



# Empowering the Community to Lead: Food Systems Planning and Policy in Lawrence and Douglas County, Kansas

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## GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS

A key goal of the Growing Food Connections (GFC) project is to document ways in which local and regional governments adopt and implement policies and plans that simultaneously alleviate food insecurity and strengthen agricultural viability among small and medium-sized farmers. To that end, beginning in 2012, the GFC team conducted a national scan and identified 299 local governments across the United States that are developing and implementing a range of innovative plans, public programs, regulations, laws, financial investments and other policies to strengthen the food system. GFC defines the food system as the interconnected network of activities, resources, industries, public and private stakeholders, and policies that play a role in the production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food. The GFC team conducted exploratory telephone interviews with stakeholders in 20 of these urban and rural local governments followed by in-depth, in-person interviews with stakeholders in four of these communities.

This case study brief is one in a series called *Innovation Deep Dive* that provides an in-depth exploration of the process taken to develop and implement innovative food systems related plans and policies. The *Innovation Deep Dive* series builds on the *Stories of Innovation* series. For this brief, GFC project team members conducted three in-person interviews and one telephone interview with key stakeholders in 2015 to better understand the food systems planning and policy making process in **Douglas County, Kansas** and document lessons for local and regional governments interested in using plans and policy to strengthen food systems.

Cover Photo: Grower at the Incubator Farm, part of the City of Lawrence Common Ground Program.  
(Credit: A. Shafer Photography)



# Empowering the Community to Lead

## Food Systems Planning and Policy in Lawrence and Douglas County, Kansas

### INTRODUCTION

The City of Lawrence and Douglas County, Kansas have united in collaborative cross-boundary planning and policy efforts to strengthen their community and regional food system. A mid-sized city/county in the heartland, they have demonstrated how local governments can work with active and engaged community members to create healthy food systems and contribute positively to the local economy. Their innovative, intergovernmental partnership along the urban-rural continuum recognizes that food system challenges and thus their solutions cross-jurisdictional boundaries. Food policy collaborations across the city and county governments span comprehensive planning, shared staff positions, funding for programs, and joint food systems studies.<sup>1</sup> This case study documents the unique community characteristics, provides an overview of food security and agricultural conditions, and emphasizes the role local government plays in connecting small and mid-sized producers with underserved consumers. A deep dive traces the roots of the Douglas Food Policy Council, including their founding, key accomplishments, and future opportunities.

### BACKGROUND

Douglas County is located in northeastern Kansas, slightly less than an hour west of Kansas City. A region with a rich agricultural heritage, bolstered by fertile soils, flat lands, and easy access to water, it was historically home to hundreds of small farms. Although commodity crop agriculture became the dominant farming method, a burgeoning local foods community - in partnership with commodity crop farmers - is thriving and striving to improve the community food system and alter their economy and residents' health for the better.

#### *Demographic Composition*

In 2015, Douglas County was home to 114,967 people, 91,305 of which live in the City of Lawrence.<sup>2</sup> Douglas County has experienced a steady population growth; in 1990 the county's population was 82,229 people.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 30% of the population of the county is between the ages of 15 to 24 years old, indicative of the large number of college students residing in the county. Eighty-four percent of residents are white, 4.4% are Asian, 4.4% are two or more races, 4% are black or African American, and 2.3% are Native American. Additionally, 5.7% of the population (of any race) are Hispanic or Latino.<sup>2</sup> The City of Lawrence is



Douglas County Food Policy Council meets "al fresco" while having a farm dinner and monthly meeting at member Lee Broyles's beef farm in Southwestern Douglas County. (Credit: A. Shafer Photography)

slightly more diverse; 82.3% of Lawrence residents are white, 5.3% are Asian, 4.5% are black or African American, 4.7% are two or more races, 2.5% are Native American, and 6.7% (of any race) are Hispanic or Latino.<sup>4</sup>

The median household income varies across Douglas County (\$50,939) and the City of Lawrence (\$46,406), although both are lower than the statewide median of \$52,205.<sup>5</sup> In 2016, the unemployment rate in Douglas County was 3.2%. Although the unemployment rate increased during the 2008 national recession, it has steadily decreased since then.<sup>6</sup> Most people in Douglas County are employed in white collar professions; nearly 45% of the county's population are employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, and 23.3% are employed in sales and office occupations.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the presence of University of Kansas, Baker University and Haskell Indian Nations University, Douglas County residents have higher levels of education than the statewide average; 26.3% of Douglas County residents 25 years and over



have a bachelor’s degree, and 22.8% have a graduate or professional degree, compared with statewide averages of 20% and 11% respectively.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the faculty and staff employed by higher education, the student body itself has a large impact on the community. University of Kansas has a student body of approximately 28,000, and Baker University has approximately 3,000 students. An additional approximately 1,000 students attend Haskell Indian Nations University, the only inter-tribal university for Native Americans in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

### Local Government Representation

Within Douglas County, there are 39 total governments. Fourteen of these governments are general-purpose governments, including 4 municipal governments, 9 township governments, and the county government. Twenty-five special purpose governments include three independent school districts and 22 special district governments.<sup>9</sup> In addition to Lawrence, there are three incorporated cities: Eudora (population 6,126), Baldwin City (population 4,515) and Lecompton (population 625).<sup>2</sup> Planning powers rest in the hands of local municipalities as the state of Kansas grants home rule to local governments.<sup>10</sup>

Douglas County and the City of Lawrence have similarly constructed government structures. Douglas County government functions via a county commission and county administrator. The Board of County Commissioners has three members elected to four-year terms.<sup>11</sup> The City of Lawrence’s City Manager’s Office administers the programs and policies approved by the

City Commission, comprised of a mayor, vice mayor, and three commissioners.<sup>12</sup> These local officials, at the city and county level, have been instrumental in creating an environment where food systems planning and policy can thrive.

## FOOD SYSTEMS PLANNING AND POLICY

Douglas County and the City of Lawrence have a long history of active residents who engage on issues relating to sustainability and the environment, among many other topics. Coalitions of horticultural producers and local food producers have been present for decades, supported in part by the state’s land grant university, Kansas State University (K-State).<sup>13</sup> Institutions such as K-State, the Kansas Rural Center, and the Land Institute have long contributed to the conversation on supporting local food systems and local farmers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to active residents and supportive institutions, the food cooperative community has historically provided opportunities for connecting producers and consumers. The Merc Co+op, a cooperative community-owned grocery store, has been a staple of the Lawrence community since 1974, advocating for, and providing a steady market for small local growers.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, the Merc Co+op purchased approximately \$1.3 million in local food.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture, food, and food processing also play an important role in the region’s economy. The sector supports approximately 1,953 jobs, or 3% of the workforce in Douglas County. The combined industries contribute \$402 million to



Local produce on display at Cottin’s Hardware Farmers Market in Lawrence. (Credit: A. Shafer Photography)



the local economy, roughly 10% of the area's Gross Regional Product.<sup>15</sup> In 2012, agriculture alone accounted for \$43.8 million in crop and livestock sales.<sup>15</sup> Douglas County is also home to the Rolling Prairie Farmer Alliance, a multi-farmer community supported agriculture program that was established in 1994 and provides a vegetable subscription service to residents in Lawrence and Kansas City.<sup>16</sup>

### Agriculture

Although Kansas elicits images of expansive commodity crop agriculture on large farms, Douglas County's 945 farms have a different profile. They are predominantly smaller farms, with less sales, and more diverse outputs. At an average size of 223 acres, farms in Douglas are significantly smaller than the state's average size of 747 acres. Approximately 62% of Douglas farms have less than \$10,000 in sales, compared to 39.6% of Kansas' farms. Of Kansas's 105 counties, Douglas ranks 97 for the market value of agricultural products sold; their average per farm sales amounts to \$43,882, compared to the statewide average of \$298,845. Similarly, the net cash farm income for Douglas County farms is \$11,315 compared to \$50,903 statewide.<sup>17</sup>

Douglas County's farmers, too, are unique compared more broadly to Kansas's farm operator characteristics. Only 35.4% (338) of Douglas County farmers consider farming their principal occupation, while 63.6% (607) of farmers consider other employment as their primary occupation. Across Kansas, this distinction between full-time and part-time farmers is more evenly divided; 48.3% of farmers consider farming their principal occupation, compared with 51.6% who consider other employment as their primary occupation.<sup>18</sup> The average age of Douglas County farmers is slightly older (59.2 years) than the Kansas average of 58.2 years. There is a higher percentage of female primary farm operators in Douglas County (15.2%), compared to the Kansas' percentage of female primary farm operators (10.98%).<sup>17</sup>

Douglas County's geography, fertile Class I and Class II soils on flat land, is ideal for agriculture, particularly nutrient-intense production of crops directly for human consumption.<sup>19</sup> Even with the ideal conditions, the majority of Douglas' farmers are producing corn, soybeans, wheat, and sorghum. Fruit and vegetable production account for less than 0.1% of the total crop production.<sup>20</sup> Crop sales account for 66% of the county's agriculture sales, and livestock sales account for 34%. Although there are very few farms producing more than ten acres of fruit and vegetables directly for consumption, the number of small and medium sized specialty crop producers is steadily growing and diversifying their product.<sup>20</sup> A burgeoning number of urban farmers are challenging the commodity crop narrative, selling directly to consumers through community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farmers markets, and local restaurants.<sup>14</sup> Supported by local government policies to protect and promote agriculture, an increasing number of small, diversified product farms are expected to spring up in urban and peri-urban areas.

Although Douglas County enjoys prime physical climate and soil conditions, there are other challenges for farmers. Some of the region's prime farmland is located near population centers



Certified-organic salad greens in-process of being harvested at Juniper Hill Farm, just north of Lawrence. (Credit: Juniper Hill Farms)

and highways, placing significant development pressure on the land. Between 2007 and 2012, the county experienced a nine percent loss in number of farms, losing 95 farms and 9,960 acres of farmland.<sup>17</sup> Significant public and private investments have sought to conserve and protect high quality agricultural lands.<sup>13</sup>

Though Douglas County is home to Kansas State University Research and Extension, Kansas Rural Center, and the Farm Bureau, large farmers struggle to locate sufficient skilled and trained farm labor.<sup>13</sup> Facilitating knowledge transfer between more experienced and newer farmers is critical to maintaining local farming knowledge.

Small-scale diversified enterprises encounter a different set of challenges than large producers. Without access to farm equipment, scaling up production can be difficult. However, much of the desired equipment is cost prohibitive. Douglas County small farmers are also experiencing the unique challenge of navigating changing market equilibriums for local foods even as market opportunities continue to grow. For example, though expansion of farmers markets, CSAs, food hubs, and farm-to-institution programs are all geared towards supporting small farmers, the rapid additions and changes to market opportunities require farmers to change their strategy annually to accommodate new market conditions.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, farmers transitioning from



Local shopper redeems tokens to double SNAP benefits at Cottin's Hardware Farmers Market. Program started as locally-funded Market Match and now operates as a federally-funded bi-state collaboration, Double Up Food Bucks. (Credit: A. Shafer Photography)

hobby farming to full-time farming as a primary occupation often find they do not have adequate business and marketing knowledge to support their endeavors within rapidly changing markets.<sup>20</sup>

### *Food Security*

Healthy, affordable, and culturally acceptable food is not accessible for everyone in Douglas County. Families working in the hospitality and retail industries - the working poor reliant on low-wage hourly work - are particularly at risk for food insecurity. In 2015, approximately 6.9% of Douglas County residents received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, lower than the statewide average of 9.5%.<sup>21</sup> However, SNAP participation rates in Douglas County are particularly low. A mere estimated 27% of people eligible for benefits apply and receive SNAP benefits.<sup>20</sup> While Douglas County has a smaller percentage of people accessing SNAP benefits than the statewide population, significantly more Douglas County residents are living below the poverty line than is found across the state. In 2012, 19% of Douglas County residents - about 20,000 people - lived below the poverty line, compared to 13.6% of residents in Kansas.<sup>22</sup> Residents in the City of Lawrence experience slightly higher levels of poverty, about 21.8% of residents are below the poverty level.<sup>23</sup>

For people with limited budgets living in Douglas County, purchasing fresh produce from local farmers can be cost-prohibitive, particularly because the lack of aggregation and distribution infrastructure for farmers forces small-batch, higher priced, sales.<sup>20</sup> Many people perceive locally produced food as only being available at high-end grocery stores, an accurate perception for many neighborhoods. Disparities in food quality exist across

geographies in the city and county. Not all grocery stores sell fresh produce, and others have limited or poor quality options, making produce options less desirable.<sup>24</sup> Discount stores do not have infrastructure to work directly with local farmers; many others do not have infrastructure to store and display fresh produce at all, regardless of source.

Residents without access to personal transportation face additional challenges to accessing healthy food, particularly in certain neighborhoods in Lawrence where there are few grocery stores. A 2012 assessment of transportation access to healthy food reported that approximately 7% of Douglas County residents are low income and do not live within reasonable proximity to a grocery store.<sup>25</sup> Though there is a public transit system, the schedule is limited, the system does not go to all of the grocery stores, and buses have bag limits.<sup>24</sup> Emergency food assistance locations, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, are not always easily accessible by public transportation as well. Residents living in more rural areas outside of Lawrence have very limited grocery store access and must drive to Lawrence and Kansas City suburbs to go food shopping. Lack of access to healthy affordable foods may contribute to the nearly 82% of Douglas County residents who report consuming fewer than five servings of fruit and vegetables per day.<sup>26</sup>

### *Role of Government*

Douglas County and the City of Lawrence local governments have joined forces to move the food systems dial forward in their community. They have collaboratively developed numerous policies, programs, and projects to address access to healthy affordable food and agricultural production and viability. Their food policy collaborations have spanned comprehensive



planning, shared staff positions, funding for programs, and joint food systems studies.<sup>1</sup> Much of the policy-related work has stemmed from creation and funding of a joint city/county food policy council, whose actions are discussed in the Deep Dive section below.

Local government interest in the food system was, and continues to be, driven by community action. Though the community has long had an interest in local foods, residents became particularly concerned about loss of high quality farmland during a regional planning process. This concern drove the creation of Citizens for Responsible Planning, a community-created citizen group, who ultimately lobbied for the election of a county commissioner who supported agricultural land preservation.<sup>14</sup> Having a local government champion who partnered with long-respected agencies such as the Farm Bureau ignited and united efforts to address the connection between underserved consumers and small and mid-sized growers. The Douglas County Food Policy Council emerged within a supportive local government environment seeking to encourage community action.

The Lawrence and Douglas governments explicitly committed to addressing inequities and disparities in housing, health, and economic opportunity, and recognized the role that food played in contributing to or decreasing disparities.<sup>24</sup> They have worked to dismantle barriers and ease regulations to allow communities to reclaim their food system.<sup>14</sup> The Douglas County Sustainability Department, host to the city-county's sustainability director and food systems coordinator, has played a pivotal role in leading efforts to develop programs and policies to support the local food economy. The Lawrence-Douglas County Planning and Development Services and the Lawrence-Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Office have served as a key implementation partner by incorporating food into binding comprehensive planning efforts. The Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department has also been a supportive partner in the effort to address inequities. They have been instrumental in addressing issues of food insecurity and increasing access to healthy foods. Guided by leadership committed to community health planning and chronic disease prevention, they have included access to healthy foods as one of their five priorities via the county's Community Health Plan.<sup>24</sup> Programs such as WIC, SNAP, and LiveWell, a community health coalition, received staffing support from the director of community health who also was a member of the Douglas Food Policy Council. In addition to direct program management, the health department serves as a fiscal agent to process grants distributed to smaller community groups.<sup>1</sup>

## DEEP DIVE

Since 2010, a food policy council that functions as an arm of local government has guided food systems planning and policy in Lawrence and Douglas. Unlike many food policy councils that are coordinated and facilitated by volunteers, the Douglas County Food Policy Council is supported by a local government staff person and several local government departments have a seat at the table. Their comprehensive and holistic approach across departments, geographies, and jurisdictions has strength-

ened the linkages between production and consumption. By interweaving food into a myriad of other community concerns, the FPC has changed structures and systems to better support underserved communities. The FPC has been responsible for, or supportive of, much of the tangible food systems actions in Lawrence and Douglas County.

The Douglas County Food Policy Council (FPC), created by a 2010 Douglas County Commission resolution, became a joint city/county council via a 2013 City of Lawrence ordinance.<sup>27</sup> The resolution includes language providing staffing support from the county to the FPC as needed. Serving as a forum for discussion and coordination of community-wide efforts to improve the community's access to local food supply and distribution networks, the council was funded in the amount of \$6,800 per year by Douglas County.<sup>14</sup> Additional funding for the council's projects and programs has come through grants. Currently, the council has twenty-three members, including joint city and county at-large appointments. Required appointments include representatives from the school district, health department, meat producers, value added or specialty crop producers, grocery stores, restaurants, and food security advocates. Additionally, several positions are held for government appointees including representatives from the Douglas County Extension Services, the City of Lawrence Sustainability Advisory Board, and three seats for appointment by the county commissioner from each commission district. Appointed for three-year terms, members can serve two consecutive terms.<sup>14</sup>

The FPC has benefited from having local government staffing support since its inception. Staffing has been provided via the partial time of a city-county sustainability director and now a food systems coordinator.<sup>14</sup> The creation of the sustainability director position was initially funded in 2010 through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds through the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant to the City of Lawrence, but now receives 60% of funding from Douglas County and 40% through the City of Lawrence. Though dedicated more broadly to sustainability goals, this position has invested significant effort towards advancing the work of the Food Policy Council.<sup>14</sup> Tasked with addressing county-wide energy efficiency programs, renewable energy options, waste reduction and recycling, and green building options, the position lent itself to considering the food system as well. Originally, this position supported the work of the FPC, but the FPC's increasingly larger influence required a full time staffing person dedicated exclusively to food. The unique food systems coordinator position, funded through a 2014-2017 CDC Partners to Improve Community Health Cooperative Agreement to the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, allowed maintenance and critical expansion of the Food Policy Council's goals and community engagement.<sup>14</sup> The food systems coordinator position provided direct staffing to facilitate and implement goals of the FPC, including coordinating and supporting local food development initiatives such as food hub creation, fostering wholesale opportunities for small-scale farmers, supporting farmers markets, farm to school purchasing processes, and leading food system assessments. Additionally, the food systems coordinator engaged in communications, public messaging, and



community engagement around food system assessments and planning. In 2016, the Douglas County Commission approved funding for the continuation of the food systems coordinator position through the general fund. The CDC funding ended in September 2017, and the position was renamed Food Systems and Sustainability Planner and will focus 50% on food systems issues and 50% on broader sustainability issues.<sup>28</sup>

The Lawrence and Douglas County local governments have also invested in staffing to support education. In response to the farming knowledge gap, Douglas County provides additional funding, beyond their regular support for the K-State Research and Extension, to fund an horticulture agent position who supports small producers.<sup>13</sup> The Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department has also collaborated with the Kansas Health Foundation on grant funding to create a full-time Farm to School Coordinator position, the first full-time FTS Coordinator in the state. In late 2016, the scope of this position was broadened, however the position still focuses a large percentage of time on Farm to School, but with a stronger focus on school gardens.<sup>28</sup> These critical staffing positions have contributed to the local government being able to implement the plans, policies, and programs described below.

#### *Local Government Actions to Connect Food Security and Agricultural Viability*

The defining success of the FPC has been their ability to approach food systems change across a spectrum of action mirroring the current ethos of the community. Their multi-pronged approach combines policy, planning, programming, and public investment, building on successes over time. The actions described below are a direct result of - and indeed key accomplishments of - the FPC's collective approach to food systems change since 2010.

#### **Research & Assessment Studies**

The FPC's actions have been, since inception, driven by research and assessment. The first food systems analysis was commissioned by the FPC to analyze strengths and challenges of the regional food system. Compiled by graduate students from the University of Kansas in 2011, *Building A Deep-Rooted Local Food System: A Food System Analysis for Douglas County Jefferson County & Leavenworth County in Kansas*, provided the FPC's original blueprint for action. Key findings of the report included pinpointing geographic areas without access to healthy affordable food and identifying the regional lack of processing, distribution, and aggregation infrastructure for local food products.<sup>29</sup> The findings guided the FPC's first actions on farmers' market SNAP matching dollars, urban food production, and a food hub feasibility study. In 2014, the city and county piloted a successful SNAP Market Match program at farmers markets in the form of \$10,000 each from the alcohol tax and \$3,800 from LiveWell Lawrence. Since then, the program became a line item in the county's budget for social service agency funding, and contributed positively to local economic development efforts.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, the county partnered with Fair Food Network and other state and regional partners in Kansas and Missouri to apply for an USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant to



Shoppers peruse local, healthy abundance on sale at Lawrence Farmers Market, the oldest market in the State of Kansas. (Credit: A. Shafer Photography)

fold the SNAP Market Match program into a bi-state Double Up Food Bucks program.<sup>30</sup> The team was awarded \$5.8 million.<sup>28</sup>

The *Food Hub Feasibility Study: Northeast Kansas* was funded in 2013 through a grant from the USDA's Rural Business Enterprise Grant program and the Kansas Health Foundation as supported by the staff time of the county's sustainability director. The creation of the study was a direct result of the food system assessment. It projected demand for local foods within six market segments. The study recommended the creation of a food hub to energize producers and grow the local economy.<sup>31</sup> In 2016, the food hub became a reality and Fresh Farm HQ (FFHQ) was established with a \$350,000 USDA Value-Added Producers Grant and \$40,000 from the Kansas Health Foundation. FFHQ is a cooperative association owned and operated by farms within the Douglas County and Kansas City (Kansas and Missouri) region for the purpose of coordinating aggregation; connecting small- and mid-sized farms in the region; and providing marketing, sales and distribution services. Douglas County was instrumental in helping the founding farmers bring FFHQ to fruition.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the tenure of the FPC, the Lawrence/Douglas community has benefited from a strong public health presence on the FPC. Initiatives of the FPC and the Health Department





previously focused on ‘healthy foods’ and ‘local foods’ separately. Through mutual decision-making, the two government entities have turned their sights to ‘healthy local foods’ together. Purposefully, the FPC and Health Department aligned priorities and adopted a common language on goals early on. For example, the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department was instrumental in the creation of two health-related assessment reports that highlighted the community’s concern around healthy food. The *Douglas County Community Health Report*, completed in 2012 with the University of Kansas Work Group for Community Health and Development, included a comprehensive community health assessment. The Health Department partnered with representatives across the community, including the Lawrence Memorial Hospital, United Way of Douglas County, Heartland Community Health Center, and others to lead a community engagement process emphasizing inclusion of often-underrepresented voices. Focus groups, interviews, photo voice activities, and surveys across the community pinpointed thirteen key findings, with lack of access to affordable healthy foods being the primary concern.<sup>29</sup>

Compelling findings from the 2012 community health report have contributed to public and private investments to increase accessibility and affordability of healthy foods for underserved residents. The county’s WIC program includes a Shopping Matters and Cooking Matters program to extend the value of WIC coupons. The local food bank has revamped their distribution

system to link disparate food pantries under a common umbrella and provided unlimited fruits and vegetables to families in need.<sup>20</sup> By integrating their distribution of fresh produce with summer feeding programs, the food bank is further able to distribute healthy food to people with limited transportation. Residents interested in growing their own food can join community gardens and public orchards supported by the local government.<sup>19</sup> K-State Research & Extension has coordinated the Produce Distribution Team, a group of volunteers who collect unsold goods from the farmers market for distribution via the food pantries. The Team does on-farm pick-ups, providing the key transportation link between farmers and food banks for up to 40,000 pounds of food annually.<sup>13</sup>

### Programs & Public Investments

Douglas County and City of Lawrence municipal governments have dedicated significant funding into programs and public investments that support community food systems, both large and small. Both the City of Lawrence and Douglas County partner with local farmers to offer CSA drop-off sites in city and county buildings for their employees.<sup>32</sup> The city’s farmers’ market also enjoys free weekly occupancy of a city-owned parking lot.<sup>14</sup> The program enjoys large community and staff buy-in, with staffing efforts coming from the sustainability director position, Parks and Recreation, Public Works and Utilities, and the City Attorney.<sup>14</sup>

The Common Ground Community Garden Program was also formed from the recommendations of the 2012 community health plan. Administered through the City of Lawrence, the program leases vacant and under-utilized city-owned property to gardeners and farmers. This highly popular program, started in 2012, now hosts a teaching garden, an incubator farm, numerous community gardens, and a community orchard. In addition to provision of free land, the program also provides garden infrastructure such as water meters and protections such as insurance. Gardens and farms are managed by community groups, non-profit organizations, and individuals who apply for a license to use the space for food production. In addition, the city requires garden and farm managers to develop a community benefit plan, which outlines how the garden or farm provides direct benefits to community residents.

### Plan-making

The community engagement processes resulting from the 2012 community health report reinforced the food access goals of the FPC and led to the creation of *Roadmap to Healthier Douglas*, a five year health plan for the community beginning in 2013. Further community visioning processes established five priority community health issues found in the Roadmap, with working groups moving forward the strategies established in the plan relating to healthy foods, health services, mental health, physical activity, and poverty and employment opportunity.<sup>33</sup> Ongoing efforts to implement this plan are supported by LiveWell Lawrence, a coalition of over 150 community leaders.<sup>24</sup> In order for the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department to maintain their accreditation, staff must complete a community health assessment and community health plan every 5 years. A new plan



Chef Rafael Gonzalez, owner of Global Café in Downtown Lawrence, participates in the Chefs Challenge at the County Fair, a now-annual event launched in 2012 by the Douglas County Food Policy Council to infuse local produce and cooking into the festivities of this cherished County agricultural tradition. (Credit: A. Shafer Photography)



is in the works and scheduled to be adopted in 2018. Hunger and food access has been identified as one of 9 top community issues.<sup>28</sup>

Similar to the successful public health partnership, the FPC's desire to be a collaborative partner with other local government agencies has extended to the planning department. Collaborating with the Metropolitan Planning Commission has allowed the FPC to be instrumental in participating in the planning processes and reviewing and contributing to plans with food systems language.<sup>20</sup> For example, attention to local and regional food systems is found in the county's more traditional set of formal plans. The Lawrence-Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Commission, in partnership with Douglas County Board of County Commissioners and the Lawrence City Commission, made multiple amendments to the *Horizon 2020* comprehensive plan in 2009 and 2011. The growth management portion of the plan limited development beyond the urban growth boundary, largely in part to protect high quality agricultural land. The environmental chapter too emphasizes strong protections for farmland and the development of a local food program.<sup>34</sup> The Lawrence-Douglas County Joint Planning Commission passed agriculture tourism regulations in 2014 easing the requirements for conditional use permits and special event permits for agritourism uses.<sup>24</sup> During this same year, the assistant planning director was appointed to the FPC as a staff liaison, providing additional staff support and generating additional local government buy-in for connecting planning and food. Because of this appointment, when the county most recently updated their comprehensive plan, a clear food component was included.

## Policies

The early creation of detailed analysis and assessment helped the FPC identify where it was necessary to permanently modified existing legislation and create new legislation to ensure systemic change from production to consumption. Several of the policies in Lawrence and Douglas County have focused on easing restrictions for production and processing. For example, in 2009, shortly before the creation of the FPC, the City of Lawrence amended their municipal code's section on regulation of animals via an ordinance to allow the raising of fowl on residential property.<sup>35</sup> In 2011, a resolution was passed by the county to fund the Natural and Cultural Heritage Grant Program, using local matching dollars for conservation easements on prime agricultural lands.<sup>36</sup> During this same time, Indigenous Food Day, was created via a 2011 county proclamation to highlight the importance of food within society and recognize the heritage and food traditions of indigenous populations.<sup>20</sup>

Since the hiring of the food systems coordinator in 2015, the pace of FPC's ability to implement programs and policy has increased. In 2016, the sustainability director and food systems coordinator worked closely with the Lawrence-Douglas County Planning Department to develop a series of policies to support urban agriculture and update the City of Lawrence Land Development Code. The code now defines "what practices residents can do by-right, what regulations limit those practices, an Urban Farm Special Use Permit for activities that exceed the allowed practices, and the way urban agriculture regulations will be enforced."<sup>37</sup>



Douglas County Food Policy Council members past and present met in June 2016 to reflect on and dream about their local food system, helping launch the public engagement process for the creation of the Douglas County Food System Plan, adopted a year later by City of Lawrence and Douglas County Commissions. (Photo Credit: Helen Schnoes)



Douglas County, in conjunction with KSU Research and Extension and the County Fairgrounds, modified their non-binding policy on using an incubator kitchen located on the county fairgrounds. They decreased usage costs, increased hours of operation, and created an easier application process.<sup>24</sup> The newly branded **Culinary Commons** community incubator kitchen now supports emerging food entrepreneurs by providing affordable and insured facilities. Additionally, the new food systems coordinator has played a significant role in the creation of the Douglas County Food System Plan, which is a part of the update to Horizon 2020. In the initial stages of the Horizon 2020 update, nineteen topics were identified as important to include in the update. These were summarized in an Issue Action Report.<sup>38</sup> Two issues directed the creation of stand-alone food system plan - Issue 13: Enhance Agricultural Uses & Rural Character in Douglas County, and Issue 14: Encourage/Support Local Food System Development. In July 2017, the City of Lawrence and Douglas County Commissioners officially adopted the *Douglas County Food System Plan*, which will be “incorporated by reference” into the comprehensive plan update.<sup>28</sup> The food system plan “serves as a guide for the development of a local food system and [to] enhance agricultural uses and rural character in Douglas County”.<sup>19</sup> The plan provides strategic recommendations in five goals areas related to food production and entrepreneurship, natural resource conservation, healthy food access, food system equity, and food waste. The plan’s development was informed by robust public engagement efforts – of which the food systems coordinator support was critical. These efforts include 13 focus groups with community organizations, a health equity initiative, a survey, and 5 public forums, as well as an update to the 2011 food system assessment.<sup>19</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Lawrence/Douglas’ experience as a Community of Innovation lends several insights and observations applicable to communities nationwide. Their ‘whole systems’ approach to uniting residents around community food systems can especially resonate with rural regions and small cities. Stakeholders emphasize the importance of institutionalizing food systems work via the creation of permanent staffing positions, policy modification, and continuous funding supports. This approach forms a ripe environment where community goals – often championed by active residents – can be cultivated. Stakeholders also place value in continually celebrating immediate successes while engaging in long term strategic planning. Additional lessons from Lawrence/Douglas include:

### *Build a Large and Diverse Table*

Lawrence/Douglas has exerted significant effort to set a table where all people were not just invited, but felt like trusted and respected equal partners. In addition to the ‘usual suspects’ of community food system planning, the FPC reserved spots for commodity producers, representatives from the Farm Bureau, large agro-business representatives, and chain grocery stores. The diversity of people present created a broader coalition to build community support. Intentionally setting the table to expand the work allowed for the community to rally around broader themes of healthy food and economic development.<sup>24</sup>

### *Dismantle Political Barriers and ‘Get Out of the Way’*

Dismantling unnecessary policy barriers can be just as beneficial as creating new supportive policies. Lawrence/Douglas municipal governments emphasize removing unnecessary policy barriers and supporting the work of community-led initiatives. Stakeholders believe food systems policy and planning has moved forward because the local government has actively worked to support residents with a vision, including removing unnecessary, outdated, or hindering policy. Political leaders such as the mayor and city manager have issued clear directives to staff to figure out how to ‘make it happen’, to navigate within existing regulations and remove ones that don’t make sense. For example, when the City of Lawrence was faced with restrictive zoning that didn’t allow agriculture and gardening as a land use, they were able to adeptly frame growing food as a recreational activity, an activity already accounted for in the zoning code.<sup>14</sup> Other city departments, such as the health department, see their job as providing data, methods, and evaluations to support work led by the community, rather than being the people leading the work.<sup>14</sup>

### *Provide Permanent Staff Support*

Numerous stakeholders emphasize the importance of having staff support for the Douglas County Food Policy Council and its associated programs. Lawrence/Douglas benefits from two key staff members, the sustainability director and the food systems coordinator, who are able to coordinate programs, facilitate communication between departments and organizations, and assist with strategic planning. Though the efforts of the sustainability director were crucial at the time of the FPC establishment, the food systems coordinator – a newer position – has taken on primary responsibility for facilitating and implementing the work of the FPC. Similar to other communities who cite the desire for permanent staffing, permanent positions allow for continuity when the FPC experiences turnover, and contribute to implementation of the FPC’s passed policies.<sup>14</sup>

### *Recognize Food as Part of Larger Community Systems*

Because of their efforts to build community-wide support for food systems, Lawrence/Douglas has successfully integrated food into other systems of community concern. For example, they have collaborated with affordable housing providers so that new construction for affordable housing will also include community gardening space.<sup>14</sup> The FPC has created a synergy between other county and city governments, most notably the health department and the school district. For example, the school district recently passed a bond-issue to re-design their elementary schools. As part of the re-design, all of the schools will include kitchens to accept local fresh food and have the facilities to process it for school lunches.

## CONCLUSION

Lawrence/Douglas is well situated to continue their successful efforts to strengthen connections between small and mid-sized producers and underserved consumers. They have built strong coalitions both within and outside local government, supported



those coalitions with permanent staff positions, identified and removed barriers, and enabled community members to lead the process. The creation of their first food systems plan, as an amendment to the comprehensive plan, holds promise for lasting change. In addition to the plan, the development of a second food system assessment in 2017 will allow for comparison and evaluation from their first 2011 food system assessment. Not only does Lawrence/Douglas stand out for their previous actions, they have the opportunity to become a leader in tracking data and evaluating food systems planning and policy change over time.

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