**Description of the Dialogues**

Over 95 people gathered at two summer events in McHenry County and Will County to discuss creating healthy communities within the context of protecting vital natural resources at the intersection of metropolitan edge farming. This first-time event hosted the environmental and agriculture sectors to discuss protecting vital resources.  There were engaging presentations by practitioners and experts from the sectors of agriculture and conservation and conversations from the community.  In early 2022 additional farmer events are scheduled  and will be hosted with partner organizations.

**Local and Regional Context**

Erin Aleman, Executive Director of Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning provided a recorded overview setting the regional context of the critical land and natural resources and four key insights on how the region can work together to support agriculture and conservation lands.  This keynote address was later shared throughout the region in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning' s network reaching thousands of Chicago area residents and businesses. To read more: (link)

**Locally Grown Food**

Raghela Scavuzzo, Illinois Farm Bureau guided the participants through the growing market channels for local foods providing examples of local products grown throughout Illinois and their various market channels.  Illinois consumers want more local foods and choices of where to purchase those them from groceries, farmers markets, farm stands and other outlets. Participants from Will County stated their interest in more local food production with affordable and equitable market choices. Health and local food consumption are strongly linked. The Will County Health Assessment (link) shows those health indicators for local food consumption. Farmers are increasing revenue through diversification, addressing their business model and customer needs; creating new events and partnerships; and producing value-added products.

**Conservation Farming**

Michael Gill, Certified Crop Advisor, Illinois Soybean Association; Ralph Schultz, Executive Director, Will County Forest Preserve District; John Bartman, Farmer, McHenry County Farm Bureau; and Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust introduced perspectives on conservation farming; government and private incentives; and the challenges and payoffs for the farmer and the world for better soil and water protection. Lists of conservation farming programs, projects and incentives are available on the Community Resource Pages for Will and McHenry Counties. Ralph Schultz previewed this story of the Will County Forest Preserve District's first organic transition farm. ***********.reconnectwithnature.org/News-Events/News/Going-Organic-Forest-Preserve-Adds-First-Organic

**Learning from Dialogue**

A portion of the events was dedicated to breakout sessions offering time for participants to share experiences and contribute to the conversation. The topic, "is nature good for the economy" led the breakout group discussions. Climate change solutions such as planting trees, regenerative ranching, and rotational grazing were concepts explored. It was recommended on farms adjacent to public natural areas to use conservation practices, and the use of land for activities such as birding, kayaking, fishing, gardening, and working vacation destinations. In summary, nature is essential for the economy. It was noted that recreational spending might include promoting festivals and outdoor sports, as well as innovative ideas such as Airbnb for agritourism. The pandemic, unfortunately, showed the fragility of our local food system and supply chain issues. As a result, consumers ended up paying more for locally grown foods. On the other hand, the pandemic seemed to bring about a new awareness and access to local foods by online sales. Participants noted mutual benefits of connecting open spaces and farmland. Farmland is a core feature for flood control for both farms and open spaces. Education on the importance of both farmland and open space is key for communities to produce the most bountiful solution.