

Healthy Food Systems Planning in New York: A Landscape Analysis of Local Municipalities

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FOOD MARKET



ROCKEFELLER COLLEGE
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS & POLICY
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY | STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK





Introduction

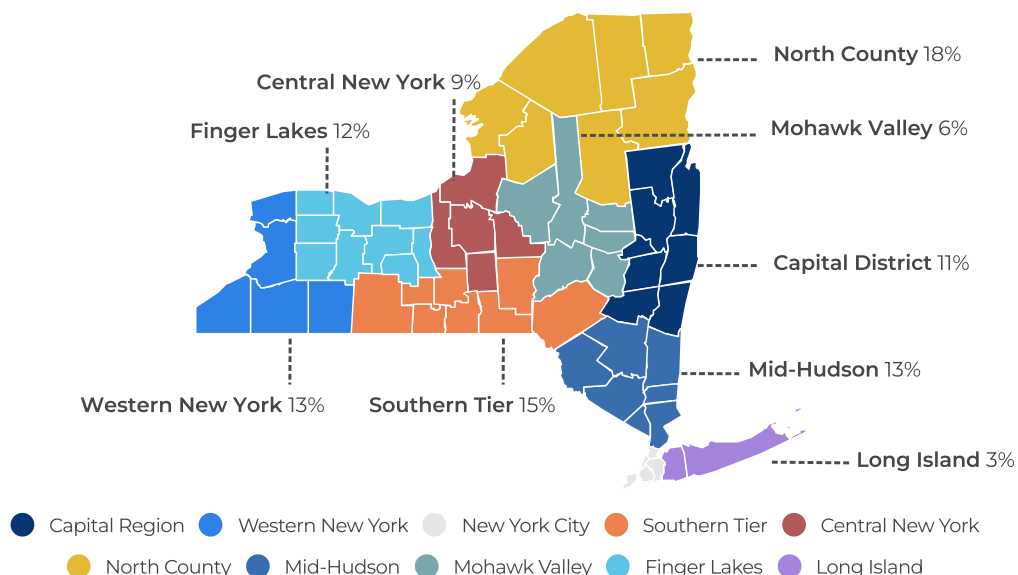
Food systems planning is a collaborative process among community-based organizations, government officials, health systems, producers, businesses, and citizens to develop and implement policies that shape how local and regional food systems operate. Local food system plans have the potential to reduce food insecurity, improve nutrition, buoy local economies, and bolster community engagement.

“To have the brightest future, the community needs better access to better food.” - *Survey Respondent*

To date, there has been little understanding of the degree to which municipalities have engaged in local food system planning efforts. To help fill this gap, in 2021, the New York Health Foundation (NYHealth) awarded Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy at the University at Albany a grant to survey town supervisors and village mayors across nine economic regions, excluding the New York City region—1,297 town supervisors and village mayors responded; response rates by region are shown below in Figure 1.

The research team collected data on a range of issues, including local capacity to support food systems plans and projects; perceptions of food insecurity, access, and quality; and challenges and opportunities associated with local food production. This issue brief summarizes key findings and offers recommendations to increase investment in local food systems.

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents by Region





Key Findings

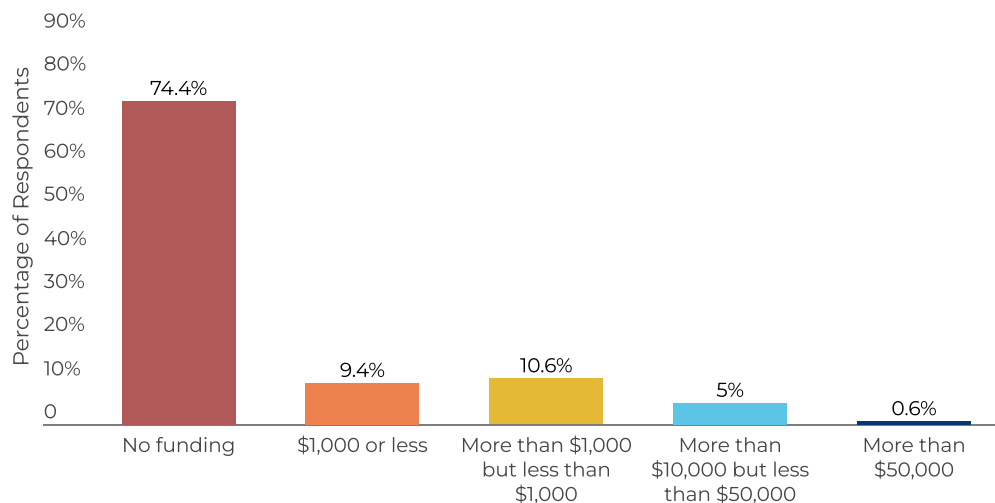
- **Municipalities have limited capacity to support local food systems planning.** Three-quarters (74.4%) of respondents have no funding to support local food systems projects.
- **More than half of the officials surveyed do not identify food insecurity as a top policy priority.** With local public finances strained, more visible problems with more straightforward policy fixes, like roads in need of repair, may take precedence.
- **Officials, particularly those in rural areas, worry about a lack of quality food retail outlets.** In rural areas, a lack of grocery stores can exacerbate existing transportation issues, especially to stores that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- **Local officials want to support local food businesses, but do not have adequate resources.** Researchers found little evidence of local food supply chains or local sourcing, and local officials lack funds for infrastructure that would enable producers to access local markets.

Municipalities Have Limited Capacity to Support Food Systems Projects

Municipalities face numerous food-related challenges, including the cost and quality of available food, lack of infrastructure, and the need for farmland protection. Food systems planning could help to strengthen local responses to these challenges, but officials have limited capacity to support planning. Local leaders report feeling unprepared to write grants, overcome regulatory challenges, and manage food-related projects. The food activities that officials do support—community gardens, farmers markets, and food drives—are often envisioned as community engagement tools, not as solutions to food insecurity or integral components of a larger food systems planning effort.

Funding is the most frequently cited challenge to food systems planning (Figure 2). Three-fourths of local officials report having no funding to support food systems projects. Yet, 28% have never applied for State or federal grants, suggesting a need for additional investment to develop this capability.

Figure 2. Distribution of Funds Available to Support Local Food Systems





Key Findings (continued)

Despite the challenges, local officials are optimistic. They describe constituents engaged in food systems work as “resilient” and “thoughtful” and express pride in their community’s ability to overcome challenges, a concept often called social capital. Growing evidence shows that communities with social capital can improve mental and physical health and reduce disparities.¹ Consistent with that finding, local officials who actively collaborate with their constituents, local businesses, and other municipalities report both better access to food and better support for food production.

“If there were more money, we would engage in projects.” - *Survey Respondent*

The Degree to Which Local Officials Recognize and Respond to Food Insecurity Varies

Across New York, food insecurity is prevalent and persistent.² However, the degree to which local officials recognize and can respond to food insecurity varies. More than half of the officials surveyed do not identify food insecurity as a top policy priority. With local public finances strained, more visible problems with more straightforward policy fixes, like roads in need of repair, may take precedence.

As one official explained, “Food isn’t part of the conversation in town governance. We are much more focused on infrastructure, zoning and related issues. But we work closely with Kiwanis on food distribution projects... addressing food insecurity issues [with] backpack programs.” It’s also possible that local officials believe food pantries are successfully helping to address food insecurity. Local officials are more likely to report that food pantries are “easy” or “somewhat easy” to access compared with grocery stores (Figure 3).

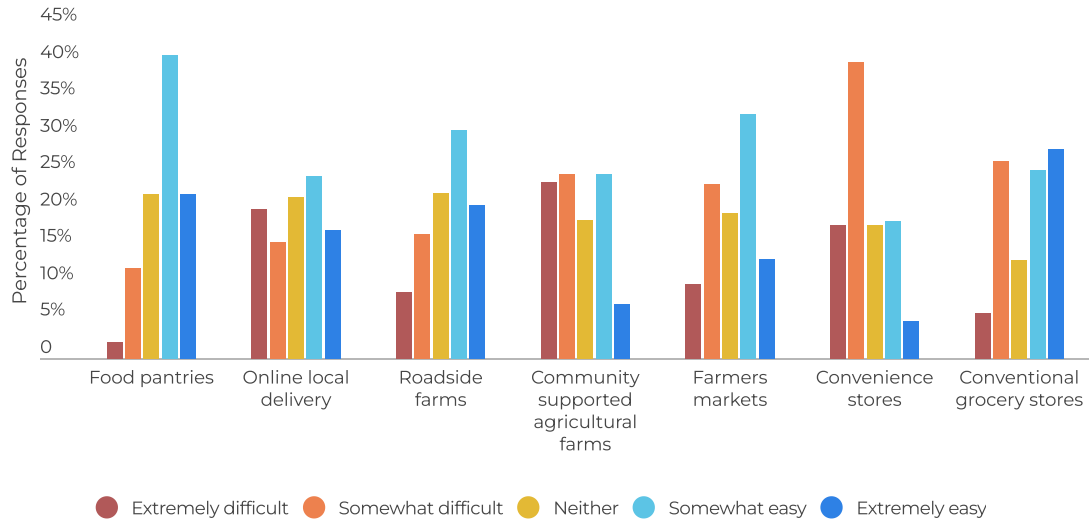
¹ Kawachi I. (1999). Social capital and community effects on population and individual health. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences Journal*. 896, 120-30. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.1999.tb08110.x.

² New York Health Foundation. “NYHealth Survey of Food and Health.” (August 2022) <https://nyhealthfoundation.org/resource/nyhealth-survey-of-food-and-health-2022/>



Key Findings (continued)

Figure 3. Community Access to Food Outlets

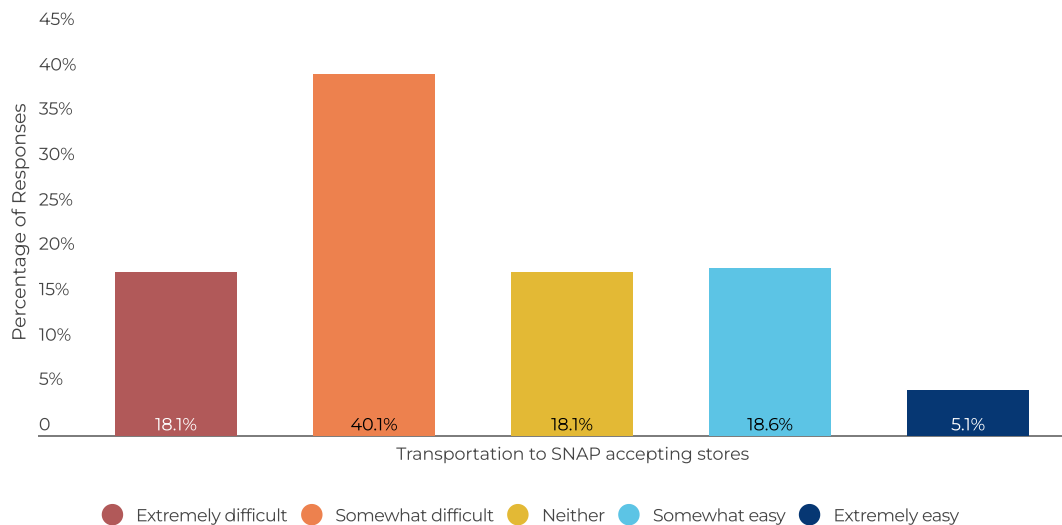


Local Officials Worry About Food Access and Quality

Food access and quality are issues that local officials are more likely to identify as policy priorities. Officials worry about the loss of independently owned grocery stores, particularly in rural regions. One official spent years actively recruiting potential grocers to her region; another shared that his community spent nearly 20 years trying to convince a large chain grocery to establish a store in his municipality. “We’re kind of at the mercy of the three or four chains [that] operate grocery stores in this part of the State,” explained a third.

The loss of grocery stores can exacerbate transportation issues, especially to stores that accept SNAP. Nearly 60% of local leaders reported that transportation to stores that accept SNAP is “difficult” or “somewhat difficult” (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Transportation to SNAP Accepting Stores





Key Findings (continued)

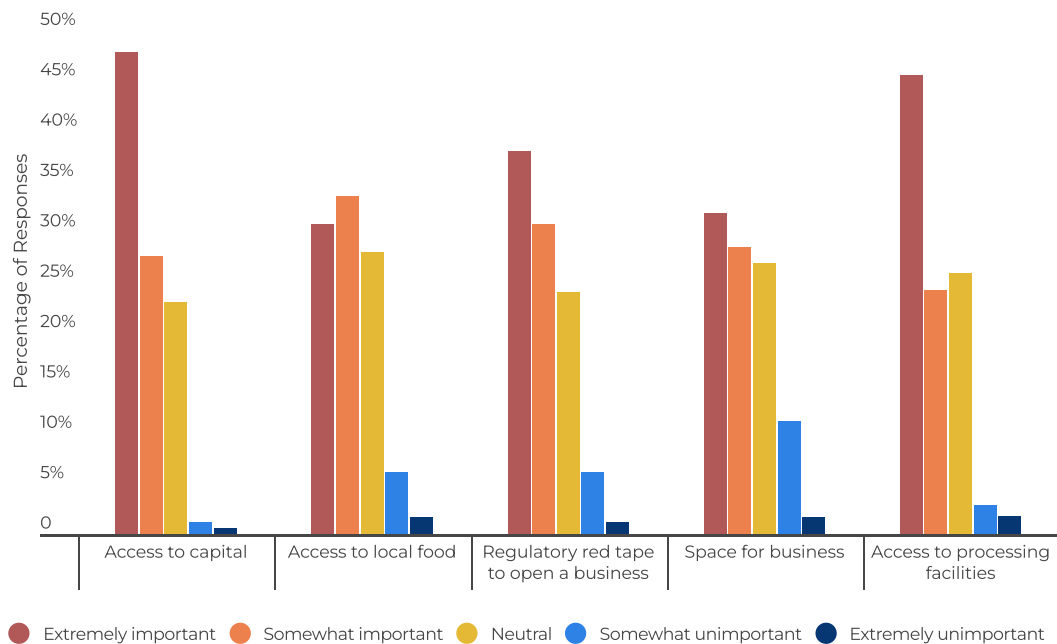
Officials also highlighted the need to address the quality of food available in their communities. Dollar General stores, a chain that has proliferated in New York State over the past decade, fill a gap in affordable grocery access. But many respondents expressed frustration about this reality, as these stores rarely offer healthy or fresh options.

"One of the things that I toy with, and I don't know how to do is: can I get the Dollar General to offer fresh food?" - *Survey Respondent*

Local Efforts to Support Food Production and Distribution Face Barriers

In theory, increased local food production could help solve the problems of food insecurity, access, and quality, while also catalyzing the local economy. But local officials face many barriers supporting local food production and distribution. The number of farms in New York State has significantly declined between 1997 and 2017.³ There are fewer small farms. And access to processing facilities and capital limit local producers' ability to expand (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Barriers for Food-Related Businesses



³ United States Department of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistical Service. "2017 Census of Agriculture State Profile". https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/New_York/cp99036.pdf



Key Findings (continued)

Local officials want to support local food businesses but feel they do not have adequate resources to do so. For example, many municipalities have organized farmers markets to promote local agriculture. But they recognize that this effort alone is not a long-term solution, as farmers markets are challenging for governments to service and do not provide reliable sources of income for producers.

New York State recently expanded efforts to support local production and distribution through Executive Order 32. This Order mandates that State agencies establish targets to purchase more agricultural products from New York and encourages local municipalities and school districts to establish their own targets. To meet targets, municipalities will need support. Researchers found little evidence of local food supply chains or local sourcing. And local leaders shared that they need additional resources for infrastructure to enable producers to access local markets.

“We need just basic food infrastructure, mainly being refrigeration or freezer storage infrastructure.” - *Survey Respondent*





Recommendations

Understanding how municipalities engage in food systems planning and the challenges they face is crucial to designing effective policies. These survey findings, along with best practices shared by food planning groups across the country, can inform next steps. Planning efforts to boost the physical and economic health of communities across New York State should include:

- ***Intentional collaboration:*** Formal partnerships can drive robust planning processes and are likely to improve outcomes. For example, partnerships that establish clear communication channels with officials and include active, in-person convening tend to lead to more measurable, sustainable outcomes.
- ***Greater monetary investment in food planning groups:*** Well-resourced food plans can strengthen collective advocacy efforts and advance policies that result in additional investment. Engaging multiple players in planning can build trust, break down siloes across sectors, and build buy-in to make plans a reality. NYHealth currently supports capacity building and technical assistance to accelerate and improve local plans.
- ***Increased local commitment to food systems planning:*** The United States Department of Agriculture and philanthropy have increased support for food systems planning, but more investment is needed to boost local officials' capacity, enabling them to take advantage of opportunities to improve food access and economic development. Local buy-in does not have to be financial. For example, the [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future's Food Policy Networks \(FPN\) project](#) supports the development of effective state and local food policy through networking, capacity building, research, and technical assistance. The Center works directly with food policy councils, national organizations, and other groups seeking to improve the food system.
- ***Statewide coordination:*** Eighteen states—not including New York—have their own food systems plans. New York could also develop a statewide food systems plan, building on existing local and regional efforts. NYHealth supports a cohort of local and regional groups well on their way to creating tailored, achievable food systems plans.



Reflections

Maura Ackerman is a director at Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance, a food planning group in New York State. She shares her reflections on this data brief and what it can mean for future food planning.

In this report, a striking revelation emerges: municipal leaders often fail to recognize the urgency of food insecurity within their communities. Frequently, issues of food insecurity and hunger remain concealed, overshadowed by more conspicuous and visible challenges. The consequence of this invisibility is that municipal leaders prioritize other issues while the gravity of food insecurity can thus remain underestimated.

This challenge continues as pandemic-era policies end, including the elimination of supplemental SNAP benefits in February 2023, and demand at local food pantries increases, straining the emergency food system well beyond its capacity. The act of eating largely remains a private affair within the confines of people's homes. Empty cupboards and barren fridges, though indicative of distress, continue to evade the attention of lawmakers, especially when compared to more tangible and public issues such as aging infrastructure.

Our modern globalized food system further exacerbates this invisibility. The complex journey of food from soil to plate remains obscured to both public officials and consumers alike. Beyond the individuals and households grappling with food insecurity, the challenges faced by our farmers, food service workers, distributors, and health care practitioners treating diet-related diseases are often overlooked by those in positions to effect policy changes. These are the very individuals who can usher in systemic and environmental adjustments that would ensure a nourishing food system for everyone, regardless of their circumstances.

For those of us actively engaged in food planning and advocacy, it is imperative that we make these issues more tangible, visible, and pressing to our public officials. By utilizing data, personal narratives, and connecting local food system concerns to broader health and economic outcomes for entire communities, we must transform these leaders into dedicated allies and champions of this crucial cause.

Maura Ackerman

Director, Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance



VOICE:
212-664-7656

FAX:
646-421-6029

MAIL:
1385 Broadway,
23rd Floor
New York, NY 10018

WEB:
www.nyhealthfoundation.org

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