



LOCAL PLANNING FOR FOOD ACCESS

A TOOLKIT FOR VERMONT'S COMMUNITIES





Everyone needs to eat. Simple, right? Food, a basic necessity, seems so straightforward. But for many Vermonters, getting affordable and nutritious food can be difficult. From children to older Vermonters, the difficulties in getting enough food that is affordable and nutritious are many. Solving the issues of food access and affordability will take coordination and effort from many parties, both in and outside of government.

This toolkit focuses on improving food access through municipal and regional plans. Plans alone won't solve hunger, but the planning process can raise awareness and build broad public support for food access initiatives. Through local and regional planning, with widespread input from diverse community members, a planning commission gathers data and community input, assesses and inventories available resources, identifies existing needs and gaps, and then develops goals, policies, and action items to lead the community into the future. Despite hunger and food access not being among the required elements in Vermont plans, there are a wide variety of ways to address food access in plans.

For this project, we use the food access definition from the [Healthy Food Policy Project](#): “Food is accessible when it is affordable, and community members can readily grow or raise it; find it; obtain it; transport it; prepare it; and eat it.” It is important to remember we are also looking for food that is nutritious and culturally appropriate. The approach included here is comprehensive and holistic.

Members of the [Vermont Farm to Plate Network](#) inspired this project. Vermont’s [Farm to Plate Strategic Plan](#) sets forth the following goal: **all Vermonters will have access to fresh, nutritionally balanced food that they can afford.** To meet this goal, all Vermonters must band together: volunteer and professional planners, community members and food access advocates, healthcare professionals, businesses, churches, and local and state government. It is all of these stakeholders who can join forces to contribute to a local plan.

Planning is not a “one size fits all” approach. Through ideas and best practices in this toolkit, communities of all sizes can find an approach that works for them. Across Vermont, communities large and small all struggle with hunger and unique barriers that keep residents from accessing food — challenges that can look different for children, adults, and senior citizens.

A municipal plan, and the community’s leaders and residents, can influence food access in myriad ways, with an approach that works for each individual community:

- **Regulations** — this includes state laws, local laws, and zoning ordinances. Do these regulatory tools create unintended barriers to food access? Do they support food availability close to where people live?
- **Funding** — this includes municipal budgets and funding within the State’s budget and its agencies. How can municipal budgets support food access, including voluntarily funding some of the initiatives referenced in the following pages?
- **Aspirational goals/strategies** — local plans establish a community vision and a roadmap for how your community will get there. What initiatives will make these visions reality?
- **Concrete projects** — these are the initiatives to make visions a reality, for example opening a food shelf, establishing a community garden, or building a sidewalk.
- **Collaboration & coordination** — this includes connecting parties to share resources, such as a farm and a gleaning organization or a grocery store and a food shelf.
- **People power** — Vermont communities are people-powered. Communicating about hunger and finding volunteers to do the work to address it builds community social fabric and engages a wide cross-sector of the population.
- **Support** — something as simple as Selectboard support for a project that needs grant funding can go a long way!

Inside this toolkit, you will find ideas and, hopefully, inspiration for your community. It is both a guide for integrating food access into local and regional planning processes and a call to action for community members.

If you’ve read this far, there is a role for YOU to play!



How to use this toolkit

If you're new to the planning process, the next few pages give an overview. If you're familiar with planning in Vermont and looking for ideas on addressing food access, you can jump to page 6, which begins the discussion of food access specifically.

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Planning in Vermont

Vermont's planning statutes, [Title 24, Chapter 117](#), outline the process by which municipalities (and regions) plan. The state is divided into 11 planning regions, each of which has a Regional Planning Commission with a Board of Directors (including town representatives) and professional staff. Each region has a regional plan. Municipal plans are optional but having an approved plan allows a municipality to participate in certain state and federal programs and access funding sources. Municipal plans feed into regional plans which help feed into state agency plans on topics as diverse as water quality, housing, and hazard mitigation. To find out the status of your community's land use plan, contact your Regional Planning Commission (vapda.org).

Plan Contents

The state planning statute lays out 12 elements that must be included in a municipal plan for it to be an "approved" plan, but municipalities are welcome to include additional issues. Some towns choose to organize their plans differently or to include additional chapters, but if your plan, like most, is organized according to these elements, food access can easily be incorporated within this structure. The * icon below indicates the elements that will be specifically explored later in this guide, but you may choose to incorporate these ideas elsewhere, or you may decide to create a separate chapter (see page 8).

The full description of the required elements is available at [VSA T.24, Ch. 117, §4382](#) or through your Regional Planning Commission. In summary the elements include:

- A statement of objectives;
- A land use plan and map;*
- A transportation plan and map;*
- A utilities & facilities plan and map;*
- Policies for preservation of natural, scenic, and historic resources;
- An education plan and map;*
- Recommendations for the implementation of objectives;

- An assessment of the relationship with the plans of neighboring municipalities;
- An energy plan;
- A housing element;*
- An economic development element;*
- A flood resilience plan.

An additional element that is not yet required but many municipalities are starting to include is public health.* Many also address local agriculture* when discussing natural resources.

Planning Process

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development has created a thorough manual on the municipal planning process, broken down into five steps, available at accd.vermont.gov/sites/accdnew/files/documents/CD/CPR/DHCD-Planning-Manual-Module1.pdf.



The Planning Process

Source: Agency of Commerce and Community Development

Collecting Information

This planning process should be characterized by engaging with those who will support and benefit from food access planning, rather than making decisions *for* those people or operating upon uninformed assumptions. Engage with those who have food access needs. This will help you understand what those needs are and how they can best be met. Once you identify potential solutions, engage those who would be affected by the project or partners in implementation. For example, if you're organizing a community garden you want to include those who will be gardening in the planning and design phase. If at any point in the planning process you find you're making assumptions about people or organizations and what they want or need, or will or won't do, that should be a cue that those people or organizations need to be brought into your discussion.

Your Regional Planning Commission should also be a close partner throughout this process. Not only can they help you understand the planning process and identify how food access can be addressed through a municipal plan, they may also help you gather and analyze data to understand your community's unique conditions.

Case Study

Food Access Data for Washington County

Hunger Free Vermont's Hunger Council of Washington County partnered with the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) to develop a mapping tool to help identify barriers community members face in accessing food at retailers like grocery stores and convenience stores. Hunger Council members and CVRPC staff gathered geographic data about housing, public transportation, food retailers, demographics, and more, and created an interactive map that allows stakeholders to combine different layers of data to understand current conditions and identify opportunities to increase access. For more information about the process of creating this tool, contact info@hungerfreevt.org.

Paying for Planning

Communities are often strapped for cash to pay for developing a plan. After all, a plan is just a bunch of words on paper — the dollars are often needed to go directly into concrete projects! But networking, in person and digitally often leads to identifying potential funding streams, including ones that can be applied specifically to food access. Alternatively, the most cost-effective way to address food access through planning is to take the “integration” approach: including food access in existing sections of the municipal plan whenever you are updating those sections (read more on page 8).

If you do pursue an independent food access plan, talk to the folks at the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund or the Department of Housing and Community Development within the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. They may be able to direct you to funding available through local, state, and federal agencies and non-profit organizations. Some places to check include the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Northern Border Regional Commission, and the Environmental Protection Agency's Local Food Local Places program. Alternatively, communities and their state agencies and local organizations could pool resources to share the cost of developing a plan.

Case Study

Local Foods, Local Places program in Unity, Maine

Unity, Maine, a small town of 2,100 people, used the technical assistance from the US EPA's Local Foods, Local Places program to create an [action plan](#) to “create a stronger local economy where businesses can prosper; young people can find jobs; more members of the community are engaged and collaborating on key initiatives; more people have access to affordable, healthy local food; downtown is a place where things happen; and the community continues to benefit and define itself by its unique agricultural, local business and educational assets.”



Food Access and Food Systems

Food access and hunger are systemic issues that are connected to the broader food system. They are impacted by state and federal agricultural policies and by local decisions in municipal and regional plans around topics like land use regulation, transportation and mobility, water quality, waste management, and more.

Because solutions for improving food access touch so many parts of the food system, make sure to engage the relevant food system stakeholders in your planning process, including local farmers and food producers, shop owners, and distributors, among others.

While this toolkit is focused on addressing food access through planning, you may also be interested in exploring how the planning process can influence the food system as a whole. The Farm to Plate resource [Sustaining Agriculture](#) provides guidance and resources on important food system topics like composting, farmland conservation, and land use regulations. Module 1 provides an excellent overview of how and why to incorporate food topics into municipal planning.



What about food self-sufficiency?

Some communities aspire towards food self-sufficiency, food self-reliance, or food independence, where the local community produces all or most of the food needed by all of the residents. Often these communities apply a [food sovereignty](#) framework (defined by the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance as, “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”), or are concerned about the instability of national and global supply chains, especially in the face of climate change. And because low income residents are less flexible in their budgets, they may be less able to accommodate spikes in food prices, even temporary ones.

What would this level of food production look like?

The feasibility of community food self-sufficiency depends on a number of factors, including not only the population size and existing land base, but also the economic landscape, residents’ diets and willingness to change them, and climatic and environmental factors that affect what types of food can be produced, especially accounting for the impacts of climate change. An example of this type of analysis can be found in the [Shelburne Falls, MA Food Security Plan](#). Shelburne Falls at the time had a population of 1,951 and the study authors “recognize[d] that producing enough food to meet the needs of all residents within the village alone may not be possible” but rather “emphasize[d] the importance of continued support of the many nearby small farms, of increased food production within the village, and subsequently of minimized dependence upon the current global food system.” The report describes in detail the many considerations they took into account and the data sources they used.

For an example of a Vermont town inspired by self-sufficiency, see the [2016 Municipal Plan for Calais](#). The Agriculture chapter explains that: *“Calais residents realize the value [of] locally grown foods that [are] nutritious and affordable. A grassroots agriculture task force, Calais Organization of Local Agricultural Support System, has been formed with the hope that through shared information we will increase an interest in growing and processing our own food to move towards food independence.”*

The chapter includes many robust objectives and action steps that could be used by other communities whether or not they are aiming for total independence.

How does this relate to food access in emergencies?

Individuals, families, and communities should be planning ahead for emergencies like natural disasters, close to home or far away, that could impact the whole community’s access to food. In an event of a local emergency, like Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, or an emergency further away that disrupts food production or distribution, your community may need to feed itself in the short term. Federal emergency response agencies recommend that individuals and families plan to be self-sufficient for at least 72 hours as it may take that long for relief to get to you. Additionally, climate change is making these kinds of events more common, and changing the way that communities need to prepare. This toolkit does *not* address these emergency situations. However, municipal plans often do address emergency planning. Talk with your local or regional planners or your town’s emergency management director to learn more about how your community is prepared for emergencies.

Types of Food Access Plans

There are at least three approaches to food access planning:

A) Integrate food access throughout sections of an existing plan

B) Create a comprehensive food access chapter in an existing plan

C) Create a comprehensive, standalone food access plan

Any of these options could be regional or town-specific.

While communities may want to consider developing a dedicated food access plan, this toolkit is focused on the integrated approach. Pages 14–35 describe ways to integrate food access into various elements of a plan. However, all the strategies discussed could be used in a comprehensive chapter or standalone plan, instead.

A) Integrate Throughout Existing Plan

Logistics

- If you are scheduled for a plan update anyway, integrating food access into multiple existing chapters may be the easiest approach logistically.
- If your town is not already updating its plan, amending multiple chapters may involve a lot of time, energy, and expense.

Benefits

- It may be easier for your community to implement food access efforts as part of the comprehensive plan, rather than yet another plan that could be forgotten on a shelf.
- By looking at food access in relationship to each chapter, you could discover strategies that benefit the town in multiple ways or identify new partnerships.
- By looking at food access in relationship to each chapter, you may find places where existing language unintentionally restricts food access.
- This approach reinforces the relationship of the topic to other community priorities and shows that food access is an integral part of your overall vision for the future.

Examples

- Barre City includes in its *Economic Development* chapter:
“Access to Healthy Food... Research has shown that individuals who live in environments where there are no nearby grocery stores and high concentrations of fast food alternatives have more health problems than those who live within close proximity to a grocery store. Keeping food growth, production, and sales within the city would also benefit our local economy.”...
“Next Steps: ... 3. Open a grocery store in Barre City.”
- The Town of Bridgewater includes in its *Community Health and Wellness* chapter:
“Access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food is a key component not only in a healthy, sustainable local food system, but also in a healthy, sustainable community.”
- The Town of Plainfield in its *Facilities, Utilities, Services & Resources* chapter describes its regional senior center (TVSC):
“The demand for meals has more than doubled in the past three years. To accommodate this growing demand, TVSC would like to own a 3,000-4,000 sq feet facility at a location with ample on-site parking....The Municipal Facilities Study Committee strongly suggests that the Town work with the TVSC to try to identify a suitable location for a permanent home for the Senior Center in Plainfield.”

B) Comprehensive Chapter in Existing Plan

Logistics

- If you are already updating your plan, you will need to make sure there is time in the schedule to draft a new chapter, but this is likely easier than creating a separate food system plan.
- If you are not already updating the municipal plan, it may be easier to begin creating an additional food access chapter than to begin editing multiple other chapters.

Benefits

- Similar to creating a standalone food access plan, this approach allows you to address the different aspects of food access in one place.
- Including food access in the existing comprehensive plan shows that it is an integral part of your overall vision for the future.
- It may be easier for your community to implement the food access efforts as part of a comprehensive plan rather than another separate plan that could be forgotten on a shelf.

Example

- The Duxbury Town Plan contains a chapter on *Food and Agriculture*, which begins:
“Our ability to grow, process and distribute food will become increasingly important to the citizens of Duxbury over the next several years as global pressures such as climate change, population growth, and food insecurity increase. The rural character of Duxbury is defined by a working landscape – its forests as well as its open agricultural land. It is therefore important for Duxbury to consider food systems and agriculture integral components to the planning process. Towns across America are rediscovering the benefits of creating a strong local food system. Local food systems that encourage the use of sustainable agriculture can create jobs, preserve the working landscape, conserve soil, improve water quality, and increase access to healthy, fresh food.”

C) Comprehensive, Standalone Plan

Logistics

- Volunteer planning commissions often receive professional support from their Regional Planning Commission to update their municipal plan. For a separate food system plan, you may need to find alternate funding and/or staff to support the process.
- If you want your local government to officially adopt the plan, you will need to make sure the governing body (Selectboard, regional commission, etc.) has the capacity and willingness for the process, and then figure out a timeline.

Benefits

- A standalone plan may be easier to create collaboratively with surrounding communities, making it easier to incorporate strategies that cut across town lines (for example strategies that apply to multi-town school districts).
- A standalone plan allows your community to take a focused look at food access and to see the cumulative impact of all the different food access challenges and opportunities.
- It may be easier for your community to involve a wide range of food system stakeholders with a separate planning process.
- Having a standalone plan highlights the importance of the topic.

Example

- The Northeast Kingdom Food System Plan addresses *Food Security and Food Justice*, explaining that
“Ensuring a healthy, sustainable food system that provides equitable and affordable access to its residents is arguably the biggest challenge facing the NEK, and the tensions between affordability and buying locally is no more evident than in the complex challenges of food security and justice...Ultimately stakeholders from the public and private sectors will need to work together to achieve a greater understanding of the food environment to eliminate the barriers that limits our residents’ food choices.”

Examples of Food Access Strategies

Any of these three types of food access plans can include a wide variety of strategies. The table below provides examples of food access strategies and what standard municipal plan chapters they might fit within. **This list is not comprehensive — there are many more strategies that could be included in your plan, and the chapter(s) in which it is most appropriate to include them depends on your existing plan and your community.** These chapters and strategies, as well as advice on the process for deciding which to include, are discussed in more depth in pages 14–35 of this toolkit.

	Where in the Town Plan might you include it?							
	Economic Development (p. 16)	Land Use (p. 18)	Housing (p. 21)	Transportation (p. 24)	Utilities & Facilities (p. 26)	Education (p. 28)	Health and Wellness (p. 31)	Agriculture (p. 33)
<u>What change do you want to see?</u>								
Establish a food shelf		✓			✓		✓	
Enhance community support for food shelves and other food assistance programs				✓		✓	✓	
Improve quality and availability of school meals						✓	✓	✓
Greater sidewalk access/walkability leading towards grocery stores		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Greater public transportation access to grocery stores		✓	✓	✓				
Establish a community garden		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Include garden space in new housing developments		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Add edible landscaping in public spaces			✓		✓	✓	✓	
New or improved farmers markets	✓	✓			✓			✓
Accept EBT at farmers markets	✓				✓		✓	✓
Improve land use regulations to support new food retailers	✓	✓						✓
Leverage economic development strategies to support new food retailers	✓	✓						✓
Encourage home food production including urban agriculture and backyard livestock		✓	✓					
Host skill-building workshops for community members					✓	✓	✓	✓
Protect working farmland and support direct-to-consumer farms	✓	✓						✓
Recover and distribute surplus food from local producers and businesses					✓		✓	✓

Implementation

How do you put a plan into action? Planning can get a bad rap for leading to dusty documents that serve better as door stops than action manuals. Moving a plan into action is one of the most difficult parts of the whole process but can also be one of the most rewarding. This toolkit provides language both for inclusion in the plan itself and as a source of inspiration to engage community members to take action.

Communities have a variety of ways to implement the plan, through regulatory actions (like ordinances, laws, and zoning), non-regulatory actions (like grant funding, volunteer led projects), and budgeting. Clearly identifying action items, setting a timeline for completion, and specifying who can take the lead on the action item will help transform goals into concrete change. In some cases, a municipality may want to support a local nonprofit or community group in doing the on-the-ground work to implement the strategies identified in the plan.

Remember that implementation can be incremental; change is often slow to happen. And it's okay to start small. Success on a small project can help develop community organization and leadership.

In Vermont, there is no requirement for how an implementation plan must be organized. The most successful communities expend more effort upfront developing an implementation plan that offers specific actions. Within each action, there is a measure for evaluating the effectiveness of the action, an estimated cost of implementation, and a lead organization.

The Resources appendix to this toolkit contains good sources of information on implementing specific strategies once you have decided to include them in your plan.

Budgeting for food access

Budgets are the ultimate expression of municipal policy priorities. In Vermont, citizens vote directly on their municipal budgets. Consider whether or not your community is willing to tax itself to support the food access initiatives developed through the planning process. Or,

Case Study

Support for food access during Town Meeting

At the 2018 Town Meeting in Royalton, the local Community Food Shelf requested \$6,000 per year in financial support from the town. After hearing that additional funding would allow the food shelf to be open for longer hours, a community member motioned to raise the funding level to \$10,000. The town voters approved this amendment and passed the motion to provide \$10,000 per year to the food shelf.

consider how your town can use its existing annual budget to direct funds towards planning and/or food access projects. Communities that show such a commitment can also make a stronger case for their efforts in grant proposals.

The social services sector and municipal budgets are typically very tight, so additional funding from other sources is likely needed to accomplish all that you may include in your plan. You might question why you should write a plan for food access knowing there may not be a dedicated funding stream to implement projects. However, there is funding available for food access projects, and having a plan that addresses food access can help a town or organization leverage those funding sources. This toolkit includes a wide range of strategies and approaches, each with different levels of cost.

The long-term cost of food insecurity in a community is great and widespread. Food insecurity has costly effects on the health and development of children, on older Vermonters' ability to stay healthy and independent in their home as they age, on developing a strong and stable workforce, on the economic stability of communities and businesses, and more. Investing in strategies to increase food access is a cost effective way to support entire communities.

Because food access is something that is not solvable by using just one strategy, just one grant, or by just one group or discipline, collaboration is key. Municipal departments, non-profit organizations, businesses, state agencies, the faith community, and interested community members who share knowledge and resources, and build strong relationships, are important to implementing food access strategies.

Evaluation

A plan that is merely aspirational will be difficult to convert to action. When putting together your implementation plan/strategies, consider how the planning commission, and the community, will evaluate the effectiveness of the action. You could build in quantitative metrics using available data, or you could identify more qualitative outcomes (like whether or not an action was completed or how recipients of certain services evaluate their effectiveness). Evaluation of progress can occur between plan updates, on a timeline determined by the implementation plan.

Case Study

The Northwest Healthy Roots Collaborative: Planning and Implementation with Multiple Partners

The Northwest Healthy Roots Collaborative, with a mission to “strengthen the local food system of Northwest Vermont for the health and vitality of our community,” runs a number of food access programs including gleaning, farm viability, and farm-to-school programming. The Collaborative has long been a close partner of the City of St. Albans as well as other municipalities. For example, the City offers the use of City Hall for storage, the annual “In Good Taste” local food tasting event, and a pickup site for vegetable prescription shares and workplace CSA shares.

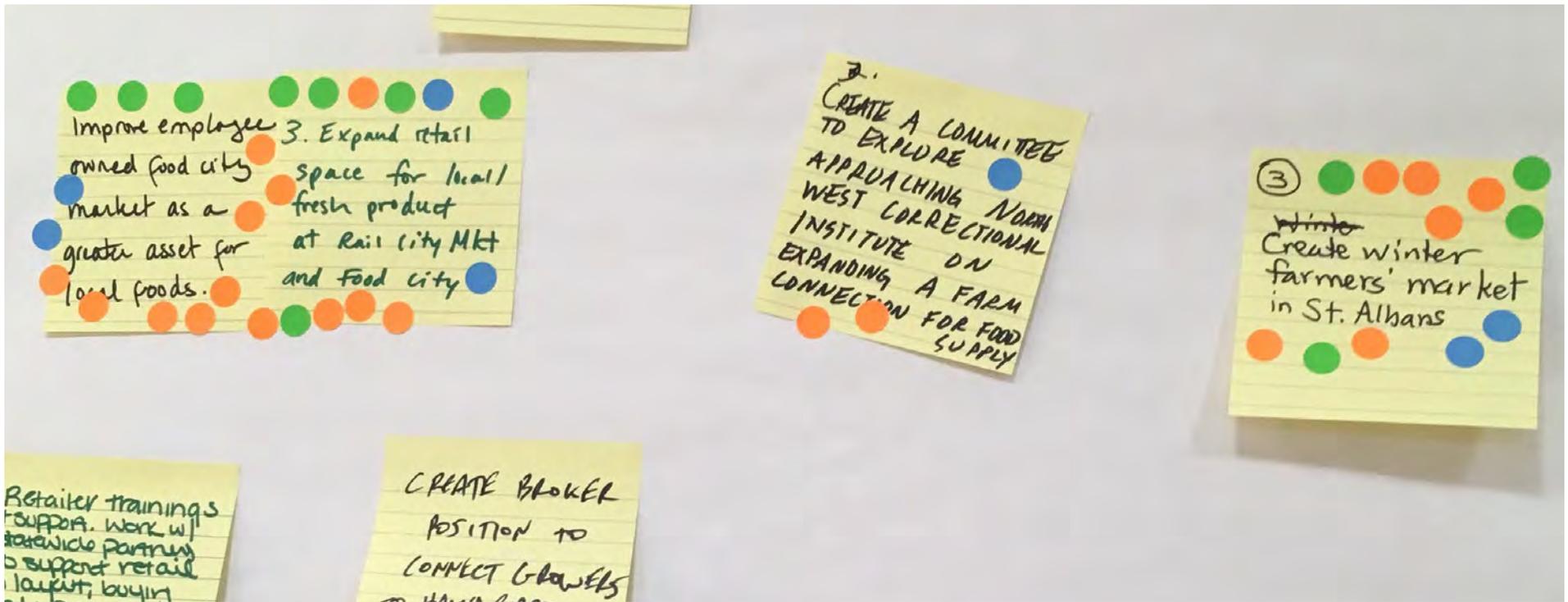
Support from the City of St. Albans

The City administration, planning commission, and professional staff have always been receptive to the idea of working on food systems issues and partnering with the Healthy Roots Collaborative. “We understand that the City is a venue for conversations and economic activity concerning food — historically that’s a role we have always played in our agricultural county,” says Chip Sawyer, current Director of Planning and Development for the City. “The value of the partnership is that the City gets to make sure we aren’t out of touch with the general food system in the region.”

The 2017 City Plan also contains numerous references to healthy food access, which he attributes to a combination of general awareness of the issues among professional staff plus outreach from RiseVT, an organization that “works with individuals, employers, schools, childcare providers, and municipalities to provide opportunities to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

Increasing Integration

The Healthy Roots Collaborative was founded in by a number of regional organizations (Northwest Regional Planning Commission, Northwestern Medical Center, South Hero Land Trust, Franklin/Grand Isle Workforce Investment Board, and Franklin County Industrial Development Corp). For the first few years, it was housed at the Northwestern Medical Center, meaning Healthy Roots staff were employees of the Medical Center.



(Northwest Healthy Roots Collaborative Case Study, continued)

In 2019, the initiative moved from the hospital to the Regional Planning Commission. While the Hospital will continue to provide some financial support, the move allows Healthy Roots more flexibility than offered by hospital rules and regulations, and greater opportunity to seek joint funding with the RPC.

Implementation

“The intersection of health and the health of the economy is a key place of overlap for the City, the RPC, and the Hospital,” says Johanna Setta, Co-Coordinator of the Healthy Roots Collaborative. “Each partner is excited to work on different pieces.” Having two staff positions for the Collaborative allows for more effective and nimble implementation of the partners’ shared vision.

The Next Round of Planning

In 2019, the Healthy Roots Collaborative and the City of St Albans successfully applied to the federal Local Foods, Local Places technical assistance program. That September, a team of visiting experts, the Healthy Roots Collaborative staff, and additional local partners facilitated a community planning session with business owners, municipal employees, farmers, food access advocates, and other community members. Over the course of a day and a half, participants identified action steps to pursue, including exploration of a food co-op and strengthening the local distribution system for the benefit of both local business and the charitable food system. Community members will continue to work together on refining and implementing these ideas.

Now You're Ready to Plan

The remainder of this toolkit is organized by the basic elements and topics typically included in comprehensive plans. For each element there are two types of suggestions: ideas for the *process* of planning and ideas for what could be included within the plan itself.

Planning Process:

This section includes ideas to help you while drafting the plan, such as potential data sources to consult, resources to review, experts or community leaders to interview, and other pieces of context and background about food access in relation to that topic.



Data: Finding data can be a numbers nightmare! However, it is important to use data for identifying what the plan should be addressing, making the case, and measuring success. Check these resources for data about food access, hunger, nutrition, and more.



Stakeholder Input: The plan should be developed with input from those who will support and benefit from food access planning. Plus, community members may provide a wealth of knowledge about related topics or promising strategies. This input could be gathered in many ways, including a community survey, one-on-one conversations, or inviting these stakeholders to the planning commission meetings where food access is being discussed. It may also be helpful to ask these community members to review your proposed language.

In the Plan:

Three categories of actions can be in the plan: regulatory actions, non-regulatory actions, and community actions. The difference lies in the mechanism for implementation.



Regulatory Action: Regulatory actions are things that can be regulated and enforced through ordinances (like zoning and subdivision regulations), laws, bylaws, and other legislative means. Make sure the municipality has the legal authority to regulate this, and identify which entity will be responsible for enforcement. For the most part, these will only be enforceable via the municipal plan in cases where Act 250 permits are needed. Zoning changes must be justified in the municipal plan.



Non-Regulatory Action: Non-regulatory actions are things your community can do that are not legally binding but rather voluntary, budgeted for, planned for, or otherwise actionable inside government. They could be things that the town governing body (i.e. Selectboard or City Council) enacts or that the Planning Commission, Recreation Committee, Town Clerk, or other group undertakes.



Community Action: Community actions are ideas for interested community members to implement. Like non-regulatory actions, these are not legally binding. If your community has the will for collective action, community organizing, collaborative projects, or using local resources to problem-solve issues of hunger, this is the category of action items to consider. Including them in the plan is a way of creating a shared vision, setting a timeline, and encouraging action, and some grant programs favor projects that are supported by the municipal plan.

Plan Elements

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While these sections are the most likely options for including food access, your plan may be structured in such a way that it makes sense to address food access in other chapters, as well or instead. Feel free to include it wherever it makes sense for your community.

Redundancy is okay! If food access comes up in your community in several chapters, don't worry — that is all the more compelling reason to address it. Then it becomes a “theme” in your plan. It starts to carry more weight when you show that it integrates with multiple topics.





Plan Element: Economic Development

Economic development is an all-encompassing section that will be tailored to the community. Data in this section includes wages, workforce development, and the vitality of local businesses. Wages are not keeping pace with other costs like housing, food, and fuel, and as incomes get stretched, many households are often stuck deciding how much to eat or what bills to pay. Employers know that a well-fed workforce performs better at work and leads to reduced absenteeism. The local economy can thrive when there are healthy, nutritious food options available, when there is a mix of different businesses and work opportunities, and when local farmers can receive a fair price for food.

Planning Process



Have conversations with those willing to discuss their food insecurity to learn from them what barriers to food access they regularly confront. Bring in someone from a large local employer or a state official from the Vermont Department of Health (VDH), Department of Labor (DOL), or Department for Children and Families (DCF) to discuss employment and hunger. Bring in a local farmer or other business owner, the zoning administrator, the town clerk, or the team at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAFAM) to identify barriers to expanding agriculture or food system businesses. Using a coalition of the planning commission, community groups, residents, researchers, and government agencies, identify specific areas that lack access to healthy food and prioritize strategies for action.



Inventory existing agricultural operations and food system businesses. Collect data on revenue generated from farms and ag businesses. Collect and analyze data related to poverty; analyze wage data according to the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes. Survey users of food shelves and other hunger services to identify barriers to accessing those resources. Organizations like Hunger Free Vermont and VDH can share insight into issues related to hunger.

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: For new grocery stores/supermarkets, waive certain development requirements such as minimum square footage or parking requirements. Provide clear, friendly regulations that encourage urban agriculture. Develop flexible zoning policies that allow farmers to expand operations and engage in a diversity of on-farm accessory activities. Run a “test permit” through local zoning bylaws — are food shelves, community gardens, and farmers markets allowed and encouraged? Review your bylaws to see if they also allow mobile markets, shuttles, and van delivery.



Non-Regulatory Action: If not having enough places to buy healthy food is an issue, identify potential locations for a grocery store or smaller market in the land use plan. Use a local economic development group/business organization to attract and recruit a grocery store to town. Utilize State funding programs and designation programs to access incentives for stores in village centers. Leverage public investment with private investment to attract food retailers. Make town-owned land available for a food retailer. Support job training programs related to agricultural and culinary employment.



Community Action: Encourage retailers/farmers to launch programs such as mobile markets, grocery shuttles, and grocery van delivery of food. Encourage organizers of a farmers market to accept 3SquaresVT benefits. Promote the use of coupons and programs that stretch a food budget at a farmers market. Encourage employers to consider offering incentives to employees that support local producers, like a subsidized community supported agriculture (CSA) share from a local farm. Work with a local farm to set up a “pop up” farm stand in a place where fresh produce may be hard to access. Encourage farms and food businesses to form or join a food hub to collaboratively store products and connect with consumers.



Farmers Markets: Proceed with Caution!

It’s exciting to think of starting a farmers market if your community doesn’t already have one. However, farmers markets can be tricky. Vermont already has a high density of farmers markets per capita, and each of these markets needs a large enough customer base to make it financially feasible for participating farmers. Before deciding to create a new market, assess where they already exist in nearby towns and whether they are accessible (both physically and financially) to your residents. You may be able to identify other strategies such as supporting mobile markets, encouraging local business partnerships, organizing transportation to existing markets, or helping existing markets accept Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards and offer matching bucks. Make sure to engage those farmers who are vendors or potential vendors to see what is needed. For additional information or assistance, check in with the [Vermont Farmers Market Association](#).

Case Study

Brownsville Community Store

Opened in 1967, the Brownsville General Store was still being run as a traditional small-town market when Ascutney Mountain Resort closed in 2010. Without the recreational attractions, lack of visitors over the years slowed business in the area and the need for reinvestment grew. The store closed its doors in February 2017 with the property subsequently going into foreclosure. The community felt the loss of the central meeting space and a group of about 40 residents calling itself The Friends of the Brownsville General Store, LLC banded together to purchase and breathe new life into the property. Supporting this effort, the Town of West Windsor, the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, and the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development staff worked to establish the Brownsville Village Center designation, enabling the group to access \$54,144 in tax credits.

The award was a significant boost to the group’s capital base and over \$350,000 was subsequently raised from community members who believed that a viable general store was critical to the future of the Village. Out of over 20 proposals the group chose the plan from a young couple, Peter Varkonyi and Lauren Stevens, with a vision to build a diversified business around local food, groceries, a fresh meat and seafood counter, and a café. Further funds were committed by the new operators to finish renovations and The Friends of the Brownsville General Store developed a “market dollars” program, akin to prepaid gift cards, to help raise working capital for the start-up.

“Providing access to quality food and products at an affordable price point has been our focus since day one,” said Varkonyi. “Even with tourist traffic a small business like ours only survives with local support.” Today the Brownsville Butcher & Pantry is a thriving business, committed to offering a livable wage to full time employees, and fulfills a critical need as a community hub to support engagement and economic vitality.



Plan Element: Land Use

A long-standing goal of land use planning in Vermont is to preserve traditional development patterns defined by compact centers of development separated by rural countryside. This goal has two profound implications for food access:

1. Traditional development patterns promote local food production because they minimize development and fragmentation of productive agricultural lands, and
2. Maintaining compact centers of development ensures that people who are most likely to be food-insecure will have convenient access to the services they need, such as food retail, community centers, meal sites, affordable housing, senior housing, and access to transit.

The land use plan is the section of your plan that lays out the vision for how your community will be built — where to locate new housing, municipal buildings, or stores and other commercial development, what land is preserved for recreation or agriculture, and how future development can occur alongside our natural resources.

What are Food Deserts?

Many people face challenges accessing food because they live in what is called a food desert. Food deserts are places where people have to travel further to reach a grocery or supermarket. This physical lack of food access points affects people of all incomes, though food deserts are more often located in areas with high poverty rates. The exact definition of a food desert can vary, but the USDA, for example, looks at access points within one mile in urban areas and ten miles in rural areas. Exploring if your community is in a food desert is a helpful starting point for identifying potential land use-based barriers to food access. However, individuals may face physical barriers to accessing food even if they do not live in a food desert. For example, a grocery store just one or two miles away may be inaccessible to community members without cars.

Planning Process

An effective land use plan should map existing and future development patterns and document the type, character, and intensity of land uses. Don't just think of the land uses you have today — envision future uses that are likely and/or desirable in your community. For example, where will new housing development occur? Where are the commercial and civic centers? Are there large holdings of agricultural and forestry lands? Are there natural constraints to development, such as flood-prone areas and steep slopes?

Assess opportunities to support local food production. Are there areas in your community that can support farming? If so, how much of it is actually being used for production? Farming is evolving in Vermont. Not all farms require massive tracts of land, nor are they only found in the rural countryside. Counter to national trends, Vermont has actually seen an increase in the number of farms. Many of these new farms support fruit, vegetables, meat, or specialty crops and are small, between 10 or 50

acres. Urban agriculture and farms located near or within village centers can provide new opportunities for food access. “Value-added” on-farm activities such as smoking and curing, processing, and freezing are becoming increasingly common in Vermont to add value to raw crops and diversify the farm’s income. If your community has active farms, is there a place where gleaned foods could be aggregated or stored for local distribution?

Identify your centers of concentrated development. Does your community have a village center or downtown? A vibrant center should contain a mix of residential, commercial, and civic uses, not to mention green spaces which might be used for a farmers market. What uses are missing from the developed areas in your town? Can the population support a weekly farmers market? Is there a central location to establish a community garden? This will ideally be located on a public transportation route or be walkable and bikeable from the downtown area.

In the Plan

There are two ways to address food access in your land use section. Through your work inventorying what your community needs, you can establish a common vision for future development. This common vision can be reflected in goals, strategies, and recommendations and also by mapping.

Mapping your current and future land uses with GIS (Geographic Information Systems) is a highly effective way to visualize your community’s physical characteristics. Fortunately, there are many resources available to assist the novice planner.

- The Vermont Planning Atlas is an online tool that allows users to view municipal level data such as downtowns, village centers, planning and zoning status, E-911 sites, natural resource constraints, and more. maps.vermont.gov/ACCD/PlanningAtlas/index.html?viewer=PlanningAtlas
- The Vermont Center for Geographic Information (VCGI), has geospatial data and imagery for download, as well as an interactive online mapping tool. vsgi.vermont.gov/

- Finally, some professional local planning offices and all the regional planning commissions have GIS staff who can help you develop maps and even conduct build-out analyses to estimate the amount and type of development that can occur under your zoning regulations.



Regulatory Action: Once it is adopted, your land use plan and map will be considered in Act 250 proceedings. (Act 250 is Vermont’s statewide land use and development law.) If a proposed development in your community requires an Act 250 permit, the proposal must be consistent with your plan. Even if a development does not require Act 250 approval, it still might need a local permit. In addition, about two-thirds of Vermont municipalities have local land use ordinances, such as zoning or subdivision regulations. If your town has a local land use ordinance, or is considering adopting one, the regulations **must be consistent with your land use goals, policies, and recommendations**. When developing your land use plan, consider regulations that support access to food.

Traditional “farming” as defined by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets is exempt from zoning, but there are plenty of accessory uses that are subject to local regulation, such as on-farm processing and retail. Many of these uses improve local food access and help keep farming financially viable. Your community’s land use plan should explore the potential for such uses so that your regulations support them.

If your community has a downtown or village center, your land use plan should identify the kinds of uses that can improve food access, such as grocery stores, farmers markets and meal sites — and make sure that your zoning allows for these uses. Also, your land use plan should identify the development patterns and densities that are appropriate for your downtown. For example, do your regulations really accommodate dense development? If your regulations specify minimum lot sizes, are the lots bigger than they need to be? Do you require minimum setbacks (distance between buildings in lot lines) and parking minimums? If these standards are too stringent, your zoning may actually prevent compact dense development.

There is also a lot of overlap between land use strategies and transportation strategies; see page 24 for more on transportation.



Non-Regulatory Action: Just because your community has adopted a plan, you are not obligated to adopt local regulations. In fact, there are several municipalities with current plans that have no zoning. Here are some non-regulatory initiatives that can help improve food access in your community:

Identify and prioritize farmlands for conservation: This strategy can be site-specific or town-wide. Many farmers in Vermont over the age of 50 are working without a planned successor. If you have a farmer in your community who is nearing retirement, your land use plan might highlight the need for technical assistance and financial support to help transfer the farm to the next owner. On a town-wide basis, your plan might support an evaluation of all agricultural lands in order to identify which lands should be considered first for conservation. This study is sometimes called a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment; your regional planning commission can put you in touch with technical assistance to complete an assessment.

The State of Vermont has a designation program that makes tax credits available to owners who rehabilitate income-producing properties. The credits (on state income tax) are often sold to banks so the developers can reinvest the proceeds back into the property. This program is immensely popular and has been used to attract retail development in underserved communities. If you want your community to participate in this program, your plan should identify the areas that are appropriate for designation. You can learn more about the designations at accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs



Community Action: If a land use section is written to support food access, it will better enable community members to implement the strategies identified throughout this toolkit. Whenever your community has the opportunity to transform a building, a piece of land, or other physical space, consider those food access projects that require space, such as farmers markets or other food retail, community gardens, or meal sites.

Case Study

City of Burlington's 2014 Open Space Protection Plan

The City of Burlington included multiple food access strategies in its land use planning. The Open Space Protection Plan set aside arable land for urban agriculture. The plan also included an analysis of the proximity of residents to community gardens and identified areas with good soil for agriculture. Concurrently, the municipality was interested in a grocery retail option that would serve groups like seniors, people with mobility challenges, and newcomers in the downtown. The City Market Onion River Co-op entered into an agreement with City of Burlington staff to open a grocery store on vacant city-owned land. Staff from Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office provided support by helping the co-op secure grant funding along with providing technical assistance. This effort allowed the store to expand into a convenient downtown location and increase from 6,000 to 16,000 square feet. It also intentionally introduced more affordable pricing for Burlington's lower-income residents.





Plan Element: Housing

There is a close connection between housing security and food security. Both are basic needs that a family must account for, and the two can become competing priorities on a tight budget. According to the Vermont Foodbank’s “[Hunger in America 2014](#)” report conducted in partnership with Feeding America, “52 percent of households who are clients of the Vermont Foodbank were forced to choose between paying for food and paying their rent or mortgage at least once in the 12-month period measured. Based on the number of households and individuals the Foodbank served in those 12 months, that amounts to 12.8% of all Vermonters. A family’s ability to pay for their food is directly related to their ability to pay for their housing. Improving one will improve the other.”

The clearest obstacle to meeting both needs is poverty. In the sense that food insecurity is a problem because people don’t have enough money available for food purchases, affordable housing is an obvious part of the solution. When families are no longer overburdened by housing expenses, they have more income available for food. Another obstacle identified by both individuals working in affordable housing and residents themselves is difficulties in obtaining transportation. These barriers may be further complicated by a lack of experience purchasing, preparing, and preserving fresh food items or a lack of adequate kitchen space/equipment for food storage and preparation.

Planning Process



Review data related to housing and transportation costs; home sales prices; rents in the community; availability of affordable housing; trends in home ownership and home affordability.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) developed [a guide for this very topic](#).



The planning commission should also bring in someone from an affordable housing development (a property manager, case worker, or resident).

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Require housing projects/developments to include land for gardens, be walkable, and/or be located near food outlets. Reduce required lot sizes for residential development. Cluster multi-family housing around areas well served by commercial goods and services, including food stores and transit. Encourage multi-family housing sites to include suitable outdoor space for summer meal sites and to shared, community kitchen space that is suitable for nutrition classes or group food processing.



Non-Regulatory Action: Donate public space to support a community garden. Plant edible landscaping in parks and community spaces. Support cooking, food, and nutrition education. Encourage and work with housing sites and a local farm to offer

CSA shares. Improve transportation between housing sites or dense residential development and grocery stores. Site full-size supermarkets, grocery stores, food co-ops, and other food retailers near new or existing housing sites.



Community Action: Organize to open a food cooperative in the village center, in food deserts, or near senior housing or affordable housing developments. Start a buying club for nearby residents to access nutritious food in bulk at affordable prices. Encourage community groups or local chefs to host cooking and nutrition workshops. Operate community gardens in central locations and supply the gardens with the tools and training to keep the garden going.

Food security can also be addressed in tangible ways in individual low-income or dense housing projects. For example, new housing sites could include community kitchen space that's suitable for nutrition classes or group food processing. They could also include suitable outdoor space for summer meal sites (i.e. something central, covered, with tables, etc.).



Community Gardens: Proceed with Caution!

Community gardens can be a wonderful community asset. A lot more than the designated land must go into a garden to make it successful, however, and some community gardens end up underutilized. Before deciding to create a new community garden, assess where they may already exist nearby with capacity to accept new gardeners. Instead of creating a new space, it may be more effective to support an existing project, for example by providing administrative or outreach support for a garden that has trouble finding gardeners, financing fencing or a water source for a garden that does not yet have adequate infrastructure, or partnering with a host organization to expand who is eligible for a plot or subsidize fees. For additional information or assistance, check in with the [Vermont Community Garden Network](#).

Case Study

Fresh Start Community Farm

The Fresh Start Community Farm (the Farm) story is a recipe of magnificent proportions: starting with a group of committed citizens, add in a dash of vacant land, a dollop of energy, a pinch of seed funding, and a splash of faith. Mix together and let sit. Several years later, reap the rewards of community strength and power.

The Farm actually consists of a series of community gardens in Newport and Derby. Its gardens are lawns, lots, public parks, and other reclaimed green spaces. Its gardeners are both the oldest and the newest generations of growers, intergenerational teams of neighbors who strive “to cultivate a baseline of food access in our city through gardens that create social, cultural, and economic hubs within the communities they serve.”

The initial idea to repurpose an underutilized plot amidst single- and multi-family houses faced pushback by some community members. As the volunteer-based effort grew legs and the plot was transformed, skeptics who thought the neighborhood was too dangerous came on board.

The Farm's original funding came from a Municipal Planning Grant, which are state funds awarded to municipalities for planning activities. Newport's grant was for community revitalization around the Summer Street area, a neighborhood adjacent to the Main Street. Out of the revitalization planning work came an interest in starting a garden to meet community needs for improved safety, a space for kids to play, and a place that seniors could enjoy. Jennifer Bernier and Jen Leithead, two members of the Leadership Team, taught themselves how to operate a community garden (and how to garden!) by utilizing available resources.

Community gardens are any plot of land gardened by two or more people. Their benefits range from access to fresh produce to



(Fresh Start Community Farm Case Study, continued)

exercise to crime prevention. All community gardens have a unique structure. The Farm has a Leadership Team consisting of five people.

After the Leadership Team — and the community — saw the success of the Summer Street garden (the first), the Farm slowly expanded. Now, the multiple gardens produce about 6,000 pounds of food annually, all going to members of the Newport community. Produce includes traditional staples –tomatoes, peas, string beans, and zucchini – as well as unusual varieties of tomatoes, hot peppers, purple cauliflower and purple peas, and anything else they can get to grow!

Working volunteer gardeners receive weekly shares of vegetables and fruit as their payment, tracking their time at each site, while on-site managers coordinate daily activities. Volunteers can work at any of the sites so long as they record their time. Vegetables are picked, washed, and distributed among volunteers weekly, with extra produce going to local food shelves, churches, schools, and senior meal sites. About 40-50 people garden throughout the year.

In 2013, the Farm started the Adopt-a-Grandparent program, a partnership with an adult day care center. The program matches the elderly with neighborhood kids, providing opportunities to learn, garden, and share ageless experience.



Plan Element: Transportation

Ponder this: many Vermonters do not or cannot drive, such as those under age 16, many of those over age 65, those who cannot afford to maintain a car, those who choose not to, or those who are not drivers for other reasons. Public transportation in Vermont can be difficult to use, or non-existent in many rural and small communities. Older adults face specific challenges as driving becomes more difficult in older age. The presence and condition of sidewalks can be a barrier to safely accessing routes to food sites. The choice between paying for gas and paying for food is a very real choice for many Vermont residents. Transportation is often a significant barrier to getting to and from stores, farmers markets, food shelves, congregate meal sites, and other places where food is available.

Solutions for improving transportation in Vermont will be inherently local and will need to take into account the mobility of those who need better access to food. The solutions for a more dispersed, rural community will look different than those for a more densely populated community.

Providing food where people regularly congregate is a logical first step and reduces unnecessary, single-purpose trips. For example, communities can co-locate places to access food with other services like schools, community centers, and post offices. You can use some of these sites to distribute CSAs, community meals, and other food. You'll want to give consideration to local food delivery networks to find the balance between reaching those who cannot even reach congregate sites (for example, those who are homebound) while efficiently using resources.

The transportation plan can also assess the need and potential for public transit; can provide support or policies for safer sidewalk access; or can provide support for or encourage grant applications for improving public transit and/or sidewalks or footpaths (footpaths and "safe routes" are a way that communities without sidewalks can still address safe pedestrian routes without the added cost of infrastructure).

Planning Process



Understand mobility in your community. Where do people have to go, and how do they get there? Are they able to get to places like schools, post offices, stores, doctor's offices, and pharmacies by means other than driving? If not, what are the barriers? Conduct a [walk-audit](#) to experience walking in your community from a variety of perspectives to assess how safe and connected your community is. Then identify areas where transit connections can be improved. Organize volunteers to survey people by going to them, to ensure you are hearing from those with limited mobility. If access to basic services is car-dependent, how do those without cars make these trips? Do they rely on a friend or volunteer for a ride? Do they arrange

for transit? What days of the week or month do they make trips? If they do drive, do they make special considerations when they do so (like reducing numbers of trips)? The patterns that emerge may inform how to best link food access to travel behavior in your community, and what travel barriers are within the power of the community to mitigate or remove. Ideally, you'll want to go through this process during both the snow season and non-snow season to see how travel choices, patterns, and behaviors change.

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Require sidewalks as a condition of approving a development plan. Reduce the number of required parking spaces to allow for commercial development, including food retailers, in walkable locations.



Non-Regulatory Action: Budget for and install sidewalks. Identify “safe routes to stores.” Ensure routes around senior housing sites and to/from grocery stores are cleared early on during snow storms. Use “traffic calming” techniques (such as narrow streets, trees, medians, flower pots, art, markings, cones, etc.) to slow traffic in busy areas and identify pedestrian paths without building sidewalks. Work with regional transit companies to ensure service routes and stops align with food shelves, supermarkets, and congregate meal sites. Shopping shuttles, which specifically connect community centers and housing sites with grocery stores, are a great way to ensure those without a car can access food retailers.



Community Action: Consider all users in all transportation projects. For example, work to align food shelf hours, farmers markets, summer meal sites, etc. with public transit routes. Ensure safe bike and pedestrian access to community events like farmers markets and other key food access points. Explore community-based and volunteer solutions to meet public transportation needs.

Case Study

Champlain Islanders Developing Essential Resources

Incorporated in 1993, Champlain Islanders Developing Essential Resources (C.I.D.E.R.) was developed as a result of a 1988 community needs assessment conducted in the five towns of Grand Isle County. The needs assessment suggested that the population of older adults and persons with disabilities was not (at that time) sufficient to justify developing new group housing and that efforts should instead be directed at providing the resources and assistance that individuals would need in order to remain living independently in their own homes.

Access to food/meals is a significant challenge for many Islanders due to a lack of public transportation and the rural nature of the county; addressing food access in this setting requires flexible thinking and creative partnership. Transportation continues to be the largest of C.I.D.E.R.'s programs, and is inextricably connected to food access.

C.I.D.E.R. has been hosting community meals and home-delivering meals across the five rural communities in Grand Isle County since 1994. This comes out of their recognition that as an older adult or someone living with a disability it can be tough in such a rural place to get the food you need, and that mealtime is a great opportunity to build and foster community connections.

C.I.D.E.R. also provides information, referral, and a variety of personal services such as rides to medical appointments. To effectively manage the requests for assistance, C.I.D.E.R. now employs a full-time executive director, transportation program coordinator, and several part-time employees. C.I.D.E.R. relies heavily upon over 150 volunteers to provide assistance in some fashion during an average year. The values that guide C.I.D.E.R. are to be: Caring, Creative, Client Based, Cost Effective and Community Based.



Plan Element: Utilities and Facilities

This section of the plan discusses utilities like electricity, water, and sewer, and facilities like town-owned buildings, parks, and libraries. Any of these publicly owned properties can be used for food access projects like community gardens, farmers markets, food shelves, community meal sites, or educational programming (such as cooking, foraging, or canning classes). You can also use your plan to identify land for facilities like a grocery store, and to make sure you are not inadvertently restricting any of these uses. The Utilities and Facilities section of the plan also includes solid waste and organics diversion. Here is an opportunity to discuss food diversion — sending food to people instead of composting it or putting it into trash.

Opportunities abound for how a municipality can take the lead to bring in food access to its existing and future facilities! To improve food access in local communities, adequate infrastructure is needed in the form of utilities and facilities. Typical facilities needed to ensure food access include food shelves, public kitchens with equipment for food processing, both dry and cold storage for food aggregation and distribution, private or publicly-owned land for community gardens and compost sites, and spaces where classes can be held on nutrition, cooking, proper food storage, and food waste reduction. Utilities related to food access include the typical water, gas, electricity, and waste disposal and becoming more critical are transportation and internet connectivity as communities try to ensure foods get from farm to plate in as short a time as possible to ensure the highest levels of quality and freshness at their final destinations.

Regulations can also have an impact. Vermont's Universal Recycling law encourages people to follow the Vermont Food Recovery Hierarchy. (More information on the law and the hierarchy can be found at the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation [website](#).) The first step is to reduce food waste and donate food to people who need it. Food waste reduction can be achieved by educating businesses about better ordering and menu planning and how to donate excess food, and the public on proper food handling and storage; increasing acceptance of ugly or misshapen foods; better use of leftovers; scratch-based cooking; and understanding expiration dates. In its first few years of law, universal recycling has led to a major increase in food donations to the Vermont Foodbank and food shelves across the state.

Planning Process



Talk with any community group interested in running a food access program that requires physical space. Evaluate the presence/absence of a farmers market and/or community garden. Talk with a farmers market committee or organizer. Bring in experts from the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) to discuss its program for farmers market EBT readers. Connect with the public librarian to discuss educational programming.

To improve food access, communities need to set aside a physical space for the charitable food system whether a separate building or space in a church or community center, so speak with the organizers of any nearby charitable food site. Is it an adequate size for the existing and future population? Is the site located on a public transportation route or within walkable distance from downtown population centers or adequate parking? Does the location have adequate space for food storage, refrigerators, and freezers? Is there a kitchen and equipment to minimally process foods if that will help ensure the foods are consumed or allow for longer storage?

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Require community garden and compost space in housing projects. Ensure that regulations support the development of new community spaces.



Non-Regulatory Action: Install edible landscapes in parks and at schools. Identify appropriate locations for community gardens. Establish a dedicated space for a farmers market. Utilize the public library as a space for training programs. Support grant applications related to food access — for example, help the charitable food system build infrastructure to process and store fresh food donations.



Community Action: Coordinate resources for community programs and public/private community spaces (like church kitchens, Meals on Wheels, food shelves, town hall kitchen). Create a food systems map that highlights food sources (farms, food manufacturing sites, grocery stores, restaurants, food shelves, community meal sites, etc.) with hours of operation and transportation options. Encourage volunteers for gleaning (partnering with local farms to harvest surplus food and distributing it to places like food shelves), cooking at meal sites, distributing at food shelves, and teaching classes on cooking, composting, and food waste reduction.

Case Study

Rooted in Vermont Library Week

In 2018, the Vermont Department of Libraries partnered with Rooted in Vermont, a program of the Vermont Farm to Plate Network, to host “Exploring Food in Your Backyard: Grow it. Hunt it. Find it,” a week in October of food-themed activities in libraries across the state. With over two dozen events across Vermont, community members came out to their local libraries to learn about farm-to-school, hunting and fishing, cider pressing, foraging, and much more. Due to the success of the events, the week has become an annual program.

“One of the things that all libraries want to do is work more directly in our communities, and an easy way to do that is through discussion or activities around food, especially local food,” says Lara Keenan, Vermont Department of Libraries’ statewide consultant for library directors and trustees, who helped to organize the week of events. *Pictured: A chicken raising workshop at Carpenter-Carse Library.*





Plan Element: Education

In municipal planning, education encompasses both the K-12 education system, including school meal programs, and ways that community members of all ages have access to learning opportunities, which can include nutrition and cooking education, how to shop and cook healthy food on a budget, and how to grow one's own food in gardens. This section covers both of these contexts.

Being well-nourished is at the root of a child's brain development, academic performance, and ability to succeed in school. Children who do not get enough to eat struggle to learn; their bodies prioritize using food and nutrients to stimulate growth and organ development, and as reported in a Tufts University study, "social activity and learning are the last place that energy from food is applied,

so children that do not have adequate access to healthy foods may experience social and learning delays." Their concentration during the school day can be unfocused, leading to behavioral disruption and inability to retain valuable information.

There are a number of federal nutrition programs that help children access nutritious meals outside of the home: at school, in afterschool programs, and during the summer. Strong meal programs ensure children have access to nutritious food, experience eating meals together, and try new foods. When all children, regardless of their family's income, have access to nutritious meals, the entire school benefits. And, when the school year ends and children lose access to school breakfast and lunch five days each week, many families struggle to fill that gap. This makes summer meal programs, often hosted in community settings like local libraries and parks, vital. Low-income children who do not have consistent access to nutritious food during the summer months are more likely to experience the "summer slide," returning to school in the fall having lost more of their learning from the previous year than their peers. Ensuring children in your community have access to strong programs not only ensures they are getting the nutrition they need now, it also helps children make lifelong healthy eating habits.

In addition to the connection between food access and learning in an education setting, communities can also support individuals of all ages in learning how to shop and cook nutritious food on a budget. Cooking, nutrition, gardening, and food education throughout one's life helps instill healthy cooking and eating habits and promotes public health. There are a variety of programs and educational materials available, from Farm to School programming for youth, to shopping on a budget, gardening, and cooking classes for youth, adults, and older community members.

Planning Process



Communities can explore how schools and other entities serving youth are supporting food access for students. Ask questions like: Are schools following best practices to maximize participation in school breakfast and lunch? Are afterschool meal programs and summer meal programs available, and do they have fun and educational programming tied with the meals? Do youth have access to a school or community gardening program and to cooking and nutrition classes? Is there a Farm to School program, and is it integrated into the classroom, cafeteria, and with local farmers? What kinds of barriers, like funding or transportation, are these programs facing?

Also explore what kinds of cooking and nutrition education programs are available in your community or neighboring communities. Find out if there are community members who would like to host these kinds of programs but need support, like access to a teaching space with a kitchen or garden space. Get creative! Many food co-ops, senior centers, and community centers may be offering programs or would be interested in doing so.



School administrators and other leaders like school board members can review school data, like the percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced price school meals, or the percentage of students directly certified for free school meals to identify opportunities to access different programs. Additionally, work with the local and state organizations listed in the resource section of this toolkit, like Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont FEED, University of Vermont Extension, and the Vermont Community Garden Network, to gather data and learn about opportunities.

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Most regulation of the education system happens at the state level, rather than in communities. For example, public schools are required by state law to offer school breakfast and lunch. Only a small number of schools utilize an option to exempt themselves from this regulation.



Non-Regulatory Action: Encourage schools and organizations serving youth to incorporate meal programs into their services and take advantage of all federal nutrition programs available to them. The plan can name best practices, such as serving school breakfast after the bell, offering meals to all students regardless of their family's ability to pay by providing universal school meals, developing a robust Farm to School program in school and early childhood settings, and coupling meal programs and high-quality programming together during the summer. Meal programs are part of a good education, and ensuring programs are serving free meals year-round in the community can be an aspirational goal detailed in the plan.

Address common infrastructure needs for cooking, nutrition, or gardening education programs for people of all ages by including language for the development of a commercial kitchen or teaching garden space in a community center or other community-focused building. Any new construction or renovations in buildings like libraries, senior centers, or community centers can include spaces for these kinds of classes and activities.

Support funding meal programs for youth, educational programming at meal sites, and nutrition and cooking education programs through special line-items in a town budget or through the school budget. For example, a plan could support funding in a municipal budget for someone to staff a summer meal site and provide fun and educational activities that reduce stigma associated with eating a free meal and increase participation.



Community Action: Community groups can also support children's access to meal programs and everyone's access to nutrition and cooking education programs. Groups can partner with schools to help provide meal programming, transport food to different meal sites, support Farm to School programming, help students with a garden, and more. There are many organizations in Vermont that can help communities with this work, including Vermont FEED, regional Farm to School organizations like Green Mountain Farm to School, Hunger Free Vermont, and the Vermont Community



Garden Network. For our youngest community members, Farm to Early Childhood programs help early childhood programs like childcare providers incorporate local food and relationships with producers into their work as well.

Community groups can also partner with local grocery stores, food co-ops, restaurants, and others to provide nutrition and cooking education. For adults, these kinds of workshops and classes provide ample opportunities for building knowledge and strengthening community relationships. There are many groups, like the University of Vermont Extension's Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and online resources that can help you develop programs that will work with your community.

Case Study

Universal Meals for NewBrook Elementary and West River School District

Chris Parker, known as Chef Chris by his students, has led his school, the West River School District, and the communities of Newfane, Brookline, Townshend, and Jamaica to invest school budget dollars into providing universal school meals to all of its students. During the 2017-2018 school year, NewBrook Elementary School was awarded a Farm to School grant through the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets. Through this grant, Parker, the school's food service manager, was able to receive free consulting support from Hunger Free Vermont to help increase access to and participation in his school meal programs and to explore how the school could provide universal school breakfast and lunch.

The school determined that the community would need to increase local financial investment for NewBrook's school meal program through the school budget in order to provide universal school meals. With support from the leadership at NewBrook Elementary and the Windham Central Supervisory Union, the school began serving free breakfast and lunch to all students in fall 2018. The program was a success — more students began eating school meals and the program was able to deepen the connections between the cafeteria, classroom, and community.

Given the great success of NewBrook's program, Chris was promoted to the role of food service director for the newly-consolidated West River School District and brought universal school meals with him. District leadership recognized the value of universal school meals and sustained funding for universal school meals in an otherwise tight school budget. Starting in the fall of 2019, NewBrook, along with Jamaica Village School, Townshend Elementary School, and Leland & Gray Middle and High School, is providing free, farm to school-inspired meals to all students, with the support of the entire community.



Plan Element: Health and Wellness

The health of our population is the underlying factor to the success of our communities. As studies have shown, “access to healthy food is associated with lower risk for obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases”. In addition, the effects of hunger on children can be detrimental to their health, well-being, and lifelong success. Children living in food insecure homes are at greater risk for poor health, nutritional deficiencies, and obesity/overweight, as well as developmental delays, poor academic achievement, depression, and increased aggressive or hyperactive behavior. For many rural Vermonters, healthy food can be far away and expensive. While not a requirement of municipal planning, many communities are choosing to include a health and wellness component in their plan.

The plan can tackle health and wellness through the lenses of transportation, zoning, housing, and community programming. Consider the distance someone must travel to find fresh produce and healthy food; meal services or programs that could be offered in public spaces; or zoning or other incentives to support farm stands, farmers markets, community and school gardens, food shelves, and mobile food delivery services.

Food access is inherent in public health, which means that any strategy to increase food access improves public health. Strategies recommended here have an explicit health focus, such as partnerships with health programs or an emphasis on improving nutrition, but consider strategies from other sections even if you intend to place them in the health and wellness section.

Planning Process



Analyze data for various diseases and food-related health concerns. Analyze trends in obesity or related chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, or cancer. Review data on community health and household income (lower income is often associated with higher rates of hunger and food insecurity). inventory places to buy fresh and/or healthy foods (i.e. fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables with no added salt, sugar, fat). What is the proportion of food retailers or other food outlets (food shelves, farmers markets, etc) relative to the number of people in the community? What is the distance of food retailers from residential areas, especially lower income residential areas? What kind of food is available for purchase? Vermont Department of Health (VDH) staff can help with this, or you can make it an active research outing for the planning commission.

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Link land use planning and transportation planning, especially through increased walkability, to increase access to healthy food retailers as well as physical activity.



Non-Regulatory Action: Encourage more walkable/bikeable infrastructure and transit options in communities, especially in and around grocery stores/farmers markets. Support a local farmers market and coupon programs. Encourage workplace health programs and incentives. Work with VDH and retailers to implement “healthy retailer” principles to increase availability of fruits and vegetables. Vote at Town Meeting to maintain or increase funding for Meals on Wheels, food shelves, and other food access programs. Get creative; making healthy food readily available could be as simple as planting fruit trees and bushes in public places or public parks. Use urban and community gardening to encourage easy access to fruits and veggies.



Community Action: Encourage the summer farmers market to relocate indoors for a fall/winter market. Work with local proprietors of general stores and convenience stores to offer fresh produce, located near the checkout counter, at affordable prices. Establish community gardens in underserved neighborhoods. Partner with farmers to “glean” or donate excess, culled, and day-old produce to food shelves. Encourage community groups, faith communities, and other partners to offer cooking classes or workshops on how to shop for, store, and cook with fresh produce and nutritious foods.

What about Wild Foods?

Vermont’s woods, lakes, and rivers are teeming with high-quality wild foods. Hunting, fishing, and foraging provide Vermonters with an opportunity to supplement their diet while enjoying the recreation that accompanies such activities and contributing to beneficial wildlife management practices. While wild food may seem intimidating, there are many resources out there that can help communities learn more. For instance, Vermont Fish and Wildlife offers free hunter education courses along with a litany of additional seminars that range in topics from whole deer processing to beginner trout fishing and more, all around the state. These skill-building opportunities also address health and safety concerns and ecological responsibility.

Case Study

Town of Morristown Supports Nutrition Education

Municipalities can do a lot to promote health and wellness programs that address food access by establishing local partnerships and agreements. Through the efforts of its Community Development Coordinator, the Town of Morristown is delivering broad support for food and nutrition education. In 2019, the Town partnered with the University of Vermont Extension’s Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and the Morrisville Alliance for Culture and Commerce to improve the ability of its community members to access, grow, and prepare nutritious food and lead healthier lives.

These partnerships resulted in a donated garden plot to be used as an educational garden where residents can learn basic gardening skills and become familiar with new, healthy foods. Planters were installed on downtown sidewalks for growing vegetables and herbs. The Town also donated “classroom” space to hold the EFNEP classes, which are offered at no cost to low-income families and youth. To create awareness and encourage participation, the Coordinator advertised the classes and publicized the garden projects on the Town’s social media outlet. By using its assets and reach, the Town of Morristown is making a significant contribution to the health and well-being of community members who need it most.





Plan Element: Agriculture

While state statute does not require that plans discuss the overall agricultural economy, it does require an identification of agricultural lands, and VSA T.24, Ch. 117, §4302 lists state *goals* for Town Plans (in addition to the required *elements*), including “to encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries.” Often communities address agriculture in conjunction with forestry as part of the required natural resources element, but some towns choose to address agriculture as a separate chapter or even group food access and agriculture together. Regardless of how your plan is organized, whenever you’re thinking about your local food producers is a natural time to start thinking about food access for all community members.

It’s important to remember that **not every initiative that helps your local food producers will help increase local food access.** Some towns choose to pursue a vision of food self-sufficiency where all local food needs would be met by local production (see more on page 7), but the current reality is that our communities are so entwined with the national and global food economy that most of your town’s producers need to sell their products beyond the local community and most of your town’s residents rely on some food that is not produced locally. Some initiatives to help your local producers, while worthwhile on their own, do not increase food access (for example, building infrastructure for high-end specialty food products) or may even reduce food access (for example, assisting local producers in shifting to regional wholesale markets when they previously sold direct to local consumers). For more information on supporting your local agricultural economy in general, see the [Sustaining Agriculture](#) series.

That said, Vermont’s local producers are already an important piece of the food access puzzle, especially when it comes to fresh produce, and towns can assist them in playing an even greater role. The strategies discussed in this section are those that have a dual benefit: supporting your local farmers economically while also increasing food access for your town’s other residents.

Planning Process



Identify barriers to expanding agricultural operations by talking to businesses, the town clerk, or the team at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAFMM). Bring in experts from NOFA-VT to discuss their Community Food Access programs. Talk with a farmers market committee or organizer if there is one and ask what might help strengthen the market and make it more accessible for more shoppers. Talk with local food shelves to see what relationships they already have with area farmers and what relationships they’d like to build.



Inventory existing agricultural operations, especially those with direct-to-consumer retail (farmers markets, CSA shares, farm stands, etc.) What is the proportion of these food outlets

relative to the number of people in the community? What kind of food is available for purchase? How hard is it to physically access these food outlets? How many of these local food retail locations can accept 3SquaresVT?

In the Plan



Regulatory Action: Consider all your town's regulations to make sure that local producers are able to sell directly to local consumers. Flexible zoning policies can allow farmers to expand operations and engage in a diversity of on-farm accessory activities — in fact, Vermont Act 143 requires towns to allow on-farm accessory businesses like farm stands; help farmers be aware of this opportunity. Looking off the farm, are farmers markets and mobile markets allowed? Are they allowed in locations that are convenient and accessible for customers? See the section on Land Use (page 18) for more detailed information.



Non-Regulatory Action: If there are farms that are interested in increasing their farmstand sales but are geographically isolated, consider providing a central location where these farms can run a farm stand that's more accessible to customers, for example in the town hall parking lot or on the town green, or help them identify such space on private property. There may be a need for processing or storage facilities to help farmers reach consumers or build relationships with local food shelves. Other town facilities could be used for classes and workshops to help residents learn how to store and prepare the types of foods that are produced by local farmers.



Community Action: Support farmers markets and farmstands so that they are both financially beneficial to the farmers while also being accessible (physically and financially) to community members. Encourage organizers of a farmers market to accept 3SquaresVT benefits and assist them in acquiring an EBT machine. Support and promote coupon programs to help low-income residents purchase more food directly from farmers. Encourage farms that have CSAs to connect with the NOFA-VT subsidized CSA program. Encourage local employers to offer employee benefits like a subsidized

CSA share. Work with a farm to set up a “pop up” farmstand in a place where fresh produce may be hard to access. Assist local general stores and convenience stores in offering more produce from local farms; for some small rural grocery stores, it can be challenging to order produce through mainstream distributors due to minimum required orders — partnerships may be possible with local producers who are willing to wholesale at a smaller volume. Assess the schedules of your local food shelves and farmers markets — are they in conflict with each other or is there a way to collaborate? Partner with farmers to “glean” or donate excess, culled, and day-old produce to food shelves — is there infrastructure that could help the local gleaning program, such as a storage area, or could the community organize volunteer labor?

Case Study

NOFA-VT Farm Share Program

One of the community food access programs run by NOFA-VT is the Farm Share Program. This program assists limited-income individuals and families in accessing produce by partially subsidizing the cost of CSA shares from participating farms, which receive the full price for the share. This allows program recipients to enjoy fresh, healthy food while supporting a farm in their community. In the 2018 season, the program served over 600 Vermonters at 30 farms.

The program covers up to 50% of the cost of the “supported shares.” 25% of the cost comes from the individual farm's fundraising, and 25% from NOFA-VT. Communities can help support specific farms in their own fundraising efforts, for example by assisting with events or spreading the word about a campaign. Recent examples of community fundraising events include a pizza night at Good Heart Farmstead in Worcester and a Farm to Ballet performance at Crossmolina Farm in Corinth. NOFA-VT also raises a significant portion of its funding from an annual event called Share the Harvest, where restaurants donate a portion of a designated day's proceeds; communities can support the overall Farm Share Program by encouraging their town's restaurants to participate.



Thank you for taking part in this work!

This work can't happen without people like you engaging in the process and shining a light on hunger, its underlying causes, and ways to improve food access.

Vermont's municipal and regional plans are an important opportunity for communities to express their values, goals, and priorities. By including food access in these plans, communities can express a commitment to ensuring all community members have access to food and can begin to prioritize this commitment when making structural and financial decisions.

We hope this toolkit encourages you and gives you the information and resources you need to work with your community to address food access through the planning process. There are likely others in your community who will be excited to work with you on this. As you get started, reach out to your neighbors and don't forget to connect with the organizations and resources listed at the end of this toolkit. And, finally, help others learn from you by letting us know how this works in your community. Please share your successes, challenges, and learning with info@vsjf.org so that we can build best practices for other communities to use.

Resources

There are many organizations, state departments, and individuals across Vermont who can provide both encouragement and expertise; this is far from a comprehensive list.

While there are many great resources online, we encourage you to reach out and contact the organizations directly, as they can help point you in the right direction and may have experience and knowledge about your specific community.

Food Access

There are two statewide anti-hunger organizations that can support you in learning how to address food access. We encourage you to reach out to them or to a local organization in your community; both of these statewide organizations can direct you to an appropriate local contact.

- **The Vermont Foodbank** — vtfoodbank.org
- **Hunger Free Vermont** — hungerfreevt.org

There are many state departments and agencies that can provide support and information on this topic as well, including:

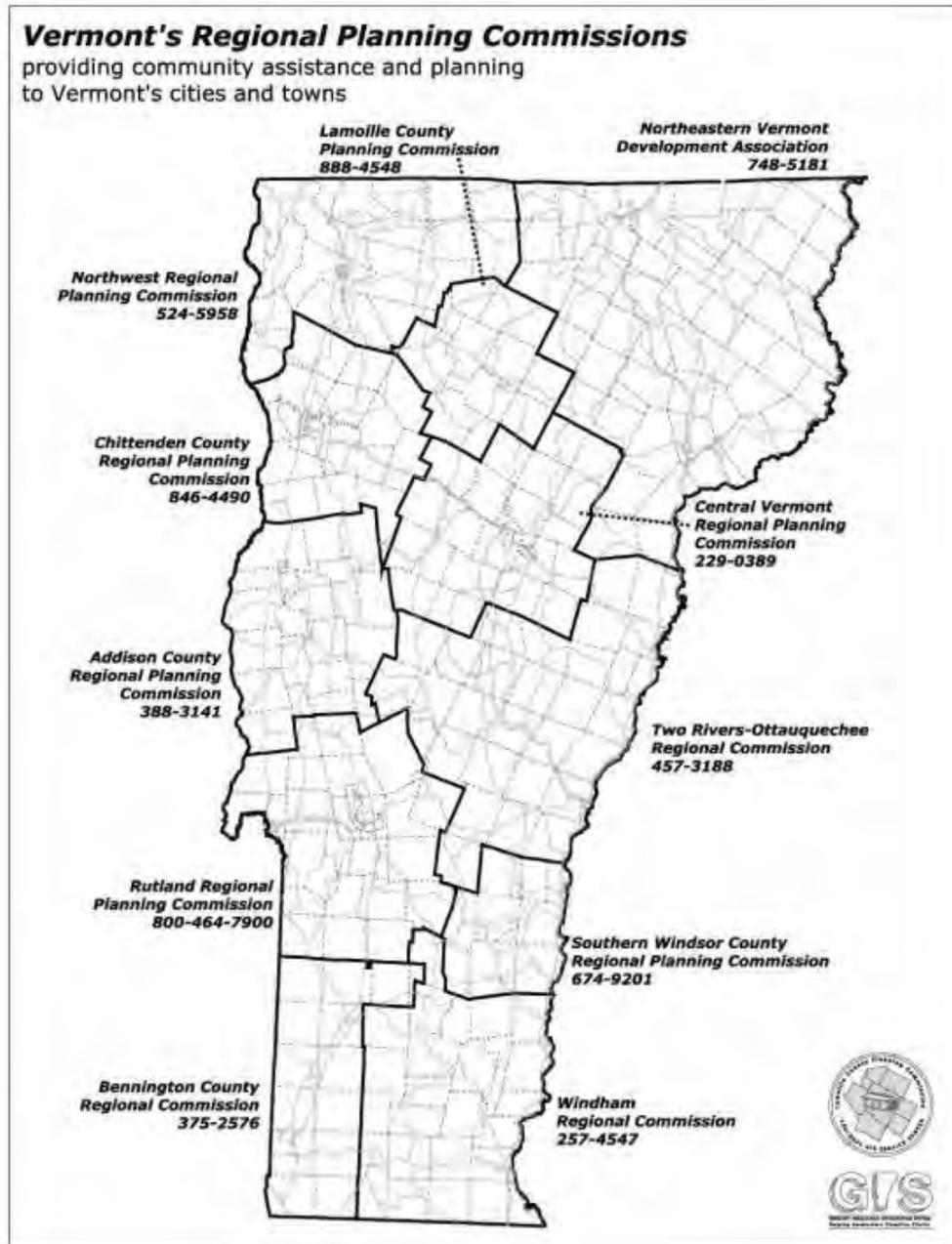
- **Vermont Department of Health** — healthvermont.gov
- **Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets** — agriculture.vermont.gov
- **Vermont Department for Children and Families** — dcf.vermont.gov

The **Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund** (vsjf.org) can provide more information about this project and other food systems planning resources, and is a good contact for the **Vermont Farm to Plate Network** (vtfarmtoplate.com), including the Food Access Cross-Cutting Team (vtfarmtoplate.com/network/food-access).

Planning

Your local **Regional Planning Commission** is the best place to start looking for resources or talking with a professional planner. If you don't already know your RPC, you can check out the **Vermont Association of Planning Districts** (vapda.org).

The **Department of Housing and Community Development** within the **Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development** (ACCD) provides a



Source: Lamoille County Planning Commission

number of resources on planning and community development (accd.vermont.gov/community-development).

If you are interested in community planning outside the formal municipal plan process, a number of organizations may be able with that as well, for example the **Vermont Council on Rural Development** (vtrural.org).

Designing and Implementing Specific Strategies

There are many additional organizations that can help with specific strategies. For example, the **Vermont Community Garden Network** (vcgn.org) can provide information and assistance with community gardens. For more resources organized by strategy, see [Appendix A](#) of this guide.

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Inside Cover: Hunger Free Vermont

P. 3: Taylor Foster

P. 6: Taylor Foster, featuring harvesting at Pete's Greens

P. 13: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

P. 15: Hunger Free Vermont

P. 16: Taylor Foster, featuring Newport Natural Foods

P. 18: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

P. 20: City Market Onion River Co-Op

P. 21: Good Food Good Medicine, featuring Green Acres Housing community garden

P. 23: Taylor Foster, featuring the Fresh Start Community Farm

P. 24: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund

P. 26: RAFFL, featuring gleaning at Rutland Farmers Market

P. 27: Carpenter-Carse Library

P. 28: VT FEED, featuring Northfield Highschool

P. 30: NewBrook Elementary

P. 31: Ben Harris/Vermont Community Foundation, featuring Food Connects Equitable Food Buying Club

P. 32: Taylor Foster, featuring Morristown Community Garden

P. 33: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, featuring Rutland Farmers Market

P. 35: Taylor Foster, featuring Craftsbury Block Party