

The Evolution of Good Urban Food Practices

USDN's Family of Fund supports the scaling of a field,
from early collaborative learning efforts to shovels in the ground.

Urban Agriculture is a common practice now in many communities, with supporting policies and infrastructure. But not long ago, cities learned primarily through collective research and site visits. Read on to explore an emerging field.

In 2012, The Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) funded its first urban food work. Amidst a groundswell of interest in urban food systems development emerging at that time among USDN members, two reports were commissioned by the USDN Innovation Fund: *Urban Agriculture: Best Practices and Possibilities*, and *City Food Policy and Programs: Lessons Harvested from an Emerging Field*.

Urban Agriculture: Best Practices and Possibilities.

This report was created by the University of Missouri and designed for USDN and Heartland Regional Sustainability Directors Network members. The cities of Columbia, Kansas City, and St. Louis spearheaded this effort. The report produced by this work provides an overview of urban agriculture, local food system resources, and practices from the U.S. and Canada. The primary emphasis is on providing resources that can encourage and support urban agriculture in Missouri's metropolitan areas.

The report ([here](#)) provides examples of practices that are working well for cities. The University of Missouri's [website](#) is still curating resources that exist for cities and their urban agriculture practitioners and advocates. Ultimately, this site is a public, searchable database that provides documents and websites of zoning ordinances, promotional and educational information, and resources on urban agriculture and food systems. During this study, several findings emerged:

- **No one way to "do" urban agriculture.** As cities grapple with ways to support and encourage urban agricultural activities, there is no one "best" path. To help cities understand and engage with urban agriculture as it is practiced in their cities, city leaders are undertaking a review of codes and city ordinances that may inhibit the development of urban agriculture, or working with stakeholders in food policy councils or food system assessments to help break down barriers.
- **Community engagement is key.** Cities can support and encourage urban agriculture through direct engagement with community residents and stakeholders in the field. When cities are overhauling or rethinking zoning and ordinances that constrain urban agriculture, education and outreach efforts should be undertaken to ensure that city officials and urban agricultural practitioners understand what is and isn't working in their cities.

City Food Policy and Programs: Lessons Harvested from an Emerging Field.

This report ([here](#)) was created by the City of Portland OR. It draws on interviews with municipal food policy professionals to address knowledge gaps through compiling and analyzing the experiences of 15 individuals from 13 U.S. and Canadian cities. The report sheds light on common challenges identified for municipal food programs, as well as avenues for addressing them.

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Recommendations include:

- **Funding.** Take advantage of all sources of funding and resources available to the food policy program, including both general fund and grant support; the budgets, staff, and programs of other agencies; and public- private partnerships.
- **Organization.** Pay careful attention to the location of food programs within the bureaucracy, as institutional structure can influence food policy priorities. House any new food policy program in a manner that promotes frequent cross-agency collaboration.
- **Priorities and Metrics.** Determine the mix of time, staffing, and resources to be dedicated to policy work versus project work. Identify and consider city-specific factors—including local governance structures and community resources—that will shape the program. Identify those metrics that are already tracked—or that can begin to be tracked in the short term—to establish a rough baseline for food policy initiatives. Explore non-numerical methods for measuring success.
- **Interdepartmental Coordination.** Enlist support from high-ranking city actors, such as the mayor or city council. Take time to understand the priorities of other departments and consider how food can fit into their existing agendas. If possible, start with projects that will garner some easy and visible 'wins.' Establish an inter-agency steering team to facilitate communication and strategic planning among city departments that connect to food issues.
- **Community Involvement.** Understand program needs regarding community involvement in food policy, and structure formal interactions with these needs in mind. Ensure that the mission of any city-convened body is well understood by its membership, and take care to select participants with appropriate types and levels of expertise.

In 2013, two more USDN investments in urban food landscape exploration followed these studies, led by Burlington VT and San Francisco CA:

Burlington VT hosted a New England Municipal Sustainability Network (NEMSN) site visit to learn about Urban Food Systems (report [here](#)). Next steps that emerged from this effort include:

- Cities received an in-depth look at Farmers Market start-up and management.
- Albany NY offered mentoring to members wanting help with outreach and social media campaigns and subsequently sent follow-up information to the group.
- Cambridge MA sent out material on their school food policy and a pledge to mentor Cranston RI, Amherst MA and to others interested in learning more.



Figure 1: Burlington City Website

The City and County of San Francisco CA and the Cities of Minneapolis MN; Portland OR; Seattle WA; and Vancouver BC, Canada created a 2-part roadmap containing a literature review and a roadmap guide for city food sector innovations and investments ([here](#)). Key findings of the roadmap include:

- **Food sector investments and policy interventions should be seen through the lens of the supply chain.** Many kinds of businesses are involved in moving food from farm and ranch to restaurant and grocer, including processing, distribution, and a host of allied businesses.
- **Policy and investment priorities will vary based on city characteristics, assets, and goals.** This is an important lens through which to view most urban food policy implications: each city should consider its own aims and assets as it develops strategies for food sector investment.

These exploratory studies and workshops kicked off what would be a lasting exploration into the nuances of urban agriculture by USDN members. USDN's Family of Funds continues to award projects that advance and spread good urban agricultural practices throughout USDN member cities and beyond. Projects have evolved from the initial focus on concept exploration and development into scaling implementation at the regional and community levels.