

QUICKNOTES

*Planning fundamentals
for public officials and
engaged citizens*

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Food Systems Planning

DEFINING THE FOOD SYSTEM

Like air, water, and shelter, food is essential for life and plays a central role in our health, economy, and culture. Food, however, is only one part of a complex system that includes the following chain of activities and processes:

Production. The use of natural resources and human resources to grow edible plants and animals in urban, suburban, or rural settings.

Transformation/Processing. The transformation of raw food materials through value-adding, processing, manipulating, and packaging to create a usable end product for consumption.

Distribution. The direct or indirect distribution and transportation of processed and unprocessed foods to wholesalers, warehouses, retailers, and consumers.

Access and Consumption. The availability and accessibility of foods and their subsequent purchase, preparation, ingestion, and digestion.

Waste/Resource Recovery. The disposal of food-related materials, waste and by-products and their subsequent disposal, reuse, or recycling.

With very few exceptions, food systems are integrated globally, nationally, regionally, and locally.

CHALLENGES OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

Healthy, sustainable communities require healthy, sustainable food systems. However, the inadequacies of our global, national, regional, and local food systems are more apparent than ever before.

The most affordable, accessible, and overeaten foods are dense with calories but poor in nutrients. Four of the six leading causes of death in the United States—heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers—are diet-related chronic diseases. Over two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight or obese. Many communities lack access to affordable and healthy fresh food. Waste from large-scale agriculture and antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals used in animal husbandry threaten the environmental quality of our watersheds. The tilling of soil, production of livestock and associated waste, and use of fossil fuels in food production, processing, and transportation all contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and poor air quality. A comprehensive planning process that incorporates food systems can help to address these issues systemically.

COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS PLANNING

Planners play an important role in the development of healthy, sustainable local and regional food systems—within the larger national and global context—to support and enhance the overall public, social, ecological, and economic health of communities.

Community food systems planning is the collaborative planning process of developing and implementing local and regional land-use, economic development, public health, transportation, and environmental programs and policies to: 1) preserve existing and support new opportunities for local and regional urban and rural agriculture; 2) promote sustainable agriculture and food production practices; 3) support local and regional food value chains and related infrastructure involved in the processing, packaging, and distribution of food; 4) facilitate community food security, or equitable physical and economic access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate, and sustainably grown food at all times across a community, especially among vulnerable populations; 5) support and promote good nutrition and health; and 6) facilitate the reduction of solid food-related waste and develop or manage a reuse, recovery, recycling, and disposal system for food waste and related packaging.



*Farmers markets are an integral part
of healthy and sustainable food
systems' infrastructure.*



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FOOD SYSTEMS PLANNING PRACTICE

Planners are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to influence changes to the community food system.

Needs Assessments

Planners can work with public and private organizations and professionals in the food security, agriculture, public health, and nutrition fields to maintain successful data collection practices and develop new methods. Community needs assessments (such as mapping, community food assessments, and land inventories) are tools that can be used to assess, analyze and inventory characteristics related to food production, processing, distribution, retail, access, consumption, and disposal. These characteristics may include: a) stakeholders; b) socioeconomic and health statistics; c) production, processing, distribution resources, trends, and economic activity; d) location and number of food sources and outlets within a community; e) the availability, affordability, and nutritional quality of foods sold in these outlets; and f) existing governmental and nongovernmental programs and policies.

Community Engagement, Visioning, and Plan Making

Through the preparation, development, and implementation of comprehensive, strategic, subarea, and functional plans, planners can engage communities in visioning and goal-setting exercises to: identify social, health, economic, and environmental problems and opportunities related to the community food system; engage and educate community residents about these issues; establish food systems goals and objectives; develop action steps, policies, and other strategies to implement these goals and objectives; and ultimately promote the long-term health and sustainability of the community.

Public Policy and Investment

Planners play an active role in developing local and regional policies—standards, incentives, and regulations—that can support the development and preservation of healthy and sustainable food systems' infrastructure and implement the goals and action steps outlined in local and regional plans. Use-based zoning regulations and financial incentives can be used to support the development and location of food production and processing facilities, grocery stores, farmers markets, and community gardens throughout a community, and limit the location of fast food restaurants and convenience stores in certain geographic areas. A variety of land-use tools (such as agricultural district programs and growth management laws) can be used to protect farmland and support the economic viability of sustainable agriculture in rural, suburban, and periurban areas. And design and development standards can provide guidance to urban designers and developers on the design and placement of rural and urban agriculture, food processing facilities, and food retail and other related businesses.

Partnerships and Consensus-Building

A growing number of state and local governments are developing policies to address issues of the food system through the collaboration and coordination of governmental, nongovernmental, and private sector stakeholders and activities, respectively. At the state and local levels this work is often done through a food policy council. Planners are increasingly becoming active members of these councils, providing expertise in the development and implementation of transportation, housing, land-use, and economic development-related policies to improve the community food system.

FOOD SYSTEMS PLANNING, MOVING FORWARD

Recently, multiple states and cities have made progress toward achieving and implementing successful food systems planning programs and policies. Among these include the comprehensive long-range *Greater Philadelphia Food Systems Study*; New York City's zoning and financial incentives program, *FRESH: Food Retail Expansion to Support Health*, and its *Food in the Public Interest Plan*; San Francisco's Executive Directive, *Healthy and Sustainable Food for San Francisco*; and the food systems goals and action steps outlined in the sustainability plan of Baltimore, Cleveland, and Kansas City, the comprehensive plan update for King County, Washington; Richmond and Marin County, California, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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