

Changing the Northside food environment

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There is a movement sweeping America. Whether in family homes, schools, neighborhoods or in the kitchen of the Obama White House, there is a growing belief in the need to take control of what we eat thereby improving our health and our lives. North Minneapolis is no exception. The community has added its voice to the call for community gardens, healthier food access and choices in our schools and work sites and neighborhoods.

A community meeting, sponsored by NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center (NorthPoint) and the Northside Healthy Eating Project Advisory Committee, addressed barriers and opportunities surrounding healthier eating – namely the increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The meeting was held at the University of Minnesota's new Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC) and attended by more than 70 Northside residents--including representatives of community and faith-based organizations. The two hour meeting explored a wide range of options to make healthier eating the easy choice.

The community meeting was part of an effort to reach out to local residents and local organizations and gather their thoughts on the local food system and how to change it for the better. Ideas expressed at the meeting included the need for increased education directed toward youth and families about the quality of the food they eat as well as how to grow, eat and cook healthy; improving the quality of school lunches, increasing the availability of fresh foods at food shelves; understanding behavioral health factors that impact healthy food choices, changing zoning policies to encourage the expansion of public land for urban agriculture and community gardens.

Those in attendance were upbeat about the opportunities that exist to begin creating sustainable change – an attitude that mirrors many of the interviews NorthPoint conducted throughout the community over the last year. .

As daunting a challenge as changing the food environment of our community is, we have no other choice if we care about our future. Medical research has found that a diet lacking in fruits and vegetables has been shown to be a major contributor to obesity and a range of diseases including diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

According to the Hennepin County 2006 SHAPE Survey, 13% of the residents of the Near North and Camden neighborhoods reported they had received a diagnosis of Diabetes. This is more than twice the rate of the total Hennepin County population (6%). A diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables has been found to prevent obesity and diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, yet residents of the Near North and Camden neighborhood are the least likely of all Hennepin County residents to consume two or more servings of fruit per day and three or more servings of vegetables per day.

Over the next few months, NorthPoint will work in partnership with community organizations and residents to further identify priorities and create a plan for a sustainable change to our food environment. We are committed to investing in the health of North Minneapolis as we have for over 40 years. That is why we are engaged in this project, why we plan to be for the long term, and why we look forward to partnering with the community to change the Northside food environment as part of our vision for a healthier Northside.