

Developing a Sustainable, Local Food and Agriculture Program within a Sub-State Municipality

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Introduction

Developing and strengthening local and regional food systems has been a recent focus of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA-AMS, 2023) but a longstanding focus on activists across the nation. Using a City Region Food Systems (CRFS) lens for discussing opportunities to increase the activities of sub-state municipal food and agriculture programming accounts for a variety of considerations necessary for making appropriate recommendations. City Region Food Systems bridge urban and rural residents and policy makers to increase food access, boost economic activity through job creation, enhance a region's resilience, protect and manage natural resources and strengthen relationships and linkages between and throughout the geographical region (Blay-Palmer et al, 2018).

The case studies conducted in this research exemplify how regions, in the United States, can support more localized food production, preserve agricultural lands, and promote economic activities related to agriculture, such as agritourism. While the main case studies are focused on county level programs and funding mechanisms, these counties are reliant on the urban-rural linkages to provide the production space and the market demand. For example, a rural county may have robust agricultural programming but is reliant upon a neighboring metropolitan area for market demand both within and outside of the county. County governments acknowledge the need for collaborative and regional activities, as Howard County states "there is no way the government alone can take on all the sustainability challenges that we face" so they "try our best to work collaboratively and across agencies" (Live Green Howard, n.d.).

Sub-state municipalities is a broad term that encompasses a variety of local governmental bodies. The most common sub-state municipality in the United States is a county but others include cities, towns, townships, and special districts including soil and water conservation districts. Sub-state municipalities have some level of legal authority which may include, “executive and legislative authorities, typically related to budget, taxes and land use policy” (Freedgood, 2024, p. 56). Sub-state municipalities have a range of ways they can support food systems and agriculture including land use planning and zoning policies, agricultural zones, food system and climate action plans, cooperative extension and grant programs (Freedgood, 2024). Counties may own and operate a myriad of services and aspects of the systems related to food production, processing, distribution, and access, including but not limited to transportation infrastructure and public school cafeterias. Counties shoulder various responsibilities to their citizens including protecting consumers, emergency management, economic and community development, managing land use and zoning codes, and protecting environmental assets (Mackey & Bryant, 2023).

Local governments vary in their revenue generation activities and are reliant on funding sources at a federal, state and local level. The complexity of funding sources can be seen in any publicly available sub-state municipal budget document, including those reviewed for the case studies within this research paper. Funding for explicit departments and/or programming related to food and agriculture is necessary for sub-state municipalities to expand their activities. This paper provides an overview of direct funding mechanisms for expanding food and agriculture programming at a sub-state municipal level and uses case studies to exemplify how these funding mechanisms can be put into practice for programmatic activities.

Direct Funding Mechanisms for Food & Agriculture Programming

An initial landscape analysis was conducted in order to understand funding mechanisms that sub-state municipalities can utilize to create and enhance programs. Commonly used funding mechanisms include tax levies and bonds, sales taxes, various fees, and federal and state grant programs. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive list of federal and state grant programs. Information on federal grants and programs can be found through the federal grant portal, grants.gov, and the recently updated USDA Local and Regional Food System Resource Guide which provides resources across seven focus areas including land conservation, production, processing, aggregation/distribution, markets/consumers, food loss and waste reduction and recovery, and research, education and technical assistance programs (USDA-AMS, 2023). These key focus areas were also prominent in the program design found through case study analysis of various sub-state programming throughout the nation.

Municipal bonds are a commonly used financing option for infrastructure development that necessitates the support of the community, often received through an in-favor vote on a bond measure (Public Finance Network (PFN), 2019). The majority of projects funded by bonds are education, transportation, and utilities, but public and environmental facilities including public parks and recreation can be built with bond dollars (PFN, 2019). The legal and regulatory aspects of bond issuance are beyond the scope of this research and will need to be assessed by the sub-state municipality desiring to leverage a bond for funding food and agriculture related projects including land conservation and publicly owned infrastructure.

Mill levies are a form of property taxes that are assessed on the value of privately owned land and structures. Mill levies can fund general revenue, public services, or discrete projects and programs. Similar to bonds, mill levies may require public approval through a vote but the legal and regulatory guidelines vary from state to state so before pursuing this as a funding mechanism, additional research to determine legality for a specific sub-state municipality is necessary. A case study on Missoula County, Montana shows how a bond and mill levy can be used together to expand food and agriculture programming, whereas the case study on Facquier County, Virginia provides an example of a program that was launched through a levy focused on farmland conservation and has expanded programmatically through general budget allocations.

Other funding mechanisms that can be explored are sales taxes. At a federal level, there has been research conducted on levying taxes on ultra processed foods, soda, and other high sugar foods leading to better health outcomes (Valizadeh & Ng, 2024). Various nations, including Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, and Barbados have taxes on sweetened beverages with the goal of better health outcomes and shifting consumer purchasing habits (Global Food Research Program, n.d.). However, no research was found on using revenue generated by these taxes on creating a sub-state municipal program focused on food and agriculture. Through this research, one county, Boulder County, Colorado, is used as a case study showing how an additional sales tax, or local option tax, can be levied to support sub-state municipal programming.

In addition to taxes and bonds, fees can be used as a funding source for municipal activities. Depending on state legislation, sub-state municipalities may be able to pass local legislation to issue fees on certain products. One commonly discussed fee is a plastic bag fee, which has been instituted in countries across the world but has not been instituted in the US. While there has been some movement at state level bans or fees, there has also been preemptive action taken at a state level to limit local governments ability to pass such bans or fees (Sellers & Scharff, 2020). The specific legal and regulatory aspects of a fee or ban are beyond the scope of this research and needs to be further addressed by individual sub-state municipalities seeking this type of funding mechanism. If a sub-state municipality is able to move forward with a fee, legislation passed at a county level would designate the use of funds acquired by the fees and those uses may include food and agriculture related programming or other environmental activities. The Howard County, Maryland case study provides an example of a plastic bag fee that provides funding for reusable bags at local food pantries and a grant program that addresses key goals from a corresponding climate action plan (Howard County Maryland, 2019).

Utilizing discretionary funds to offer agricultural and food system programming can be done through political will. Additional revenue generation measures may be required to kick-start a program but through the election of politicians that support agricultural vitality and a populous that deems agriculture relevant and agricultural adjacent businesses worthy of a portion of their tax dollars, programming can be funded through general property tax collection and specific grant programs that are applied for and administered by the sub-state municipality itself.

Case Studies

Fauquier County Virginia

Fauquier County is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and is a gateway from Appalachia into the D.C. Metropolitan area. There are approximately 75,000 residents, as of 2023 (Fauquier County - Data Explorer, 2022). The agriculture programming in Fauquier County began through the creation of a purchase of development rights (PDR) program in 2002 (Fauquier County Virginia, n.d.). In 1998, Fauquier County initiated a Farmland Study with three purposes, 1) “assess the characteristics and personality of Fauquier County’s agriculture industry and agricultural landowners”, 2) “assess the educational and service need of agricultural and forest landowners”, and 3) “to develop a database of locally produced agricultural products” (Fauquier, 1999).

The current department offers a plethora of programs all bucketed under five kinds of activities, promotion, marketing, education, supporting, and collaborating. The department produces a farm product directory, a directory of retail access points including farmers markets and roadside stands, organizes farm tours, promotes agritourism opportunities including vineyard and brewery visits, a marketing program - HomeGrown, farm and cold storage linking programs, collaboration in an educational farm, and farmland preservation programs (Fauquier County Virginia, n.d.). To uplift the agricultural heritage of Fauquier County, the department recognizes century farms through a designation program. In addition to the marketing, promotion, and support services, the Agriculture Department coordinates feasibility studies, including a regional food port report. The county’s agriculture department is advised by the Fauquier County Agricultural Development Advisory Committee. This committee is authorized through the

municipal code and is composed of appointed members representing the agricultural economy throughout the County (Fauquier County Virginia, n.d.).

In 2004, the County adopted an article that creates a conservation easement service district “with boundaries that follow the boundaries of the county, and which district includes all real and personal property located within the boundaries of the county” (Fauquier County, 2004). This article gives the County Board of Supervisors the opportunity to assess an annual levy that provides funding for acquiring conservation easements (Fauquier County, 2004). Twenty years later, the agricultural activities of the county have expanded significantly. The budget has tripled since 2022, with a proposed budget of \$392,953 in FY 2025 compared to \$67,688 in FY 2022. The budget includes three staff positions and three main program areas, Agricultural Marketing and Promotion, Sustainable Agricultural Production, and Agricultural Economy Advice and Data (Fauquier County, Virginia, 2024). Aside from the programmatic activities, the Economic Development Authority provides grant dollars for an Agricultural Production Mini-Grant, awarding \$25,000 per year with requests totaling over \$700,000. Another agricultural program that the County participates in is the Fauquier Education Farm. The cost was originally split between County Extension and the Agricultural Department, with a grant from the County paying for the management of the farm. Now the farm operates as a separate non-profit entity with the County participating as an advisory role and a minimal funding role. The farm provides educational opportunities as well as new farmer incubation programming (Fauquier Education Farm, 2014).

An interview with department staff was conducted to better understand the revenue sources for the department. The administrative manager shared that the funding is approved by the board of supervisors and comes from a variety of sources including a portion of the levy for the Purchase

of Development Rights program, state grants including from the Department of Forestry and the Land Conservation Foundation, and general property taxes. According to the staff, every board of supervisors has had farmer representation. This shows that the residents of Fauquier County vote in support of the agricultural heritage and conservation goals set forth by the County. A key takeaway from the conversation with staff was that the department has big ideas with a small budget. Each year more funding is requested and programmatic activities are expanded. The residents and visitors of Fauquier County are supportive of this agricultural focus and the farmers, the main beneficiaries of these efforts, are well served.

Howard County Maryland

Howard County is located between the DC Metropolitan and the Baltimore Metropolitan area and has a total population of just over 330,000 people (About Howard County, n.d.). The Howard County government in Maryland provides a plethora of activities that serve the community as it relates to food systems and broader sustainability. Howard County has an Office of Community Sustainability that includes various departments and funding bodies, including Planning and Zoning, Public Works, Recreation and Parks, and Economic Development. To uplift the County's activities, along with non-governmental activities, the Howard County Office of Community Sustainability created the Live Green Howard project to showcase the vast activities related to food and agriculture that exist within the sub-state municipality. By 2018, the Office of Community Sustainability had been awarded over \$7.5 million in grant dollars from federal and state programs as well as private and public foundations (Live Green Howard County, n.d.). In 2023, Howard County further invested in its agricultural programs by creating

an Office of Agriculture that has a physical location for community engagement and educational services. The Office of Agriculture, housed under the Department of County Administration, will share space with the Howard County Economic Development Authority's Director of Agricultural Business Development, the Department of Planning and Zoning, and University of Maryland Extension (Live Green Howard County, 2023). Budget details are not available on this specific office but broader budget information for the County is shared below.

Highlighted in the approval budget for FY 2024, Howard County is spending \$150,000 on a feasibility study for a USDA meat processing facility, \$500,000 for a conservation easement pilot program, and an additional \$250,000 for various agricultural programs including grants for farmers, restaurant procurement promotion program “We are HoCo Fresh”, and supporting the Roving Radish. Agricultural Preservation is accounted for through special revenue funds and saw a 67% increase from FY 2023 to FY 2024, for a total budget allocation of \$19,385,500. The Disposable Plastics Reduction Fund saw a 6.5% increase, for a total of \$1,177,000 in FY 2024. The Office of Community Sustainability, through the County Administration Department, has an approved budget of \$6,561,854 in FY 2024, which includes food system activities outside of agricultural land preservation. Additional, non-departmental operating funds related to food and agriculture include the agricultural education initiative, SNAP summer program expansion match dollars and the climate action plan. The main revenue sources are property and income taxes. Other taxes and fees include recordation tax, transfer tax, admissions and amusement tax, hotel/motel tax, and charges for services, licenses and permits (Howard County Maryland, 2024).

Howard County's Office of Community Sustainability provides resources to connect residents and visitors directly to retail access points for sourcing local food, has a marketing program "HOCO Fresh" to increase purchasing of produce and proteins grown in Howard County by restaurants and businesses, designed an educational farm in collaboration with their local 4-H students, and operates the Roving Radish, a mobile market and meal kit delivery vehicle (Live Green Howard County, n.d.). These efforts were spearheaded by a 2014 Food Policy Task Force that eventually led to the hiring of an Agricultural Coordinator. Various reports have been conducted including a food hub study. Based on the approved budget, it is anticipated that a meat processing facility feasibility study will be available in the near future.

Outside of the food system specific programming, Howard County's Office of Community Sustainability manages a plastic bag fee program that uses revenue to provide reusable grocery bags at area food pantries and funds a grant program, where awarded grant projects are aligned with the county's climate action plan. The plastic bag fee was adopted by the County Council during the 2019 legislative session by the approval of Bill No. 64-2019. The five cents per bag fee was imposed on all stores that offer bags to customers who purchase products placed in a disposable bag. To cover the administrative costs of managing the fees, the store can retain up to 20% of the collected fees. The remaining 80% of the collected fees are collected by the County. The fees are collected and stored in the Disposable Plastics Reduction Fund that has three purposes. The first purpose is to provide reusable bags to vulnerable county residents, award grants to entities performing various environmental activities, and public education about reducing disposable plastic use, as well as the cost of implementing, administering and enforcing the legislation (Bill No. 64-2019, 2019).

The County is projecting over \$1,000,000 in revenue from the fee in FY 2024. From the initiation of the fee in 2020 to October 2024, Howard County has distributed over 13,500 reusable grocery bags through various food banks, hunger relief and food distribution operations, and the County's Roving Radish meal kit and marketplace (Live Green Howard County, n.d.). The Plastic Reduction and Environmental Protection (PREP) Grant program began in 2021 and has close to \$1,500,000 in projects through 2024 (Live Green Howard County, n.d.). Grant awards in 2024 were tied to strategies and actions outlined in the County's Climate Action and Resiliency Plan. Actions connected to food systems and agriculture including supporting nature based climate solutions such as improving soil health and carbon sequestration, reducing organic waste sent to landfills, and expanding the use of sustainable materials (Howard County Climate Forward, 2024). Counties that are able to create new revenue streams through an approved fee, like a plastic bag fee, can direct funds to specific agricultural or food system programming.

Missoula County Montana

Missoula County Montana is located in the western part of Montana with a population of almost 118,000 people (Missoula County, MT, n.d.). Montana is endearingly called Big Sky Country because of their scenic, open landscape that is uninterrupted by city development. Preserving this scenery is critical to sub-state municipal governments, like Missoula County. Missoula County has successfully passed three open space bonds which fund a variety of programming that align with the purpose of "conserving, enjoying and enhancing open space land, conserving agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and rivers, lakes and streams, protecting scenic

views, and making improvements to open space lands” (Missoula County, MT, 2018). The community initiated the bond measure to raise \$15,000,000 in 2018 through a letter to the Board of County Commissioners, containing the support of 325 county residents (Residents of Missoula County, 2018).

Food and agricultural programming span various focus areas within the Land & Communities subsector of the County Government. Land & Communities itself falls within the broader Community Development governmental structure. Land & Communities included planning, development and sustainability, parks, trails and open lands, grants and community programs, and ecology and extension (Missoula County, 2024). There is an active Open Lands Citizen Advisory Committee, created in 2006 (Open Lands Citizen Advisory Committee, 2023) and a Food Policy Advisory Board, created in 2020 (Food Policy Advisory Board, 2020).

The Lands & Community 2023 Annual Report highlights a variety of food and agricultural sector impacts including a rural grant program, water and irrigation district grants, nutrition education program series, master gardener program, 4-H programming for youth, support of the Corner Farm Village, open space protection on agricultural lands, land stewardship awards for agricultural operators, and renovation of the fairgrounds (Missoula County, 2024).

Missoula County is facing development pressure and the open space bond provides funding for conservation easements. Another way the County is supporting open lands is by working with developers to establish the “Corner Farm Village: A Sustainable Vision for Farmland Conservation and Community Cohesion” (Missoula County, 2024). This type of planned neighborhood incorporates the need for more housing units with the values of farmland preservation, agriculture business viability, natural resource protection, and bridging the urban-rural divide (Missoula County, 2024). While the County isn’t the developer, the Planning,

Development & Sustainability team from the County worked closely with the developers to ensure this type of development was possible and served the greatest number of residents possible.

Another Missoula County governmental entity that works within the food and agricultural programming is the Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board. In 2024, the advisory board wrote a letter to the Open Space Advisory Committee, recommending the approval of funding for the Corner Farm Project. The letter outlines the ways that the Corner Farm Project aligns with a variety of sub-state municipal goals including the conservation of agricultural lands, the County's 2016 Growth Policy and the Climate Ready Missoula Plan (Berglund, 2024). Aside for policy letters to guide decision making at the County level, the advisory board issues quarterly newsletters highlighting local events, data briefings, and survey results. The Advisory Board conducted a food community assessment survey in spring of 2024 in an "effort to learn more about what Missoulians want out of their food system and how the Food Policy Advisory Board can serve the community (Food Policy Advisory Board, 2024). The survey results identified food policy community priorities including the protection of agricultural lands from development, protecting natural resources, increasing access to healthy food, promoting more local food production, and growing the regional food economy (Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board, 2024).

The Department of Ecology & Extension had an approved 2023-2024 budget of almost \$6,000,000 in expenses with over \$17,000,000 in revenue. The primary driver of revenue at this time is bond proceeds. Additional financial support for the Missoula County Department of Ecology & Extension is provided by the Healthy Acres Healthy Communities Foundation (Healthy Acres Healthy Communities Foundation, 2016). This public foundation receives

donations and provides philanthropic support directly to the County department. According to the most recent 990 filing for Healthy Acres Healthy Communities Foundation, their 2023 annual expenses was less than \$12,000 so the funding provided to the County department is minimal (Suozzo et al, 2024). This department has relocated to the Gerald W Marks Exploration Center and Rocky Mountain Gardens, which is open to the public and offers programs in “horticulture, nutrition dedication, ecosystem management and youth development” (Missoula County, 2024).

Through the continued engagement of the residents of Missoula County Montana, public officials are reminded of the values of their constituency, leading to the continued support of programming that preserves open lands, supports regional food systems, and protects natural resources.

Boulder County Colorado

Boulder County Colorado, located in north-central Colorado, includes urban centers, rural farmland and mountain landscapes, is home to over 325,000 people (Boulder County, n.d.). The county government of Boulder has identified two values aligned with agriculture and food systems - environmental sustainability and open space conservation. These guiding values allowed for eight voter-approved sales tax resolutions, beginning in 1994 that provide funding specifically for open spaces and, most recently, sustainability efforts (Boulder County, CO, 2024b). The original resolution identified that the proceeds of the tax will be used for the purpose of acquiring real property and pay for the costs related to the acquisition and construction of trails, trailheads, water improvements, and to manage, patrol and maintain all open space property, as long as the open space serves functions related to buffer zones between urban and rural areas, preservation of critical ecosystems and natural areas, linkages and trails,

access to public bodies of water, areas of environmental preservation, outdoor passive recreation, and the conservation of natural resources which includes range and agricultural lands (Resolution No. 93-174, 1993). Through a number of voter-approved resolutions, the sales tax proceeds and functions have shifted to address a broader set of goals, including the allocation of 0.125% sales and use tax as a Boulder County Sustainability Tax (Office of Sustainability, Climate Action & Resilience (OSCAR), 2024).

The 2023 report on the Boulder County Sustainability Tax showcases expansive impacts generated from the revenue provided by the sales and use tax. There are programs beyond the scope of food systems and agriculture but this case study will highlight six programs - Circular Economy Funding, Climate Innovation Fund, Farm Stand Pilot, Fruit and Veg Longmont, Sustainable Food and Agriculture Fund and the WIC Gap Farmers Market Program. The Circular Economy Funding program funded two agriculture and food based projects in 2023, including the expansion of on-farm composting and equipment purchasing at a food market for increased efficiency (OSCAR, 2024). The Climate Innovation Fund focused on projects that provided carbon removal and landscape resilience opportunities. In total, 136 acres of land boosted soil health to capture 120 metric tons of carbon from the atmosphere (OSCAR, 2024).

In an effort to support local agricultural producers, the Office of Sustainability, Climate Action and Resilience identified a need to simplify the permitting process for farm stands. In collaboration with agricultural producers and expert working groups including various County departments, OSCAR has created a pre-approved farm stand design that will be available to the public at no cost (OSCAR, 2024). Another way OSCAR is addressing access to fresh fruit and vegetables is through a program that serves families that face food insecurity but are ineligible for federal food assistance programs. This program provides coupons for purchasing fruit and

vegetables at farmers markets, farm stands, and independently owned grocery stores (OSCAR, 2024). Another program, the WIC Gap Farmers Market Program, further increases access to fresh, locally grown produce. The funds from the sustainability tax provide home delivery of fresh food to families that receive SNAP and/or WIC benefits on a weekly basis (OSCAR, 2024).

The Sustainable Food and Agriculture Fund focuses on four areas - farmer education, farmers market infrastructure, sustainable local food and crop processing, and programmatic support for frontline farm workers (OSCAR, 2024). This fund received \$405,000 directly from the sustainability tax (Boulder County, CO, 2024a). In 2023, the Sustainable Food and Agriculture Fund's grant allocations produced 132,977 lbs of local food through regenerative practices on 500 acres of land, supported 2,000 frontline workers, and reached over 16,000 people with a variety of educational programming (OSCAR, 2024).

The Office of Sustainability, Climate Action and Resilience has a growing budget year over year. In 2021, expense actuals totalled \$5,842,477. By 2024, the approved budget for expenditures was \$18,779,019, with the largest change in the Energy sub-section of the Office (Open Gov, 2024). The Sustainability Tax provided just over \$11,000,000 in FY 2023 and future projects show this revenue stream growing modestly over the next five years, surpassing \$12,000,000 by 2029 (Office of Financial Management, 2024). At the time of this writing, it is unclear where the revenue shortfall will be generated from but with the understanding of the County's prioritizing, it may be assumed that the general fund will cover the different between the revenue generated from the sustainability tax and the budget of the Office of Sustainability, Climate Action and Resilience. Future research conducted on the continuation of the sales and use tax passage and

use of funds for agriculture and food system efforts will provide clarity on whether or not these programs are aligned with the community's expectations and values.

Key Takeaways

Four key takeaways emerged through the research process and are highlighted as recommended actions for any sub-state municipality striving to protect agricultural heritage and boost economic viability for food based businesses. The four areas include the preservation of land, creation of food councils and/or task forces, generation of strategic plans and reports, and the need for public will. Each of these is addressed, in detail, in the following subsections.

Agricultural Land Preservation

A community's valuation of open spaces was oftentimes used as a decision making tool for funding programming related to agriculture and food systems. In the case of all the studied counties, the agricultural and open space protection was one of the earliest activities taken on by sub-state municipalities. The author recommends that any sub-state municipality interested in beginning or expanding programming related to agriculture and food systems begin by assessing what existing mechanisms are available for open space and agricultural land protection. If there is an existing program, such as purchase or transfer of development rights, or conservation easement funding mechanisms, review the resolution or legislation that created this program. There may be provisions within the already adopted rule that support the expansion of programming and at the very least, an already established resolution declares a level of community interest. This research did not go into detail on various mechanisms that can be used

for agricultural land protection and open space conservation as various resources exist.

Organizations like American Farmland Trust, the Nature Conservancy, and place-based land trusts often support activities related to land conservation. Collaborations between non-profit organizations and sub-state municipal governments provide an appropriate avenue for protecting and preserving agricultural lands and open spaces. Mechanisms for incentivizing land preservation was outside of the scope of this research paper but may include property tax relief and use-value assessments (Freedgood, 2024).

Food Policy Councils & Task Forces

Another trend identified through this research was the existence of food policy councils and task forces. Oftentimes, the creation of this group informed the expansion of programmatic activities at the sub-state municipal level. Beyond direct land conservation, planning and zoning policies can influence the future of open spaces and agricultural lands. Zoning plays a role in activities that are allowed in geographical areas, such as farming activities and food service facilities (Freedgood, 2024). Ensuring that these policies align with the community's values around local food systems and agricultural heritage are necessary and having an active food policy council is one vehicle to achieve that alignment. Food policy councils make recommendations to governing bodies and act as a voice for the agricultural communities as members have a deep understanding of the local food system (Dillon, 2007). Some counties appoint members from various agricultural industries and some members are elected by the community. The structure of each council is determined by the governing body. If a sub-state municipality does not have an active food policy council or task force, this research indicates that forming one may be a priority step in expanding programming that supports food and agriculture at the local level.

Creation of Plans & Reports

All the case studies reference plans or reports that showcase the activities at a sub-state municipal level. Counties, themselves, undertake feasibility studies and planning studies to determine the best course of action. These types of studies can be funded by federal or state grant dollars and may be necessary to be awarded high dollar value grants in the future. Studies that include surveys of the residents of a locale can be used to show community appetite for programmatic offerings or funding opportunities, such as the passage of a mill levy or sales tax resolution. Reporting on the impact of activities is an important aspect of sub-state municipal transparency. Funding that comes directly from a tax base, such as sales tax or mill levies, is coming out of the pockets of residents and visitors to a locale. Providing accurate and timely information about the activities performed, impact achieved, and lessons learned is good practice. Reports and plans go beyond serving the constituents of the sub-state municipality itself and provide other sub-state municipality leaders and researchers with examples of how programmatic offerings can be structured, funded, and expanded. Each county studied in this research paper provided a plethora of information through websites but the quality of websites and reports varied. Consideration of accessibility should be considered when generating plans and reports and the associated costs of accessibility should be included in budgets.

Broader plans, such as a Comprehensive Plan or Climate Action Plan, can outline values and goals of a sub-state municipality that are aligned with agriculture and food system activities. These types of plans are referenced in decision making discussions including budgeting processes and development approval processes. Grant programs that can be administered by the sub-state municipality can use a Climate Action Plan to determine focus areas, as seen in the Howard County case study. Leveraging an existing food policy council or creating a specialized

task force to support the inclusion of agriculture and food system values into a broader plan can be a critical action taken by sub-state municipalities.

Political Will & Community Appetite

Beyond the tools listed above, an appetite for offering these programmatic services at the sub-state level is required by politicians and the general public. There were many examples of county level activities that floundered when individuals moved on from their political positions, such as The Grove in Harford County, Maryland (Barton, 2022) and a variety of efforts taken by a Director of Rural Economic Development in Woodbury County, Iowa (Dillon, 2007). To ensure longevity in programming, as seen in Missoula, Boulder, Howard and Fauquier counties, the general public needs to be in favor of these activities while the elected politicians need to be held accountable to supporting these values through the budgeting and rulemaking process. Without the broad base of support, these programs and funding apparatus would be short lived and the long-term benefits of land and resource conservation, economic development, and health outcomes would not be experienced.

Conclusion

This research process required a depth of inquiry into the specific details of county-level government structure and fiscal management that varies from one sub-state municipality to the next. To fully understand the programmatic offerings of any level of government, researchers would need to speak to a variety of staff members and those individuals may be hard to reach. Navigating bureaucracy is cumbersome and understanding the intricacies of budget creation and fiscal oversight was beyond the scope and level of expertise of the primary researcher. The

original intent of the research was to scope a variety of funding mechanisms for offering agriculture and food programming at the sub-state level. Through initial conversations, it became clear that the program staff weren't necessarily in the know of where funding came from and how fiscal decisions were made. This led the researcher to shift focus and provide examples of various programming that exists at the sub-state level that had clear revenue sources, such as mill levies and sales tax allocations. Overall, the research proved beneficial in outlining various ways a sub-state municipality could create or expand services to meet the needs of the community and align with values such as preservation of open space, protection of agricultural heritage, and economic prosperity through farm viability.

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