

Growing Local Food Systems

A case study series on the role of local governments



MSU CENTER for REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local food systems align consumer demand with locally produced and distributed food. These systems have the demonstrated capacity to enhance overall community sustainability by increasing economic resiliency through expanded employment and market opportunities; promoting public health through improved access to healthy food; accounting for environmental considerations in land use planning and policy; and addressing social equity by tailoring initiatives to disadvantaged populations. Given local governments' roles as leaders and conveners in these activities, managers and staff can play a critical role in efforts to promote and support local food systems.

In 2012, Michigan State University's (MSU) Center for Regional Food Systems and the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Center for Sustainable Communities collaborated to understand more about the ways that local governments are supporting local food systems through a national survey. Building off that survey research, the organizations identified four communities to feature as part of a series of case studies exploring how and why they engage in food systems development.

Staff interviewed key stakeholders from each of the four communities to document their experiences and identify common themes that have affected their suc-

cess. The four communities profiled are:

- Catawba County, North Carolina (population 154,810)
- Decatur, Georgia (population 20,086)
- Topsham, Maine (population 8,750)
- Washtenaw County and Ann Arbor, Michigan (county population 354,240; city population 117,025)

The communities profiled are distinct in their size, geography, and demographics. They share a commitment to local food systems, though their motivations, approaches, and allocated resources vary. In some of the communities where agriculture historically has been a prominent industry, local food is not a new concept and efforts have been made to preserve land for new generations of farmers. In other communities, interest in accessing local food is a more recent development and residents are cultivating small plots for the first time.

In all of the communities, local government has been a critical partner in a variety of programs and activities, including farmers markets, training and outreach targeted towards such diverse audiences as youth or immigrant populations, local food aware-



Cooking local in Catawba County.

Source: Catawba County staff

ness campaigns, and planning and policy processes that address local food issues. Local governments also have found low- or no-cost opportunities that help to demonstrate the range of actions that can be taken to promote local food systems.

Based on the findings from survey research and stories told through the case studies, MSU and ICMA have identified these leading practices by local governments:

- **Convening and building partnerships that leverage resources and expertise throughout the community.** Local government staff members don't have to become experts in irrigation systems, food marketing, or farmers market management; instead, they should identify their strengths and those of others and build teams that advance the collective goals. These partnerships can be as formal as Washtenaw County's Food Policy Council or informally cultivated through open communication with key individuals and organizations.
- **Leveraging their position to raise awareness of local food systems through campaigns, community events, and other outreach strategies.** In order to achieve buy-in and maintain support for local food systems activities from a broader range of stakeholders, efforts should be communicated and framed as aligning with as many community goals as possible for economic development, public health, environmental sustainability, and social equity. There may already be natural champions

on staff, if it's not possible to support a dedicated coordinator as Catawba County has done.

- **Paying particular consideration to how local food systems can address equity issues.** Food is a basic human need, and local food systems have a unique capacity to protect and support vulnerable and low-income residents. Farmer's markets have increasingly catered to these populations by locating in low-access areas—so-called “food deserts”—and by expanding accessibility and purchasing power for those using such government-sponsored food assistance as in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County. Community gardens can also provide economic independence for these residents.
- **Integrating food systems activities into local government plans and strategies.** The processes through which these are developed provide opportunities to learn about and balance interests across different internal departments and community stakeholders. The resulting directives can help to link disparate activities through a common language or agenda and to set reasonable expectations for roles and anticipated outcomes. For example, Catawba County's Food and Farm Sustainability Plan, Topsham's Comprehensive Plan, Decatur's Strategic Plan and Environmental Sustainability Plan, Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Advisory Commission's strategy, and Washtenaw County's U.S. HUD Sustainable Communities Challenge Grant all included goals related to local foods.
- **Being inclusive and looking beyond jurisdictional or geographic boundaries to define community more broadly when thinking about available resources and potential benefit.** In Decatur, the city found a great piece of land right outside of city limits that met its needs. While it serves Decatur residents, one of its main stakeholder groups is based in a nearby community. Local food activities need not be divisive; they can exist in communities with rural to suburban characteristics, as in Topsham, and in those with a conventional agriculture presence, as in Catawba County. Consider opportunities to preserve land or support the distribution infrastructure that will enhance food systems at the regional, not just local scale.

CASE STUDY: Catawba County, North Carolina



CATAWBA COUNTY AT A GLANCE

Population: 154,810^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 405^b

Median Income: \$44,332^c

Population in Poverty: 15.2 percent^d

Additional Resources: [Catawba County Food and Farm Sustainability Plan](#)

^a U. S. Census Bureau, 2013.

^b Data provided by Catawba County staff.

^c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

^d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

Catawba County, located in the western part of North Carolina, covers approximately 405 square miles of land bordered on the north and east by lakes along the Catawba River. The county includes eight municipalities, with Newton as its county seat. The county’s 154,810 residents are approximately 78 percent Caucasian, 9 percent Hispanic, 9 percent African American, and 4 percent Asian. Prior to the economic downturn of 2008, the county developed its economy into a traditional manufacturing base consisting of furniture, textiles, and telecommunications. Economic development efforts are now directed at new sectors that include manufacturing and a \$52 million agricultural economy.¹

Catawba County has historical cultural roots in agriculture, as evidenced by the depictions of livestock and wheel in the county seal. The county has demonstrated its commitment to support farming as a continually viable way of life by promoting agriculture and development of a local foods system. The success of the county’s Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program that encourages the preservation of farmland throughout the county, including within incorporated areas, has resulted in more than 10,143 acres dedicated to farming for the next 10 years.

“Self-reliance is valued as an ethic,” says Mary Furtado, assistant county manager. “The community supports agriculture as a way of life. It’s part of community identity.” The county does its part to bolster this identity through a number of initiatives taking place across the county and in partnership with neighboring jurisdictions and stakeholders. The Catawba County Farm and Food Sustainability Plan has a central focus on local foods, pulling together these initiatives to prioritize efforts, to track success, and to achieve progress toward local foods and agricultural preservation goals across the county.

Key Projects in Catawba County

Local foods in the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan

The community plan was approved by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners in April 2013. The [plan](#) includes efforts to ensure the sustainability of a local food system by developing a robust “Farm-to-Fork” initiative, linking local food producers with local food distributors and restaurants to ensure the availability of fresh, locally-produced food within Catawba County.

The plan was championed by the county’s Agricultural Advisory Board appointed by the County Board of Commissioners, and it was developed by a working committee of 20 community representatives. It began with a community input meeting in July 2012 that was attended by more than 100



Using the pro-bono designed logo for Eat, Drink, and Be Local has branded the campaign to increase recognition.

Source: Catawba County staff

people. It took seven months for the committee to prioritize feedback from meetings and identify 20 organizations that could lead or serve in a supporting role in implementing individual action items with short (0–2 years), mid (2–5 years), and long-range (5+ years) timeframes.

The plan has served to tie together the various efforts towards promoting a local foods system across the county and includes 66 action items that are organized into five broad categories, including local foods. Action items in this category include programs and activities aimed at developing a reliable supply of locally produced fruits, vegetables, and meats; developing systematic connections between producers and local institutions like schools, hospitals, and restaurants; and helping residents make the connection between local food and nutrition.² Stakeholders with responsibility for action items on the plan check in every few months using an online tracking tool to ensure that they are on track; however, communication between partners remains a challenge.

Partnership with North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension

One outcome from the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan was the creation of a Local Food Extension Agent in October 2013. The position is funded jointly by the North Carolina State Cooperative Extension and the county to implement the plan in coordination with its partners, as well as to provide additional capacity for agricultural producers selling in local markets. One major local food awareness campaign initiated by the Extension Agent is titled “Eat, Drink, and Be Local.”

In its third year, Eat, Drink, and Be Local was a week-long celebration in May 2014 that featured free events, including gardening workshops, film screenings, farm tours, and highlights of local ingredients used in restaurants. The slogan Eat, Drink, and Be Local has become a branded

awareness campaign to increase residents’ knowledge of the benefits and availability of local foods.

Other benefits of the partnership include the connection to traditional agricultural producers who have been critical partners in providing guidance in connecting local food efforts. Working with the Cooperative Extension Service also provides access to research in sustainable agriculture practices in the region and to increased opportunities for partnership and information exchange with neighboring counties. A U.S. Department of Agriculture employee is also housed in the county’s facility adjacent to Cooperative Extension, giving employees and community representatives access to training and information on resources and funding opportunities to support their efforts.

Local Foods’ Tie-In to Public Health

In order to improve community access to fresh healthy local food, the Catawba County Public Health Department organized its first farmers market in its parking lot in 2013. The market began in response to findings of a community health assessment that highlighted an issue of obesity. In 2013, the overall obesity rate was 26.4 percent and more than 38 percent of children were found to be either overweight or obese.

Through partnership with Public Health’s Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program and Catawba County Health Partners’ Eat Smart, Move More coalition, the market hosts local growers certified to accept WIC Farmers Market Nutritional Program (FNMP) vouchers to increase convenient access to fresh produce for people in the area, an area that is designated a USDA-recognized food desert.³

The market is located along a convenient and well-traveled corridor just behind a major medical center, attracting members of the general public, residents, local workers, and visitors to the area. The WIC program is run out of Public Health’s building, so staff strategically schedule appointments with individuals interested in using WIC FNMP



The Public Health Farmer’s Market.

Source: [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

vouchers at the market on the days the market is open.

This integration increased WIC FNMP voucher redemption from 51.29 percent in 2012 to 62.88 percent in 2013. Food assistance benefits (SNAP/EBT) and debit cards can also be used to make purchases. A Bonus Bucks program was also implemented that provided WIC FNMP voucher users with an additional \$4 coupon. These coupons, which were funded by employee fundraisers and private donations, were redeemed at more than \$1,000 in 2014.

Since its first year in 2013, the number of market days per season was reduced from 24 to 17; however, the overall number of participants increased from 4,338 to 4,586. The market is managed by one primary contact and supported by 60 volunteer staff and six additional community volunteers. Public health staff members were careful to schedule the market so that it did not compete with other markets in the community, and farmers were not charged a booth fee to ensure that selling opportunities would be enhanced and farmers' income maximized.

Farmers also receive same-day reimbursement for SNAP/EBT and debit payments through a system set up with the county's accounting department. Despite initial challenges in navigating technical financial systems to ensure same-day repayment and offering payment through SNAP/EBT, WIC vouchers, and debit cards, the process has resulted in benefits for both producers and consumers. Accounting staff's willingness to work with public health staff was critical. Public health staff members now provide technical assistance to the three other farmers markets across the county that would like to establish similar payment systems.

Hmong Agricultural Program

Within the 4 percent of Catawba County's Asian population is a small group of about 1,000 Hmong immigrants, whose growing presence since the 1980s contributes to North Carolina having the fourth largest Hmong population in the United States. These immigrants arrived in the country as refugees after the Vietnam War. Their migration to North Carolina may be attributable to the characteristics of the land and climate that are similar to the mountain region of northern Laos where this nomadic, farming people originated.⁴

In Catawba County, the Hmong Agricultural Program was the result of a 2007–2009 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant through the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program. The program coordination was staffed by personnel from North Carolina A&T Cooperative Extension to teach Hmong farmers modern farming techniques and to move away from their traditional "slash and burn" approach in order to improve production, marketing, and profitability. Once the three-year grant expired, the county and NC A&T partnered to continue funding the program and hired a full-time immigrant agriculture program coordinator to organize it.

Farmer training is primarily conducted at the three-acre Hmong demonstration site at the Catawba County Eco-



The Hmong demonstration site at the Eco-Complex Facility in Catawba County.

Source: North Carolina State and A&T State University Cooperative Extension website, <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/>

Complex Facility, which was started in 2009 and consists of six farm plots with water access. Each plot is farmed by a Hmong family, with an average of six family members per plot. The site serves to showcase different sustainable techniques to help farmers increase production and extend their growing season.

More than 128 farmers were trained throughout the duration of the program from 2009 to 2014, and 17 participants are selling in local markets, including the Hickory Flea Market that takes place every Thursday on the fairgrounds. One farmer currently sells at the Hickory Farmers Market, and program staff is engaged in efforts to get farmers to transition from selling in the flea market to the farmers markets. To date, three families working at the demonstration site have begun to diversify their markets and have begun selling to the local Asian grocery stores in addition to selling at the flea market and farmers markets.

Opportunities for Local Government Managers

Link disparate initiatives to maximize resources

"The role of local government [in these efforts] is to pull together disparate parts to build a broader base of support," explains Furtado, "The local food movement works to further several community objectives beyond that of ensuring the next generation of farmers is in place. It's our job to help people understand those larger connections."

"Access to fresh local foods helps our environment by using sustainable agricultural practices, our economy by keeping our local dollars here in the community, and our community health by working to address food access issues," she says. "There are citizen, community, and local government groups working on their own issues in each of

those narrow areas. Imagine the power we gain when we succeed in demonstrating the interconnectedness of the local food movement across those areas?”

The planning process brought together stakeholders involved in local foods and related initiatives to identify collaborative opportunities, and it was found that there were more resources than initially anticipated to address this shared issue.

Consider low-/no-cost opportunities

County-level initiatives have been successful using these lower-cost strategies to promote local food:

- **“Eat, Drink, and Be Local” branding initiative.** The “Eat, Drink, and Be Local” awareness week itself was based on a successful, similar event in 2011, where a county employee asked restaurants to feature local foods for a week. The event kicked off an ongoing branding campaign. The logo that was used was designed pro-bono by a local graphic designer. Since the event, the logo has been used on marketing materials for other local food events, including training events for farmers and Agri-Tourism Day, an event that offered self-guided tours of Catawba County farms.
- **Engaging kids in healthy eating and local food.** In order to inspire excitement in kids about local foods and engage them in farmers market shopping, organizers of the Public Health Farmers Market created “Buddy Broccoli”—a broccoli cartoon character that was hidden among a different farmer’s produce each week. Kids who found Buddy would receive a small prize like a water bottle or a jump rope. This also brought more traffic to farmers’ booths.

Lessons Learned

- **Increase convenience of purchasing and procuring local foods for consumers, restaurants, and businesses to reduce barriers to access.** GIS data has enabled local government to find food deserts and place farmers markets accordingly.
- **Frame issues based on a multitude of factors to increase the base of support.** For example, promoting local foods as a way to combat a widespread health issue of obesity. “Currently, there is a focus on local foods, but it started out as an agricultural production initiative for

economic development,” explains Local Foods Extension Agent Kellyn Montgomery, “Local foods became a strategy for that. Other folks may see local foods as a strategy for nutrition as well.”

- **Consider that building robust and viable systems take time.** Setting short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals in the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan has helped to alleviate this and provide opportunities for continual visible progress towards a long-term initiative. “Be patient about seeing results,” Assistant Manager Furtado advises, “Act with urgency to make things happen today, but recognize that realistically it’s a long-term change.”
- **Focus on the broader, traditional agriculture community in addition to those interested in organic production.** This has helped Catawba County to be successful, and its grain and commodity market sellers who have not historically produced food for sale locally have been supportive. Having local food initiatives housed with Cooperative Extension provides an advantage for maintaining this relationship because of the Extension’s established relationship with this community. “Be inclusive,” Furtado recommends, “There’s room for both.”
- **Strengthen local food systems to increase capacity to address issues of equity for a minority community that might otherwise be marginalized.** The Hmong community has been integrating into the community through access to the more mainstream markets that the local foods system is beginning to provide.

Endnotes

- 1 Catawba County Farm & Food Sustainability Plan. Catawba County: April 2013. <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/planning/Sustainability/FFSPlan.pdf>
- 2 Catawba County Farm & Food Sustainability Plan. Catawba County: April 2013. <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/planning/Sustainability/FFSPlan.pdf>
- 3 According to USDA.gov, a food desert is an urban neighborhood or rural town with limited access to fresh, health, and affordable food, particularly in an area composed of predominantly lower-income residents.
- 4 Xiong, Der. Immigrant Agriculture Program. Catawba County Extension Center: 2013. http://als.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/MN_Attachments-5_SACSPC_Ju.y2013.pdf

Study Participants

Mary Furtado, Assistant County Manager, Catawba County

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CASE STUDY:

City of Decatur, Georgia



DECATUR AT A GLANCE

Population: 20,086^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 4.27^b

Median Income: \$73,679^c

Population in Poverty: 14.3 percent^d

Additional Resources: City of Decatur 2010 Strategic Plan; City of Decatur Community Garden Guidelines; City of Decatur Environmental Sustainability Plan

Located just outside of Atlanta, Decatur, Georgia, is the county seat of DeKalb County and one of the state’s most densely-developed cities. Decatur spans just 4.27 square miles and has been built out since the 1950s. The city’s location at the top of four major watersheds creates an opportunity for the community to protect local waters, but it also means that much of the remaining greenspace is in areas designated as floodplain. Decatur is home to Agnes Scott College and Columbia Theological Seminary. Most of its residents commute to nearby Emory University, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or downtown Atlanta for their jobs.

Decatur has seen significant demographic change over the past 20 years. In the 1990s, the city’s median household income was \$35,558;¹ by the 2010 Census, the average income had more than doubled.² The city’s exceptional school system has attracted new residents, which has increased demand for the city’s already limited housing and land stock.

As of 2014, an acre of land in Decatur is worth, on average, \$1 million.³ As a result, property values have risen and the city’s demographics have shifted. In 1990, the city was 59.5 percent white, 38.4 percent African American, 1.1 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 0.9 percent Asian.⁴ In 2010, Decatur was 73.5 percent white, 20.2 percent African American, 2.9 percent Asian, and 3 percent Hispanic/Latino.⁵

Despite its limited usable land, Decatur has seen an increase in community gardening over the past few decades. These efforts have arisen through partnerships between Decatur’s government and residents, and lower-income populations in nearby communities, and are rooted in the City’s Strategic Plan, which supports the entrepreneurial spirit of the city.

History

Early local foods efforts

The city’s first community garden in the plot now known as [Scott Garden](#) was established more than 30 years ago by the residents of Phillips Tower, a senior high-rise community. It was later moved to city property located adjacent to Phillips Tower, and behind the Decatur Recreation Center. Over the past decade, the garden has opened up to the general public and gone through a renovation to incorporate walking paths and an irrigation system.

The garden, which is roughly 1,800 square feet, has an application process for city residents who want to join; the 27 small garden beds are leased for \$25 a year. By the city’s own admission, the guidelines for membership have been onerous in the past, and they have been updated recently to create a more social and manageable endeavor. As of January 2015, monthly

a U.S. Census Bureau, 2013.

b U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

workdays will be held on the third Saturday of each month, with three or four of those events featuring a speaker and potluck meal meant to be shared among the full garden membership. The city's involvement with Scott Garden became a model for the level of its engagement with other plots that have been established.

During the renovation, Decatur's Public Works Department staff helped clear the site and prepare it to be gardened; the city also provides the water that residents use to tend the gardens. The city, however, stops short of actually weeding or watering the plots. Establishing these parameters early on—and maintaining them over the years—has been important in managing expectations of residents who are interested in working with the city on these initiatives.

Educating Decatur's youth

In 1993, Decatur resident Sally Wylde had recently moved to town and began noticing children trampling her neighbor's garden each day as they left school. Instead of calling the police, she got together with several neighbors and invited the children to care for the garden. The children reacted positively to the experience, and Sally decided to expand the garden to a nearby site.

This small project turned into the Oakhurst Community Garden, which was renamed the [Wylde Center](#) in 2012 in honor of its founder, and the multiple garden locations that have become part of the project. The Wylde Center serves as community garden, nature center, neighborhood meeting space, and wildlife habitat that is open for all. Local schools use the space for field trips; local organizations host events to raise awareness for their causes. One significant source of funds for the Wylde Center is its plant sale. Staff and volunteers grow plants in a greenhouse on the premises. The plants are then potted individually and placed in the center's front yard, along with a price sheet and container to collect



The Oakhurst Community Garden is a popular destination for school field trips and a gathering place for the whole community.

Source: Stephanie Van Parys and the Wylde Center

the funds due.

The city supports and partners with the garden to support several of their initiatives. Direct financial contributions have been made to their capital campaign in recent years to preserve and repair the residential home that serves as their administrative offices. Sugar Creek Garden, the second greenspace established by the Wylde Center, is located entirely on city-owned property. While Sugar Creek was initially supported financially by the city, it has become entirely funded by the Wylde Center. The Decatur Earth Day Festival is hosted each year as a collaboration between the Center and several city departments. It is one of the primary outreach events centered on environmental education.

A city supported farmers market

Decatur is home to a 10-year-old farmers market held on Wednesday and Saturday each week. More so than community gardens, the farmers market has felt the impact of Decatur's limited available land and has frequently changed locations as private property owners changed, to increase visibility, and to coordinate with other public uses. The market has strived to establish itself in the face of the complications created by a dense urban environment. It requires space for vendors to load and unload, parking for shoppers, and room for dozens of stalls, which makes it more challenging to situate.

Despite the moves, the market continues to be a strong presence in the community and serves people from varying income levels, whether they reside in Decatur or nearby. The [State of Georgia](#) committed years ago to providing the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machines necessary to process Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The market's leaders also work closely with [Wholesome](#)



Plants grown at the Oakhurst Community Garden.

Source: Stephanie Van Parys and the Wylde Center



Community members and their plot at the Decatur Kitchen Garden.

Source: Robin Chanin and the Global Growers Network

[Wave](#) to help run a double bucks program, which doubles in value any SNAP benefits used at the market.

Decatur Kitchen Garden

While community gardens have existed in Decatur for decades, one impetus for their increase and the city's support for them came from Mayor Bill Floyd, who served in this role from 1999 to 2013. Mayor Floyd's initial vision was a full-scale farm that would produce enough to support an expansive farmer's market. City Manager Merriss encouraged a more tempered goal, but agreed that within reason a city-supported community garden would be a worthwhile investment for city staff and resources.

Assistant City Manager David Junger brought management and city expertise to the project, but he and Merriss realized that they needed agricultural experts if this project was really to get off the ground. They reached out to the state-wide non-profit [Georgia Organics](#), which provides "education, mentorship programs, and support systems for Georgia farmers to strengthen and expand the number of organic and sustainable farms in the state,"⁶ to think about budget, a job description for the garden manager, and other planning challenges. The city intended to provide the budget and general oversight of the garden, while contracting out the day-to-day management of the garden.

As the city's vision began to take shape, one of the areas of highest concern was finding the land for the garden. After a thorough review, they realized the most promising plot was right outside of the city limit, in DeKalb County, at the United Methodist Children's Home (UMCH), which had been a self-sustaining farm in the 1950s and 1960s.

City staff discovered Umurima Wa Burundi, also known as the "Burundi Women's Farm," that was located on a plot of privately owned, commercial property. The garden was

being managed by a group operating within Refugee Family Services, which has now become a separate non-profit called the Global Grower's Network.

Decatur staff was struck by how well the Burundi Garden was organized and maintained and how much it seemed to produce for such a small amount of space. They reached out to Susan Pavlin at Refugee Family Services to ask if it would be interested in managing the land at UMCH. Serendipitously, Ms. Pavlin was looking for land and grant partners to expand their agricultural programs.

With UMCH on board and the city able to outsource the garden to the capable team at the Global Grower's Network, Decatur staff got to work solidifying the details of the arrangement. In the end, the city agreed to hold a lease to the land for \$10 per year with a provision to have the land managed by an outside partner. Several key staff members at Refugee Family Services were creating a separate organization called Global Growers, and the city ultimately created a management agreement with Global Growers. Decatur Kitchen Garden was born.

Global Growers and similar organizations provide land and some gardening instruction to immigrant families; the families that have plots are responsible for what is grown and whether it is taken to a farmers market, sold elsewhere, bartered, or just consumed. These kinds of programs have a focus on sustainable agriculture and creating economic opportunity for immigrant communities.

For its part, the city of Decatur provided some staffing and equipment support to help the garden begin running and to support ongoing maintenance. The grounds maintenance supervisor tilled the entire space according to a site plan that was designed to allow water to flow naturally to the plots. The financial contribution was designed to taper off, allowing the garden to slowly become more self-sufficient. The city provided \$40,000 to the Decatur Kitchen Garden in its first year, \$30,000 in the second year, and \$20,000 in the third year.

After a year in operation, the Global Growers' team did a full report to the city on the state of the garden, its impact on the community, and how team members had used the money received from the city. Merriss remembers being blown away by the productivity achieved with so few resources and on such a small amount of land. She claims that, "For everything we've done, either by accident or plan, the Kitchen Garden is one of the most extraordinary."

Given the Kitchen Garden's strong track record, the city was willing to continue finding ways to support its efforts. In 2013, the city helped organize the Decatur Dinner Party, a fundraiser for the Kitchen Garden. This inaugural event relied heavily on city staff to coordinate logistics, marketing, and partnerships, and it raised \$10,000 for the garden. In 2014, the party raised \$14,000 with slightly less city involvement in the planning. Lena Stevens, Decatur's Project Manager, says that the city recognizes that it could turn this event over entirely to Global Growers, but it is happy to leverage its experience and connections working with

vendors to hold the event.

The City's Role in Decatur's Food System

Good fences make good neighbors

A local food system is rarely designed and implemented by a single organization or sector. In Decatur, the city has helped support multi-partner efforts, acting as a convener and facilitator. Importantly, the city has also helped to articulate the role of the different partners and expectations of each in their contributions. While the city has been enthusiastic in its support of local food initiatives, it has also been measured.

In the city's 2010 Strategic Plan, which was developed with significant input from residents, Decatur committed itself to supporting the expansion of gardening opportunities, highlighting the physical, social, economic, and health benefits that community gardens are known to bring.⁷ While providing this overall endorsement, Decatur has limited its role in the implementation of different tactics.

When deciding which role the city should have in these endeavors, it played to its strengths as a source of support, owner of mowers and other relevant equipment, and steward of the big picture. It has allowed residents, partners, and organizations leverage their abilities as gardeners, educators, organizers, and volunteers to manage the day-to-day activities of markets and gardens.

Leveling the field

In 2009, the city established [guidelines for community gardens](#). These guidelines were requested by the City Commission as a way to help elected officials and staff communicate with and educate residents who were leading the efforts to ensure that they are aware of the various considerations to keep in mind. These guidelines include an application, scope of work, information on liability, acknowledgement of garden responsibilities, and guidance from the Decatur Environmental Sustainability Board on urban agriculture. Applications are evaluated on whether proposals:

- Help develop the knowledge of city residents of all ages regarding how to grow food, how to protect the environment while growing food, and how to improve nutrition and food quality.
- Increase opportunities for city residents to interact with one another and celebrate the city's food heritage.
- Are integrated with, assist, and enhance the city's efforts to implement three plans that the city has developed: greenspace plan, stormwater plan, and waste management plan.
- Address short- and long-term funding sources to ensure that the garden does not become a drain on city resources or a nuisance to residents.⁸



Local chefs support the Decatur Kitchen Garden at the annual Decatur Dinner Party.

Source: City of Decatur

A "yes, if" approach

City Manager Merriss takes pride in the entrepreneurial nature of residents and has a history of leveraging their good ideas to benefit the entire community. For several garden initiatives and before the 2009 guidelines were in place, residents would approach her to ask permission to start gardens on plots with environmental sensitivities. Her response was to tell the residents yes, but only if they checked with the affected parties, received sign-off from appropriate city staff, and pulled together the correct supporting documentation.

Encouraging residents' ideas keeps the city government attuned to their interests and concerns. Empowering residents to work through roadblocks toward their ultimate goals allows them to demonstrate their commitment to the issue and ensures that they are aware of all the different factors that need to be considered. This approach makes community gardens and similar projects a true community effort.

WHY SHOULD A LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT COMMUNITY GARDENS?

- **Can attract new residents.** People want to live in a dense, urban environment, but they want a place to go and get dirty.
- **It's a matter of public safety.** Gardens create a small amount of security, should a disaster strike and food supplies cut off.
- **Keeps residents healthy.** Fresh food and the act of gardening feed into goals of fostering an active, healthy community.

— Staff at the City of Decatur

Lessons Learned

- **Don't let great get in the way of good enough.** There are few perfect opportunities to move forward with a food system or other initiative. Decatur has jumped on the opportunities that are good enough to get started with, out of a belief that being in motion will set them up for bigger projects when they come along. This has made it much easier to get momentum and buy-in.

Initially, for instance, Assistant City Manager David Junger was asked to lead the effort to design and staff the Decatur Kitchen Garden. While he had not worked with community gardens before, he had won “garden of the year” in his neighborhood, making him the most qualified person on staff.

- **Plant the seeds for relationships early.** You can't build partnerships the day that you need to do something with those partners. It's important for local government officials to invest time in establishing relationships with community members well before it's time to join together to act. The Decatur Kitchen Garden was a new idea for the city, the Methodist Children's Home, and the Global Growers. Its success hinges on the trust developed between those partners to honor agreements and be transparent in their dealings.
- **Define community broadly.** A key to one of Decatur's most successful local food initiatives was the city's willingness to look past geographical boundaries. The

Decatur Kitchen Garden sits outside of city limits, and most of the farmers are not residents of the city. But the land at UMCH was the best plot of land available and the people that Global Growers supports are the population that would be served best by the initiative.

Even though Decatur and its residents weren't at the center of the site selection and gardens, the Decatur Kitchen Garden has been a boon for the community. Residents are often spotted volunteering at the garden, inviting their neighbors to its fundraisers, and buying the food produced at the local farmers market.

Endnotes

- 1 City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan. City of Decatur: 2005. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=1701>.
- 2 State and County QuickFacts. U.S. Census. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/1322052.html>. Accessed on 11/25/2014.
- 3 Conversation with City Manager Peggy Merriss on October 21, 2014
- 4 [Comprehensive Plan](#), pg. 2-5.
- 5 [State and County QuickFacts](#).
- 6 “Programs” page. Georgia Organics.com. <https://georgiaorganics.org/about-us/programs/>
- 7 2010 Strategic Plan. City of Decatur, Georgia. 2010. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=2570>.
- 8 Responsibilities and Guidelines for Communities Gardens on City-Owned Properties. City of Decatur, Georgia. Adopted in 2009. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=1973>.

Study Participants

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Peggy Merriss, City Manager, City of Decatur

Lena Stevens, Project Manager, City of Decatur

Stephanie Van Parys, Executive Director, Wylde Center

CASE STUDY:

Town of Topsham, Maine



TOPSHAM AT A GLANCE

Population: 8,750^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 32.2^b

Median Income: \$61,607^c

Population in Poverty: 17.2 percent^d

Additional Resources: Topsham Comprehensive Plan; Topsham Natural Areas Plan

The town of Topsham spans 32.2 square miles along the Androscoggin River, just off Maine’s southern coast near the Merrymeeting Bay tidal basin. It is also part of the scenic Casco Bay region, which includes the state’s largest city of Portland located some 30 minutes from Topsham, along with smaller towns like Freeport (home of retailer L.L. Bean), Bowdoinham, Bath, and Brunswick. Topsham’s 8,750 residents are 93.6 percent Caucasian, 0.1 percent African American, 1.7 percent Asian, and 0.9 percent Hispanic.

Topsham is a historically rural community that has, particularly in the past three decades or so, transitioned to a more suburban character. The timber industry around which the town developed has given way to a growing retail and service sector, and the town boasts several commercial clusters that ring its central village of more concentrated residential and mixed-use development. An extension of Interstate 295 in the mid-1970s, followed by the completion of the “coastal connector” linking I-295 with US Route 1 in 1996, improved Topsham’s accessibility such that it is now located within commuting distance of two-thirds of the state’s workforce.

Today, Topsham is an interesting mix of such newer developments as big-box retail, retirement facilities, and an improved transportation network, as well as its historical residential and commercial buildings and abundant natural resources. The latter include many farms that have been a part of the town’s rural landscape for multiple generations. According to Town Manager Rich Roedner, a farm field is viewed as a rural resource, and an attachment to land and appreciation for those resources are embedded in the community fabric.

But in a growing community like Topsham, affinity for agriculture isn’t always enough to ensure it remains a viable and protected part of the local identity and economy. The town has employed a mix of proactive and reactive, formal and informal strategies to do so, often playing a supporting role but one that is clearly valued by local food advocates.

Local Food and Agriculture

Unlike some communities where local food is more of an emerging or novel idea, Topsham hasn’t had to introduce its residents to the concept. Residents gather at the Topsham Fairgrounds for the annual agricultural fair, which just celebrated its 160th anniversary, and for other community events throughout the year, including a winter season farmers market—one of less than 20 in the state. They purchase bacon, milk, meat pies, and assorted other specialties from the 85-year-old, five-generation meat market, abattoir, and livestock farm located on 500 acres in the town.

a U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

b U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

c U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

d U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.



Midcoast Winter Farmers Market.

Source: [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

Adapting and looking ahead through plans and policy

As the demographics and perception of agriculture have changed over time, Topsham has looked for ways to accommodate shifting needs and priorities identified largely through community planning processes, including the most recent comprehensive plan, which was adopted in 2005 and amended in 2007, and includes a goal to preserve its working farms, forests, and natural areas.¹ As part of its implementation, development of a natural areas plan followed.² This reinforced and expanded on specific recommendations for changes in policy and practice that would support conservation and farm landowners.

A seasonal retail provision added to Topsham's code in 2006 "seeks to create an opportunity for local agricultural producers to sell their products in expanded areas in Town, from which they are currently restricted, in an expanded 'farmer's market' manner," and allows on- and off-site sales subject to a set of criteria related to lot size, hours, parking, and other operational characteristics.³

Other code amendments passed in 2008 give rural landowners the ability to do things other than just farm in hopes of providing more flexibility to those looking to diversify their business models and waiting for resurgence in the agricultural sector. Under the new code, landowners can now engage in rural entrepreneurial activities, which may include lab and research facilities; light manufacturing; professional offices; service businesses; wholesale businesses; and warehousing storage, and distribution. The reuse of agricultural buildings was also permitted for these same types of nonresidential activities in an expanded list of zones.⁴

Just as the building reuse provision hoped to prevent the demolition of existing agricultural infrastructure, other land use policies have been oriented toward farmland conservation. While the zoning code laid out agricultural land conservation and development standards for residential

subdivision proposals of at least 10 acres of open fields or pasture, Planning Director Rod Melanson notes that in recent years, the town has taken additional steps to turn the subdivision regulation process on its head.

Prospective major subdivision developers must now first complete a preapplication process in which they submit a site inventory, analysis, and conservation plan. This allows the planning board and staff to consider the potential impacts on natural and cultural resources before being presented with a detailed development plan.⁵ New types of open space development also allow for the consideration of density bonuses in exchange for the protection of valued natural resources via conservation easements.⁶

A Key Partnership: The Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust

Leadership in land conservation

The local government is not alone in its conservation interests. In 1985, a group of community members banded together out of concern for a 20-acre coastal meadow under threat of development. They pooled resources to establish the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust (BTLT), which has since grown from an all-volunteer effort to a 1,100-member organization, operating on a budget made up of membership fees, donations and grants, and a staff of 3.6 full-time employees.

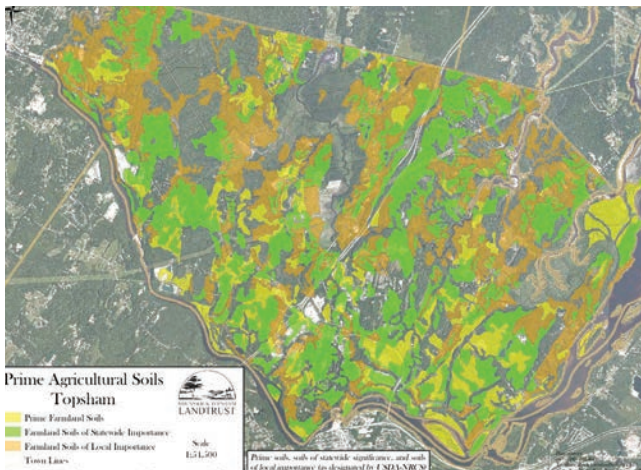
BTLT's mission is to "preserve, protect and steward the cherished landscapes and rich natural resources of our communities, to provide access for recreation, and to support local agriculture and other traditional land uses, now and for generations to come." In three decades, the trust has conserved more than 2,300 acres of natural areas.

Among BTLT's most well-known conservation efforts is the Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick, which the trust purchased outright in 1994. The farm has expanded from 170 acres at that time to 320 acres today. On this signature



Scammon Farm, preserved land in Topsham.

Source: Chris Cabot



Map of Topsham's soils, developed by Chris Cabot as part of a farmland inventory conducted through the Local Farms - Local Food initiative.

Source: kennebecestuary.org

property, BTLT operates one of the state's largest farmers markets, a community garden benefitting people challenged by food access or physical disabilities, and five miles of public nature trails that weave around farm fields; 115 acres are farmed and managed by a couple who have leased the land from BTLT since 2004.

In 2014, following a series of short-term leases, the farmers and BTLT entered into a 50-year lease agreement that took approximately three years to develop. This innovative model is transferable, allowing the farmers to build equity in their business, but ensures that the public access and the trust's assets—the land itself and the structures on the property—will be maintained.

Local Farms – Local Food initiative

While BTLT's focus on agriculture and farmland preservation has been integral since its inception, in the past five to seven years, it has expanded work regionally to enhance, support, and grow a local food economy. The Local Farms-Local Food initiative is a partnership with the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust and is active in a dozen towns in the region, including Topsham.

With major goals to preserve farmland and farmer viability, the partners have worked to identify and protect the best soils for farming and facilitated outreach to farmers to gain a better understanding of their challenges. They've also worked to raise community awareness of local agriculture, promoting farm to school opportunities, expanding EBT access at farmers markets through a partnership with Maine Access Health, and taking steps toward establishing a community food council.

The ability to aggregate and distribute food to retail and institutional markets is critical to the viability of local agriculture, and the initiative has worked with municipalities in the region to identify infrastructure gaps and opportunities.

In Topsham, one such opportunity arose when the Brunswick Naval Air Station closed in 2011. The base's former commissary, located in an annexed area now known as Topsham Commerce Park, was identified as a potential site for a highly-desired food hub for the region—a need initially championed by local agriculture and preservation advocates and affirmed by interest from local institutions. A local fair trade, organic coffee roaster has since purchased the entire 35,000 square-foot facility and is also supportive of the concept, though full financing for the food hub element remains a challenge to secure. Nonetheless, partners remain optimistic that given the persistent support of key stakeholders, including the local government and its economic development agency, some version of their food hub vision is on the horizon.

“By having the local economic development folks and the municipalities, in addition to the nonprofits who support conservation and farming, all saying that ‘this is good for our economy, it’s good for our quality of life, it’s good for all of these things; it will happen,’” says BTLT Executive Director and Topsham resident Angela Twitchell, adding, “The partnership with the town makes all of this work possible.”

Opportunities for Local Government Management

Be a “responsive driver”

That's how Roedner describes the local government's role in supporting Topsham's local agriculture. “We've looked at it from an economic development standpoint,” he says, “It makes sense. It puts people to work.” While he and other key planning and economic development staff have embraced this basic idea, they haven't usurped the activities and capacity of nonprofit and private stakeholders. Rather, they have leveraged their planning and policy tools to enhance those efforts and further encourage the viability



Former navy commissary and site for potential food hub.

Source: Laura Goddeeris



The Local Farms-Local Food initiative is a regional partnership working to raise awareness of food system issues in Topsham and neighboring communities.

Source: kennebecestuary.org

of local agriculture.

Topsham has been able to do this while maintaining a generally neutral position, attempting to balance competing interests by creating options in response to community feedback. In 2008, as the town looked to develop its natural areas plan, it recognized that some rural landowners felt threatened by growing interest in protection of open space. Staff reached out to both sides of the debate and invited stakeholders to community input sessions in which they sought to identify common interests. Melanson says the message to the town was essentially, “You want to do the right thing, let’s make it easier for you to do that.”

Recognize the intersection of food and agriculture with various municipal functions

As local governments around the country are becoming interested in food systems, they are finding potential overlap with a wide range of departments’ functions. Whether this percolates from the departments and staff themselves or is directed by top-level management, recognition by the latter is ideal. In Topsham, Roedner can quickly identify several government staff whose work intersects with food and agriculture in some way, including the directors of planning, economic development and code enforcement. While each works on food issues through their own particular lens, they, too, are aware of the intersections and collaborate when appropriate.

Facilitate connections to external resources and partners

The local government also embraces the role of facilitator, making connections with regional, state, or federal resources whenever possible. The town, for example, has applied for state-administered economic development fund-

ing, which is part of its Community Development Block Grant allocation, on behalf of the food hub project at the naval commissary. Twitchell and Melanson also noted that local government engagement in local food and agriculture initiatives can open up access to funding streams that would otherwise be difficult to access.

In addition to seeking financial resources, Topsham has benefitted from connections to human capital at various public, private, and nonprofit organizations within the region and state, where partners administer or advise on supportive programming or research. Examples have included the Maine Department of Agriculture, Maine Farmland Trust, Sagadahoc Agricultural and Horticultural Society, and Bowdoin College.

Lessons Learned

- **Local food and agriculture can have a place in a suburbanizing landscape.** With respect to development, Topsham has kept an eye toward the big picture. It knows many of its small town aspects and especially its natural resources, including local farms, must maintain a place in its future. By being flexible, forward-thinking, and receptive to community input, they have been able to broker plans and policies that balance interests of developers, conservationists, and local producers.
- **Distribution infrastructure remains a challenge and an opportunity.** Topsham, like other towns in Maine, is fortunate to possess many local food system assets at either end of the supply chain—new farmers and good soils on the production end and interest in local purchasing by schools and other institutions on the market side. But the infrastructure to aggregate, process, and package local produce appropriately for these markets is not yet sufficient. The challenge here is capitalizing—literally—on this interest as an economic development opportunity.

Topsham’s story also illustrates that **it’s possible to be a strong supporter of local food and agriculture without major commitments of resources.** Here are simple strategies that foster a spirit of collaboration, while allowing partners to do much of the heavy lifting:

- **Be open to building personal relationships.** “We’re small enough that when someone has an issue, one of the things they think to do is to call the town office,” says Manager Roedner. Twitchell agrees that personal relationships have been critical to the success of efforts to preserve and promote local agriculture. Having gotten to know local government staff through participation in various committees as an active resident, she agrees that “It’s just easier to go talk about things that we’re doing, things that they’re doing, and try to problem solve together.” She suggests building those relationships should be an early step when other communities are looking to engage in local food system development.

- **Speaking a common language goes a long way.** “Even just recognizing that there is a common goal, that it would be good for our local economy if we had stronger food systems and better ways to distribute local food to our institutions, just by [municipalities] being aware that that is an important goal for our communities, opportunities that you may not see come about,” says Twitchell. “And the message can be simple and inclusive as ‘supporting local agriculture is supporting our local economy,’” In Topsham, it hasn’t been critical to define local food in terms of specific types or scales of production. Even the organic Christmas tree producers are considered part of the local agriculture movement.
- **Don’t assume others know what you know.** This applies to your active collaborators who may not be aware of relevant legislation, funding opportunities, or other matching activities at the regional, state, or federal levels. Sharing that information is an easy way to help to build those relationships with your partners, as has been the case in Topsham.

This lesson also applies to the general public. Consider the opportunities for signage and other branding or communications tools to affirm why and how you support local food and agriculture. Sometimes what seems obvious still bears repeating.

Endnotes

- 1 Topsham Comprehensive Plan 2005. Topsham Comprehensive Plan Update Committee & Topsham Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee: May 2005, amended May 2007. <http://bit.ly/1G2ON5x>
- 2 Topsham Natural Areas Plan. Town of Topsham: May 2010.
- 3 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-60.5 (2006). <http://ecode360.com/9088023>
- 4 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-60.11 & § 225-60.12 (2008). <http://ecode360.com/10391067> & <http://ecode360.com/10391068>
- 5 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 191-2.2 (2012). <http://ecode360.com/16235051>
- 6 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-20.1 (2010). <http://ecode360.com/14479866>

Study Participants

Rod Melanson, Planning Director, Town of Topsham

Rich Roedner, Town Manager, Town of Topsham

Angela Twitchell, Executive Director, Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust

CASE STUDY: Washtenaw County and City of Ann Arbor, Michigan



WASHTENAW COUNTY AND ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN AT A GLANCE

Population: 354,240 (Washtenaw County); 117,025 (Ann Arbor)^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 705.97 (Washtenaw County); 27.83 (Ann Arbor)^b

Median Income: \$59,055 (Washtenaw County); \$55,003 (Ann Arbor)^c

Population in Poverty: 15.4 percent (Washtenaw County); 22.1 percent (Ann Arbor)^d

Additional Resources: [Ann Arbor Greenbelt Program Reports & Plans](#); [Ann Arbor Sustainability Framework](#); [Washtenaw County Public Health – Healthy Eating](#); [Washtenaw County Office of Community & Economic Development Reports](#); [Washtenaw County Food Policy Council Agenda](#)

a U.S. Census Bureau, 2013.

b U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

Located 30 miles outside of Detroit in southeast Michigan, Washtenaw County’s approximately 700 square land miles span urban, suburban, and rural communities. Its 28 municipalities range from small villages and townships to its county seat of Ann Arbor, which is home to the University of Michigan and accounts for about a third of the county’s population. The county’s residents are approximately 72 percent Caucasian, 12 percent African American, 8 percent Asian, and 4 percent Hispanic.

Though Michigan was hit hard by the Great Recession, Washtenaw County’s economic profile includes several positive indicators. Per capita and household income statistics exceed those for Michigan and the US, and the county’s unemployment rate is the second-lowest in the state. Manufacturing employment, which reached a high in 2001, fell by more than 57 percent by 2011, but demand persists for jobs in health care, information technology, and renewable energy sectors.¹ A culture of entrepreneurship has also emerged, supported by such entities as Ann Arbor SPARK, a nonprofit regional economic development organization encouraging business acceleration, attraction and retention.

But within the county, significant disparity exists between municipalities, some of which report income and employment data lagging behind both the county and state averages. The far eastern part of the county, which includes the city and township of Ypsilanti, also includes the county’s most extreme patches of low-income and low-food access and perhaps as a result, significantly higher rates of food assistance enrollment and the most concentrated activity around emergency food distribution.²

Despite tough economic challenges, Michigan has gained attention for its activities around local and regional food systems development, and Washtenaw County is home to many organizations providing leadership in this field like Growing Hope in Ypsilanti, the Fair Food Network and the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, and the southeastern Michigan-focused Food System Economic Partnership. As local governments have begun to formally adopt priorities related to food systems, partnerships like these, along with an engaged resident base, have been instrumental in their development and implementation.

Food Systems in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County: Then and Now

Historic public market

Some food systems activities within the county have deep historic roots.



Ann Arbor Farmers Market, open year-round.

Source: Courtesy of Ann Arbor Farmers Market

The Ann Arbor Farmers Market, which has been in operation since 1919, is among the oldest markets in the country and is currently managed through the city's parks and recreation services unit. The market effectively functions and is treated much like a city park, providing a lively, visible gathering place for residents of Ann Arbor and surrounding communities.

The traditional Saturday market operates year-round, at peak season featuring 70 to 80 produce, meat, fish, and dairy producers; approximately 20 vendors offering baked or other prepared foods, including coffee and honey; and another 25 to 30 artisans. Approximately 30 total vendors remain through the winter season. The daytime market is also open Wednesdays during the months of May through December. Most recently a seasonal Wednesday evening market has been added. This new venture has attracted a number of new farm and food entrepreneurs, with approximately half in operation for less than a year and a high rate of women-owned businesses.

Taking advantage of the IT infrastructure within the office located onsite, the market has been accepting food assistance benefits through an EBT terminal for close to a decade and has more recently expanded electronic transactions to include tokens for purchase by credit card. The city currently employs a full-time market manager and additional part-time staff who oversee market operations. The market manager collaborates with an appointed Public Market Advisory Commission that provides the perspectives of vendors, customers, and neighborhood residents on decisions regarding market operations and improvements.

Preservation for local agriculture

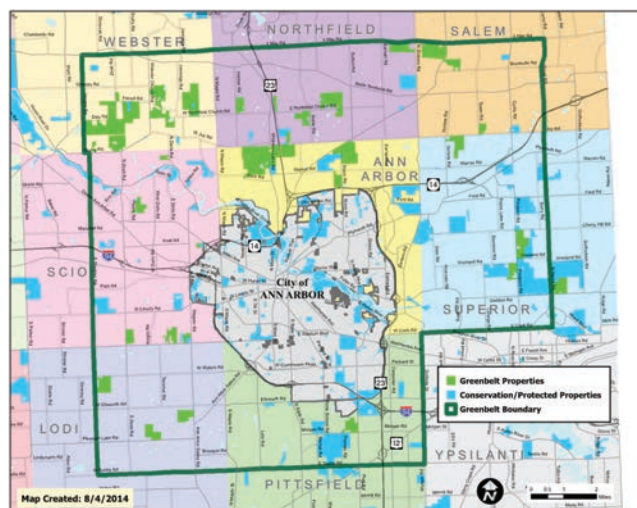
Along with the long-standing market for local and regional producers, it follows that agriculture is a part of the county's history; however, agricultural land use has decreased by more than 60 percent since 1940, with 170,154 acres currently in production as of the most recent Agricul-

tural Census in 2012 (down from 458,240 in 1940).³ Within the county, more than a dozen public and private preservation programs, many of which collectively make up the "Preserve Washtenaw" consortium, have emerged in response to development pressures on farmland and other types of open space and natural habitats.

Since the founding of the state's first land trust—the Washtenaw Land Conservancy (now known as the Legacy Land Conservancy)—in 1971, private conservation efforts have successfully protected land and raised public awareness of development consequences and alternatives. Early attempts to initiate complementary, publicly-funded programs in the county were met with political challenges, but advocates honed in on specific municipalities where they identified champions within local government and anticipated stronger community support. Ann Arbor, for example, was willing to consider extending and expanding a parks acquisition millage to include land preservation if voters agreed.

Voters did, thus the Greenbelt program was established in 2003 by city of Ann Arbor millage and is administered through a partnership with a national nonprofit called The Conservation Fund. Funds generated by the 30-year, 0.5 mill tax levy are used toward the purchase or protection from development of land within the 13-square mile Greenbelt boundary that extends through eight surrounding townships. Three of these townships—Ann Arbor, Scio, and Webster—have passed and in some cases renewed their own millages in similar support of land preservation.

In 2009, three years after the adoption of its first strategic plan for the Greenbelt, the city's Greenbelt Advisory Commission amended its strategic priorities to specifically acknowledge an interest in supporting farmland for local food production, in recognition of such associated economic opportunities as direct to consumer sales. To date, more than 4,300 acres have been protected through the Greenbelt Program, and at least eight protected farms are currently



Ann Arbor Greenbelt map.

Source: www.a2gov.org



A community health advocate provides a fresh food box to a program participant.

Source: Washtenaw County Public Health Department

producing specialty crops for local markets.

Public health programming and cross-disciplinary planning efforts

Within the past decade, food systems topics have been incorporated into efforts of several county and city departments, with public health emerging as a key champion and partner. Between 2005 and 2012, Washtenaw County Public Health received funding from the Michigan Department of Community Health’s Building Healthy Communities initiative aimed at chronic disease prevention.

As a part of this project, the department piloted a program called Prescription for Health, through which select local medical clinics and food pantries serving low-income community residents distributed tokens that could be used to purchase fresh produce at participating farmers markets. With renewed funding from the Kresge Foundation, the program has expanded to include additional county clinics and markets.

Through the Building Healthy Communities initiative, department staff worked with a diverse network of partners, including some nontraditional to the public health field, enacting policy and environmental changes to improve healthy food access and physical activity of county residents. Sharon Sheldon, program administrator, believes the initiative laid a foundation for communicating across disciplines.

The Office of Community Economic Development (OCED), for example, bought into the connections between food systems, community health, and economic outcomes and emerged as an ally. Recognizing food access as a part of community resiliency in its successful application for a 2011 HUD Sustainable Communities Challenge Grant, OCED identified “support for local food businesses and urban agriculture” as one of six major priority areas. Implementation strategies being pursued include workforce development

programs to link underemployed individuals with agribusiness and food system jobs, as well as development of a commercial kitchen incubator.

Meanwhile, Ann Arbor recently completed a two-year process to develop and adopt a sustainability framework as a core component of its master plan. As part of this process, city staff and advisory commission representatives reviewed more than 20 of the city’s plans, studies, and resolutions for their connections to elements of sustainability (i.e., environment, equity, and economy). In the resulting framework, which synthesized 200 existing recommendations into a more manageable set of overarching goals, local food emerged as one of just 16 priority areas.⁴

The Washtenaw Food Policy Council: Advancing a Comprehensive Food Policy Agenda

In 2012, following a series of discussions at county board working sessions and, prior to that, among public health staff and community-based food system organizations and advocates, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution creating the Washtenaw Food Policy Council as an official advisory body. Upon its creation, the board also seated its initial 15-member roster according to draft bylaws, appointing representatives from various food system professions and viewpoints, including an at-large community member and a member of the county board.

Working over the next two years as one united group and through several focused policy action teams, along with operating assistance from a local community foundation and in-kind support from the health department, the council conducted outreach toward development of a comprehensive policy agenda. This 23-item platform, inspired in part by the goals of the [Michigan Good Food Charter](http://www.michiganfood.org/) (<http://www.michiganfood.org/>), recommends various types of actions by county, state, federal, institutional, municipal, and school board stakeholders in support of its mission to increase and preserve access to safe, local, and healthy food for county residents.⁵

Approved by the council in July 2014, it was then approved by the county board the following November. Later that month, the board also passed two resolutions directly in support of the policy agenda, amending the county procurement policy in favor of more environmentally-friendly foodservice ware and packaging, and giving preference to locally-produced food, other goods, and services. The OCED and the Office of Water Resources’ Solid Waste Division assisted in the development of these amendments.

The council has both the ability and the charge, according to County Commissioner and Food Policy Council member Yousef Rabhi to look at the county as a community and take a broad view of issues. He acknowledged the inequities related to food access and health across the county, particularly in the eastern part, and noted that those underrepre-

sented or underserved should be advocated for strongly.

In general, the establishment of the council and its ongoing work should elevate the collective understanding of how food systems intersect with so many facets of local government. According to Rabhi, given the council's ability to achieve success in a more limited amount of time, its organization may also serve as a model for consolidating other interest groups that advise the board.

Opportunities for Local Government Management

Funding for food system development

As local governments in Michigan and elsewhere contend with decreased state revenues, depressed property values, and increasing legacy costs, financial support for what may be perceived as discretionary activities around food systems may be challenging to justify. In both the city of Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County, the local governments have maintained commitments, even in recent years.

Until July 1, 2014, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market annual operating budget historically operated as an enterprise fund, separate from the general fund. As a result, however, of changing Governmental Accounting Standards Board principles regarding recording liabilities for unfunded pension amounts, combined with market-operating expenses outpacing revenue as a result of increased programs and administrative support, the Ann Arbor City Council approved the city administrator's budget, moving the market operating budget to the general fund. In 2014, city staff worked with the Public Market Advisory Commission to implement an increase in vendor fees to rebalance the market's finances and become more in line with vendor fees at other markets.

Washtenaw County has taken advantage of century-old statewide legislation, Public Act 88, which enables the county board to levy millages in support of agricultural or industrial economic development—among a shortlist of eligible activities—without requiring full voter approval. Since 2009, the county has annually approved an economic development millage, most recently at the rate of 0.7 mills for a total exceeding \$1 million. These funds offset activities that would have been borne out of the general fund.

Putting investments in perspective

It is an important step for government departments and for elected officials to realize the connections between food systems and their functions and priorities. It is another to effectively communicate this connection to their constituents. Examples of positive communications can be found in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw:

- More than 10 years since its inception, with a significant bulk of acquisitions completed, the Ann Arbor Greenbelt has intensified its efforts to raise community awareness of its impacts. This includes development of signage and

other marketing materials and annual community tours of protected properties.

- The Washtenaw OCED, which administers the Act 88 millage revenues, has commissioned research on the economic benefits of a local food economy to continue making the case for investment to policymakers and to the private sector. Specifically, one report looked at economic impacts of a 25 percent shift toward the purchase and consumption of local food and food services. Another looked at the potential for expanding agricultural production, processing, and distribution in Washtenaw and the surrounding counties.

In both of these examples, where millages were involved, it was particularly helpful to talk in terms of actual dollars, at least in this community context. Sarah DeWitt, Ann Arbor Farmers Market manager, noted that it's significant to be in a community that generally values local food. Ginny Trocchio, project director for the Greenbelt added that the average Ann Arbor homeowner is paying about \$100 per year in support of its land preservation activities. For many, though certainly not all, that seems reasonable.

Look for low-cost, no-cost and win-win opportunities

Farmers markets in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County are involved in several creative strategies and partnerships to promote accessibility by consumers who in turn support their vendors.

- **Support food assistance beneficiaries.** For several years, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market and others in the county have partnered with the locally-headquartered Fair Food Network to offer the Double Up Food Bucks program, a nationally-recognized incentive program that expands the value of food assistance benefits for shoppers purchasing Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables.

Similarly, the Prescription for Health program in Washtenaw County works to improve the eating habits of residents at risk for chronic disease, and participants consistently report consuming, on average, an additional cup of fruits and vegetables each day. And again, the prescriptions are redeemed at local farmers markets, which themselves are economic opportunities for local and regional producers. The four Ypsilanti and Chelsea markets participating in the 2014 season reported that a total of \$65,000 in food access benefits, including SNAP dollars and various incentive programs, were used toward purchases from their vendors, which include approximately 60 small businesses.

Also using dollars from an internal city grant program, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market purchased an iPad for use in offering point of sale translation services through an online application. The majority of translations are done in Chinese or Russian, and these customers are using food assistance benefits to make their purchases. The ability to provide communication support, particularly in the use of food assistance benefits



Prescription for Health staff at the Depot Town Farmers Market in Ypsilanti.

Source: Washtenaw County Public Health Department

and incentives, reduces barriers for those who might otherwise be deterred from accessing the market.

- **Foster other strategic partnerships.** While much of the programming offered by the Ann Arbor Farmers Market is initiated and implemented by the market staff and its volunteers, the market also leverages its status as a community-gathering place and attracts partners whose activities generate additional traffic and support. Examples include the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, Washtenaw County Public Health Department, and 826 Michigan, a youth enrichment organization. The Downtown Development Authority also provided funding for installation of a solar energy demonstration project on the market roof.

Lessons Learned

- **Partnerships with key community groups and representatives with extensive food systems expertise have**

expanded capacity and accelerated change. Local governments are well-advised to identify assets in their own communities and explore how their financial or political support can build on existing efforts.

- **Clarity of roles and purpose has been helpful.** While those involved with farmers markets, land preservation efforts, and other food systems planning, policy, or programming initiatives often share mutual interests and can collaborate effectively, clarity of roles and purpose has both maintained appropriate boundaries and enabled success of respective activities.
- **Tracking impacts is important.** Food systems planning, policy, and programming in the city and county have provided opportunities to support food access, health, and economic security of vulnerable community residents. It will be important to continue tracking the impacts of these strategies and to refine and expand them based on findings.
- **Communicating the outcomes and benefits of governmental support for food systems activities,** including alignment with established priorities around economic development, environmental sustainability, and social equity will help to further community awareness and buy-in.

Endnotes

- 1 *Washtenaw County Economic Vitality Report.* Washtenaw County Office of Economic Development: January 2014. <http://bit.ly/1zo8f8e>
- 2 *Washtenaw County Food System Maps.* Washtenaw County Food Policy Council: October 2014. <http://bit.ly/1AT7f0j>
- 3 *County Profile: Washtenaw County, Michigan.* National Agriculture Statistics Service, United States Department of Agriculture: 2012. <http://1.usa.gov/1CJ5Qsq>
- 4 *Ann Arbor Sustainability Framework.* City of Ann Arbor: February 2013. <http://bit.ly/1FtTOXq>
- 5 *Washtenaw County Food Policy Agenda.* Washtenaw County Food Policy Council: July 2014. <http://bit.ly/1zo8ss7>

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