A Local Partnership for Sustainable Food and Agriculture: The Case of PlacerGROWN[1]

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Interest in sustainable development—generally recognized as an effort to integrate environmental quality, economic prosperity, and social equity—is growing at the international, national, and local levels.[2] At the same time, an extensive literature describes the threats to sustainability posed by the global political economy in its current form. Key features of this economy—growth and short-term profit maximization as the means to prosperity; reliance on market mechanisms rather than public regulation; centralization of power in the hands of corporate and government managers with little accountability—are well documented. [3] They raise the question: Can the vision of sustainability be forged into concrete policies and practices on a democratic basis—one in which citizens and local governing bodies carve alternatives out of the situation at hand?

The food and agriculture sector is among those that have been significantly altered by corporate restructuring, free trade agreements, global sourcing and marketing, and related features of the current economy.[4] Yet there are inherent limits in applying the doctrine of comparative advantage to food commodities. Unlike factories, which can be located wherever the business climate is considered most favorable, food production depends on climate and soil conditions which are geographically specific. The historic link between food and regional cultures is one obvious manifestation. Maintaining this link is one reason interest has grown in designing programs to promote greater local reliance on regionally grown agricultural products, but there are many others. These include energy savings from reduced transportation, re-circulation of food dollars in the local economy, enhanced profitability of local farms, preservation of open space, better flavor and nutrition from eating fresh foods, and reduced concerns about the safety of imported food products.

The following case study investigates one county's efforts to achieve these goals in the face of significant obstacles. The setting is Placer County, California—a rapidly urbanizing county with a rich agricultural heritage. The focus is on PlacerGROWN—a citizens' initiative to control growth and sustain local agriculture. At a critical moment in the county's history, PlacerGROWN articulated a narrative and mapped out related strategies which reconciled the county's historic rural identity with the reality of increased suburbanization. Our concern is threefold: 1) to describe the processes that led public agencies and local citizens to partner in developing PlacerGROWN; 2) to discuss challenges experienced in developing the new organization, and consider alternative responses; and 3) to draw from the case core lessons that can inform the broader academic and public discourse about sustainable development.

Our analysis draws on statistical reports and public documents to describe the policy context in which PlacerGROWN developed, and on open-ended interviews with county leaders familiar with the organization.[5] We have sought to maintain a strategic perspective, in contrast to the tendency in much of the sustainability literature to list promising cases without assessing the community processes that give rise to citizen action, or confronting the organizational development issues that are essential to sustaining initiative over the long haul. Important exceptions exist, and often involve intensive study of a particular case, or drawing lessons from a set of related cases.[6] The authors are grateful to the PlacerGROWN participants who shared their perspectives with us in a constructive spirit, one reflective of the values that gave rise to the organization. We have made every effort to present this report in that same spirit, grounding our inquiry in a respect for the organization's aspirations and its significance as an experiment in securing greater democracy.

The Strategic Significance of the Case

Placer was the second California county, after Sonoma, to create a local ag marketing organization. At least five other rural counties or regions in the state now have similar organizations in various stages of development. An important influence on these initiatives is the movement for sustainable agriculture, increasingly defined not simply as opposition to chemical-intensive farming but as an effort to reassert democratic control over the food and agricultural economy.[7] Many sustainable agriculture initiatives emphasize the well-established economic principle of import substitution, looking for ways to reduce leakage of dollars from the local community.[8] Common strategies include direct marketing to increase farmers' share of food dollars (e.g. farmers' markets, roadside stands), adding value by processing ag products locally, educating consumers about the benefits of eating local produce, and diversifying the range of products grown by local farms.[9]

Unlike many new approaches to rural economic development, these strategies retain a central role for a traditional resource-based industry. They are part of an emerging emphasis on homegrown, community-based approaches that acknowledge resource constraints, develop existing assets, plug economic leaks, capture added value, and support local businesses.[10] The experience of local ag marketing organizations is providing one important test of the viability of these ideas, and the challenges faced when adapting them to particular community circumstances.

Two specific features make the Placer case of particular strategic importance. The first is extremely rapid growth that presents an immediate crisis in terms of loss of farmland. In this respect, Placer is more like counties in California's Great Central Valley than it is like the other California counties and regions that are experimenting with local ag marketing, most of which are either in low-growth regions (e.g., Humbolt Harvest), or in areas where stronger growth controls are already in place (e.g. Sonoma Select). At issue are two critical questions: 1) Will an effort to diversify farms and convince consumers to "buy local" broaden the constituency supporting farmland protection?; 2) Can the local initiative develop a compelling cost-benefit analysis to convince economic development planners and decision makers that an investment in agriculture will pay off? The latter is particularly difficult in a county where the chief recent mode of economic development has been a successful effort to lure high-tech computer firms to the region.

The second feature is the important role played by the County Board of Supervisors and the local Cooperative Extensive in the development of PlacerGROWN. A key constraint to sustainable development is the difficulty mobilizing citizens' initiatives in a culture that distrusts politics and is fearful of grand schemes.[11] By contrast, PlacerGROWN has developed as a partnership with existing public agencies, and its moderate approach appeals to constituencies with different motivations: environmentalists concerned with the costs of growth; business interests (including farmers) concerned about preserving local quality of life; local elected officials seeking to regain control from higher authorities; and long-time residents who value attachment to place.[12] A key question is: In what ways can local efforts benefit by alliances with, or grounding in, community institutions such as Cooperative Extension with the staff resources and legitimacy to enlist citizen energy and support a long-term effort?

Local Policy Context: Agriculture in A Rapidly Suburbanizing Rural County

The idea behind PlacerGROWN surfaced at a community forum held March 11, 1994 in Auburn (the county seat and home to the local Cooperative Extension office). Like their counterparts in other California counties, the fifty citizen leaders gathered were concerned about how development pressures were altering their quality of life. Diverse in outlook, participants in the "Ag Forum" shared a sense that the county's agricultural economy was at a critical juncture. If growth continued at its rapid pace, it was easy to imagine Placer's once proud agricultural heritage being paved over as the Sacramento region continued its relentless expansion along the I-80 corridor. Would Placer County go the way of Santa Clara and Los Angeles, or could it maintain a viable agriculture by crafting a new model of sustainable development? As one participant remembered:

> The feeling was we had almost a crisis situation here. Were we going to become a bedroom community for Sacramento, or were we going to keep our rural quality of life? Personally, it terrified me to think of using up all our land and importing our food from Mexico.

The crisis has a number of roots, the most obvious of which is long-term growth trends. Between 1980 and 1996 Placer County grew in population at a rate of 4.6% per year, increasing from 118,400 to 206,000.[13] While the county extends over the crest of the Sierra to Lake Tahoe in the east, and 30% of its land is publicly owned timberland, the proximity of its western section to Sacramento has made it the fastest growing county in the Sierra region. In 1997 it ranked as the fifth fastest growing county in the entire state, with a population of 215,600. California Department of Finance projections indicate this growth will intensify over the next two decades, with an expected population of 358,500 by 2020.[14] Concurrent with growth is a significant decline in farmland: from a high point of nearly 450,000 acres in the 1950s (nearly half of all land in the county) to less than 150,000 acres today (about 15% of all county land). Farmland acreage has dropped

35% in Placer since 1978,[15] far exceeding the percentages in other suburbanizing counties in California.

Historically, Placer was a major supplier of fruit (plums, pears, cherries, citrus, apples, persimmons, etc.) to east coast markets due to its railroad access. By 1930 over 60% of local farms were producing fruit, spurred by a favorable climate and varied topography (from 100 feet to more than 6,000 feet in elevation). Today, however, no packing sheds remain. During the 1950s and 60s, the development of irrigated agriculture in the Central Valley, refrigerated shipping, and industrial expansion all contributed to the decline of the fruit industry. During the 1970s and early 1980s the fruit decline was partially offset by growth in the poultry industry, but subsequent concentration in the industry has led to a precipitous and near total decline in turkey production. In the 1990s, agriculture in Placer looks much different than in previous decades. Average farm size decreased from 224 acres in 1978 to 122 in the mid-90s, with 71% of farms being 49 acres or smaller. Increasingly, these farms are dependent on off-farm income to survive, with 50% of farm owners spending 200 days or more working off it.[16] As of the mid-1990s, rice, nursery products and livestock are the top agricultural commodities.

Still, agriculture remains a $55 million industry, whose health is important to the county, even if no longer the primary economic base. Growing concern over the well-being of the agricultural industry led the Board of Supervisors in 1986 to direct the Planning Department to investigate ways to protect and promote agriculture. This effort resulted in the 1987 “Placer County Agricultural Study,” which prompted more discussion among county leaders. In 1989 the Board of Supervisors adopted an agricultural element in the County General Plan, along with a right-to-farm ordinance. The agricultural element (updated in the 1994 General Plan) contains policy language intended to protect the County’s remaining agricultural areas. Like most General Plans, it fails to distinguish between crop land and ranch land; any land zoned as “agricultural exclusive” can be subdivided into 20 acre parcels. This policy permits the gradual disappearance of ranchland to "ranchettes" or urban development. A particular concern for the future is that of the 70,564 Placer acres enrolled in the Williamson Act as of the mid-1990s, more than one third, or 28,246 acres, have been initiated for non-renewal.[17]

As is true in many California communities, Placer’s most productive agricultural soils (on the county’s west side) lie directly in the expected path of new development. Faced with high costs, flat prices, reduced federal subsidies, and a declining share of the food dollar,[18] many farmers look forward to the opportunity to sell their land as a means of generating retirement income. As one county leader put it:

> Many farmers are sitting on land now, hoping to turn it over to developers so they can pass something on to their kids. When the Highway 65 corridor improvements were made, farmland went from $500/acre to $15,000/acre.

As of 1992, the average age of county farmers was 55 years and climbing. Many will reach retirement age just as the predicted surge of new population arrives and development pressure intensifies.

Not surprisingly, these trends have given rise to a local political culture increasingly skeptical of growth. California counties have been described as “growth machines,” fueled by a hunger for sales tax revenues and development fees in the wake of the Proposition 13 restrictions on property tax increases.[19] Growth, and accompanying loss of farmland, is often a slow, routine, inexorable process; easier to see in retrospect than to mobilize against in advance. But in Placer, the rapid pace of growth created a sense of immediate threat, which galvanized citizens into a more proactive posture. Long-time residents and newcomers, groups typically at political odds in growing Western communities, found common ground in questioning the growth-related actions of local government and in articulating the desire to maintain a rural quality of life. A Sierra Business Council survey found that 77% of the county’s residents indicated the “quality of life” as a major factor in why they lived in Placer County.[20] At the same time, large and small farmers found common cause in the need to preserve farmland and enhance economic viability. The result has been a loosely-knit political coalition which has spawned slow growth ballot initiatives, fought new development proposals (including an unsuccessful attempt to prevent a new WalMart store), and made growth issues highly visible in County Supervisor races. In this context, preserving open space and a rural quality of life has become a popular banner under which agricultural preservation efforts can be promoted.

From Vision to Organization: Building Political Support for PlacerGROWN

While crisis often provokes purely defensive postures, participants at the Ag forum went further, articulating a positive vision of how Placer citizens might work together to enhance existing community assets and achieve a greater measure of food self-reliance. By the end of the day, one of the three work groups formed during the meeting became animated by the desire for a renewed partnership between agriculture and local residents. As later described in a tabloid insert distributed to 70,000 county residents, “the vision of the group evolved into a “win-win” arrangement in which county economic development at large is joined to an agricultural industry sustained and supported by its residents.”[21] By buying local agricultural products, consumers get the benefits of fresh produce and help growers maintain economic viability; a healthy agricultural economy in turn benefits the whole community by preserving open space and maintaining a sustainable and harmonious relationship to nature.

Within four months, the marketing work group had convinced the county Board of Supervisors to allocate $97,458 in start-up funding for a new non-profit organization, PlacerGROWN. Four factors account for this relatively short period of gestation. The first is the energy and initiative provided by a core group of well-connected civic entrepreneurs. These leaders gathered information, organized tours of similar efforts in other counties (such as Sonoma Select), ironed out the details of the proposal, and systematically lobbied members of the Board of Supervisors. One proponent made it a point to take every member of the Board to lunch to explain the group’s intentions.

A second factor was the presence of a strong supporter on the Board of Supervisors. Alex Ferreira, a respected farmer and Placer native, served on the county Board of Supervisors for over two decades until his retirement in 1994. He knew first hand many of the problems facing agriculture, and his engaging personality helped bring together otherwise factious farmers and farming organizations. The fact that the March 1994 forum attracted such a diverse group of farmers, and that they were "remarkably free of the normal rancor," was attributed by many to his presence. Equally importantly, attendees left the forum knowing that if they could develop a viable proposal, Ferreira would champion it before the Board.

A third factor was the leadership provided by the Placer County Cooperative Extension office. The staff work and detailed follow-through of the Cooperative Extension Director and farm advisors was cited by nearly all of those we interviewed as playing a central role in getting PlacerGROWN underway, and later in sustaining its impact. During the aftermath of the Ag forum, this involved convening and facilitating weekly or biweekly meetings of the marketing work group as it developed its proposal.

A final factor was fortunate timing. PlacerGROWN could build on the community precedent set in 1989 when community leaders won county financial support to create the Foothills Farmers Market. During the early 1990s the market expanded rapidly, and added four new locations.[22] The new markets, along with festivals and fairs designed to attract tourists, provide a valuable direct marketing outlet for farmers, and have become an important social meeting place. The effort to convince the Board to support the farmers' markets rehearsed many of the arguments and brought together many of the same players later involved in promoting PlacerGROWN.

As it turned out, the proposal was not a hard sell. Because of hard fought battles over recent ballot initiatives, members of the Board were eager to appease slow growth advocates. County coffers were relatively intact (despite the recession that plagued most California counties during the early 1990s), and few other major requests were before the Board when the PlacerGROWN proposal was considered on July 12, 1994. The clinching factor was the upcoming retirement of Ferreira from the Board, and the sentiment that the Board should not stand in the way of the last major proposal he would champion. Thus it was not a big surprise when the Board unanimously supported the PlacerGROWN proposal, even though the size of the first-year investment was substantial.

What little opposition that did exist argued against using public funds to promote marketing efforts that would not benefit all farmers or businesses. By the time their concerns were voiced, a strong consensus supporting the proposal already existed. Many viewed it as a logical extension of the earlier support by the County for the Farmers Market, and foresaw only positive benefits for the entire county. The only other substantive issue raised during the approval process was the specification that the first year grant should be considered seed money only, rather than a pledge of long-term support. True to this intention, the Board continued to fund PlacerGROWN in subsequent years, but at the greatly reduced level of $10,000.

Starting and Sustaining the New Organization

The plan approved by the Board on July 12, 1994 listed four broad goals:

1. Develop a non-profit agricultural marketing organization to expand the demand for locally grown and processed foods.
2. Increase agricultural production, profitability and opportunity.
3. Create and enhance a more sustainable community.
4. Enhance and increase economic development and stability in Placer County.

An addendum to the proposal made it clear that the initial $97,458 allocation was to cover front-end costs, but that the ongoing funding of the organization would require membership fees and grant writing. It went on to suggest $50 as a standard membership fee, and anticipated that over the first two years the number of members would be in the range of 250-300. The addendum expressed the expectation that the fee could eventually be raised to provide more support.

After Board approval, the new program was housed in the Cooperative Extension office. As with any new non-profit group, much time was devoted early on to required start-up activities such as achieving 501c(3) status, securing liability insurance, developing bylaws, establishing membership policies, designing a logo, registering trademarks, etc. Equally important and time consuming was the patient work molding a diverse group of participants into a working Board of Directors. The strength of the coalition pushing for PlacerGROWN was its diversity, but that very diversity made group building a challenge. The original Board brought together small and large growers, livestock and vegetable growers, those who were familiar with marketing and those who weren't, those who knew the political process and those who did not. It included consumers, farmers, local government representatives, the farmer's market manager, etc. Some members had worked together before, but not necessarily with satisfactory outcomes. Politically, the group encompassed a full spectrum, from solidly conservative to decidedly progressive. Further complicating the mix was the addition early on of three contractors with contrasting styles. The three were hired to work on different aspects of the workplan: membership, agricultural marketing expansion and development, and educational development and delivery.

Despite the many challenges, and spurred by the work of the contractors (who were part-time and received approximately $15,000 each for a year's work), the first year produced a lengthy list of accomplishments. As reported in the year-end report to the Board of Supervisors, these included:

- establishing PlacerGROWN as a non-profit corporation with a nine member Board of Directors and over 150 paid memberships;
- developing a promotional campaign including a logo, slogan, point of purchase cards, posters, signs and stickers;

- developing a farm trail map and harvest calendar featuring ag producers, restaurants, caterers, bed and breakfasts and other outlets for PlacerGROWN products;
- distributing 70,000 PlacerGROWN newspaper tabloid inserts;
- developing educational packets geared to different audiences: media, consumers, general public, growers, and restaurants and caterers;
- producing a bimonthly newsletter for 1,800 ag producers in the County;
- holding the first yearly farm conference attended by over 100 local ag producers;
- conducting educational workshops on water, value-added marketing and a short course on ag marketing;
- developing a youth educational curricula;
- conducting a 5-week Reason for the Season education program that trained 15 community volunteers as food educators;
- contacting local restaurants, grocers, institutions, and others to promote the idea of using locally grown products;
- developing a promotional program that gave PlacerGROWN a visible presence at festivals, fairs and other community events.

While the number of memberships is somewhat misleading (all attendees to the annual farm conference were required to become members as part of their registration fee), the breadth of these activities, and the volume of concrete educational materials produced, cannot be underestimated. It is doubtful that any county in the nation, even those with ag marketing programs similar to PlacerGROWN, has witnessed such a concentrated and comprehensive educational campaign related to sustainable community development over such a short period of time. By the time the first year was completed, the new organization was able to produce a 7-page report detailing their accomplishments, and setting forth three priorities for year two: market expansion and development, stimulating value-added products, and consumer education.

Since year one, with their annual County funding reduced to $10,000, PlacerGROWN has not had the benefit of paid contractors to carry out key organizational activities. A part-time staff person has been hired to handle clerical duties, leaving the programmatic mission primarily in the hands of volunteer Board members and the Cooperative Extension staff. Despite the normal turnover on the Board, the dedicated efforts of these individuals have allowed many of the educational activities begun in year one to continue, albeit at a slower pace. These include the newsletter, educational workshops, promotions at festivals and fairs, farm tours, and the annual Farm Conference. Attendance at the Farm Conference has grown in each year from 1995-98, providing the most visible evidence that PlacerGROWN continues to strike a meaningful chord among farmers, consumers and the general public.

Support from the Cooperative Extension office has been critical to nurturing the organization. In addition to providing office space and distributing PlacerGROWN materials, three members of the Cooperative Extension staff (including the Director) have been significantly involved with PlacerGROWN activities despite many other programmatic responsibilities. Through their ties to the University of California, Cooperative Extension secured two small grants to fund surveys of growers and consumers, and related educational activities. The surveys provided useful baseline data that revealed substantial interest in local marketing among both farmers and consumers. For example, 80.6% of consumers said they would choose a local fruit "always" or "a lot" if it were readily available, with 53.7% indicating a similar preference for locally produced meat.

Assessing Progress to Date: Stakeholder Perceptions

While it is early to hold a still-young community organization accountable for achieving its full spectrum of goals, it is never too early for participants to begin reflecting on how well various activities are contributing to intended outcomes. Studies suggest that the most successful community organizations engage in a process of "continuous learning," taking time to reflect on past activities before taking next steps.[23] Such "outcomes assessments" can clarify strategy, suggest new directions, focus energy, and provide occasions to celebrate success. It is also increasingly critical to both public and private funders, who want to know not just how their money is being spent but what community benefits are resulting.[24]

In our interviews with County stakeholders, we asked them both for their own assessments of PlacerGROWN's progress, and for suggestions as to what are the most important indicators that might be used to track ongoing efforts. The assessments were appropriately mixed, noting significant accomplishments but also areas of concern. Many pointed to the excellent educational materials (which have become models for other communities) and the growing attendance at the Farm conference, ag tours, and workshops as signs of PlacerGROWN's vitality. Others noted the ongoing financial support from the Board of Supervisors, and evidence that the Board is developing additional tools for ag land preservation (e.g. a recent Board workshop focused on conservation easements).

Others supplied particular examples of the types of changes PlacerGROWN intends: a farmer who now sells six or seven value-added products under the PlacerGROWN label; the expansion of the mandarin orange industry after successful promotion of a mandarin festival and work with producers; efforts of several livestock producers to direct market to consumers; the development of a few community supported agriculture projects by local producers; new crop production such as wheat grass for a local eatery bar; a local restaurant that now buys a good deal of its produce locally; the popularity of a youth curriculum designed to educate about the benefits of seasonal eating; etc.

Membership trends drew mixed reactions from the stakeholders. As of Fall 1997, PlacerGROWN has 92 dues paying members, about equally divided between farmers and non-farmers. On the one hand, this is far short of the original goal of 250-300, and not enough to provide stable organizational funding. On the other hand, it represents a relatively strong base for a community organization, and is a rare instance of success in bringing together farm, consumer and community constituencies.

Stakeholders found other indications more troubling: relatively few farmers, even PlacerGROWN members, are displaying the logo to attract business; public visibility has waned after the initial burst of activity during year one, and many community members have trouble distinguishing PlacerGROWN from the Farmers' Market (though each is a separate non-profit); funding to supplement the small County allocation has been difficult to obtain; and county economic development officials have shown reluctance at providing increased staff support for ag marketing efforts. Indeed, agriculture does not even show up on the list of "key industries" contained in the 1997 organization and marketing plan of the county Economic Development Office.

The stakeholders suggested a number of indicators that PlacerGROWN could use to track its ongoing efforts. Some of these involved keeping a closer eye on routine activities and their immediate outcomes, such as the number of logo stickers and signs issued and used, and the number of publications distributed (e.g. farm trail maps). With respect to PlacerGROWN's larger mission, the most frequently mentioned indicators were: the number of acres of ag land in production; the number of acres in new plantings and alternative crops, the number of small farmers (and some measure of their economic viability, such as the continuity of small farm operators); farmers' market attendance and sales; increased retail participation (as evidenced by the percentage of stores using the logo, consumer surveys, etc.); and growth in the number of farm acres protected by conservation easements or other means.

In justifying local marketing initiatives to economic development decision makers, a key difficulty is a relative dearth of relevant and easily available data. The agricultural census and annual reports from the County Agricultural Commissioner provide little data that describes the contributions and condition of small-scale, local growers. Nor is there a way of documenting year to year shifts in local markets that reflect when commodities appear, their duration, and general variety and diversity trends. On top of this is the problem of measuring changes in consumer attitudes that can only be expected to occur gradually after years of persistent effort. No easy method exists for understanding the effect of various educational strategies on consumer choices, or the aggregate effect of these choices on local demand patterns. A few academic researchers are beginning to tackle these concerns, but much work remains to be done before local groups have access to the data and tools they need.

Learning From the PlacerGROWN Experience

In reflecting on the PlacerGROWN experience, three core lessons emerge. The first is the need for substantial public investment if a local marketing organization is to remain viable over the long haul. The second is that local marketing initiatives can strengthen farmland protection efforts, but only if there is clarity about conceptual and organizational linkages. The third is the power of a compelling narrative and motivated civic entrepreneurs to advance the sustainable development agenda, in ways that transcend the ebb and flow of particular organizations and initiatives. The following sections discuss each of these in turn.

<u>The Need for Public Investment</u>

PlacerGROWN's experience calls into question the assumption that local marketing organizations can rely on membership as the primary source of support, especially during the formative years. The shortage of fiscal resources has left the organization without full-time staff to attend to basic organizational functions such as recruiting members, promoting the logo, etc. Brand marketing is an expensive and difficult form of marketing, requiring a consistent effort to focus both consumers and producers on the logo.[25] It can take many years of sustained effort of this kind for the logo/brand to become a force in the marketplace, thus attracting greater attention from retailers. Until this happens, the corollary benefits sought by groups such as PlacerGROWN—farm viability, quality of life, etc.—are more difficult to realize.

In an era of policy devolution, where federal farm subsidies are being gradually phased out, it makes sense for state and local governments to begin considering how they might use their own resources to support community food systems. In California, the most successful local marketing efforts have required substantial public funding. For example, Sonoma Select has benefited from receiving a dedicated share (~$58,000 per year) of the county's Transient Occupancy Tax revenues (derived from tourist accommodations). Even so, it took their organization about four years to take hold, and six before retail participation was widespread.

In addition to direct fiscal support, government agencies can "adopt" these initiatives in ways that support the work of community-based organizations during their start-up phase. Goldrich and Cooper (1984) have described typical organizational struggles and strategic dilemmas facing citizen initiatives to advance democracy, equity and sustainability. These include member attrition (particularly as the stage shifts from initial, dramatic encounters to more mundane tasks), underdevelopment of new leadership, and the limits of localism—the latter referring to default on broader policy questions caused by the narrow focus on parochial issues. Over and against the substantial costs entailed in developing greater organizational capacity are the benefits of increased clout and staying power. The organization becomes less vulnerable to powerful interests who can wait out the flagging interest of local activists. More broadly, there is the power generated when local people come to a firmer understanding of how their particular struggle is part of something bigger; when they develop what Mills called the sociological imagination—the capacity to see those struggles not just as troubles unique to themselves but as social issues amenable to collective resolution.[26]

As we have seen, PlacerGROWN has been nurtured by the willing and able cooperation of the local Cooperative Extension staff. The case provides a creative example of how teamwork and dedication can allow Cooperative Extension to expand upon their traditional role as extenders of knowledge relating to farming, nutrition, and related concerns. In this case, they took on a broader role as community developers. This is particularly commendable given the relative dearth of support or reward for such activity in an organization that has come to pride itself on narrowly defined expertise. The Placer staff drew on their significant expertise, but did so in a manner that helped spark and complement a citizen-led process. Cooperative Extension offices exist in most counties in the country, and might profitably be called on to initiate and support active citizenship on the types of critical resource issues Placer faced.

At the same time, all local participants acknowledge that the close affinity to Cooperative Extension has tended to undercut PlacerGROWN's quest for a distinct community identity. Cooperative Extension staff have gradually sought to wean the new organization, but such efforts are constrained by a countervailing desire to support PlacerGROWN until it is on a stronger footing. There are no easy answers to finding the appropriate balance. If it is true that sustainability initiatives can benefit from the sponsorship of existing public agencies, issues of this sort will bear regular scrutiny and discussion. A key concern is how the sponsoring organization can provide training or locate training resources that expand members' skills and knowledge.

One area where skill development is particularly needed is in strategic planning. By their very nature, complex sustainable community development initiatives embody visions that are holistic, implying multiple goals and strategies. But organizational, political and financial resources are limited, making it impossible to focus on more than a few core goals at any given point in time. Strategic planning can provide needed focus, but only if the organization can deal with inevitable conflicts over priorities. A typical failing, not at all unique to community-based organizations, is to remain open to all plausible suggestions rather than risk offending particular members. By contrast, mature organizations must become adept at defining strategic opportunities sequentially, finding win-win opportunities today that increase visibility and build support for tomorrow's tasks.

Linking Local Marketing Initiatives and Farmland Protection

Despite being the nation's leading agricultural producer, and in the face of a 23% loss of farmland over the past generation, California has no coherent statewide policy for protecting this resource.[27] Land use decision-making happens at the local level, where fragmented decision-making and fiscal dependency enhance the clout of the land development industry. By contrast, the forces committed to farmland protection are, to quote a recent analysis, "too weak, fragmented and isolated to secure sufficient political support".[28]

Both the history of animosity between environmental and farm interests, and the divisions within the farm community between those supporting farmland protection and those farmers and their heirs who see the land as their greatest fiscal asset, make it difficult to build stable and effective coalitions. Even in cases where the agricultural community begins to demonstrate greater unity on the subject (as in the report of a recent coalition of agricultural interests calling for protection of farmland in the Central Valley[29]), the public is appropriately skeptical of a scheme in which farmers benefit from public subsidy while promising little to the community in return.

In this context, PlacerGROWN represents a unique approach, in which farmland protection is linked to supportive changes on the part of consumers, citizens, *and* farmers. Consumers redirect a portion of their food purchases to local products. Citizens redirect a small portion of tax dollars to support educational efforts. Farmers are provided training that supports environmentally responsible production, and are encouraged to diversify their crops to meet consumer interests and demand. This begins to provide a deeper rationale for farmland protection, rooted in a greater sense of reciprocity between agriculture and the community.

At the current time, Placer County is considering new policies to preserve open space and protect farmland. This includes a new program called Placer Legacy, which is exploring specific tools the county might use. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which PlacerGROWN's educational work has contributed to this active climate of policy experimentation, but it is certainly one important factor. Three civic leaders with extensive ties to the organization now sit on the citizen's advisory board that is overseeing the Placer Legacy program.

In addition to the potential benefits, there are potential pitfalls in linking ag marketing and famland protection goals. When we asked people, "What are the goals of PlacerGROWN?" the replies suggested two distinct understandings. The first views the organization as the policy voice and vehicle for all agricultural interests in the county. It emphasizes the need to be inclusive of both large and small growers, and to focus on shared concerns around land use, growth and development. The second views the organization as the facilitator of local marketing of agricultural products. It sees the organization's main tasks as market development and consumer education and its primary agricultural constituents as the county's small farmers.

In principle these two goals are complementary, but the linkages need to be clearly and continuously articulated so that the expectations of organization members are realistic, and effective coalitions are possible. Our interviews found some confusion about PlacerGROWN's identity, and a resulting diffusion of its energies. To the extent that the organization emphasizes marketing, it appears to be primarily a small farm organization (since few large growers make much use of local/direct marketing channels), undercutting its potential role as a policy voice for "all" of agriculture. To the extent that the organization devotes time and energy to pursuing farmland protection goals, it dissipates attention from its marketing effort. Of course, these issues would not be as troubling if the funds to hire more staff were available.

The Power of a Compelling Narrative and Committed Civic Leadership

Because of PlacerGROWN, residents of Placer County have a working strategy for a partnership linking farmers and consumers to create a stronger community. While it will be important to track the long-term impact of this strategy on preserving farmland, farm viability, and consumer choices, the more immediate contribution is to bolster the community's sense of identity in the midst of rapid change. Rather than wistful dreams of yesterday, or a blind embrace of development, PlacerGROWN articulates a plausible means to reconcile the community's historic rural identity with the reality of increased suburbanization. The vision may never be fully realized, but the fact that the vision has been articulated is itself a significant contribution to community well-being. It offers a way to link the county's past, present and future into a coherent and sustaining narrative. And it gives farmers and residents tangible ways to act incrementally on their own behalf, guided by an understanding that links self-interest to community vitality.

PlacerGROWN's experience no doubt is typical of many sustainable community development initiatives. New visions of community well-being congeal slowly; new patterns of political and social cohesion build incrementally; and new institutions for economic collaboration must evolve patiently.[30] It is easy to wax poetic about sustainability, much harder to sustain a long-term effort to change attitudes, practices and institutions. Development pressure will not abate soon. Consumers, primarily educated via mass media advertising, require repeated exposure to the contrasting messages of the "buy local" campaign. All of this suggests the need for an organizational capacity flexible enough to meet new situations and leaders with the strategic savvy to sustain the initial vision over the long haul.

Whether PlacerGROWN as an organization promoting local ag marketing can sustain and expand its influence remains an open question. But it is certain that the organization has provided a productive focus for the energies of a core of committed civic entrepreneurs. What marks these entrepreneurs is not formal roles or organizational affiliations, but the ability to mold financial, intellectual, and organizational resources into a practical plan of action. The Placer case is consistent with previous research indicating the importance of a community's "entrepreneurial social infrastructure"—the means by which social capital is mobilized in an evolving community context.[31] Just as PlacerGROWN supporters built on previous community endeavors such as the farmer's market, the PlacerGROWN experience has enhanced citizen education, experience, and connection to the political process.

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[5] Interviews were conducted during the period August-December of 1997. They were taped and transcribed, and analyzed to discern recurring themes. The authors wish to thank the approximately two dozen community leaders who participated in interviews and community meetings during the course of our research. Many others were helpful in identifying sources of data or key community contacts.

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