

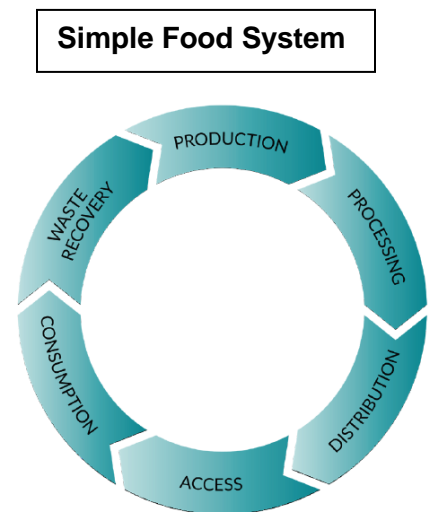
## Incorporating Food Systems Language into Comprehensive Plans

Food systems planning is concerned with improving a community's food system. A food system is generally understood to be the chain of activities connecting food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. Food is a necessity a basic essential for everyday life, along with air, water, and shelter. Yet, only in recent years have food systems become a focus of serious professional planning interest.

Food system activities take up a substantial amount of urban and regional land and represent important parts of community and regional economies. Access — or the lack thereof — to affordable, healthy food can have significant impacts on communities, and both hunger and obesity are nationwide public health concerns. The environmental impacts of food systems, from farming practices and food waste, as well as the energy and resources consumed by growing, harvesting, processing, and transporting our food are substantial.

A goal of food systems planning is to identify problem areas within a community and develop strategies to produce desirable food outcomes. The overall focus is to feed a population in a nutritious and sustainable way that also has a positive impact on the environment and health of a community. Below is each element of the food system defined:

- **Production:** Describes how food is converted from raw materials to a basic edible product. Production relates to the cultivation and harvesting of food products.
- **Processing:** The way in which basic products generated in production are made appropriate for human consumption, cooking, or storage. This stage is where basic products are converted into other food stuffs that are considered attractive and long-lasting.
- **Distribution:** How food is collected, stored in a warehouse, and allocated to places of sale such as retailers, restaurants, cafeterias, etc. This process logistically looks different depending on product and location of distribution.
- **Access:** Explains how individuals acquire resources, such as food and water, for overall health and well-being. This is related to sanitation, clean water, a nutritious diet, and healthcare. This process specifically has many impacts relating to transportation and location of stores.
- **Consumption:** When food is consumed by an individual.
- **Waste Recovery:** The process in which technology and techniques guide the recovery of food components and by-products, where they are recycled in a viable and efficient way.

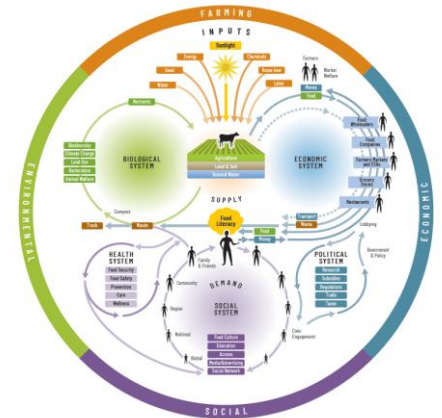


Within these six elements of the food system, every area greatly impacts the outcomes in the other parts of the process. If there are issues found in one of the elements, it can cause concern and ineffective processes in another area. For example, if a food product is processed and put into packaging that is too

large for the product size, it may cause less effective food distribution and excess waste. Thus, it is vital to take corrective actions so that the food system can work efficiently and effectively in its cycle for the most desirable outcomes in a community.

Apart from the influences each element of the food system has on one another, food systems also experience outside influences such as socioeconomic and environmental factors as seen in the [“Complex Food System Diagram”](#). These factors must be kept in mind as they will affect food products and are not always preventable because they are outside controlled systems. An example of this may be weather or overpopulation. Although these factors are inescapable, there are controls that can be put in place by creating guidance suggestions and back-up plans. These controls still allow food systems to operate, even in difficult and sometimes surprising situations.

### Complex Food System



### The Benefits of Food Systems Planning

Healthy, sustainable local and regional food systems bring economic, environmental, and social benefits to local communities. Planning for local food systems helps maintain and grow economic opportunities in the agricultural and food sectors through jobs and production on farms and in farm support businesses, food processing, food transport, food marketing, food distribution, food retail, and other food-related areas. Community food systems that stress local and regional food production and sales as well as ecologically friendly, sustainable farming practices reduce the amount of energy and resources needed for food production and distribution as well as the negative environmental impacts of agricultural production on land, water, and air. Planning to promote better access to and availability of healthy, fresh food impacts health at both the individual and community level, as does attention to community food security and equitable food access issues. Educating and engaging local residents in community food systems can improve health outcomes, increase social capital, strengthen sense of place and community character, and offer entrepreneurial opportunities.

### Comprehensive Plans

The comprehensive plan is a document designed by a city, county, or other local unit of government to guide the future actions of a community. It presents a vision for the future, with long-range goals and objectives for different activities that affect local governments. This includes guidance on decisions impacting the community's physical, social, and economic development, as well as cooperative efforts with other governmental entities and issues of pressing concern. Most plans are written to provide direction for future activities over a 25-year period after plan adoption. However, it is best practice that plans are reviewed annually and updated every five to seven years when possible.

The elements of a comprehensive plan can vary from community to community. In most cases, plans consist of a study of existing conditions and a discussion of future trends, goals, and objectives. Land use patterns, housing conditions, population, roadways, and other infrastructure issues are usually principle elements that are studied.

In some cases, educational facilities are reviewed along with recreational and other government facilities. Social service facilities may also be discussed. Comprehensive plans tend to deal with the land-use-related issues relevant to each of these topics.

### **Integrating Food Systems Planning into Comprehensive Plans**

Local and regional planners have begun to work closely with public health officials, extension offices, and other professionals with food planning efforts, including the development of food system plans and the integration of food systems considerations into comprehensive plans. As part of these processes, planners are able to identify problems and opportunities related to the community food system; engage and educate community residents about these issues; establish food systems goals and objectives; develop strategies to implement these goals and objectives; and ultimately promote the long-term health and sustainability of the community.

The inclusion of food issues in a comprehensive plan helps connect food systems with land use, transportation, economic development, natural resources, health, and other elements of local policy and planning. When included in comprehensive plans, food is often addressed through the lens of community health and access to healthy food, but food systems can be linked to other plan areas, including land use, economic development, natural resources, and energy, among others.

According to the American Planning Association, the five areas that are most commonly addressed in comprehensive plans with regard to food systems are rural agriculture, food access and availability, urban agriculture, food retail, and food waste. Addressing these areas, along with a multitude of others, are ways a community can become more resourceful, improve the economy, and positively change health for individuals and the community at large.

Since the foundation of comprehensive growth plans is to improve community issues and foster positive changes, and work to strengthen the local food system aims to accomplish this as well, it is important for communities to consider incorporating food system language into their comprehensive plans to positively impact current and future residents.

### **Food System Specifics in Comprehensive Planning**

Areas addressed in comprehensive planning are fairly broad. Nonetheless, when areas within the food system are looked at more closely, these plans can be much more specific as to how food system related topics are approached. Consider some of the following questions as they relate to food systems:

**Rural Agriculture:** Is there enough land allocated and preserved within a community to support local farming enterprises?

**Food Access and Availability:** Is public transportation available to people without vehicles to provide access to grocery stores?

**Urban Agriculture:** Does a city ordinance that support the operation of a community garden, boulevard gardens, or an urban farm?

**Food Retail:** Are healthier food options priced lower compared to unhealthy options at restaurants and grocery stores?

**Food Waste:** Do local restaurants have access to a city/county-wide composting program to handle excess waste?

Comprehensive planning will coincide with a particular community's needs, resources available, and the support it receives by funders and community members, all of which can affect directions and priorities taken by a given community. Apart from the areas that are stated above, other food system related topic areas to look for in comprehensive plans are pollinators, housing, transportation, economic development, and food production. Something to note as one browses through comprehensive plans is that food system objectives are not always clearly laid out in one section titled "food systems". There are many issues related to the food system that may be included in larger sections such as land use, transportation, housing, and agriculture. Always be thorough in looking through all parts of a comprehensive plan to evaluate whether food systems are addressed.

### Partners

A valuable part of implementing different actions related to the food system in comprehensive plans relies on support and cooperation of community organizations, community members, and donors. Whether it is a local organizations like public health, extension, and a metropolitan planning organization (Metro COG), or residents who want to physically or financially support local food system plans, everyone can play a helpful role in bringing change within a local food system. With support from partners, food systems work can be expanded by developing policies and programming that reinforces goals outlined by a community's comprehensive plan. A single organization or individual cannot accomplish every community goal, so it is vital for collaboration among partners to support efforts to positively change a community food system.

### Conclusions

Addressing policy related to food systems is gaining momentum and positively affecting a myriad of health, food, waste, and economic outcomes. Working to strengthen all aspects of the local food systems is an integral part of community planning and a number of communities across the United States have embraced the concept. Efforts to create sustainable food systems are happening in [Austin Texas](#), [Oakland Michigan](#), [Portland Oregon](#), [Salt Lake City Utah](#), and [Seattle Washington](#). Resources such as the Minnesota Food Charter, the American Planning Association, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning offer guides for food systems related planning and provide many examples of how to include food system language into policies and comprehensive plans. As communities work to develop or update comprehensive plans, consider incorporating food system language and policy issues into the plan. Doing so offers the potential to positively change outcomes in the community now and in the future.

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