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Support our local growers

{ "CC Editcopy"/} Saturday afternoon approximately 200 people attended an open forum about how to improve the supply and distribution of locally produced foods.

The meeting, held in Oneonta, was attended by farmers, consumers, retailers and representatives of organizations with an interest in building a strong local food economy. Organizers of the event said a key question to be addressed was whether we can increase our supply of fresh and nutritious food, while we protect farmers' livelihood, keep cash within our local economy, preserve open space, and drastically reduce levels of fossil fuels used?

As the price of fuel increases, food will become more and more expensive _ both to produce and distribute. Higher fuel costs are also likely to have other negative impacts on the local economy, which depends heavily on the tourist industry.

It is possible to address those impacts by building a strong regional economy based on shopping first with local producers and suppliers for not only food, but any number of goods and services.

In the economy that once existed here, farm dollars were estimated to pass through seven hands as they went from the farmer to feed mill, equipment dealer, hardware store, the hired man and the livestock auction.

Today, far too many of the dollars spent in the local economy end up in places like Bentonville, Ark., or some foreign country with cheap labor and materials.

Food production is a good place to start to rebuild a strong local economy. Everyone eats so everyone is a potential customer.

One of the most important things that is needed is a better marketing plan for local food. Consumers need to be educated to understand why local, organic or sustainably-raised food is better for them, the local economy and the environment.

Organic farmer Don Barber was correct when he commented Saturday that consumers' purchasing power can bring about change. If people committed to purchasing even 25 percent of their food from local producers, it would make a huge difference.

`` It's not just local food, but local products of all kinds. We have to choose the future and can do it everyday with our purchases," he said.

We support the efforts of the participants and the organizations that sponsored Saturday's event _ the Environmental Working Group, Otsego County Conservation Association (OCCA), Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship (CADE), Sustainable Otsego, Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY), and the Town of Franklin Peak Oil Commission.

We also hope consumers will use their purchasing power to strengthen both our local economy and the financial viability of the farmers, who will play an increasingly important role in feeding us in the future.