

Food Assessment Article

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Planners – get your food policy on! But how do you wrap arms around the issue of food in your community? To begin, you start with a food assessment. Because food is a basic human need, planners must understand how the entire food system operates in their community from production, processing, and distribution all the way to consumption.

The American Planning Association, American Dietetic Association, American Nurses Association and American Public Health Association recently announced the following shared statement:

A healthy and sustainable food system emphasizes, strengthens, and makes visible interdependent and inseparable relationships between individual sectors (from production to waste disposal) and the characteristics (health promoting, sustainable, resilient, diverse, fair, economically balanced and transparent) of the system.

A complete food assessment will help planners and the citizens they serve incorporate food policy into their comprehensive and strategic plans for their community's healthy future. Code amendments and programs implement your community's vision for its future.

A community food assessment is a participatory and collaborative process that engages a diverse group of stakeholders to assess the community food issues and develop a set of public policy recommendations. Other accomplishments include documenting resources, setting vision, and building new programming around foods. According to the Community Food Security Coalition there are four key steps when conducting a community food assessment. This includes:

- Organize (stakeholders and participants)
- Research (collect and analyze data)
- Plan (decision making)
- Advocate (Action documents and communication with the public)

Missoula County's Community Food Assessment investigated two questions:

- What is needed for viable and sustainable commercial food production in Missoula County? What are the existing assets and barriers to creating a more viable and sustainable production system?
- What concerns do Missoula County residents of various income levels have about food? What do they perceive as the County's food-related assets?

Community food assessments yield several topics of interest to the community including the following common ones:

- Food quality
- Food access
- Food purchasing from the home to institutional level
- Citizen interest and knowledge of food and nutrition

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- Emergency food access
- Nutritional and health disparities
- Sustainable production and distribution
- Food retail and safe handling
- Land use
- Transportation and food distribution
- Economic Development – Value to the local economy and job creation

For example, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission 2009 assessment for Greater Philadelphia describes their food system as “interconnected and complex” and concludes with a list of conundrums that may be a challenge to all communities:

- A trend toward consolidation of farms – but more people interested in farming.
- An increasing demand for local food – but decreasing production.
- More collaboration between farmers – but an increasing tension between farmers using different methods.
- Farmers making less money with food prices increasing.
- Higher income households more likely to pay more for “local “ brand – but low income households needed better access to fresh and affordable food.

Food assessments can be a challenging and insightful process for a community to undertake and will lead all planners and their citizenry into a more broad based direction for a healthier future.

Resources

- [Community Food Security Coalition](#): Comprehensive list of resources related to Community Food Assessments.
- [Community Food Security Coalition: What's cooking in your food system?](#) Comprehensive guide to planning and implementing a CFA, including potential data sources.
- [The USDA Community Food Security Assessment](#): Comprehensive guide to planning and implementing a CFA focused on Food Security, including potential data sources.
- [Community Food Security Coalition: Four Key Steps to conducting a CFA](#)