

What exactly is Feeding The Cities? Got that question for not the first time last week.

As FTC marks a little more than a year, I can now answer that question with some confidence. First, it is me, Martin Ross, former journalist, retired from Bloomington-based Illinois Farm Bureau after more than a quarter century covering federal food policy and research, the role of U.S. agriculture in meeting domestic and global food and nutritional needs, and innovations in food technology and distribution.

Since 2014, I've worked with a variety of community interests, including Not In Our Town: Bloomington-Normal, which for more than 20 years has promoted inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, school anti-bullying programs, and security for all Twin Citians. NIOTBN partnered in 2017 with Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development and Department of Sociology and Anthropology in a first-of-its-kind, student-researched analysis of Twin Cities issues ranging from residential segregation and police-community relations to economic and geographical disparities in access to financial, transportation, educational, and health resources and healthier, higher-quality food supplies. Researchers noted the cities' concentration of grocery stores largely on and adjacent to the Veterans beltway and asserted that given the higher ratio of convenience stores to full-service outlets especially on Bloomington's lower-income West Side, "unhealthy food options are more available than healthy ones."

That stoked my fire, and last September, more than 75 of the community's major food resource experts, activists, and concerned citizens came together at an inaugural FTC Food Summit not to answer every question but instead to frame the right questions and priorities and create a new context for improved collaborations.

A little and quite a lot have happened in the subsequent 10 months: Grassroots ideas have flowed in through the FTC Facebook page, at community gatherings and in offices and gardens across the Twin Cities. FTC has been fortunate enough to be able to collaborate with and in a few cases support groups including the West Market Street Council, West Bloomington Revitalization Council, Bloomington Township, the Extension Service, and the new Healthy Eating/Active Living Coalition (formerly the McLean County Wellness Coalition).

What is FTC? It is a facilitator, a conduit for the best and brightest, creators and innovators at all points in the socioeconomic spectrum, and the dreamers and doers to pool their ideas and energies in the interest of a healthier community. We're where no idea is stupid, where no one inspects your academic or professional credentials at the door, where what might seem impossible gets the scratch test of crowd wisdom and open-minded analysis.

This summer, FTC has granted \$700 for local organizations to educate cramped families and individual in fresh production and mothers in need in improved food selection and preparation, and for a West Bloomington consortium to explore a locally owned full service grocery in the heart of the neighborhood food desert. FTC has conferred on the mission of a restructured county wellness effort, researched data for and consulted on a proposal for a sweeping new area health collaboration, and is now exploring a way to keep a key community garden growing and a plan that could take basic essentials to the people who need them most.

The goal is this: Put improved macro- and micronutrients and sustenance in local bellies, and work to address the dietary habits that contribute to chronic health issues. We're not here to argue food "politics" or turf — the former is for you all to hash out, the latter for you hopefully to set aside as we work together. My concern is to help you get essential nutrition and fundamental education to every Twin Citian.

Over the past year, you've exceeded my expectations. Meet, share your best ideas, make connections, and make a difference. I'm here to help, should you want or need.