

Integrating food access and equity language in city comprehensive plans

Through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (the Center) awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. The Promising Practices series highlights successful strategies used by these organizations and important lessons learned that can be used by other organizations to inform their work.

Improving food access in greater Minnesota and suburban communities

Over the past five years, two organizations—Zeitgeist Center for Arts and Community and Open Door—have implemented multiple strategies to improve food access in their respective communities, the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Duluth and Dakota County. These organizations have engaged community residents in conversations about equitable food access, increased the number of community gardens, and engaged in policy conversations with organizational partners and cities. More information on the work accomplished by the organizations over the past five years can be found in their ripple effect mapping reports (under References).

This summary describes how these organizations worked to incorporate food access and equity language within city comprehensive plans and highlights lessons learned that may be beneficial to other organizations interested in similar work.

Food access and comprehensive planning

Both organizations used the Minnesota Food Charter's *Food Access Planning Guide* in their work. The guide provides an overview for planners and food advocates on how to engage in a comprehensive planning process. It includes tools, policies, and strategies that may be used to include food access language in comprehensive plans. The planning guide encourages partnerships between community organizations and planners to contribute food access language.

City comprehensive plans outline long-term goals for communities, encompassing areas such as housing, transportation, economic development, and land use. Including food access language in comprehensive plans can improve residents' health, promote economic development, and address structural barriers that prevent equitable food access (Minnesota Food Charter *Food Access Planning Guide*). In Minnesota, city plans are updated every 10 years and look 20 years into the future.

Fair Food Access Campaign engages in Duluth's comprehensive planning process

The Fair Food Access Campaign (FFA) was started in 2012 by Zeitgeist Center for Arts and Community and other community partners. Through FFA's engagement in food access work, they recognized the ways that food access intersects with housing, transportation, economic development, and saw incorporating food access language in Duluth's comprehensive plans as a next step to engage with the city. The previous comprehensive plan did not include food access language.

FFA and its organizational partners connected with key city staff they had worked with in the past, and who were familiar with their food access work. FFA hosted two community events to discuss the comprehensive planning process and food access across the city, asking participants to consider existing policies and how they might be changed. A selection of examples from the *Food Access Planning Guide* was presented to the group and modified according to the discussion that took place at the meetings, and over the previous four years of community engagement. This community input was compiled into a report that was shared with key city staff members. Duluth hosted meetings to gather community input on the proposed changes, where FFA was invited to discuss being intentional about food systems.

In addition to the community events, FFA partnered with the city at community events and presented information on food access in their community, how the food landscape had changed over time, and the importance of having a food policy that is inclusive of everyone in their community. While community members were mainly supportive of strengthening their local food system, some community members were not supportive of contributing financially towards new grocery stores. This led to conversations about food access and how it is affected by factors such as access to reliable transportation or evening work hours.

Duluth's comprehensive planning process started in December 2016, and the draft is currently under review. The city had a committee of 20-30 leaders from across different sectors in Duluth monitor the process. A couple of committee members were also FFA coalition members and were able to speak to food access language within the plan.

Within the draft comprehensive plan, food access was acknowledged in multiple places: under Governing Principles, Open Space, and General Development, where an entire section was dedicated to food access. This included policy language that was heavily adopted from the *Food Charter Planning Guide*. The following selections of policy language come directly from Duluth's draft comprehensive plan.¹

¹ For the full list of strategies see: City of Duluth, Minnesota. (2018). *Imagine Duluth 2035: forward together*. <http://www.imagineduluth.com/document>.

Selections of policy language from Duluth's draft comprehensive plan

Governing principle #13

Develop a healthy community.

Supporting health and well-being is a priority. The City will actively promote access for all to health resources, quality food, recreation, social and economic opportunities, and a clean and secure environment. Investments and polices will advance and maximize health and health equity in the city.

Open Spaces Policy #5

Encourage urban food growth.

While acknowledging the costs to manage open space and parks and recreation services, the city will look to improve opportunities for all

- **S1.** Study the demand for community garden lots throughout the city and utilize existing public land where additional space is needed.
- **S2.** Investigate the need for a coordinating body that maximizes efficiencies and assists in the development of community gardens, urban agriculture, and small-scale value-added food production.

General Development

Food access is such an important need that it crosses all five of this plan's focus areas—economic development, energy and conservation, housing, open space, and transportation. The Lincoln Park neighborhood is identified as a USDA food desert. For more on Food Access, see the Open Space chapter.

- **S1.** Continue to ensure transit connections to grocery stores and farmers markets, with on-board use-appropriate design elements (grocer bins, etc.)
- **S2.** Support the growth of a local food system. Clarify City standards and regulations for urban gardens and urban farms. Allow agricultural uses that have no land use or health-related conflicts with residential properties (such as orchards, gardens, etc.) as a permitted use in all residential zones. Lessen restrictions on where farmers markets can exist throughout the city (see Chapter 10, Open Space).

The comprehensive planning process coincided with another grant FFA had with Blue Cross Blue Shield's Center for Prevention, the Health in All Policies project, where including health and equity language in the city's comprehensive plan was a priority. While much of the language that had been discussed with the city was included, the plan does not include food policy councils and food commissions, which would have prioritized Duluth's role as a leading convener of the local food system in the Arrowhead region.

Open Door engages in suburban comprehensive plans

Open Door, a suburban-based food shelf, engaged in the comprehensive planning process with four cities: Burnsville, Eagan, Lakeville, and Apple Valley. They engaged with various staff including city planners, city administrators, and elected officials on incorporating food access language and publicized community meeting information for residents. At the start of the process, there had been some staffing changes at Open Door, where new staff members had to build new relationships with city staff and community residents.

Open Door shared the Minnesota Food Charter’s *Food Access Planning Guide* directly with planners and others interested in incorporating food access language. They found that key planning staff were puzzled with Open Door’s involvement in the comprehensive planning process and were not used to incorporating residents’ feedback.

Open Door also found residents were not familiar with the comprehensive planning process, and that they needed to facilitate community conversations to increase resident awareness. Because of this, it was difficult for Open Door to engage community residents and partner with cities throughout the planning process similar to FFA’s process in Duluth.

An overview of food access language included within suburban comprehensive plans

A review of the comprehensive planning documentation available at city websites notes varying levels of food access language inclusion within city comprehensive plans. The following is a selection of food access language located within comprehensive plans

Apple Valley

Food was referenced under the “Parks and recreation” chapter and included the following strategies:

- provide a destination park that can accommodate community events (i.e. food truck festivals, Oktoberfest, outdoor concerts, graduations, art fairs, race finish line festivities, etc.)
- Developing a park and recreation system that is innovative by providing food and beverage services (i.e. Biergarde, café, food trucks, etc.). This type of service could be run by an outside partner.

Lakeville

In the “Goals and policies of the plan” document located on the city’s comprehensive planning section, land use policy refers to food in the following goal:

- Create opportunities for local food and fiber production and access.

Eagan

Eagan referred to food access under the “Land Use” chapter in the following areas:

Placemaking/sustainability/resilience policy #4

- Support a land use pattern that promotes and protects community gardens and urban agriculture areas to decrease the distance between households and retail food options.

Active and healthy living strategies

- Locate transit routes, pedestrian facilities and bike lanes near grocery stores, farmers markets, food shelves and community meal programs.
- Identify areas or populations with little access to healthy food and identify strategies to increase food access.

Burnsville

Burnsville identifies several sustainability areas, one of which is “sustainable food system opportunities” to consider under the neighborhood and housing, natural environment, community enrichment, transportation plan, future land use, and economic development and redevelopment sections of the comprehensive plan. “Sustainable food system opportunities” approaches include:

- Support programs that support and incentivize urban agriculture and local food production and business
- Continue implementation of ordinances and/or zoning district standards that permit urban agriculture and local food producers.
- Encourage local/cottage food industries
- Strategies to allow/incentivize neighborhood food production (bees, chickens, goats, etc.)
- Ensure that there are no neighborhoods that are food deserts.
- Use permaculture (examining and following nature’s patterns) in landscaping.

Lessons learned

FFA and Open Door identified the following lessons learned through their engagement in comprehensive planning processes:

- **Partnering with organizations in conversation around food access and equity assists with the comprehensive planning process.** FFA worked with its organizational partners and the city to host sessions with community residents on food access and the comprehensive planning process. This strengthened their collective understanding of the importance of incorporating food access language in the comprehensive plan, making it easier to discuss with community residents.

Organizational partner members participated in the city's comprehensive planning committee and were able to speak to food access sections of the comprehensive plan. Partnerships with other organizations can also help maintain momentum in the event of staffing changes, as knowledge of the group's work is spread across multiple members.

- **Taking time to build relationships outside of the planning process pays off.** FFA had worked over the past five years with organizational partners similarly committed to increasing food access for Duluth residents before the beginning of the comprehensive planning process. Their work encompassed conversations around community resilience in addition to touching on gardens/open space, housing, transportation, bus routes, and economic development. This groundwork for policy development over the previous five years was instrumental to FFA's ability to engage effectively in Duluth's planning process.
- **Engaging community residents in the comprehensive planning process takes time.** The comprehensive planning process takes years to complete. It takes time to engage thoughtfully with residents who have varying levels of familiarity with the process, and it requires an ongoing commitment to engage residents throughout different phases of the process. Involving residents early on, to incorporate their ideas before the language is drafted, may be a significant change in practice for some cities and requires a commitment to engaging and informing residents of the process.
- **Integrating food access language across multiple sections of comprehensive plans highlights its importance across multiple areas.** Throughout the planning process, FFA noted the importance of including food access language throughout multiple sections of the comprehensive plan. In the end, however, the city chose to highlight food access predominantly under the General Development section, noting its importance across multiple areas.

More Information about FFA and Open Door

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Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700

www.wilderresearch.org



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For more information

Zeitgeist/Fair Food Access Campaign: Brooke Wetmore | 218-336-1361 | brooke@zeitgeistarts.com

Open Door: Jason Viana | 612-390-5613 | jasonv@theopendoorpantry.org

Wilder Research: Azra Thakur | 651-280-2760 | azra.thakur@wilder.org

Prepared by Wilder Research on behalf of the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.