

Supporting Urban Agriculture

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Cities and suburbs are recognizing that growing, selling, and distributing food have a vital role to play in urbanized environments. Urban agriculture is evolving nationally and regionally and encompasses community gardens, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, food buying clubs, food hubs, farms, beekeeping, animal husbandry, and more.

Many public tools and incentives can support urban agriculture. These include menu labeling laws, the use of Electronic Benefits Transfer technology at farmers' markets, food desert and food shed studies and mapping, micro loans for CSA programs, community kitchens, and Buy Fresh Buy Local marketing programs.

The most fundamental way cities, suburban towns, and villages can support urban agriculture is by developing reasonable zoning ordinances for growing and selling food, raising animals, and composting waste.

Considerations for Local Communities

Urban Agricultural Zoning

In urban areas, zoning can encourage sustainable food production in vacant buildings, public lands, rooftops, back yards, and window boxes. Urban agricultural zoning ordinances may establish standards for signs; parking; fencing; pedestrian paths; community gardens; mobile vending; structures such as greenhouses, hoop houses, compost bins, warehouses, farm stands, and alternative food outlets; the use of farm equipment, delivery trucks, manure, and chemicals; and food processing facilities.

Honey and Egg Ordinances

A growing trend in many urban and suburban areas around the country is the adoption of food-producing animal ordinances, often



Foodlink, a regional food bank, converted the third floor of a building in downtown Rochester into an indoor hydroponic garden. The city's zoning allows the use by special permit in a manufacturing district.

known as "honey and egg" ordinances because many such ordinances permit the raising of bees and chickens. In order to address neighbors' concerns, restrictions may vary by, for example, type of dwelling unit ("owner-occupied, yes; rental, no"), number and types of animals ("five hens, no roosters"), or other issues. The suburban Town of Irondequoit in Monroe County allows a wide variety of food-producing livestock in non-agricultural residential districts by special use permit.

Off-Farm Marketing Ordinances

Equally important for many farmers is the long-term, predictable access to good off-farm retail locations. Local governments can support farmers' markets (and CSA programs' food pick-up sites) in many ways, including helping farmers get access to sites with appropriate lighting, parking, vehicle and foot traffic, and rest rooms.

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Food Procurement Policies

Public institutions, including county and local governments, school districts, community colleges, and even prisons, can establish a procurement policy with preference given to local farmers, food processors, and food distributors. The idea is to create local jobs by keeping more local tax dollars circulating within the local economy. Albany County passed a resolution whereby its residential healthcare facilities and correctional facility purchase a portion of their food locally.

Rewriting procurement policies can be an intimidating task, and many local governments around the country have taken the more limited approach of buying local food on an ad hoc basis for special events.

Local governments are also partnering with local schools and colleges to start farm-to-school programs, which can include nutrition education, food-focused curriculum, local food snack bars, on-farm visits, and school gardens.

Healthy Food Zone Ordinance

An intriguing concept, currently adopted by a couple of cities and under consideration by several others around the country, is a zoning restriction on the number and concentration of fast food outlets with unhealthy food, particularly in neighborhoods with a disproportionately high number of existing fast food restaurants or at a minimum distance from schools, daycare centers, and other facilities that serve children. A model ordinance, developed by the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN), provides language for areas around schools and can be used in conjunction with Safe Routes to School programs.

Composting

Recent studies indicate that 40-50 percent of food produced in the U.S. is landfilled rather than consumed. Reducing or reusing waste from food can save tax dollars in diverted landfill costs, while producing a supply of nutrients for community gardens and other food-growing efforts. Composting is the most common way to reduce food waste. Local public composting programs range from the distribution of bins for backyard composting to household composting classes to curbside pick-up of food compost. To encourage food composting, the Village of Cold Spring in Putnam County distributed 100 backyard home composting units to residents at cost.

Selected Resources

Model agriculture-related ordinances in New York State

www.farmlandinfo.org/farmland_preservation_laws/index.cfm?function=laws&articleID=0&sortOrder=rating&articleTypeID=246&publishedStatusID=2&questionStatusID=&stateID=NY&topicID=&categoryID=&go.x=43&go.y=16&go=submit

Model Healthy Food Zone Ordinance, NPLAN
<http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/model-ord-healthy-food-zone>

Zoning Practice: Urban Agriculture, American Planning Association, 2010
<http://www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2010/pdf/mar.pdf>

Cornell Farm-to-School Program
<http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/>

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