a voice as problems evolve?

Juli: the long range transportation plan does annual updates. We are currently discussing ways to keep it iterative.

Jennifer: any briefs focusing on indigenous perspectives? There is a lot of USDA and RIDOH funding for indigenous initiatives. Young people from tribal communities are leading the way with environmental work. Willing to help with community needs assessment work with tribal led and youth led perspectives.

Juli: the Narragansett Indian Tribe has been included throughout the briefs and they will be developing their own brief to elevate the indigenous perspective. We are also thinking about a youth council and this could be another way to integrate.

Terry: My recommendation is to be as specific as possible – this agency will do this and this timeline in the recommendations.

Juli: what's the best approach to ensure ownership in state agencies?

Terry: At DEM, Ken and I we will look at. If its something new, it will need to go to the director level in the state agency.

7. HETF Workgroup Recommendations (Rachel Newman Greene)

Rachel Newman Green from the RI Food Policy Council introduced the 2024 Action Group #2 that sought to provide recommendations on food coordination during times of emergencies. Action Group #2 met three times since May looking at emergency food coordination.

Lina Roman was an active participant of this group and will be passing along recommendation. Lina works with communities directly and is part of the Community Health Worker Association of Rhode Island. Lina read the recommendations from the Action Group's letter to Director Gray and Juli Stelmaszyk.

- IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA: Develop communications and coordination plans between State Agencies and nonprofits that provides for clear and quick updates in the event of emergency, especially as it relates to emergency food and nutrition programs.
- IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA/RIDOH/DEM/Commerce/DHS: Develop a tiered communication and coordination protocol for State Agencies that describes how responsibilities will transfer in the event of an emergency. During COVID, RIDOH needed to divert the majority of staff to address the public health emergency. As a result, there was no clearly responsible party to take over communications on RIDOH-related emergency food programs. Many nonprofits were unaware of who had taken over these programs in the interim and were unable to communicate with them.
- IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA: Convene an annual walk-through of the communications and tiered Agency contact protocol with nonprofits and other community-based organizations. This walk-through with nonprofits should include an opportunity for feedback on this plan and how it can be the most effective.
- IFNPAC/Governor's Office/RIEMA/National Guard/RIDOH: Improve coordination on leadership transition between State Agencies, the National Guard, and community-based organizations as levels

of emergency changes. During the pandemic, emergency food providers were initially supported by the National Guard to meet community needs. However, there was little conversation between the National Guard and RIDOH throughout this emergency. Resultantly, many emergency food providers were negatively impacted by the sudden withdrawal and change of systems when the National Guard pulled out. State Agencies should have a direct and clear line of communication between them and the National Guard prior to emergencies.

- IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Charge all State Agencies supporting food and nutrition programs to attend and share regular updates on monthly RI Food Access Office Hour calls. The majority of State Agencies participated in these calls at the height of the pandemic. However, since the immediate emergency has subsided, there has been a decrease in State Agency participation.
- IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Increase awareness of the RI Food Access Office Hour calls as the standing structure for community agencies to receive food and nutrition updates during future emergencies. Lack of consistent State Agency participation in the calls has led to a sense of disconnection for community agencies seeking regular updates. While simultaneously charging State Agencies to participate in these calls, State Agencies should develop and implement strategies to promote these calls amongst their community agency associates to ensure awareness and use during states of regular operation and future emergencies.
- IFNPAC/Governor's Office: Invest in and widely support resource hubs like 211 to ensure they are properly staffed and supported to refer households to the appropriate services.

Rachel noted that this action group had a lot more recommendations and welcomed more conversations after this meeting. These organizations are still very much still working in the aftermath. The next action group will be providing recommendations on increasing the purchase of local and healthy food at schools at the next Hunger Elimination Taskforce in October.

Terry asked if the action group talked with EMA. Rachel shared that the RI Food Policy Council has had conversations with the EMA through the Food Systems Preparedness and Recovery Plan process. The action group's letter will be an appendix in the plan. Terry mentioned that he is not aware of a food plan within the EMA. Rachel noted that the recommendations are beyond emergency – using 211 and food access calls as standing structures for sunny day information. Vernon thanked IFNPAC council move so swiftly on the recommendations from the first Action Group.

Juli can offer updates at the next Council meeting of what IFNPAC can do and happy to hear it will be included in plan

Funding Cliff

Terry: The upcoming funding cliff is not exclusive to the food system. A lot of COVID funding are sunseting now, and many food programs' funding will be ending. The mission of this white paper is to communicate as the multi-agency council that there is a state wide impact to the governor's office. Terry presented at DEM presentation, but its not a DEM only issue. We need to speak the language of our audience. We need to align with the things they are setting as state priorities. The Governor speaks of Learn 365 – healthy food is the engine that powers that learning. There is a focus on small business – a lot of these companies in the supply chain are small. Raising income directly links job and business creation. We need to frame food programs in this language. Healthy Rhode Islanders is everybody and an obvious alignment with the work we are doing here. It's a tough budget environment.

Juli: In total its about 7 million ARPA dollars that different agencies have received (mostly through cooperative agreements) that will be lost. A lot of the dollars were set to achieve the goal of more local food available to more local individuals. This white paper seeks to capture what investments have sought to accomplish and what will happen if dollars won't be replaced. The goal is not to replace the dollars apples to apples, but ask what have we learned and how can we move forward. Juli asked the council to review and get specific about who would be impacted through the loss of funding for the program within the week.

Terry: Think of the funding in two buckets - supply chain impact and the delivery piece and the people who benefit from what we do – often the most vulnerable populations (kids, seniors, people in need).

Jesse Rye shared how the Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program (LFPA) established a diverse partnership through a \$750k infusion of funds. Out of \$750k, 60% has gone to underrepresented and historically marginalized producers. These are small businesses who have experienced an infusion of funding to feed their communities. When we see impacts, the impacts are too big to not keep going. Sen Reed looking to keep the funding going on the federal level. The partnership is continuing work through this year. It builds growth for small businesses in the state and food supply for food insecure.

Jessica Patroliia shared about the Local Foods for Schools Program (LFS) that also focuses on food supply chain. RIDE received about \$750k for small businesses and small producers. It impacted businesses, but also the children with access to high quality food and culturally appropriate food. The loss of funding will also mean a loss of agency capacity and institutional knowledge. It also impairs the ability to pick up a program in the future. There is concern that we don't lose the pipelines so that if future funding comes we are ready.

Terry stated that agency budgets are due on Monday. We want this to be part of the conversation.

Jessica noted while we are looking at federal funding cliff, we are also looking at a tight state budget. Each agency is beholden to FTE cap. Jessica's program administers 60 million with a staff of 3. The 3rd FTE is not making it in the next budget and will limit the ability to administer funds effectively.

8. Public Comment

Rachel Newman Greene shared that the Food Systems Preparedness and Recovery Plan had a productive meeting at the end of August with the core planning team and advisory council. Consultants will be developing a draft structure and draft recommendations. They will be getting together with key state agencies to ensure that the doc being put together will meet the needs of state agencies. The team will be reviewing on the 30th and reviewing topics on briefs making specific in depth recommendations. After that they have draft for review in October with the hopes to release final doc in November.

Juli asked if there has been a visit to RIEMA yet. Rachel said there has been no visit yet.

Jessica shared that RIDE is expanding certification that would allow more kids to pre-qualify for free school lunches. They have seen a doubling of children who would pre-approve, estimating about 64,000 participatns. It means more kids who get free meals with no paperwork.

Terry noted that Question 4 for the Green Bond is on the ballot in November for the Green Bond. This will provide 5 million dollars to continue farmland preservation work, an important investment. RIDEM promoting the bond and educating voters.

Meeting adjourned at 11:03