# *Edible Connections*: A Model for Citizen Dialogue Used to Discuss Local Food, Farm, and Community Issues

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## Abstract

**Edible Connections:** Changing the Way We Talk About Food, Farm, and Community introduces a model created to facilitate public dialogue on local food system issues such as farmland preservation, food safety, and hunger. Overall, this article describes and compares **Edible Connections** to other public discourse strategies used to engage individuals within a community in discussions regarding concerns about their local food system. Two characteristics set **Edible Connections** apart from other public dialogue strategies. First, the media—print, broadcast, e-commerce—are forum participants. Second is **Edible Connections**' clear focus on food system issues. Its format allows those carrying out forums the flexibility to structure the dialogue to meet specific local objectives. Descriptions of how Pennsylvania communities defined and carried out **Edible Connections** to address locally important questions on the food system illustrate the ways in which **Edible Connections** helps to meet community interests and needs.

The United States' food system is infinitely complex. Despite the fact that supermarkets are stocked with a dazzling array of products, chronic hunger is on the rise and farmland and family farms are disappearing. Consider these facts:

* Food banks across the country (e.g., in Florida; Connecticut; Atlanta, GA; Dallas, TX; Roanoke, VA; Wichita, KS; Surprise, AZ; and southwestern Pennsylvania) all reported increases in demand and decreased donations in 1999 compared to 1998 (Lavoie, 1999; Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center, 1999).

* Millions of acres of farmland are being lost.  In Pennsylvania, more than four million acres, an area greater than Rhode Island and Connecticut combined, have been lost largely due to urban and suburban sprawl since the 1950s (Hylton, 1995).

At the community level, issues such as hunger, access to food, encroachments on farmland, and disputes over how to plan for the future use of land can cause a sense of hopelessness and frustration in citizens. Citizens often feel powerless to find and carry out solutions to problems in their communities (Smith & Maretzki, 2000).

Opportunities to engage citizens in discussions on community food system issues can empower local people in several ways:

* Citizens become aware of others who share common interests about food system issues.

* People learn specifics about their community food system (such as the extent of hunger and farmland loss) and how they can put their knowledge to work.

* Citizens can be part of creating a solution that addresses community concerns (such as food safety, sprawl, keeping local farms in business, or supermarkets closing in a neighborhood).

* People can be prepared to contribute in meaningful ways to public decisions on how to deal with community concerns.

* Citizen dialogue forces people to consider the ideas and opinions of others as they create a vision for the future of their community food system (Smith & Maretzki, 2000).

How to foster public dialogue related to a community's concerns about its food and farms is the focus of this article. It describes a

recently developed initiative, **Edible Connections:** Changing the Way We Talk About Food, Farm, and Community, and compares it with other public dialogue strategies such as Future Search conferences, focus groups, and study circles. These comparisons are made to highlight the uniqueness of each strategy and to illustrate how **Edible Connections** is distinct.

## *Edible Connections* — A Model for Citizen Dialogue

**Edible Connections** is a food communications forum that brings together the media, the consumers—those who eat, and many food system stakeholders from within the community. Stakeholders are defined as those who make their living through the food system.

**Edible Connections** was created as a model for communities to use to organize their own forums. The intent is that each forum will result in increased awareness and understanding of a region's food system, strengthened connections among those whose livelihoods are connected to foods, and the emergence of programs and activities to address food system issues identified by a given community.

Public dialogue can be an important tool both to frame and prioritize key issues in a community and to generate social action around those issues (Bridger, 1996). The grassroots involvement that can result from public dialogue lends legitimacy to the issues of concern to citizens and provides social energy to sustain action (Pelletier, Kraak, McCulum, Unsitalo, & Rich, 1999). "The evolution of an issue in a policy or community setting is, in a proximate sense, a function of the participation, power relations, and nature and quality of discourse" (Pelletier et al., 1999, p. 404). Public discourse or dialogue, then, is a key component in defining shared values and common ground to address an issue. **Edible Connections** is a model for communities to use to begin dialogues about their food systems and how these systems can be strengthened through local action.

## *Edible Connections* — Uniqueness

**Edible Connections** can be distinguished from other citizen dialogue models by its focus on including the media as forum participants. In today's environment, most of the information the public receives on issues of general interest, including information on the food system, comes through the mass media (CMF & Z, 1996). **Edible Connections'** organizers invite a broad spectrum of food system stakeholders to participate in the forum. Adding media representatives to the mix of individuals is an important step in communicating

concerns about sustainable agriculture, hunger, and food security to a broader audience than forum participants.

**Edible Connections** was created in 1998 by faculty at the Pennsylvania State University and a group of food system professionals and consumers. Its development was supported through a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Keystone 21 initiative. The forum model was created to encourage increased local discussion about food system issues as well as to expand local media coverage of these issues, thereby furthering understanding among consumers and food system professionals. "Serious gaps in communication and understanding exist among the media, the food and agricultural community, and the public. These gaps contribute to the limited understanding among consumers about 'food and from where it comes' and therefore to the public's growing concerns and declining trust in their food supply and those persons who produce, regulate, and market food" (Thomson & Maretzki, 1997, p. 2).

## Planning an *Edible Connections* Forum

**Edible Connections** forums can be hosted by one or more organizations. Usually a steering committee forms to plan the forum, select the venue, and publicize the meeting. Audiences for forums that have taken place have ranged from 15 to 400 people. The challenge is to attract a mix of people to ensure that a variety of perspectives are represented, but not so many that all viewpoints cannot be heard.

The forum, typically a one-day event, is built around six elements:

- **Setting the Table** defines the goals of the forum and the topic that will be addressed. To provide context, this segment also includes an overview of the local food system and how it has changed over time.

- **Food as Lifestyle** is a discussion, often among panelists, that focuses on how participants interact with the food system as consumers and as members of families and organizations. Topics that can be covered during this segment include diet and health, time pressures, ethnic diversity, food as ritual, hunger and food security, food as a part of celebrations, and nourishment and learning (Nunnery, Thomson, & Martzki, 2000).

- **Food as Livelihood**, also often a panel, explores how the food system represents a point of common connection for many workers in a community. This element highlights the

way those in different food-related professions communicate within and between professions and with the public.

- **Food as Connection** explores how food connects consumers to "the local environment, the local food system, and to each other" (Nunnery et al., 2000, p. 6). Topics that can be discussed in this segment include the diversity of production in the region; how to build linkages among people of different ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and ages through food-based activities; and what role media can play in helping to foster such linkages (Nunnery et al., 2000, p.6). This segment typically features an invited speaker who attempts to draw these connections. In forums that have already taken place, this speaker has been a professor of nutrition, a chef, a farmland preservation activist, and a longtime anti-hunger advocate.

- **A Town Meeting** allows forum participants, via a facilitated discussion, to clarify questions and to explore the food system locally desired and actions that can be taken to strengthen the food system. The facilitator is selected beforehand by forum organizers and must be someone who encourages discussion and makes sure that all voices are heard. The goal of this conversation is to answer the question, "What could be done by the public and the media as well as by stakeholders in the local food system to bring the many stories of food to the attention of the citizens of this community?" (Nunnery et al., 2000, p. 6).

- **A Celebration of Local Foods**, featuring locally grown and processed foods, allows participants to continue the dialogue begun during the forum (Nunnery et al., 2000).

For the panel discussions, food system professionals, activists, and the media are invited from within the community. Forum organizers attempt to recruit panelists from a variety of professions and perspectives, such as farming, food banks, the media, food retail, restaurants, local government, education, and the food processing industry. Forum organizers designate someone from within or outside their ranks to moderate the panel discussions. The moderator is someone who is able to ensure that a full spectrum of food system concerns of the community is discussed, and that all perspectives are sufficiently represented. The moderator prepares a list of questions to help generate discussion among the panelists.

Following the panel discussions, moderators, panelists, and audience members use the Town Meeting to explore ideas for addressing food system issues as described earlier. At the Celebration of Local Foods, participants have the opportunity to continue their discussions informally and to sample the region's food bounty.

## Local *Edible Connections* Forums

The first **Edible Connections** forum took place in October 1998 in Philadelphia; it was used as the model for six subsequent forums that have taken place in Pennsylvania communities. The creators of the **Edible Connections** model organized the first forum and subsequently awarded mini-grants (funded through the Keystone 21 initiative) to groups who conducted the forums that followed.

The forums following the initial event all maintained the model's elements while being tailored to address issues relevant to their communities. At a forum hosted by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Food System Council (SPFSC), discussions focused on the choices and challenges of preserving the nation's most productive farmland. Participants at the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger's forum concentrated on how people can work to ensure food security in their neighborhoods. The Cooperative Extension Agent in central Pennsylvania used the model to educate children about the diversity of foods grown in their region. Penn State faculty organized a forum as part of the university's series of events to recognize the Day of Six Billion, the day when the planet's population reached six billion people.

Feedback from the forum organizers indicated that involving media in the events helped to create broader community awareness about food system issues. At the forum in southwestern Pennsylvania, a reporter from a local radio station attended and invited one of the panelists, a farmland preservation activist, to be interviewed on a radio program. Several articles about the forum also appeared in local newspapers. The organizers of the forum said that the media coverage helped to broaden the membership and support-base in the SPFSC (Javor, personal communication, Sept-Oct. 1999).

One of the most significant impacts of the forum for the SPFSC was that one of the panelists, an assistant manager at a food co-op, became an active member of the organization's steering committee. Before the forum, the SPFSC, which works to sustain the food production and distribution systems in southwestern Pennsylvania, was unable to attract people from the food retail industry to become

involved in its projects. The participation of this individual is particularly important, given the group's present focus on combating the closure of several neighborhood grocery stores in Pittsburgh (Javor, 2000). The SPFSC has also made a commitment to host an annual event to discuss regional food system issues. In September 2000, the group's event focused on maintaining neighborhood supermarkets.

In central Pennsylvania, the Extension Agent reported that the media played a vital role in the multiple **Edible Connections** events that she organized (Spilman, personal communication, 2000). Six articles appeared in the local newspaper, and for one of the forums, a reporter for that paper was a member of the planning committee. As a presenter at the forum itself, he stressed the importance of teaching healthy nutrition and practices to children as well as allowing them to become involved in the processes of growing and preparing food. One feature of this forum was a series of stations at which children could prepare dishes showcasing particular food groups. The reporter led one of the stations at which children helped to prepare quesadillas and salsa. He also delivered closing remarks at the event, in which he emphasized the importance of the media's involvement in educating the public about food system issues (Spilman, 2000).

In the forum hosted by the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, participants indicated that the event encouraged them to commit to buying more locally grown produce, become involved in gardening projects, and educate children about where their food is grown (Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, 1999). These forums occurred in both urban and rural areas in Pennsylvania, demonstrating that **Edible Connections** was carried out in more than one community setting.

## Other Food Communications Strategies

Because **Edible Connections** is a new model, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of alternative public dialogue strategies and comparing them to **Edible Connections** is useful. Each of the strategies discussed below (Future Search conferences, focus groups, study circles, and educational resources) was selected because it has been used to explore issues about local food systems. Exploring these strategies can highlight the contributions that **Edible Connections** can make to public dialogue at the community level.

### *Future Search*

Future Search is a model that enables groups to develop a consensus on a vision for the future of their community or institution.

This model has two goals:

1. helping large diverse groups discover values, purposes, and projects they hold in common; and

2. enabling people to create a desired future together and start implementing it right away (Weisbord & Janoff, 1997, on-line).

Future Search conferences were first conducted in the 1960s in London by the Tavistock Institute, an independent social science research, advisory, and training organization (Rushmoor Borough Council, 2000). Future Search conferences have been used in various contexts. Citizens in Santa Cruz County, CA, conducted a Future Search conference to devise action plans addressing sensitive housing issues. Whole Foods Market, a Texas-based firm, used the model to create a national expansion plan (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995).

A Future Search conference typically takes place during four, half-day sessions and consists of five tasks (Weisbord & Janoff, 1997):

1. looking back,

2. identifying the trends affecting the current state of affairs and what stakeholders in the group are doing right now,

3. highlighting what members of the group are presently doing of which they are proud and which they regret,

4. looking ahead: developing a common vision for the future, and

5. formulating action plans

In terms of developing a vision for local food systems, the Future Search model has been used by several groups. In southeastern Pennsylvania, the Regional Infrastructure for Sustaining Agriculture (RISA) held a Future Search conference in November 1995 to develop a shared vision of how to protect and strengthen the food system in the area. At the end of the conference, participants agreed on 12 points of common vision for the type of food system they would like to see in southeastern Pennsylvania in 2015. Attendees also formed six action committees to continue the discussions and work begun at the conference (Smith, 1996).

Counties in northern New York have also employed the Future Search conference model to enhance community learning, planning, and action related to community food security in six rural counties (Pelletier et al., 1999). Future Search conferences conducted in each

county generated surprisingly similar ideas regarding how citizens wanted to improve food and agriculture in their communities. "The action agendas reflected a strong interest in re-localizing many food system activities, strengthening the economic viability of local agriculture, improving access to healthful local foods, strengthening anti-hunger efforts, and strengthening education about larger food system issues in addition to consumer/nutrition education" (Pelletier et al., 1999, p. 414).

The strengths (Table 1) of the Future Search model are that it, a) provides a venue for a diversity of stakeholders to express their views, and b) generates concrete action points and committees so the common vision that emerges can be pursued. One weakness (Table 1) of the format is that it requires long-range planning and a great deal of time and effort to ensure that all perspectives on an issue are represented at the conference. To develop a vision for a region's food system, organizers of Future Search need to ensure that diverse perspectives are being represented.

Another weakness is that ownership of the action plans can get lost in the group process. For follow-up activities to be effective, individuals need to take leadership roles and sustain those roles over time. A coordinating individual or individuals need to keep committees on track and informed of what other committees are doing. Groups need to address how they will deal with attrition before embarking on the process laid out by the Future Search model.

### Focus Groups

"A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 1994, p. 6). Usually seven to ten individuals participate with sessions lasting from one to three hours (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups were used first by sociologists in the 1940s and are currently most commonly used as tools in marketing research (Morgan, 1988).

From 1994 to 1996, four partner educational institutions in Pennsylvania (including Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences and the Rodale Institute, a sustainable agriculture research and education center) conducted 81 focus group meetings with 823 stakeholders from a variety of food system perspectives (Hood, 1996). This activity was part of Phase I of the Pennsylvania Food Systems Professions Education (FSPE) project, an initiative supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The purpose of these meetings was "to create a broadly shared vision of a sustainable food system in Pennsylvania

**Table 1:** The strengths and weaknesses of public dialogue strategies

| Model | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|---|
| Edible Connections | —Media representatives are included in public dialogue<br>—Provides venue for diverse stakeholders to express their views<br>—Facilitates quick learning about local food system issues<br>—Shows how food connects people as consumers and as professionals | —Requires lengthy advance planning<br>—Requires strong leaders/ organizers to ensure diversity of participants, quality dialogue, action plans, and outcome activities<br>—Follow-up needed with media to ensure greater coverage of food system issues |
| Future Search | —Provides venue for diverse stakeholders to express their views<br>—Provides framework for generating concrete common vision | —Requires lengthy advance planning<br>—Requires strong leaders/organizers to ensure diversity of participants, quality dialogue, action plans, and outcome activities |
| Focus Groups | —Provide opportunities to discuss issue in-depth, generating consensus on ideas for action | —Limited follow-up<br>—For unified action, need to synthesize ideas from multiple focus groups |
| Study Circles | —Provide opportunity to educate small groups about an issue | —Limited follow-up<br>—Individual, as opposed to organizational, representation in groups makes it difficult to generate commitments to action on a community or regional level |
| Educational Resources | —Provide way to present detailed information about an issue | —Difficult to motivate communities to action unless used to supplement a citizen dialogue process |

in the 21st century and to identify the key educational needs of the professionals who will serve this food system"(Hood, 1996, p. 1).

To supplement the focus group meetings, organizers also held a day-long visioning session with a broad range of stakeholders (Hood, 1996). From the focus groups and meeting, the project collaborators were able to list 19 educational needs of food professionals in the 21st century and four transformational strategies for conducting work in Phase II of the Pennsylvania FSPE project (Hood, 1996).

The strengths of focus groups (Table 1) are that concrete objectives and strategies were developed by means of consulting many people who have a concern in regard to how food system professionals will be educated in the next century. The project partners also identified several weaknesses of their approach. They found that "focus groups are most effective when the topic under discussion is familiar to the participants" (Hood, 1996, p. 11). Because group participants had not had a prior opportunity to conceptualize the food system, focus groups were not always the best tool for data collection. Another weakness of focus groups (see Table 1) is that they typically lack follow-up. Action plans typically do not result from focus groups, which are used to collect information. Therefore, mobilizing individuals involved in focus groups to formulate actions in response to the common trends or concerns uncovered during the meetings is difficult.

## Study Circles

Study circles are small, peer-led discussions that provide community members with the opportunity to learn about and act upon important social and political issues (Study Circles Resource Center, 2000). Study circles allow average citizens to increase their understanding about issues facing their communities and brainstorm alternative actions that they can take as individuals. "They bring the wisdom of ordinary individuals to bear on difficult issues" (Smith & Maretzki, 2000, p. 7).

Study circles typically involve between 8 and 12 participants who meet three to six times to discuss an issue of importance to society. A study-circle organizer provides written, audio, or video material to participants to help inform and frame their discussions and to help reduce the complexity of the issue (Smith & Maretzki, 2000).

Study circles have their origin in the Chautauqua movement, which was active at the turn of the century. The movement's name comes from the Lake Chautauqua Assembly, which was established in 1874 in response to "the increasing complexity of public life and

the lack of sufficient education beyond high school" (Study Circles Resource Center, 2000, on-line). "In 'Chautauquas,' people could hear popular lectures and enroll in home study circles where they could go on to participate in small-group study and discussion of public issues" (Study Circles Resource Center, 2000, on-line).

The Pennsylvania State University and the Rodale Institute conducted a series of study circles in April and May 1995. The study circles were used to engage people who were not involved in agriculture in discussions regarding their concerns about the food system (Wagoner & Thomson, 1995).

Participants were given pre- and posttests to measure changes in their knowledge over the course of the meetings. During their final meeting, participants discussed action steps they could take. They agreed that as informed consumers they could support local farmers and processors by choosing locally produced foods. They also suggested that the convincing of people to change their purchasing and consumption habits needs to begin through fun events such as garden tours, food fairs, and "whole foods" potlucks (Wagoner & Thomson, 1995).

The strengths of the study circle approach (Table 1) are that small groups of citizens are encouraged to explore an issue in depth and formulate strategies for changes that they can make as individuals within their communities. A weakness (Table 1) of the approach is that it involves only small groups of people, and thus, changes at the community level are not articulated.

### Educational Resources

Several tools have also been created to educate the public about local food systems and the U.S. food system as a whole. The Northeast Regional Food Guide (Wilkins & Bokaer-Smith, 1995) is a full-color poster with a food pyramid featuring foods of the Northeast region, listing the availability of fruits, vegetables, and herbs by season. Together with a series of fact sheets, the guide is a tool for "increasing food system awareness among northeastern consumers, encouraging sustainable food systems, increasing consumption and production of regional plant foods, and conveying a sense of abundance year-round" (Wilkins & Bokaer-Smith, 1995).

Strengths of the guide (Table 1) are that it provides a lot of information into a colorful, easy-to-read format, offering consumers tips which they can begin using right away (Table 1). However, such a guide is a passive tool for change, not actively engaging citizens

in dialogue about local action. The guide can be used effectively in other citizen dialogue settings to introduce action ideas that individuals can take to initiate changes in their personal lives as well as in their communities.

Other educational resources include two recent manuals on the food system for youth educators. Food Systems: Youth Making a Difference (Maretzki, Harmon, & Giesecke, 1997) contains 11 lessons on a range of food system topics, including food safety, how policies influence the food system, where our food comes from, formulating a vision for reorganizing parts of the food system, and developing a plan to bring about change in a food policy issue in schools or communities. Another resource is The Food System: Building Youth Awareness Through Involvement (Harmon, Maretzki, & Harmon., 1999). The final stage in a research study that included a survey on food system awareness among high school students, this resource serves as a guidebook for community educators, parents, and teachers. It traces the food system through a series of chapters on inputs, production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and waste; offers activities to complement the discussions in the chapters; and challenges readers to consider ways to sustain the local food supply.

## Comparing *Edible Connections* to Other Citizen Dialogue Strategies

One obvious difference between **Edible Connections** and other strategies is that **Edible Connections** is meant to focus discussions specifically on food system issues, while the other models can be used to bring groups together to discuss any issue of common interest. Another uniqueness is **Edible Connections'** emphasis on media involvement (Table 1). Such inclusion is a deliberate effort to expand the audience that receives information about food system issues and to influence the way local food system issues are framed by the media. Common across each of these models to stimulate public dialogue is the need for respected leaders to facilitate discussion, develop a shared vision, and generate action.

### Edible Connections and Future Search

Both **Edible Connections** and the Future Search models focus on drawing as many diverse stakeholders as possible into discussions about critical issues affecting society. A Future Search conference requires a commitment of at least two days from participants to work through all the tasks. An **Edible Connections** forum can be

conducted in a single morning, afternoon, or evening. Both models require a long and detailed planning process (Table 1).

Included among the tasks of a Future Search conference is the generation of a concrete agenda for how the common vision developed by participants will be realized. The **Edible Connections** model is more fluid in that there are no specific expectations for what will come out of the Town Meeting at the end of the forum. **Edible Connections** is formulated to allow organizers in different communities to structure forums to meet specific local objectives. These objectives might include informing community members, mobilizing citizen action, or encouraging the media to increase coverage of food system issues.

### Edible Connections and Focus Groups

One primary difference between **Edible Connections** and focus groups is size. An **Edible Connections** forum is meant to attract up to 100 people representing all aspects of the food system. Focus groups are meant to be small so that in-depth discussion can take place. In the example described earlier, the FSPE steering committee members had to hold 81 meetings to ensure that the views of all stakeholders were adequately heard. Follow-up activities also do not typically result from focus groups, for they are meant principally to gather information rather than to generate action. **Edible Connections**, on the other hand, encourages participants to use the Town Meeting to brainstorm ideas for changes that can be made at both an individual and community level.

### Edible Connections and Study Circles

Like focus groups, study circles can also be distinguished from the **Edible Connections** model by their size. Unlike focus groups, however, study circles do not collect information but rather impart it. Study circles are useful in encouraging participants to develop ideas for action based on the new knowledge they gain. Study circles require an extended time commitment from participants as they usually meet multiple times.

Enthusiastic moderators are needed to keep participants motivated to continue to return after the first session. As mentioned earlier, **Edible Connections** forums require at most one day of participants' time. Although not as time-intensive as study circles or Future Searches, **Edible Connections** forums can present a wide range of viewpoints and encourage participants to think about how the decisions they make every day affect their food system. **Edible Connections** can also provide an impetus for groups to form study

circles to further explore the issues to which they were introduced at the forum.

*Edible Connections and Educational Resources*

In terms of stimulating citizen action, educational resources such as written guides and videos are typically most effective as supplements to other citizen dialogue strategies. In the study circle strategy, written materials are distributed to participants prior to each session to help them prepare for the discussion. Educational resources give people time to learn more about issues so that their discussions can be better informed.

For **Edible Connections**, a planning guidebook and supporting video have been produced as a resource for those who want to organize their own forums (Nunnery et al, 2000). The planning guide introduces the forum and its elements as well as outlines the steps involved in conducting a forum: creating a planning team, defining the purpose, setting the agenda, recruiting presenters and participants, choosing a site, marketing, and conducting and evaluating the forum. Discussion questions and planning tips conclude each chapter. A planning timeline and budget worksheet are also included. The video illustrating the six elements of an **Edible Connections** forum features footage from previous forums as well as interviews with both those who planned and participated in them.

# Conclusion

**Edible Connections** has much in common with the Future Search and study circle strategies as a way to engage local citizens in public discussion on food system issues. Each focuses on motivating participants to take action as a result of their participation in a public dialogue group. Well-organized and consistent follow-up is required to maintain the euphoria and enthusiasm with which participants often leave Future Search conferences or study circles. This challenge applies to **Edible Connections** as well. No matter how well they are organized, forums and conferences—and the hard work put into organizing them—will not translate into continued work and commitment on the part of participants unless there are dedicated leaders to maintain momentum.

Communities are continuously faced with complex problems to which there are no easy solutions. One way to begin the process of seeking solutions is to actively involve the citizens who live with the problems. Involving citizens in constructive dialogue can help to develop a collective will, helping people overcome the

frustration and hopelessness many feel toward issues that concern them. **Edible Connections** represents a new public dialogue model. The strength of this model is its flexibility to be tailored to meet specific local needs. In communities that carry out **Edible Connections**, this model will not be duplicated or replicated based on what others have done. Rather it will be tailored to serve the specific needs of that community to strengthen the connections among food, farms, and community locally.

## Keywords

Public dialogue, food systems, communications forum

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