



Cleveland, Ohio: A Local Government's Transition from an Urban Agriculture Focus to a Comprehensive Food Systems Policy Approach



The Ohio City Farm is one of many urban farms in Cleveland promoting food access for residents and supported by city policy. Image Source: <http://cccfoodpolicy.org/about>

The City of Cleveland municipal government began advancing food policy in 1976 with support for urban agriculture, namely community gardening, which has remained the city's key area of focus. In 2008 other food systems issues, beyond urban agriculture, began receiving unprecedented municipal government support. For example, the municipal government began linking food production policies with strong food access goals. This required a multi-sectoral approach to policymaking. Under the leadership of the Cleveland-Cuyahoga Food Policy Coalition, the Ohio State University's (OSU) Cuyahoga County Extension, and the City of Cleveland – public, private, agricultural, non-profit, health, education, and other key sectors regularly collaborate in addressing food production gaps and enabling better food access for residents.

The City of Cleveland, located in Cuyahoga County, is home to 389,521 of Ohio's 11,594,163 residents. Cleveland is a minority-majority city with a 53.3% black population, a 10% Latino/Hispanic population, and a one-third white population¹. Like other industrial cities of the 20th century, Cleveland experienced major population decline and staggering property vacancies beginning in 1960. Compounded by the 2008 recession, more than half the city population had left Cleveland by 2010².

Urban agricultural production in Cleveland is diverse, but focuses primarily on specialty crops such as fruits and vegetables. More and more producers are beginning to raise bees, chickens or ducks in the city. There is also potential to further develop egg and meat production in the city. The models of urban food production are as varied as the products, including residential agriculture, community gardens, and market gardens, as well

as urban and peri-urban farms. Products are grown or raised for both personal consumption and commercial sale. Within the broader Cuyahoga County, demand for healthy food has increased alongside the growing number of people interested in urban agriculture. This demand and interest is mirrored by more opportunities for direct sales and marketing of local agriculture products in the county, including more farmers selling directly to restaurants.

Food producers are nevertheless challenged by a limited growing season; barriers to accessing business licenses, land leases, insurance, and capital; as well as soil quality and water access issues. Accessing the necessary infrastructure to produce and subsequently distribute food to retail outlets is also a challenge for commercial growers. Urban farmers additionally struggle with pricing food affordably, yet high enough to cover their livelihoods, and persuading residents to make healthy choices by purchasing locally farmed goods.

Residents face their own set of challenges in accessing healthy affordable food, urban grown or otherwise. These challenges include a lack of walkable or transit-friendly grocery store or market options as well as limited incomes with which to purchase food. As a result, Cleveland residents – 35.4%³ of whom are living in poverty – rely on corner stores, which tend to lack the capacity to stock healthy or culturally appropriate food. Low-income residents, seniors, and children are some of the most underserved populations in Cleveland and face significant food access challenges.



Despite the challenges, the Cleveland municipal government has been able to implement a number of policies and programs to support food production and improve food security, in part because of ongoing multi-sectoral collaboration largely coordinated by the City of Cleveland and Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition. What began as support for a municipal community gardening program has over three decades evolved into a high-level adoption of food systems thinking within Cleveland’s local government.

Support for Urban Agriculture

In the late 1970s, Cleveland’s municipal government began supporting urban agriculture with the inaugural Summer Sprout community gardening program. This was the first of several important policy efforts of the municipal government to increase opportunities for urban food production and improve food access within city limits.

- **Summer Sprout, 1976.** Summer Sprout is the City of Cleveland’s longstanding community gardening program dating back to 1976, which is funded in part by the City of Cleveland Department of Community Development. Today, the program currently supports 197 gardens on 43.32 acres of land throughout Cleveland by providing equipment and technical assistance in partnership with Ohio State University Extension.
- **Series of Urban Agriculture Regulations (2007 to 2011).** Between 2007 and 2011 the City of Cleveland adopted a number of urban agriculture policies to promote urban agriculture as a land use and to reduce barriers to urban agriculture for those wishing to grow food in the city. These policies build on one another as well as Cleveland’s pre-existing urban agriculture practice and legacy.
 - **Urban Garden District, 2007.** The Urban Garden District prompted the creation of a new zoning category for urban gardens. If a non-garden use is proposed in this zoning district, a public hearing is required.
 - **Restrictions on the Keeping of Farm Animals and Bees, 2009.** This zoning ordinance revises the zoning and health code to allow for the keeping of small livestock, including bees, throughout Cleveland.
 - **Cleveland Land Bank Policy Changes, 2010.** An update to Cleveland’s Land Bank program supporting longer term leases for urban agriculture.
 - **Agriculture in Residential Districts, 2010.** Amendments to the zoning code providing regulations for residential districts to allow farm stands, guidelines for farm fencing, and allowing urban agriculture as a principal use on vacant lots.
 - **Water Access Policy, 2011.** This was a collaborative policy process leading to more affordable water access for urban agriculture activities.

- **Gardening for Greenbacks, 2008.** The City of Cleveland Department of Economic Development has been leading Gardening for Greenbacks since 2008. The program was initiated in 2008 under Mayor Frank G. Jackson as a health promotion initiative in the form of an urban agriculture incentive program. Led by the Department of Economic Development, Gardening for Greenbacks provides grants of up to \$5,000 to entrepreneurial agriculture organizations such as farmer cooperatives and other types of community-supported agriculture programs for equipment related to growing and selling produce. A major objective of the program is ensuring residents have access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. The City of Cleveland is an original funder of the program. Additional recent funders include AgriBank, CoBank, and Farm Credit Services of Mid-America.

Integrating Food Systems Thinking

Beyond urban agriculture, the City of Cleveland has also integrated broader food systems thinking into its policy, as evidenced by the Cleveland Food Charter, close collaborations with the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, and the integration of food systems issues in the Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland Plan.

- **Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition, 2007.** The Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition was founded in 2007 with funding support from the Cleveland Department of Public Health’s Steps to a Healthier Cleveland initiative in 2007 and 2008. While the coalition is no longer funded by the City of Cleveland, instead accessing private funds, and is not an official advisory group to government, City and County staff are still largely involved in the coalition as part of its leadership team. The coalition supports a large number of program and policy areas, including developing the Cleveland Food Charter, and brings together a broad scope of public, private, and agricultural partners.
- **Cleveland Food Charter, 2008.** The Cleveland Food Charter was authored in 2008 by the Community Food Assessment working group of the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition and subsequently presented to the Mayor and Cleveland City Council. The Charter was passed by City Council through [Resolution 1563-08](#), demonstrating the municipality’s commitment to ensuring adequate food access for all citizens, support for local farmers and food businesses, the reduction of climate impacts and urban greening through food systems, and a strengthened economy, among other broad goals.
- **Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland Plan, 2008.** This 2008 plan for re-purposing vacant land in Cleveland includes strategies for improving local food security, among other goals. Many of these strategies include making land available for urban food production as a way of improving



food access for residents such as by creating an urban agriculture land use category and ensuring residents are within walking distance of farm and garden space.

- **Local and Sustainable Purchasing Ordinance No. 1660-A-09, 2010.** The City of Cleveland adopted this ordinance in 2010 giving preference to local and sustainable businesses in municipal bidding processes. This includes local producers and local food purchasers.

In addition to the urban agriculture and food systems policies highlighted above, the City of Cleveland boasts a strong collection of additional food production, food security, and other food policies:

- Connecting Cleveland 2020 Citywide Plan, 2007
- Cleveland Corner Store Project, 2009
- Sustainable Street Food Pilot Program, 2009
- Farmers Market Access Project & Double Value Produce Perks, 2010
- Healthy Cleveland Resolutions, 2011 & 2013
- Produce Prescription, 2013

¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39/3916000.html>

² http://vacantpropertyresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/VPRN-Cleveland-Case-Study_EXEC_SUMMARY-1.pdf US Census QuickFacts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/24/24510.html>

³ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39/3916000.html>

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