

Food Innovator Profile: Tamera Downs Schwei (Minneapolis MN)

Tamara Downs Schwei (Minneapolis MN) brings a non-profit background to her city position, and she discusses the city's thoughtful evolution towards building a sustainable food culture.

Tamara talks about how to create a healthy urban food ecosystem, leveraging community and policy maker interactions, and prioritizing inclusivity. Learn some of her tactics.



Figure 1:
minneapolismn.gov

Q. [This page](#) has an amazing amount of resources. Tell us about your urban food journey. When did the city begin, and how long did it take to evolve to this point?

A. We launched our Homegrown Minneapolis initiative in 2008. It was a culmination of several factors: we had a supporting Mayor, City Council, and City Departments, especially the Health Department, as well as funding from a Federal grant. Also, the community was already quite active in food issues, and in some cases their desires were ahead of our city rules and ordinances. We saw the opportunity to catch up and take advantage of this momentum in partnership with the community.

We sat down together and figured out how the city was currently working for local food, and what could be changed to remove urban food barriers and to be more supportive. We had 4 groups that met over the course of several months in 2009. Each group had co-chairs from city staff and from the community. It was a dynamic and iterative process.

These 4 groups brought recommendations to City Council, which, when adopted, resulted in the construction of an Implementation Task Force. This group worked on what resulted in our urban agriculture text amendments, Urban Agriculture Policy Plan and the resolution that formed our Food Policy Council. Amendments were incorporated into the city code and into the city's Comprehensive Plan. This work resulted in the launch of a new type of Farmers Market license, as well as in a dynamic shift in our City's support for local urban food culture.

In 2012, the Food Council officially formed. They meet monthly, and uphold the broader mission and vision of our urban food initiative. They reassess key priorities and define gaps to target for progress. It's a volunteer group of city staff and community members, initially staffed by a part-time consultant. I am filling the first full-time city urban food-focused staff position, and now staff this group.

Q. How did you come into this role as the City's first full-time staff position dedicated to urban food?



A. I've been in it for 3 years now, and have built on the efforts of those who came before me. Previously, I was the executive director of a local non-profit that worked, in part, on youth gardens in St. Paul. I have a field background: leasing land from the city and others, growing food, and selling at Farmers Markets. I try to be a bridge between the city and the community, and to be the best touch point possible for someone navigating our urban food system.

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Q. Minneapolis was part of the city team that created a 2-part roadmap for city food sector innovations and investments ([here](#)). How did being part of this early USDN urban food learning collaboration influence your work?

A. The city influenced the field with those early efforts, and were also influenced by learning from our peer cities. We shared and gained knowledge. Last year, we had a Peer Learning Exchange team from Baltimore come to visit, see our corner stores, and learn about our policies. There are some areas where other USDN members are pioneering, and some areas where we are the leaders. We really build on the work that occurred in the past, even as we continue to evolve. One of the goals with our website is to be responsive to community needs. We continue to add resources, so it is a comprehensive one-stop shop for community members.

Q. How is your current Partners for Places grant working for you as you strive to build a community of Farmers Markets for a healthier city-wide food system, and support increased capacity building for the most economically disadvantaged residents?

A. We are mid-way through this grant work, and there are a lot of moving parts. With the launch of the Farmers Market season, it has been busy! We have common goals and a shared framework that allows us to learn from each other in part through collection of vendor and customer data. We are learning where the common challenges and opportunities are across the Farmers Markets of Minneapolis system.

Despite our limited capacity, we have been able to leverage even more support through this work. It has allowed us to see more clearly the next steps we need to take to move towards a large-scale formal collaborative. This city-wide collaborative is a part of our long-term plan, but we needed the right time and resources to implement it. The north Minneapolis portion of our project is planned so we can go both deep and wide with this work and focus on an area of the city with more food access barriers. We have partners who are ready with more opportunities. The work is growing itself through our discoveries.

Q. What lessons would you tell others who want to emulate your work?

A. Continually make the case of urban food importance. One staff member is great, but not quite enough to do it all. That is where partnerships come in handy! One of these opportunities has been to build partnerships with the University of Minnesota. The Farmers Markets are a nexus of local food systems activities, and quantifying progress through partnerships like these motivates me. There's still a way to go with building and understanding food systems at the micro-level, and connections between academia and food distributors really help in this process as well as through supportive funders.

Homegrown Minneapolis is a community-driven initiative. It belongs to anyone who wants to pitch in. It takes all of us working together to build a strong food system. Make sure you are listening regularly to the community and continue to have the policy makers and staff at the table with the community members. We do an annual City Council report, and it is a yearly milestone - a substantial list of accomplishments.

Having formal and informal ways to connect at all levels is critical. Also, strive to be inclusive. Inclusivity to us means not only inviting but also being welcoming. We have been on a journey towards greater inclusivity and equity in the food system and in our activities. It is worth every ounce of effort. We have one of the most diverse City Advisory Councils, and our Food Council members are wonderful representatives for many community groups within our city.

Finally, the support and partnership we have received over the years from USDN has been very important and helpful to our work as a city – both through grant funding, collaborative partnership with peer cities and from participation in the Food Systems User Group. There are resiliency and food conversations that sometimes happen separately, but it's clear that having a healthy food ecosystem makes a community more resilient overall. It is connections like these that USDN can make, to the benefit and advancement of many sustainability fields.