

**2020 STATUS UPDATE**  
**Illinois Local Food, Farms & Jobs Council**  
**(created by the Illinois Food, Farms, & Jobs Acts, 2007 & 2009)**

**TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST**

by Samantha Boas  
Northwestern University  
A class project for: Media, Earth, and Making a Difference  
December 2020

**BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH**

Debbie Hillman  
co-founder of the ILFFJ Council, 2006-10  
Evanston, IL  
[www.FoodFarmsDemocracy.net](http://www.FoodFarmsDemocracy.net)

Harry Rhodes  
member of the ILFFJ Council, 2013-17  
Chicago, IL  
Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)  
[www.Foodanimalconcernstrust.org](http://www.Foodanimalconcernstrust.org)

**WITH A BRIEF REVIEW OF**

The Illinois Pilot Project: A New Model for State-level Food Procurement Legislation  
a project by graduate & professional school students  
in the Climate, Animal, Food, and Environmental Law & Policy Lab (CAFE Lab)  
Law, Ethics, & Animals program  
Yale Law School

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** When you think of Illinois, what do you think of? Your first thought might be Chicago, maybe sports. Looking outside the city, you probably think of corn and farmland, and with good reason. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Illinois had 72,000 farms in April 2019. 75% of the state's total land area is farmland.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Over the last few decades, there has been a rising focus on supporting local farmers and food producers, and Illinois is no exception. And the year 2020 plays a unique role in Illinois's food conversation. For starters, COVID-19 has created new challenges for farmers.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** And legislatively, 2020 is the benchmark for the goals set by the Illinois Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Act of 2009. The Act was a few years in the making, and to get to 2020, we have to start at the beginning.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** I talked to Debbie Hillman, a food and farm activist who played a key role in what ultimately led to the Act. Debbie's efforts helped lead to the creation of the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force, a task force that would later develop into the Illinois Local Food, Farms and Jobs Council. Born and raised in Chicago, Debbie was a professional gardener for 25 years.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** And since 2005, I've been part of the national food and farm movement to involve all eaters and all producers in all decisions that are made about food and farm issues in the United States.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Around April 2007, Debbie and the Evanston Food Policy Council, which she co-created in 2005, started talking to Illinois state representative and urban legislator Julie Hamos. After describing some of the issues, including people not knowing where their food comes from and a decline in the farmer population, Julie wanted more information about what specifically she could do in the state of Illinois. After all, she was an urban legislator and wasn't supposed to be proposing farm bills for the state. Julie also wanted the Council to show that there's a big coalition of people rallying behind these food systems issues. A few months later, Debbie and the Council met with Julie again with a few more people, and a few more ideas.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** Finally, in October of that year, we had another meeting, a third meeting and at that meeting, we brought more people. We brought farmers from central Illinois and I'm sure you know that farmers in October are usually very busy harvesting. When she realized that these farmers drove two or three hours to meet with a state legislator that they did not know in the middle of harvest season, she realized that something was going on positive with our growing coalition.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** And so there were about 10 of us at that meeting. We filled up her small conference room and by the end of the meeting, which was about two hours, she said, okay, I'm still hearing that there's a lot of things that you all need to talk out. And so she said what she could do as a legislator is to create a task force, a temporary task force. And then we would meet for two years, write a report and hopefully the report would come out with some recommendations.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The 2007 bill that created the task force passed unanimously. So the process of writing the report began.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** We started having listening sessions all around the state and because I was one of the two coordinators, the coordinators were the ones charged with setting up the listening sessions and then going to the listening sessions and to document whatever people on the ground were telling us, so that then we would take it back to the task force and start incorporating it into whatever, you know, report we were starting to put together. So we had, I think, 18 listening sessions around the state and I think that's in the report, I think there's a list of them.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** So what did this report have to say? Let's start with the problem. Illinois is producing a lot of food, but much of that food is leaving the state. And "the vast majority of the food we eat comes from outside of Illinois."

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The report sums it up through an economic lens, saying "to retain a larger share of food dollars, Illinois needs a plan to increase the supply of farm products grown, processed and distributed in Illinois for Illinois."

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The report proposes how to do this, saying, “Building an Illinois food, farms and jobs economy will require production, infrastructure, customer access, and public awareness to be developed at the same time.”

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The report also addresses some of the obstacles, like insufficient access to farmland, and limited knowledge of current market opportunities for farmers, increased by isolation and a lack of coordination between producers and consumers. The report also proposed a multitude of solutions to these problems, serving as a guideline for what the state and its residents can do. The 48-page report was finished in March 2009.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** I think the biggest achievement of the whole initiative is the report itself, which I think still stands as one of the better food and farm plans in the entire country.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** One element of the report that made it stand out, Debbie said, is its focus on what diversified farm production can look like, ranging from grains to cosmetic products. The report highlighted the importance of crop diversity and production of non-food crops. For example, much of farmers’ profits can come from agritourism through corn mazes, pumpkin patches, and selling Christmas trees.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** But I think that the fact that we included all those other ways that farmers have made money over the years, but we made sure to include that as something that the government, the state of Illinois should support.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** It just really is an important piece, for non-farming people to understand how much everything in our life comes from the land.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The report also proposed a permanent Illinois Local Food, Farms and Jobs Council. A second bill creating this Council and getting the state to adopt the report was taken into effect in August 2009 as a part of the Illinois Food, Farms & Jobs Act of 2009.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The Act laid out goals and measures to help build an Illinois food, farms and jobs economy. Section 10 of the Act, said that by 2020, 20% of the food purchased by State-**owned** agencies, including facilities for mental health and developmental disabilities, correctional facilities, and public universities should be local.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** And the Council created through this Act would be responsible for ensuring that 10% of food purchased by organizations **funded** partially or wholly by State dollars, will be local farm or food products by 2020.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The Council would be governed by a 35-member board of directors, composed of government representatives, farmers, product retailers and more. And with the creation and legal support of the Council came the end of the task force; the task force achieved its goals of creating a plan for supporting and encouraging local food production. Debbie decided to not go onto the Council.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Harry Rhodes was a member of the Council from 2013 to early 2017. Harry’s background is in urban agriculture. From 2001 to 2018, Harry served as the executive director for

Growing Home, a non-profit urban farm organization in Chicago. During his time on the Council, he attended meetings in Springfield and participated in conversations about expanding the local food scene.

**HARRY RHODES:** There was a lot of activity around 2014, 2015, a lot of great ideas and goals. Unfortunately, there wasn't any funding behind it. The department of agriculture kind of took it on to, to run the council.

**HARRY RHODES:** There was a lot of talk, but I didn't feel like a whole lot was accomplished. One of the main reasons is just lack of resources and everyone who was on it was a volunteer and beyond the meetings, few people had time to put into it. There was a steering committee. I know a few people who were on that who were pretty active and they had meetings and came up with some really good actual plans, but the implementation was always challenging.

**HARRY RHODES:** And then I think around after Governor Rauner was elected, I think he was elected in 2016. The council stopped meeting shortly after that. He took away authority from the department of agriculture to run the council, so there was no one there to run it and it wasn't a priority for him to keep the council going or, or for his administration.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** And Governor Rauner's takeover is reflected in the legislature. A January 2017 amendment to the Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Act downsized the board of directors from 35 to 20. And a February 2020 amendment delegated many of the Council's responsibilities to the State, making the State responsible for the 2020 goals.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** So the question remains, with the downsizing of the Council and its responsibilities, and the benchmark year of 2020, have the goals of the Act been met?

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Harry doesn't think so.

**HARRY RHODES:** No, no. I think there's, you know, different forces at play and in the past four years, I think that market forces have really kind of taken over and industrial ag (agriculture) has gotten even stronger, and something we're fighting against. And we're part of coalitions, about 75 to 80% of the meat that is eaten is produced or processed by four big corporations around the country. And it's hard to fight against those big, wealthy corporations.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Some other research echoes the sentiment that the goals of the Act haven't been accomplished. For example, an article from SIU's The Daily Egyptian stated that zero Illinois colleges reported pursuing a local food purchasing program after 2017.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** But Harry also thinks that a lot of good has come, especially compared to the beginning of his time working in urban agriculture.

**HARRY RHODES:** So there's a lot more activity and funding available than there was. I started with Growing Home in 2001 and there was hardly anything happening. And now it seems like there's a lot more happening. There's work happening statewide.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** So even if the Act didn't achieve all of what it hoped, not all hope is lost. On a state and municipal level, people can lobby for legislation that supports the goals of the Act, and maybe even adds some others.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** A group of students out of Yale’s Climate, Animal, Food and Environmental Law and Policy Lab have created the “Illinois Pilot Project” which is a proposal to revise the Illinois Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act in a way that will address climate and the environment, animal welfare, food and nutrition, and workers’ rights.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** The Project recommends that at the state level, the inactive Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Council should be replaced by a new and more comprehensive statewide Food Policy Council. And unlike the original Act, this plan would clearly establish how progress will be monitored and evaluated over time. The Project also recommends an establishment of a Food Hub Network, which would support aggregation and distribution of local food, especially for small-scale producers.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** There are also individual actions we can take to facilitate the growth of local food producers and farmers in Illinois.

**HARRY RHODES:** I would say start out, educating yourself, find out what food you can trust, what food is healthy. And then take the next step and buy locally, buy as much from farmers as you can, buy from co-ops. There's other companies that are trying to support farmers and support local foods getting into the food system. Check them out, find out who's doing good work.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** The first thing I would say would be to look in their community and to see if there is a food policy council. Because there are food policy councils all over the United States now and Canada, and some of them are very local.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** That would be the first thing is to see if you have a food council in your community and ask them what they need.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** Within her organization Food + Farms + Democracy, Debbie has worked to develop communication within local food infrastructure, especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**DEBBIE HILLMAN:** And so right in March, when things really started getting crazy with the pandemic and everybody was worried that, like we were afraid that maybe the health departments, would say no farmer's markets this year, which would have been disastrous for farmers, would have been disastrous for people who want good, fresh food. And so we as an organization or a grassroots group working on food policy councils just really rallied around and said, this is what we have to do in our local communities to make sure that they don't shut down the farmer's markets, or the community gardens or the urban farms.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** For more information about food policy councils and finding local organizations, check out Johns Hopkins University’s web database for food policy networks. The link for that is <http://www.foodpolicynetworks.org>.

**SAMANTHA BOAS:** If you’re more interested in making sure the food you eat was produced safely and humanely, on the website for Food Animal Concerns Trust, the organization Harry is currently a part of, you can find information about humane farming, restaurants, and labeling. That website is <https://foodanimalconcernstrust.org>