

## A Food System Plan for Austin

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### Summary

Austin, TX is a city with goals for a strong community food system, as expressed in *Imagine Austin*. The City proposes creating a strong local sustainable food system and increasing access to healthy food for all residents. Food system planning is necessary for creating a strong community food system, but Austin lacks a food system plan to ensure goals are met through policies appropriate for its food environment. A food system plan is a strategic tool adopted by local governments at the city, county, or regional level. Food system plans are shaped by the unique food environments of each community while adhering to current strategies in food system planning, leading to the main question of my research: **what are best practices for creating a food system plan for Austin?**

This report researched food system planning literature and analyzed five food system plans of four cities and one county in the United States and Canada – Seattle, WA, New York City, NY, Vancouver, Canada, Edmonton, Canada, and Multnomah County, OR – in order to create recommendations for an Austin food system plan. Analysis also included interviews with city staff from Edmonton, Seattle, and Vancouver. The analysis will provide insight into key elements of plans but focuses on three areas of interest for Austin; what role does geographical scale, such as neighborhoods or districts, have in food system plan implementation; which food system components are typically tracked and used as indicators; and, which entities are mentioned in reference to actions in the food system plan? The analysis led to the following recommendations.

### Recommendation #1: Include General Plan Elements

There are several key steps and components to a plan or strategy that all of the reviewed plans share, and each serves an important purpose for the general audience. The following elements were common across all plans and create a helpful framework.

#### KEY ELEMENTS TO INCLUDE:

- Background for food system context
- Plan-making process (includes community engagement)
- Goals and values
- Strategies and actions
- Implementation or next steps
- Tracking and measuring progress
- Research questions
- Recommendations

### **Recommendation #2: Create an Interdepartmental Team or Steering Committee**

Create an interdepartmental food team or a steering committee comprised of staff from multiple city departments to guide the plan creation and implementation. Collaborating across departments will build buy-in for the plan, forge allies, and allow for the integration of food in other city initiatives and operations. As city staff interviewed expressed, food affects all other systems (transportation, housing, land use, environment, health, etc), but it is necessary to show how addressing food can enhance or support the work already being done in their department rather than create additional work that is not advancing collaborative goals.

### **Recommendation #2: Involve Diverse Entities in Plan-making Process and Mention Specific Entities in Plan Implementation**

All five of the food system plans name key partnerships or entities that were involved in the plan-making process and implementation. The City should include diverse entities in the process of creating the plan and specifically mention key partners for implementation. The following table provides entities included in the plan as suggestions for the City to consider.

COMMON ENTITIES INCLUDED	LESS COMMON ENTITIES INCLUDED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• City departments</li><li>• Public agencies</li><li>• Regional entities</li><li>• Food businesses and restaurants</li><li>• Universities and schools</li><li>• Faith groups</li><li>• Farmers' markets</li><li>• Neighborhood groups</li><li>• Community gardens</li><li>• Food banks</li><li>• Food justice organizations</li><li>• Community members</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conventional food sector</li><li>• Developers</li><li>• Transportation authorities</li><li>• Childcare facilities</li><li>• Senior living centers</li><li>• Botanical gardens and parks</li><li>• State Cooperative Extension</li><li>• Distribution Centers</li><li>• Youth organizations</li></ul>

### **Recommendation #3: Allow for Multiple Geographical Scales for Actions**

There is not one specific geographical scale that is indicated to be more successful or appropriate. Out of the five plans, only three mention neighborhood-specific strategies, actions, or recommendations. The Vancouver food strategy is the only plan that indicates at which scale actions are to be implemented, and the City saw value in doing so. The New York City plan suggests partnering with organizations and entities participating in food system activities in various areas of the city. The Seattle plan mentions working closely with the Department of Neighborhoods. The Edmonton strategy did not address scale with the intention of giving allowing for flexibility in implementing projects. The City of Austin should allow for the flexibility of actions at multiple scales, whether at the neighborhood, city, or regional scale, but it would be helpful to also suggest specific actions that can be taken at each scale so that both residents and the City can prioritize where their time and energy can be invested.

#### **Recommendation #4: Focus on Specific Projects Through a Lens of Social Equity**

The City of Austin should focus on a few key projects, especially those that address issues of equity. As in the cases of Seattle and Edmonton, specific projects and policies led to widespread change in the food system. In Seattle, the Fresh Bucks program and the Farm to Table program use city dollars. These programs were created to meet community goals to increase access to healthy food in their neighborhoods and improve social equity. In Edmonton, changing zoning laws to allow for backyard bees and chickens were seen as successes. These pilot projects and zoning changes were seen as some of the biggest impacts of the respective food plans; thus, it is worthwhile for the City of Austin to consider focusing time, energy, and funds on specific projects that will meet the goals of community members in diverse contexts, especially in marginalized, underserved communities. Through community engagement with key stakeholders, priorities will surface to help guide the City's initiatives.

#### **Recommendation #5: Choose Measurable and Meaningful Food System Indicators**

There are certain food system components that are more advisable to track and use as indicators, which Austin could include in a future plan. The City of Austin's Office of Sustainability has gathered food sector data to create a picture of the state of the Austin food system. Much of the data is comparable to indicators proposed in the five food system plans. This report proposes a selection of indicators derived from the Austin's food sector data combined with suggested indicators from the five food system plans and literature. In order to make the plan stronger, appropriate benchmarks should be set for these indicators to measure progress. However, measuring progress should be based on useful indicators that can realistically be tracked and monitored. Also, indicators do not convey the full value achieved by certain actions or numbers that are advancing community goals and creating social capital. Thus, it is important to create room for narratives and qualitative data that explains the greater value the indicators provide to the food system.

#### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

By creating a food system plan, the City will be able to assess its current food system; listen to community voices and better understand priorities, create supporting policies, strategies, and actions; and establish a means of measuring progress. There is still a need for understanding the community's vision for a food system and creating policies to support that vision. Resoundingly, city staff interviewed emphasized that one of the most important impacts of plans was having the leverage to create policy. The City should begin to research how best to create a food system plan, how to invest its time and funds in food projects, create partnerships to further the work, and address social equity through food. Through collaborative partnerships, meaningful indicators, and a holistic perspective that addresses equity, a plan will strengthen Austin's food system and advance Imagine Austin goals and the community's vision for a sustainable local food system. Pieces of the groundwork have been laid and the community is ready; the time is now ripe for the City to lead efforts in planning for a strong community food system towards a vibrant, livable, connected Austin.