



LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR FOOD SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2012 NATIONAL SURVEY

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Local governments are potential partners in the development of food systems that promote economic viability, equitable community development and environmental sustainability.

To assess the current landscape of support, the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) partnered with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to conduct a national survey of local governments concerning their food-related policies, programs, partnerships and plans.

With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CRFS led the development of the survey instrument and ICMA coordinated the survey administration. Surveys were distributed to all counties and to all municipalities with populations over 2,500, for a total of 10,575 communities. Hard copies (which also included a link to an online response option) were distributed in May and August of 2012. A total of 1,957 surveys were received, for an overall response rate of 18.5% (response rates for individual questions varied; for complete details, see the reference included at the end of this summary). Respondents represented communities with populations from 2,500 to in excess of 100,000, and from every state.

LOCAL POLICIES

Communities were asked about the presence of policies or regulations related to 14 possible food access and production issues. Examples of all policies presented were found in both municipalities and counties, though in general, municipalities were at least slightly more likely than counties to have any of the regulations present.

- The most common types of policies and regulations reported concerned farmers markets (59.2%) and allowing the sale of produce at sites other than farmers markets (50.8%).
- Support (ranging from approximately 22-40%) was also found for a variety of activities that could be grouped as “urban agriculture” issues, such as the provision of land or water for community gardens or the keeping of chickens, goats or bees in residential zones, though these activities are occurring in non-urban communities as well.

- While the findings do not indicate whether policies are necessarily supportive or restrictive, many communities (44.8%) reported policies related to mobile food vending, suggesting, at least, an awareness of this food access issue.
- Policies aimed at regulating unhealthy food, or increasing access to fresh food through grocery or corner stores, were among the least common.

PROJECTS, PROGRAMS & PARTNERSHIPS

Communities may also support food systems through local programs or projects, and the survey asked about the presence of such activities in respondents' communities. It further prompted for descriptions of the nature of local government involvement in such programs, asking whether the activity was administered by the local government alone, by the local government in partnership with another entity, or without any local government involvement. In general, programs administered as partnerships were most common.

- Of programs with high likelihood of local government involvement (either complete or partial), farmers markets again topped the list of reported activities (75.2%). Other common programs included economic development and/or land use strategies involving agriculture and food (approximately 16-32%).
- Of programs with a low or medium likelihood of local government support, common activities related to the supply of emergency food (approximately 60%) and broad community health initiatives (45.4%).

In contrast to the policy issues, counties were slightly more likely to report the presence of programs than municipalities.

FOOD-RELATED PLANS

Official plans are another tool available to local governments for shaping food system development. Therefore, communities were asked about the existence of various types of planning documents, and whether any addressed issues related to food production, processing, distribution, access or disposal. Results indicate that all types of plans presented—comprehensive, sustainability, climate change, community development, economic development, land use, transportation, housing—and more address food issues.



- 1,603 communities reported the existence of at least one type of planning document. Of those communities, 19% (306) reported one of more of their plans dealt with food issues in some way, totaling 674 plans altogether.
- Among communities reporting plans, counties were more likely than municipalities to address food issues (23.6% and 17.9%, respectively).

Having any sort of plan addressing food topics was positively correlated with the average number of policies or programs reported by communities.

COORDINATION & COLLABORATION

Recognizing that communities are generally unlikely to have a department devoted exclusively to food system issues, the survey asked communities to indicate where food issues applied within their organizational structure. 1,268 communities (938 municipalities, 330 counties) provided responses.

- 58% indicated that food issues were within the scope of responsibility for departments of public or environmental health. For counties only, this rate rises to 87.6%.
- Other commonly-reported departments included planning (37.9%), parks and recreation (23.5%), and economic development (21.9%).

Respondents were asked whether they coordinate food-related activities with any surrounding communities or regions. Food policy councils, whether designated at the community or regional level, have emerged as one strategy for coordinating diffuse public, non-governmental and private food system interests. Local governments were also asked about their participation in such bodies.

- 22% (415 respondents) indicated they are collaborating with other communities on food projects or programs.
- 16% (313 respondents) indicated their local government staff participates in a food policy council or similar group. Of those, 57 communities indicated the group to be an official governmental body; the rest described them as an ad-hoc committee or other structure.

FEDERAL PROGRAM USAGE

Results indicate that local governments are not fully aware of the wide range of federal programs available that can support food system development.

The survey listed a variety of specific programs and program areas offered by the Departments of Agriculture (USDA),

Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Transportation (DOT); the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for which local governments are eligible grantees. Respondents were asked about their awareness of, interest in and actual use of the programs to fund food system development.

- Respondents were most familiar with (84.1%), and most frequently using (42%), HUD's Community Development Block Grant program.
- Awareness was also high for the EPA's Brownfields Grants (73.3%), as well as the Sustainable Communities Grants offered through a HUD-EPA-DOT partnership (59.2%).
- In comparison, awareness (approximately 23-46%) and use (approximately 5-15%) of USDA programs was relatively low.

It is important to note that programs vary widely with respect to number and frequency of grants awarded, total amount awarded, maximum size of individual awards and eligibility criteria. These differences should be considered when comparing results.

NEXT STEPS

This survey represents the most comprehensive effort to date to quantify the status of local governments' food-related activities. The results provide insight into the ways and lenses through which local governments engage in and view food systems, which may be of interest to good food advocates seeking municipal or county support for their efforts. They also reflect significant potential for innovation, as virtually every type of food-related activity included in the survey was found to exist in every type of community: municipalities and counties, small and large, in every region of the country. Looking ahead, even as communities continue to learn from each other, additional analysis and research will help to identify the most appropriate roles for local governments to play in this movement.

Complete analysis of results is featured in ICMA's *Municipal Year Book 2013* (available at icma.org/press). CRFS will also release additional briefs on survey topics beginning in spring 2013. ➤

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