

New Yorkers Debate Bloomberg's Food Legacy at Talking Transition

Chris E. Crowley

NOV 19, 2013 3:00 PM



"We need to decentralize these opportunities for civic engagement and get up into the hood," said Raymond Figueroa-Reyes, Jr., President of the [New York City Community Garden Coalition](#) at a panel discussion on Sunday. "We need to get out into the South Bronx, Bed-Stuy, El Barrio."

He was speaking at the Future of Food Policy in the Post-Bloomberg Era organized by the [NYU Wagner Food Policy Alliance](#) and [Just Food](#)'s executive director Jacquie Berger, one of many discussions at the ongoing town hall-style [Talking Transition](#) tent that was erected in Duarte Park. There's an open invite to all New Yorkers to visit the tent and attend panels on city issues while relaying their concerns, needs, and desires to the incoming DeBlasio administration. The tent is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. with daily programming; at the end, organizers will present Mayor-Elect DeBlasio a white paper summarizing attendees' viewpoints.

Figueroa-Reyes made his point during his opening comments, in which the five members of the panel were asked, "What do you think the Bloomberg administration did right with regards to food policy?"

Other members of the panel, which included Kady Ferguson of the [Brooklyn Food Coalition](#), Professor Jan Poppendieck of the [NYC Food Policy Center at Hunter College](#), Joel Berg of the [New York Coalition Against Hunger](#), and Diana Robinson of [Food Chain Workers Alliance](#), spoke to issues equally close to their hearts.

Professor Poppendieck had two positive comments about food policy during Bloomberg's tenure, the first that the administration appointed a director of food policy. "It got us thinking about the consequences of how we eat, and it instituted universal free school breakfasts, which is a step in the right direction. We need to make [breakfast] a shared meal in order to remove the stigma and make it more convenient.



NYCCAH's Joel Berg, however, believes the administration was an unequivocal failure by the measures it judges itself by: statistics.

"1.4 million of our neighbors live in homes that can't afford food. One in five New York City children live in food-insecure homes. A lot of people think the reason we have so much hunger in New York is because we have too much food waste or we don't distribute food well enough. No," Berg said.

In a later email, he continued, "Poverty is the main cause of hunger in New York City, and inequality is the main cause of poverty. New York can't completely end these problems on its own, but it can lead the way and make a real difference here by ensuring that the wealthiest pay more of their fair share of city taxes."

Berg's organization has proposed the incoming administration with [Food Secure NYC 2018](#), a citywide plan aimed at addressing food insecurity and policy. In addition to confronting the inadequacy of the minimum wage and taxation inequality, their plan calls for strengthening New York's food industry by making food jobs a central component of the city's job creation strategy and by encouraging the growth of manufactured food in the city.

During her opening statements, Poppendieck harped on the need to create good food jobs as well, suggesting we train home health aids to become skilled cooks for people with diabetes and other dietary restrictions.

"For farmers and producers to be successful and stay on their land, they need consumers who can afford to buy the food. And consumers need farmers and producers in order to have healthy, nutritious, and affordable food," Berg said during the panel.

Figuroa-Reyes, Jr., the last of the panelists to speak, emphasized the importance of community gardens in disaster relief. This is something [we saw](#) in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, when Added Value Farm

reorganized itself to address and aid food issues in a devastated Red Hook, Shore Soup established the Rockaway's first urban farm, and GrowNYC supplied soup kitchens across the city with farmer and consumer donated local produce.

Community gardens, Figueroa-Reyes, Jr. said, have to the present day been a "resiliency strategy for communities to organize themselves against the man-made disasters of unemployment and poverty." He cited the victory gardens of World War Two, organized by communities when war rations were insufficient. With the economy still struggling and unemployment rates especially high in inner city and minority communities, cuts to food stamps programs—already insufficient for a reasonable diet—highlight the need for supplemental food sources.

"The mayor's Interagency Task Force On Urban Agriculture, that was good. We got agencies very interested in how they could deploy their resources in support of community agriculture," Figueroa-Reyes, Jr. said.



After the conclusion of his statements, audience members were asked to come onstage to share issues in their community that concerned them. One such group formed around the issue of community gardening, and after a 20 minute discussion advocated for greater support and protection of community gardening. The concerns, issues, and policy issues of all 16 groups formed will be forwarded to DeBlasio's office for consideration.

"Our group talked about creating a more symbiotic relationship between developers and community gardens," said Eddie Shumard of [Good Eggs](#). "It starts with empowering citizens to take over their communities, and eventually we can move into changing zoning policy to recognize community gardens as a development project and not as a stopgap between an empty lot and an apartment complex."

About the author: [Chris Crowley](#) is the author of the [Bronx Eats](#) and [Anatomy of A Smorgasburg Pop Up](#) columns. Follow him on [Twitter](#), if you'd like. In person, your best bet is the window seat at Neerob, or waiting in line at the Lechonera La Piranha trailer.