

FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Project Summary

Tompkins Food Future is a community food system planning initiative to craft the first-ever comprehensive food system plan for Tompkins County. The goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable, affordable, and healthy food system for all members of our community. What follows is an overview of the state of our local food system gleaned from community conversations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, neighborhood canvassing, and data collection. This section covers the **Food Environment**.

Introduction

A mix of businesses and institutions create the “food environment” in any community. Residents of Tompkins County access food through many channels. On the surface, based on the numbers of farm, retail, and food service outlets, Tompkins County is a food center/hub for the region with many more food outlets than our neighboring counties. We have one of the most vital farmers markets in the region, numerous CSAs, more restaurants per capita than New York City, a cooperative food store, and a full array of regional and national food retailers. In addition, a large volume of food moves through our institutions—three colleges, five school districts, eleven elder care facilities, a hospital, and a jail. These opportunities make up a food environment that impacts the lives of residents and the broader local economy.

Food environments are the “combination of the ‘spaces’ in which people make decisions about food, and the foods and drinks that are made available, accessible, affordable, and desirable in those spaces.”¹ Healthy, sustainable, and equitable food environments are central to community food security, public health, and a strong local economy.

This section describes our community’s food environment—food retail, restaurants, and institutions—and examines the challenges and opportunities faced by those working in the food service and retail industry.

Challenges

Food service and retail workers (especially those in the night economy) report feeling undervalued and underrepresented. There is a lack of visibility and support for food system workers and businesses and the issues they face. Food system workers have been disproportionately impacted by Covid, food insecurity, mental health issues, and other on-the-job burdens in an already exploitative industry. Workers in the night economy finish work at 2am, hungry and with extremely limited options to meet that need. .

¹ [What are 'food environments'? - EPHA](#)).

TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD ENVIRONMENT AT-A-GLANCE

A mix of businesses and institutions create the “food environment” in any community. Grocery stores, supermarkets, convenience stores, specialty markets, institutional food service, farmers markets, restaurants public schools, and emergency food services impact the lives of residents and the broader local economy.

113

FOOD RETAIL
OUTLETS

105

FULL SERVICE
RESTAURANTS

74

FAST FOOD
RESTAURANTS

3,279

WORKERS IN FOOD
RETAIL SECTOR

\$37K

AVERAGE ANNUAL
WAGE

5

RESTAURANTS
PROVIDING LIVING
WAGE



LOCAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE
PURCHASING POWER, MINIMAL
LOCAL FOOD PRODCUREMENT

AT LEAST 17 FOOD PANTRIES
COUNTY-WIDE, PRESENT IN EVERY
MUNICIPALITY. 25 FOOD BANK OF
THE SOUTHERN TIER PARTNERS.



FARMERS MARKETS IN 6
COMMUNITIES, EVERY DAY OF
WEEK, 143 VENDORS. THIN
MARGINS FOR FARMERS, HIGH
COSTS FOR CONSUMERS.

FOOD SERVICE WORKERS FEEL
UNDERVALUED,
UNDERREPRESENTED,
UNSUPPORTED



Affordability and perception limit resident’s usage of SNAP at farmer’s markets and CSAs. Underutilization hurts producers and consumers.

Reliance on multinational supply chains creates vulnerabilities in the local food retail environment. Product shortages impact small retailers. Covid made visible the need for resilience in our local food system to prepare for future shocks.

Hiring and retention are significant challenges for local food retailers. A limited labor pool plus high turnover means positions are frequently unfilled. Most retailers do not pay a living wage, exacerbating turnover.

Corporate decision-making restricts local retailers’ ability to buy local, with purchasing agreements relegated to those outside the community. Regulations, such as GAPS certification, create barriers for local producers who would benefit from accessing larger markets.

Institutional food service limitations make it hard to incorporate local, seasonal foods (e.g. tight budgets, inadequate facilities, few workers, regulations that prevent direct purchasing agreements, and more).

Local farmers lack incentives to sell to institutional buyers who require low prices relative to direct market sales (farmers markets, CSAs).

Small retailers operate on thin margins in our limited local market. Forced to increase prices just to get by, they

inadvertently restrict accessibility for potential customers.

Volume and consistency of local food supply are the most challenging variables for retailers and restaurants trying to source local products. Time required to build relationships, and food safety requirements such as USDA processing for local meats also impede opportunities.

Opportunities

Pay food system workers for their labor by instituting improved payment structures such as a bartender commission.

Create stronger markets for local food by having small-scale retailers function as community hubs for farmers and producers. Brookton's Market and Main Street Market are examples of places that already function (loosely) as food hubs in their communities—gathering places, supporting local farms, supporting community groups/non-profits, helping with food access, etc. This model could be expanded to all towns in the county.

Develop programs to support food-related businesses who need help with legal, bureaucratic, or licensing processes. These aspects of running a business are especially complicated and time-consuming. Support services could strengthen existing businesses and encourage start-ups in the restaurant industry where many inequities exist.

Expand food systems education to encourage more residents to shop at farmers markets and CSAs and to build awareness of programs that help with affordability and access. Increase promotion and outreach for programs like SNAP, which currently represent a very small portion of farmers market sales.

Provide funding to pilot a Farm to Institution program (akin to Farm to School). Institutional buyers serious about buying from local sources would need to make a major commitment to work with local suppliers. Local farmers would have to deliver a high-quality, uniform product over more extended timeframes.

Support cottage laws which allow people to bake and prepare certain foods on a small scale in their own kitchens for sale to local retailers. This capacity would remove barriers to participate in the local food system, increase participation among more individuals who stand to benefit, and encourage innovation and entrepreneurship.

Develop a retail customer service training program and jobs pipeline in partnership with BOCES and other educational partners



Food Environment Stakeholder Insights

(word-for-word quotes)

"When the pandemic hit grocery workers got a new profile where folks would have ignored them before."

“Need to have a baseline of paying for people’s labor in order for the system to be just.”

"Its a struggle to stay open when you’re so small, but provides an amazing feeling of community"

"People with families aren’t able to survive on what we’re able to offer."

"Most farmers and small producers don’t understand how to get into larger retailers and can be difficult to navigate"

"It was a nightmare at the beginning. The supply chain has not completely recovered yet to where it was pre-pandemic. It felt like tailspin at first."