Joyce Marin and Michelle Diaz: Eating locally grown food benefits our health, region's economy

The next time you eat something, take a moment to think about where the food that nourishes your body actually was grown. How far did the food travel from farm to table to make it to your plate?

When you eat out, consider, too, "Where was this food produced?" Ask the server or the restaurant owner if he or she knows the producer and suggest purchasing local products and supporting local producers.

The recently published Envision Lehigh Valley food report makes several important points about our food choices in the Lehigh Valley. This project — formally called "The Assessment Report: Lehigh Valley Local Food Economy" that was published by Buy Fresh Buy Local Greater Lehigh Valley, a program of the Nurture Nature Center in Easton — shows that a commitment to eating local foods can bring positive impacts.

What type of impacts? Improvements in your physical health and the economic and environmental health of our region.
Already, leaders in the region are acting on the EnvisionLV report. For example, leaders in Northampton County recognize that farmland, urban gardens, open space and greenways all have extrinsic and financial benefits to their residents. In partnership with EnvisionLV, Northampton County and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission are undertaking a study to quantify this impact.

The food report was completed as part of Envision Lehigh Valley, the project of a $3.4 million federal Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities Planning Grant administered by Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp., coordinating the work of 13 consortium members. At the end of this year the grant will end. In 2015 the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission will take all of the EnvisionLV reports, including the one about food, to consider when it revises the region’s comprehensive plan in 2015-16.

The food report states that, “If residents spent just $10/week on locally grown food, nearly $100 million in economic activity would be generated annually.” Keeping these dollars local could provide our Lehigh Valley farmers with the income to pay their taxes, allowing farmland to remain farmland. Purchasing food from local farmers and producers is a way to access fresh food, support local farmers and preserve farmland, as farmers will be less pressured to sell out to developers.

How can you connect with local food through local farmers and producers? Farmer markets, farms with farm stands, wineries and caterers who use local produce are featured on the website of buylocalpa.org/lehighvalley. Just insert your ZIP code to find nearby producers.

What about people whose family budgets are already stretched to the breaking point, people who say that they cannot afford local produce?

One of the solutions suggested by the food report, and already begun in the region, is the establishment of community gardens. The Lehigh Valley now has many existing community gardens, where residents cooperatively maintain individual gardens to plant and harvest fresh local food. You can see them dotting the region from Emmaus to Easton, with some in neighborhoods and some in parks. The “Lehigh Valley Local Food Economy” report, available at envisionlehighvalley.com, contains a map of community gardens in Appendix A.

Gardening is a way to access fresh food, get exercise, connect to the seasons and get to know your neighbors. With a little sweat equity, you can eat well for the price of a couple of packets of seeds and a few bedding plants. The bounty of the harvest can be preserved through canning, freezing or drying — “put up,” as a previous generation described it. For those who want to learn more about canning, the county cooperative extension offices have information.

Joyce Marin is executive director of Renew Lehigh Valley and is an Envision Lehigh Valley Consortium member. Michelle Diaz is a volunteer with RenewLV.
Fresh local food aids local economy - themorningcall.com

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