



FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Helping local, regional, and state governments address food system challenges

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FOOD SYSTEM PLANNING BRIEFING PAPER

In response to growing concerns about food deserts, obesity rates among children, the loss of prime agricultural lands, a dwindling farmer population, and environmental problems such as soil erosion and water contamination, more and more towns, cities, regions, and states are forming food policy councils (FPCs). Through policy and programmatic strategies, FPCs help local, regional, or state governments address these food system challenges and others. As part of a broader community-based food systems approach, FPCs work to restore the social, economic, and environmental health of local and regional food systems.

FPCs are typically comprised of community residents and representatives from the five food sectors (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste recovery) who collaborate on mutually ben-

eficial solutions to food system problems. In recent years, FPCs have increasingly reached out to a number of community partners in the private and public sector, including urban and regional planners, to help them find pragmatic solutions.

This report provides an overview of FPCs, charts the functions of planners on FPCs in a detailed matrix, highlights common ways that planning departments support FPCs, and offers lessons learned. It draws upon the experience of four FPCs—the Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition, the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, the Santa Fe Food Policy Council, and the Regional Food Policy Council of the Puget Sound Regional Council—and highlights the ways in which they work with planners and planning departments.



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FPC PURPOSE

FPCs provide local, regional, or state governments, as well as residents, information and advice about various policies and programs that support community-based food systems. Such a food system emphasizes, strengthens, and makes visible the relationships among producers, processors, distributors, and consumers of food at the local and regional levels (Raja et al. 2008; Hodgson et al. 2011), while aiming to be:

- ◆ **Food secure and literate**, providing equitable physical and economic access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate, and sustainably grown food at all times across communities and fostering an understanding and appreciation of food, from production to disposal.

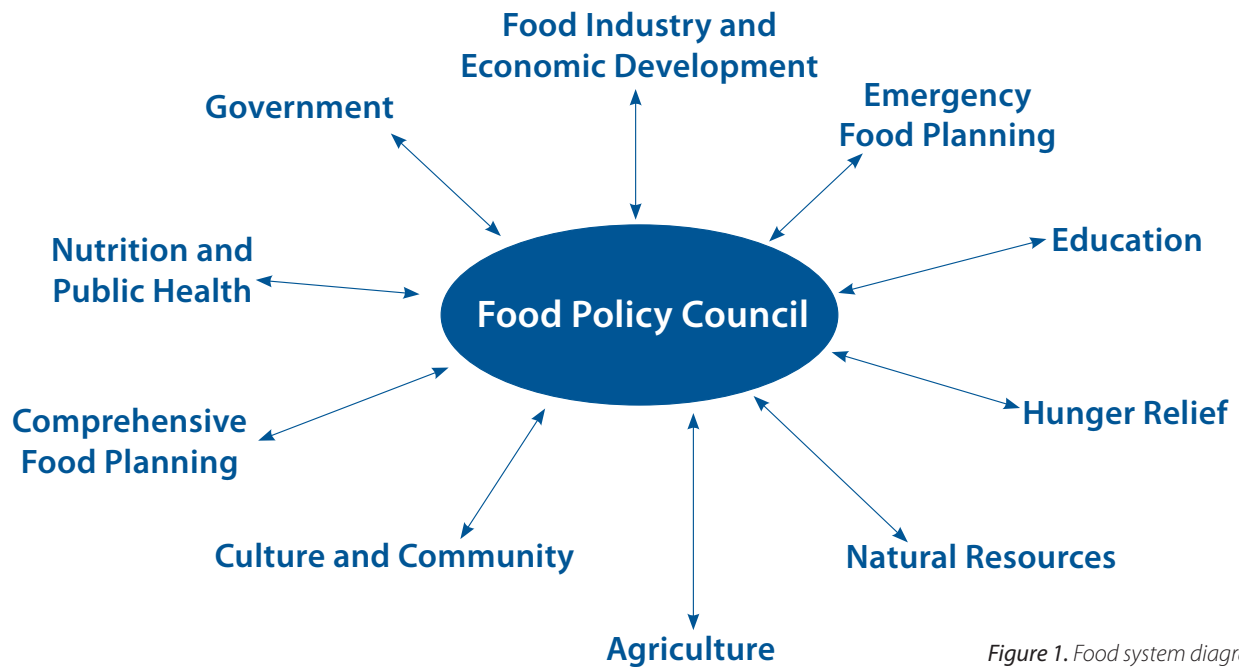


Figure 1. Food system diagram
source: www.fpcplancounty.org/overview

- ◆ **Place-based**, promoting networks of stakeholders, linking urban and rural issues, engaging residents, and creating senses of place;
- ◆ **Ecologically sound**, using environmentally sustainable methods for producing, processing, distributing, transporting, and disposing of food and agricultural by-products;
- ◆ **Economically productive**, bolstering development capacity and providing job opportunities for farmers and community residents;
- ◆ **Socially cohesive**, facilitating trust, sharing, and community building across a diverse range of cultures and addressing the concerns and needs of marginalized groups, including minority and immigrant farmers and farm laborers, financially struggling small farmers, and underserved inner-city and rural residents; and

The negative health, environmental, economic, and social impacts of the food system have typically been addressed in a piecemeal fashion, with each of the five food sectors working independently. In contrast, FPCs comprehensively evaluate such impacts through systems-thinking approaches that bridge food system sectors. As Figure 1 illustrates, FPCs bring together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively solve problems and, in doing so, ensure that community-based food system policies and programs reinforce each other.

One problem many FPCs tackle is how to increase residents' access to grocery stores. FPCs unpack the interrelated causes of the problem, considering things like:

- ◆ **Infrastructure:** Are public transportation links to existing grocery stores adequate?

- ◆ **Economic development:** Which banks will or will not loan to new grocery stores?
- ◆ **Built environment:** Which zoning codes or regulations could be changed to locate grocery stores closer to residential areas?
- ◆ **Alternatives or supplemental programs:** Could a farmers market or home delivery program fill service gaps?

FPC OBJECTIVES

FPCs improve the social, economic, and environmental health of a given food system by setting a number of related objectives.

The main objectives of a food policy council (Harper et al. 2009) are to:

- ◆ Advocate for policy change to improve a community's food system
- ◆ Develop programs that address gaps in a community's food system
- ◆ Strategize solutions that have wide applicability to the food system
- ◆ Research and analyze the existing conditions of a community's food system
- ◆ Communicate information about a community's food system
- ◆ Cultivate partnerships among a community's five food sectors
- ◆ Convene meetings that draw diverse stakeholders of a community's food system

FPCs across the country are tackling food systems problems with inventive solutions—whether it's proposing agricultural overlay districts and backyard beekeeping ordinances, or researching local produce purchasing programs for detention centers.

COMMON FPC CHARACTERISTICS

FPCs often operate as a nonprofit, quasi-governmental entity or within a government agency, and cater to both community and local government needs. The name of an FPC often varies from community to community and reflects its operation within or outside of a local, regional, or state government. For example, food systems or food policy coalitions typically operate outside of government, whereas food policy councils typically operate within government.

Nonetheless, all FPCs share operating characteristics. FPCs often:

- ◆ Take a comprehensive approach
- ◆ Pursue long-term strategies
- ◆ Offer tangible solutions
- ◆ Are place-based
- ◆ Advocate on behalf of the larger community
- ◆ Seek government buy-in
- ◆ Establish formal membership
- ◆ Operate with little or no funding

FPC JURISDICTION AND AFFILIATION

FPCs can exist at the local, regional, and state level; many FPCs serve more than one jurisdictional level.

Deciding the most appropriate jurisdictional level for an FPC depends on:

- ◆ **Spatial aspects:** how dispersed a given community is
- ◆ **Community boundaries:** which people are linked by which food traditions
- ◆ **Environmental boundaries:** whether communities are linked by a watershed, river valley, or other natural border
- ◆ **Political landscape:** which government level can support FPC activity

For example, Rubina Cohen, coordinator of the Santa Fe Food Policy Council, notes that the council's city-county dual jurisdiction best reflects the unique geography and community of Santa Fe. "In a location where there are no borders between where the city ends and the county begins, a city-county jointly appointed council best unifies what are false distinctions between 'urban' issues in the city and the 'rural' issues in the county," says Cohen.



Kick-off meeting at the Resource Center for Independent Living for the Utica/Oneida Food Policy Council

Photos by Pam Jardieu



FPCs also organize themselves according to how closely aligned they are with either nonprofits and community groups or government agencies. Regardless of where an FPC falls on this spectrum, most FPCs rely on at least one foster organization or department to support their development. For instance, the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition is housed in two academic institutions—Case Western Reserve University’s Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods and Ohio State University Extension.

A number of factors contribute to which organizational entities an FPC may be supported by or affiliated with:

- ◆ **Political will:** Dedicated government officials or agencies sometimes choose to fully or partly house FPCs in government departments. This is often the case if an FPC has been formed by executive order or legislative act.
- ◆ **Access to resources:** FPCs need time, money, and space to function. Affiliating with a strong nonprofit, or an institution like a state university extension office, can offer much-needed support.

- ◆ **Community:** Many FPCs are housed in community and grassroots organizations to help them stay connected to the people and interests they represent.

FPC MEMBERSHIP

The FPC membership process can be formal, informal, or some combination of the two. FPC members may be formally appointed by a governmental official or executive board, nominated by governmental officials or other FPC members, or selected from an application process. Additionally, FPC members may be informally chosen through a self-selection process.

For example, the membership process for the Santa Fe Food Policy Council depends on whether a member represents the city or the county. City members are nominated, recommended for appointment by the mayor, and then approved by the Santa Fe City Council, while county members are nominated, recommended for appointment by the county manager’s office, and then approved by the Board of County Commissioners.

FPC membership structure strives to be diverse and professional, but obtaining this balance can be a daunting task. To help refine the membership selection process, FPCs will often weigh such considerations as:

- ◆ Community need
- ◆ Quantity and kind of “seats” or “slots”
- ◆ Expertise of potential candidates
- ◆ Access to resources of potential candidates

Once FPCs have determined the scope of their membership needs, they can then focus on which individuals to work with. In addition to actively recruiting representatives from the five food sectors (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste recovery) FPCs seek members from:

- ◆ the general public
- ◆ community-based organizations and coalitions
- ◆ institutions such as schools, churches, and hospitals
- ◆ nonprofits
- ◆ public agencies
- ◆ the private sector

Some FPCs are reincarnations of other community food or food-related groups. Whether to continue momentum from a prior success or to refresh from a failure, retaining the bulk of an existing group can be an advantageous way to establish FPC membership. The Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, for instance, was launched as a way to continue the successful dynamics of a group formed for the 2007 Steps to a Healthier Cleveland campaign. This campaign was one among other city participants in the federal Steps to a Healthier US program that directed monies to communities for combating such health issues as obesity, diabetes, and asthma through initiatives to address physical inactivity, tobacco use, and poor nutrition.

Many FPCs are simply a group of about eight to 12 members with a director or chair, but others establish working groups or subcommittees to help manage the various interests they represent. The Santa Fe Food Policy Council, for example, has five subcommittees: Policy Initiatives, Assessment, Resource Development, Land Use & Farm Production, and Outreach & Education. These subcommittees have allowed the council to coordinate activities across jurisdictions with diverse stakeholders, community partners, and various elected officials while retaining a focused mission.

PLANNERS AND PLANNING DEPARTMENTS WORKING WITH FPCs

Though planners and planning departments have been slow to formally engage in food systems work (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 2000; Caton Campbell 2004), FPC history is nonetheless peppered with the contributions of planners and planning departments (Clancy et al. 2007). For example, the first FPC—the Knoxville-Knox County Food Policy Council in Tennessee—was formed in 1980 after a local organization, the Community Action Committee, cooperated with the Metropolitan Planning Commission and pressed the city council to form a legitimate public body that could enact recommendations laid out in urban planning professor Robert Wilson’s 1977 study of the city’s food system (Zodrow 2005).

Planners and planning departments are rarely sought out for their expertise in food systems, but rather for the many tools planners use to effect change in the built environment. Today, planners are working with FPCs as:

Full members, representing planning departments

Of the four seats allotted to city and county staff on the Santa Fe Food Policy Council, two are currently filled by planners. Katherine Mortimer, environmental planner for the Housing and Community Development Department of Santa Fe, holds one of the city staff seats. Renee Villarreal, community planner for the Planning Division of the Santa Fe County Growth Management Department, holds one of the county staff seats. They both count FPC responsibilities as part of their daily planning workload.

Full members, independent of planning departments

Academic planner Branden Born, associate professor at the University of Washington, helped start the Seattle-King County Acting Food Policy Council and currently serves as member of the newly formed Regional Food Policy Council that is housed at the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC).

Participants of an FPC working group

Kim Scott, lead coordinator for urban agriculture with the city of Cleveland Planning Commission, regularly works with the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition through the coalition's land-use working group. Because Scott's assigned planning area receives many requests for city land bank parcels, she is in a position to help the coalition observe land-use trends.

Advisers

Patty Noll, a city planner in Kansas City, was recently asked to serve on the steering committee of the newly organized Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition, which was familiar with Noll's earlier work helping the Kansas City Center for Urban Agriculture (KCCUA) and the KC Healthy Kids with zoning and development code revisions to enable urban agriculture in the city. Throughout the revision process, Noll provided a host of consulting and facilitation services for KCCUA and KC Healthy Kids, including reviewing and translating code, explaining policy procedures, and acting as a liaison with government staff.

PLANNER FUNCTIONS ON FPCs

Though many planners don't have explicit knowledge about food systems, all planners are equipped with an understanding of the built and natural environments, a systems-thinking approach, and familiarity with the policy process that enables them to participate in a range of FPC projects. Specific planner functions on FPCs are outlined in the matrix below and are shown in relation to FPC objectives. Many of the outlined planner functions—such as crafting policy language, conducting land inventories, or conveying information through geographic information system (GIS) maps—will be familiar.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT SUPPORT FOR FPCs

While planners perform certain functions within FPCs, planning departments offer more general support. The FPCs profiled in this report primarily worked with public planning departments at the city and regional levels. Planning departments serve FPCs by offering:

Access to information and resources

Katherine Mortimer of the Santa Fe Food Policy Council says that the council's direct partnership with the Santa Fe city and regional planning commissions affords advantages like direct contact to city grants and access to resources, including the GIS department. Additionally, Mortimer notes, "the council can coordinate with other city agencies more easily because we are colleagues. We can get data about institutional food purchasing, for example, very easily."

Validation

Planning departments that endorse FPCs or their projects help validate FPC legitimacy. Morgan Taggart, co-convenor for the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, notes that "having the city planning director and public health director's vocal support at public meetings—especially ones where influential stakeholders were in attendance—was invaluable." When Cleveland City Planning Director Robert Brown said that urban agriculture is sometimes the highest and best use of city land, Taggart says, it showed that the city was thinking of using land in the same way that the coalition was.

Political clout

Having a government agency like a planning department to support FPCs helps them navigate the policy process. When the Seattle-King County Acting Food Policy Council moved to the PSRC, it increased its leverage in the region on account of the PSRC's status as a federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization. Branden Born explains that the Seattle-King County Acting Food Policy Council "always knew it would get lost in the wilderness if it were just another advisory group" and that the council knew it needed a close relationship with government in order to be authorized—and recognized—as a policy advisor. Having the support of the PSRC helps the council's policy work get done.

FPC OBJECTIVE	PLANNER FUNCTION ON FPC
Advocate for policy change to improve a community's food system	<p>Recommend new policies or changes to policy language that impact food system, such as beekeeping and backyard chicken ordinances</p> <p>Share knowledge of policy process with the FPC, such as explaining bureaucratic hurdles or filing procedures</p> <p>Serve as a liaison between the FPC and local government by helping FPCs understand the political context that policies operate within</p>
Develop programs that address gaps in a community's food system	<p>Identify legal barriers to new or existing food system programs, such as outdated land-use regulations or restrictive zoning codes</p> <p>Find applicable funding sources for food system programs, like Community Development Block Grant funds</p>
Strategize solutions that have wide applicability to the food system	<p>Incorporate food system objectives into comprehensive and strategic plans by using FPC knowledge in conjunction with the planner's systems-thinking approach and long-term perspective</p> <p>Devise win-win solutions to food problems, such as using regional scale transfer of development rights for farming urban land or bridging urban-rural divides through direct-to-consumer outlets like farmers markets</p>
Research and analyze the existing conditions of a community's food system	<p>Examine existing policies for their positive or negative impact on food related goals and objectives, such as improved food access</p> <p>Conduct food system assessments by gathering baseline data about the state of food system sectors or stakeholders in a given community</p> <p>Conduct land assessments, such as inventories of city-owned vacant parcels or inventories of brownfields</p>
Communicate information about a community's food system	<p>Raise awareness of a community's food system to local government and residents by sharing information about FPC activities at public forums</p> <p>Explain policy language to FPC members and community residents, for example by translating zoning codes or breaking down technical jargon</p> <p>Convey information to elected officials and the public through visually engaging mediums like GIS maps</p>
Cultivate partnerships among a community's five food sectors	<p>Highlight common goals within the food framework by helping planners and other professionals see their own work through a food "lens"</p> <p>Foster trust among stakeholders through an objective perspective and a professional manner</p>
Convene meetings that draw diverse stakeholders of a community's food system	<p>Encourage community participation in food system decisions by helping FPCs coordinate outreach efforts such as conducting surveys or hosting guest speakers at FPC meetings</p> <p>Facilitate meetings, including community visioning sessions or food system charrettes</p>

Extended network

Kristen Hopkins, a planner with the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission who frequently works with the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition's Land Use Working Group, explains that the support of the county planning commission has helped extend the council's reach to a wider geographic area. Noting that eight mayors representing the different planning regions in Cuyahoga County serve on the county planning commission, Hopkins believes that sharing information about the coalition's initiatives at the planning commission's bimonthly meetings has helped raise awareness of food system issues among suburban mayors who may not otherwise hear about the coalition. As a result, Hopkins has seen more communities interested in updating their master plans to add various food system policies.



Trained staff

Whether working with FPCs on one project one time, or many projects over a long period of time, planning departments can share trained staff with FPCs. For example, Morgan Taggart explains that the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition often works with no fewer than seven to 10 planners from the Cleveland City and Cuyahoga County planning commissions. Some of these planners, like Kim Scott, regularly work with the coalition through the Land-Use Working Group, while other planners work episodically or on specific tasks like making GIS maps.



These photos show Santa Fe FPC members on various tours. Clockwise: Pam Roy and Denise Lynch check out chickens on the Gallina del Sol farm tour; South Mountain dairy goats greet members; members listen to Wendy McQuire discuss her turkey farm activities on the Gallina del Sol farm tour; Steve Warshawer and Denise Lynch observe the pasteurizing process explained by South Mountain dairy owner Marge Peterson.

Photos by Renee Villarreal



Capacity to spearhead initiatives

A planning department can lighten the load for resource-strapped FPCs by launching food-related initiatives. For example, Trevor Hunt, planner with the Cleveland City Planning Commission, explains how Cleveland's Economic Development Department and City Planning Commission are launching a mobile food cart initiative to encourage small business growth as well as promote vibrant public spaces. When a government agency like a city planning department can assist or even spearhead a food system initiative, it allows FPCs to focus on other objectives like policy work, community outreach, and research.

LESSONS LEARNED

This report was informed by existing FPC literature and from case studies of four U.S. FPCs. Given the context-specific nature of food systems work, some of the comments included in this report may not resonate with all FPCs. However, some recurring themes that arose during interviews with planners, FPC members, and leading FPC experts merit highlighting. The following are observations on how planners and planning departments can continue to contribute to, or expand their role in, the development of successful FPCs.

FPCs and planners share similar goals, as well as the same systems-thinking approach for reaching them.

FPCs and planners share a fundamental concern for a community's social, environmental, and economic health and welfare. Additionally, FPCs and planners use a systems-thinking approach for addressing community health and welfare problems. While an FPC's day-to-day focus is on discrete expressions of food system problems—for example, inadequate public transportation to grocery stores or poor quality food in schools—FPC vision is nonetheless long-term, macro, and comprehensive. Similar to a planner's approach, FPC work does not end when a bus route has been added or when school nutrition improves. Rather, FPCs continue to chip away at the other expressions of food system problems in their community with an eye toward systems-wide improvement. Robert Brown, director of the Cleveland City Planning Commission, likes to call the work of planners and FPCs "a great marriage" because of these shared fundamental concerns and a systems-thinking approach.

FPCs offer planners an ideal entry into food systems planning work.

The many issues that FPCs address provide an ideal training ground for planners looking to know more about food systems work. The particular FPC objectives—such as engaging in policy work or researching and communicating information—are also traditional planning activities, and as such, are easy for any planner to participate in. The familiar processes behind FPC projects help planners feel welcome to participate in broader food systems work. Many of the planners interviewed for this report noted how their work on particular FPC tasks showed them a new food systems perspective. Renee Villarreal of the Santa Fe County Growth Management Department admits, "I always saw the various pieces related to the food system, but then the [Santa Fe Food Policy Council] made the connection of those pieces clear."

FPCs seek out planners for general planning skills and perspective, not for expertise in food systems.

Many of the planners working with the FPCs profiled in this report possessed little knowledge of food systems at the start of their FPC work. In fact, FPCs often sought out planners for their traditional skills and training, not for their expertise in food systems. When asked why planners are valued on FPC projects, interviewees remarked on such things as a planner's ability to bridge various sectors and disciplines, to apply skills and training to specific contexts, and to solve problems in a strategic way. This interest in general planning skills means that FPCs call on planners for help with everything from research and outreach projects to policy and program development projects.

CONCLUSION

The FPCs profiled in this report demonstrate that inventive and comprehensive work comes from joining the planner's place-based approach with FPCs' food systems focus. Planners need not have any familiarity with food systems work to meaningfully work with FPCs on a range of projects. Rather, FPCs value general skills, familiarity with the policy process, an understanding of the built, social, and natural environment, and a systems-thinking approach.

As the number of FPCs continues to rise, so too will the opportunities for collaboration with FPCs. The FPCs profiled in this report all have strong relationships with individual planners and with public planning departments at the city or county level. Additionally, private planning agencies may forge partnerships with FPCs or start collaborating on FPC projects.

Whether at the city, county, or state level, planners and FPCs are working together to rebuild fractured food systems and to shift how communities orient their food system operations and development patterns. This work is producing exciting changes in the built, natural, and social environment, which have real impact on long-term community food sustainability.

This briefing paper was written by Christina DiLisio, a graduate student at Tufts University in the Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning department and an intern in APA's Planning and Community Health Research Center, and edited by Kimberley Hodgson, AICP, former manager of the center. They thank the representatives from the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, the Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition, the Santa Fe Food Policy Council, and the Regional Food Policy Council of the Puget Sound Regional Commission, as well as the planners that work with them, for their time and thoughtful comments.

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RESOURCES

Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC). CFSC is a North American coalition of diverse people and organizations working from the local to international levels to build community food security. Their stated mission is to "catalyze food systems that are healthy, sustainable, just, and democratic by building community voice and capacity for change." www.foodsecurity.org.

North American Food Policy Council webpage, maintained by CFSC: www.foodsecurity.org/FPC.

North American food policy council list, maintained by CFSC: www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/council.html#tn.

Food Policy Q & A; Questions Most Frequently Asked About Food Policy Councils, maintained by Drake Agricultural Law Center: www.law.drake.edu/academics/agLaw/?pageID=foodPolicyQnA.

Food System Planning Briefing Paper

This briefing paper covers how planners can work with partners in the food systems sector and use creative strategies to achieve economic, social, environmental, and community goals.

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