

Jones: How secure are we?

May 26, 2020

Recently, 1,900 cars lined up on the runway at the airport in Berlin because our neighbors in those cars needed food. That is 1,900 households in the Montpelier/Barre neighborhood who are food insecure. This orderly traffic jam was lined up because the farmers and food producers and the Vermont Foodbank had gotten together to make an offering of fresh food: milk, vegetables, staples and meat. You look at the listing of what was offered, and it was a veritable bonanza of food for a hungry family. The organizers of this gift were trying their best to provide some food security to folks who have been hammered by the crisis. But the food ran out earlier than expected and many folks left with junk food or nothing. Such challenges are to be expected in difficult times.

What is shocking is the number of people who felt enough in need that they would spend hours and hours sitting in line, just to claim this shared bounty. That represents a lot of food insecure people here in central Vermont. Most of us aren't seeing this need yet, because there still seems to be plenty of produce and food in the supermarkets. If the food is available, why the worry? Actually meat supplies and specialty items are dropping fast so we will be worrying more soon. With plenty of basic food still available, such emergency demand means a lot of people (like 10% of our county's population) are concerned about how to afford food and, possibly, keeping a roof over their heads. If our relatively well-to-do corner of the state is experiencing such dislocation only 3 months into the lockdown, one could be tempted to ask: How secure are we?

Of course, we know this painful disruption in our lives supposedly comes from the virus. What we miss, is the virus has shown a harsh light on the workings of an exceptionally unstable economic system. That translates to food challenges because this essential part of living is now produced in factory operations, far away from us. In the name of profit, our economically efficient food system has destroyed our local capacity to feed ourselves.

Today, it is cheaper and more profitable to have factory farms in the Midwest, delivering daily "harvests" of pigs and cows to the processing plants. This is where the animals are turned into meat products for the supermarket and restaurant trade. It's similar, but less gory, to see how the cheap vegetables and processed food gets to the shelves. It is a big machine, from the questionable field workers to the finance, packaging and delivery of the products.

This brings us back to those almost 2,000 cars on the runway in Berlin. As various parts of the food machine have stopped working during the past three months, many neighbors lost their jobs, and they are not sure where the next job is going to be found. The money these folks once spent has disappeared and that is causing even more people to lose their jobs. Stores, restaurants and other small businesses no longer have the money for rents, services and supplies. Without these business payrolls, the tax base of our towns and cities will shrink.

So the towns and cities have to start wondering what services they can actually provide and how much they are paying people who are still working? Union contracts get reopened because cities can't pay the wage and benefit demands. It just gets harder to keep things working.

So what do we do?

This is one of those historical moments when, I suspect, we must begin to reimagine our futures with a great loss in convenience and privilege. In the best traditions of American self reliance, we must figure out how to keep a local level of civility and security, even if we see large segments of the U.S. diving into unbridgeable divisions. We need to reach into our best communitarianism values to see if we can help ourselves and our neighbors through what is going to be a very difficult time.

At risk of being laughed off your attention stage, I am going to suggest that we can best prepare for the coming dislocations by refinding our roots in the local Earth. Those folks waiting for the food handouts are only going to grow in numbers. We need of way of keeping our neighbors warm and fed in the coming winters.

To do this, I propose it's time to start working to get more food out of our local soil so all of us can afford to eat. Maybe, one way we can afford it is because we helped grow it. And that is the core of the proposition. We immediately need to start turning suitable open spaces into food-producing gardens. Perhaps some of the folks feeling food insecure, who showed up for Friday's donations, could be recruited to help grow the food on land made available for gardens.

Now, I don't know about you, but I walk around Montpelier (and even a bit of Barre) and I am struck by the amount of possible garden space being wasted on lawns. There is a lot of space that could be dug up, composted, tended and weeded to produce a huge amount of food within walking distance of most folks. There are lots of feed corn and hay fields in close proximity to our towns that could be turned into local food production. By implication, this means reducing our support of dairy farming and increasing the support for other crops.

To keep ourselves and our neighbors fed, we need to consider making a rapid and mindful economic transition to rapidly build as much small-scale local food production as possible. Nobody will be getting rich out of this effort but together, we could build a level of local food security. We need to tap the deep wisdom of the old farmers to train young people in the skills to raise food and then be a valued part of the next level of a sustainable local economy.

Because, if you think the federal welfare support for payrolls and quick cash gifts to us peons will continue, I also have a bridge to sell you. Every month, more people will fall out of that safety net, and you can bet they will then feel more insecure and will be part of the thousands of cars lining up for the next possible food gift distribution. Our future security must be built locally, even if it isn't what we have been expecting for the past 60 years. And the time to build a sustainable sense of local security is now.

Dan Jones is Sustainable Montpelier Coalition Executive Director.

