tompkins food future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tompkins County Community Food System Plan:

Food System Baseline Assessment

September 21, 2021

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 from early 2020 through mid-2021. Full reports will be available at www.tompkinsfoodfuture.org/food-system-plan.

Land Acknowledgement

Tompkins Food Future, Tompkins County Food Policy Council, and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County acknowledge that we are located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogo̱hó:nǫ' (the Cayuga Nation). The Gayogo̱hó:nǫ' are members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an alliance of six sovereign nations with a historic and contemporary presence on this land. The confederacy precedes the establishment of Cooperative Extension, Cornell University, New York State and the United States of America. We acknowledge the painful history of Gayogo̱hó:nǫ' dispossession, and honor the ongoing connection of Gayogo̱hó:nǫ' people, past and present, to these lands and waters. We aim to ensure that the future of Tompkins County's food system addresses past injustices and builds greater food sovereignty among Indigenous people.

FOOD PRODUCTION

Introduction

The people who plant, grow, raise, and harvest the food we eat are at the heart of our local food system. Farmers work in relationship with the land and environment to provide the foundation of food for our community. Where our food comes from and how it is produced are key pieces of the food system. In this section, we explore who farms and grows our food, how it is produced, and the type and quantity of food produced in our region. We also look at the environmental impacts and benefits of our agricultural system, and discuss the increasingly severe impacts from climate change. We spoke with farmers and producers about their biggest challenges, and we asked what is needed to create strong and sustainable businesses for the long-term.

Challenges

Workforce: A shortage of interested, trained, local employees. Farm labor is the biggest annual expense for local farms and critical for their viability.

Transitions: Transitions occur when ownership or land tenure changes or

when an owner/operator decides to change their enterprise to new crops, new technology, or between conventional and organic techniques. Barriers to transitioning farms include skill building requirements, financial risk, and a profitability lag. It can be difficult to find new farmers with the financial capacity and skills to take over mature farms ready for new ownership. Young and minority farmers face additional barriers to finding capital and supportive networks.

Profitability: Limited access to retailers, distributors, and processors (e.g., slaughterhouses, canners, frozen food markets), and high costs of production (e.g., land, labor, insurance, regulatory costs) make it difficult to run a profitable agricultural business. Supplemental, "off-farm," income is needed for most farm families to survive, and without existing wealth new farmers struggle to get off the ground.

Scale and Markets: Marketing was the biggest challenge identified by small farmers, who described it as an uphill battle in need of constant attention. Many small farms in Tompkins County do not have the capacity to supply at the scale needed to join wholesale distribution chains, have difficulty finding retail operations that will buy directly from them, and are frustrated by the time and skills required to provide customer service for direct-to-consumer sales.

Regulatory Burden: Rules and regulations are one-size fits all and layered through multiple municipalities, impacting modes of production and product standards at the point of sale. This impedes value-added opportunities, innovation, and access to new and diverse markets.

Business Support: Access to accountants, lawyers, insurance, and business / marketing support is limited, inconsistent, unreliable, and an additional cost for farmers, who are expected to operate modern businesses and juggle many competing priorities.

Land access: Due to systemic racism, increasing land prices, and development pressures, inequities for new and prospective farmers are practically insurmountable, especially BIPOC individuals and those without existing wealth. A high percentage of new and beginning farmers rent land, making long-term investment difficult and limiting their choice of agricultural products to cultivate or raise. The early years are the hardest and while some loans are available, they do not cover the costs of production in Tompkins County.

Climate change: Increased drought, erratic rainfall, late and early frosts, and the emergence of new pests have substantially increased time and resources needed to mitigate and adapt to extreme weather conditions.

Market Disruption from COVID-19: In 2020, farms experienced declining sales to restaurants, retailers, and distributors, while CSA and direct-to-consumer sales surged and then waned in 2021.

Community gardening: Residential and community gardens increase access to fresh produce, exercise, nature, and other people, and so have many benefits. However, community gardens depend on volunteers, have limited funding, and see fluctuating levels of use. Opportunities are limited for those who rent, are low-income, or have limited time. Even large gardens do not produce the majority of calories consumed by a typical household.

Opportunities

Financial incentives and transition support for retiring and beginning farmers would keep agricultural land productive. Facilitated transition support would increase equitable access to agricultural land for the next generation of farmers.

Education, training, and mentorship program expansion would prepare and support beginning farmers and expand access to the industry.

Financial investment in small farmers who wish to expand would increase capacity in our local food system, feed more of the local population freshly harvested, nutrient dense crops, and potentially lower prices. Fencing, irrigation, greenhouses, and other capital improvements expand our overall capacity as well as that of an individual farm.

Climate impact education would help farmers prepare, plan, and maintain resiliency in the face of rapid shifts in weather, pests, and disease.

Climate mitigation funds would help farmers invest in infrastructure to control irrigation, protect from frost damage, extend season capabilities, and avoid crop losses.

Payments for ecosystem services would increase the carbon carrying and water retention capacity of our cultivated areas as well as supporting the financial viability of farms investing in such outcomes.

Collective infrastructure such as a grower's cooperative would help farmers position themselves for growth by helping with marketing, strategic business planning, and other business services. A collective can also identify opportunities for new products and promote local purchasing.

Food systems education expansion for children and area residents would increase consumer support and build a stronger coalition of future farmers.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

The process of how our food gets to our plates is complex, obscure, and poorly understood by food consumers. It depends on a huge multinational production and distribution system which has evolved over the last 100 years. This consolidated system of food production and distribution is highly dependent on fossil fuels, foreign labor, narrow production margins, and high costs associated with processing, packaging, and moving food. Expedience often trumps quality . This has raised questions about the sustainability of our food system.

Our system includes some local packing, processing, and distribution, and these players are more integrated with community conversations and supportive of efforts to grow our local capacity. Processors operating in Tompkins County include beverage makers, added value processors, bakers, and herbalists. The local beverage industry thrives on agritourism revenue as well as sales, incentivizing owners to protect surrounding farmland and other natural landscapes.

Distant actors who do business in Tompkins County, on the other hand, show very little interest in working with community-led efforts towards reform. This is our greatest challenge because there is no transparency about their operations and little accountability to update their operations to meet local community expectations. Our small market scale gives us little power to regulate reform without pushing some businesses away.

The following section explains how food makes it to Tompkins County. There are gaps as well as opportunities for information gathering.

Challenges

Supplying seasonal items from local farms at wholesale levels requires a great deal of flexibility based on local weather conditions and the variable quality of small batch items from multiple farms. This lessens their competitiveness with larger, diversified distributors.

Hiring enough workers is an ongoing challenge. There is currently a national shortage of drivers. Other packers and low-skilled workers are also hard to come by and the cost of that labor is higher here than in other states, making our products expensive to produce.

Scaling up operations at farms and value added processing requires access to capital, facilities, technical expertise, understanding the regulatory environment, sourcing supplies, and sufficient business support.

Access to USDA-approved slaughterhouses is limited due to regulatory requirements and a shortage of trained butchers, causing backlogs that can last multiple years. Farmers need to cull herds in the fall when livestock has finished the grazing season and the meat is the appropriate age and weight. However, they compete with area hunters for access to the small meat processing facilities and with large operations for appointments at USDA facilities.

The cost of doing business in New York is higher than in other states, making it difficult to compete on a local as well as regional scale.

Opportunities

Farm cooperatives have helped many industries achieve a sufficient scale to invest in equipment, share

staff, and find access to wholesale markets. A shared brand would also help farmers sell to New York City and other larger markets. However, many small farmers want to maintain control of their operations and are hesitant to enter into shared management agreements. Grant funds would be needed to supplement available loans and support an initial 4-5 year growth period.

Local distributors such as Regional Access, Finger Lakes Farms, and Headwater Foods are growing and currently maintain an emphasis on purchasing local products. Their success will support area farmers who wish to grow beyond direct-to-consumer sales.

Cold storage, frozen food facilities, and canning operations are business services that would help farmers add profitability. Incentives to operate these food processing services could spur new businesses. These services would also extend consumer access to local foods beyond the growing season.

Shared use and community kitchen facilities would help food entrepreneurs develop and expand their businesses, as well as provide an outlet where surplus farm and retail food can be processed for sale or donation to local buyers.

Buy New York initiatives like the NY State Farm to School program subsidize the institutional purchase of local products, making these enterprises more competitive. Additional support for local entrepreneurs tailoring goods for this market would position them here in Tompkins, where they can build a local network of expertise and share business services.

Food business incubation needs were assessed in 2013 by Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD, now IAED) and initial recommendations for business guidance and networking support were carried out through the Food Business Incubation Program, housed at Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins from 2018-2020. Funding would re-ignite this successful program.

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. .

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 time frames.

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."

FOOD ACCESS AND SECURITY

Introduction

Food is an essential component to human life. Being well nourished enables us to sleep well, exercise, perform well at school or work, and live a full life. Even if we ourselves are food secure, the food insecurity of our neighbors impacts the whole community.

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. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Despite the abundance of food available in Tompkins County, over 11,000 of our neighbors struggle to regularly access and afford enough fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food that meets their preferences. Here we explore the nature and scope of food insecurity in Tompkins County and some of the conditions that inhibit food access.

One challenge we all share is that of a changing climate. Temperature shifts, extreme weather events, and coastal flooding profoundly affect the production and distribution of food, exacerbating price spikes, shortfalls, and inequalities in food access.

Many in our community champion food sovereignty, an idea developed by Via Campesina and brought to the public in 1996.

> *"Food sovereignty is 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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."*
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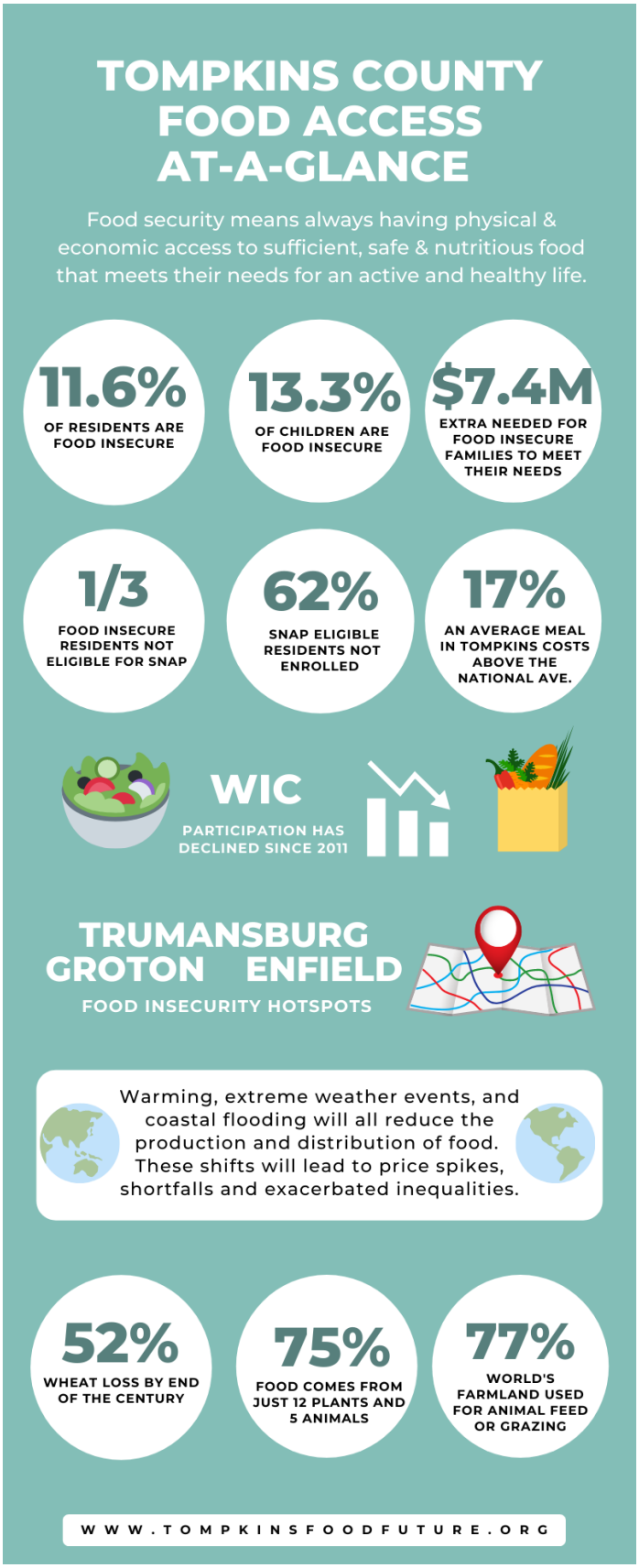
> *Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007*

Challenges

Affordability: An average meal in Tompkins County is 17% more expensive than the national average. High-cost food places an additional burden on low-income residents already struggling to afford housing, childcare, transportation, and other necessities. Fully one-third of food insecure residents earn too much to qualify for public food assistance programs, yet struggle to stretch a limited food budget. Among those Tompkins residents who are eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps), only 30–40% are enrolled. Neither SNAP nor WIC (Women Infants and Children) cover all food costs and the enrollment process and eligibility are challenging to navigate.



Transportation: A spectrum of transportation-related issues disrupt food access and security, including not owning a vehicle (over 5,500 residents), lacking reliable access to a vehicle or ride, inaccessibility of bus routes and times, the hardship of transporting groceries on a bus, and limited food delivery.

Time: Food shopping and preparation is time consuming. SNAP and WIC provide groceries that include canned and frozen meals, but fresh prepared foods are not allowed. Without adequate space and equipment, cooking becomes even more time consuming and the nutritional balance of food consumed suffers.

Systemic Problems, Root Causes: Food insecurity is inherently tied to other structural factors: inadequate wages, intergenerational poverty, racism and classism, mental health and physical disabilities, and housing and transportation insecurity. Racial disparities in food assistance enrollment show higher levels of food insecurity among Black residents, which is layered on top of the lowest rates of income and highest rates of poverty in the county.

Awareness of Support Services: Private food assistance programs help residents access and afford food. The majority of services in Tompkins are concentrated in the City of Ithaca and residents find it challenging to keep track of what is available and when,

who is eligible, and what to do to receive support. Families without transportation, people living in rural areas, people with disabilities, seniors, children (especially 0-4) and people of color are hardest to reach with existing services.

Limited Access to Nutritious, Fresh, Culturally Appropriate Foods: Produce is challenging to distribute and keep fresh, so small retailers and many pantries opt for shelf-stable food options. These convenience foods do not fill the nutritional, cultural, or preferential needs of county residents.

Evolving Emergency Feeding Programs: Food pantries and other safety net food programs provide crucial support to people in need of food. Unfortunately, stigma deters people from utilizing these services. Residents running pantries expressed their dissatisfaction with the emergency food distribution model and a desire to dramatically shift the service model toward “free groceries” or “food centers” and reduce the need for them altogether. They also expressed the need to train pantry volunteers in trauma-informed service and a desire to hire staff as rates of volunteerism decline. Without paid staff and consistent funding, pantries lack the resources to build capacity in many important areas, including grant-writing, data collection and tracking, delivery systems, sourcing and storing fresh and culturally appropriate foods, customer service skill development, and community outreach—all of which could help address unmet needs.

Climate-Induced Food Losses: Access to food in Tompkins County depends upon a vast global network of producers who use a wide array of means to safely transport perishable and staple items. Worldwide, these systems are under threat from shifting temperatures, extreme weather, and rising seas. The resulting shortfall in supplies, increased costs for

cooling and transportation infrastructure, and more frequent spoilage of perishable items will likely reduce our ability to access preferred foods and increase our grocery bills.

Opportunities

"People need to be supported in three areas at once: having money to buy food, having transport to get it, and having time to cook it."

Pay a living wage throughout Tompkins to help more households afford food as well as housing, childcare, and other necessities and decrease reliance on emergency programs.

Make SNAP participation easier to increase the food budgets of the 62% of eligible households not currently enrolled. Catholic Charities helps with SNAP enrollment: A campaign to support enrollment and reduce stigma is underway by the Childhood Nutrition Collaborative in collaboration with the Nutrition Outreach Education Program (NOEP) coordinator at Catholic Charities.

Provide free transportation for food access to support the use of SNAP and WIC benefits. Similar programs support free rides to healthcare appointments. Access to nourishing food would provide preventative care for food insecure residents who currently add $10–$20 million to our county's health care costs.

Provide free/low-cost food delivery for low-income households to minimize the burden transportation places on food access. Leverage points include financial support for expanded delivery from food pantries and expansion of pilot programs that permit delivery options for SNAP and WIC.

Expand community outreach to inform residents about their options and reduce stigma associated with financial food assistance and free grocery programs.

Improve data and resource management for food donations, food rescue, and perishable items to optimize distribution of emergency food to those who need and want it.

Develop our food assistance workforce to increase quality food and service in emergency food programs and boost referrals to health and human services in Tompkins.

CONSUMPTION

Introduction

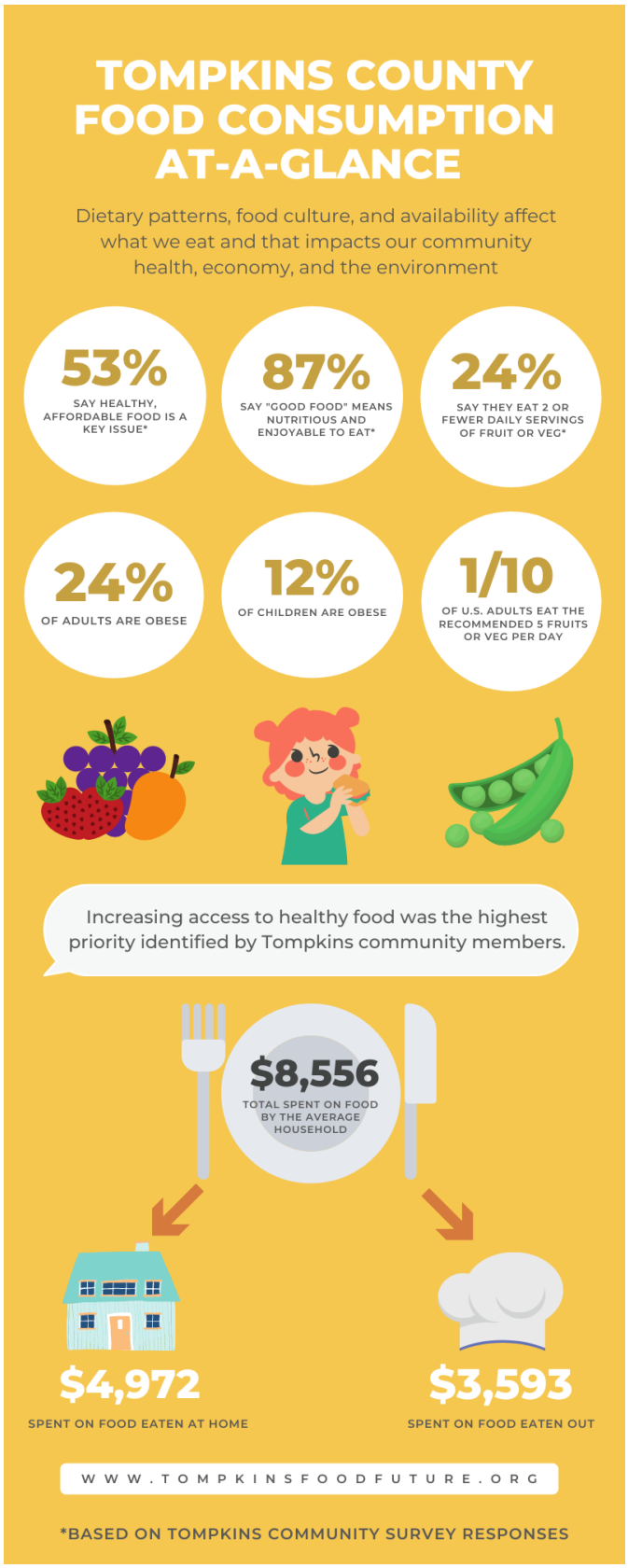
Food is one of the essential components to human life. Being well nourished enables us to sleep well, exercise, perform well at school or work, and live a full and connected life. Through shared meals, cultural dishes, and celebrations, food also nourishes our family and community connections. For many, food choices reflect our values about how we want producers, processors, retailers, and other food system workers to live and thrive; our values about how animals should or should not be domesticated for our consumption; our connection to the land; and our desire for cleaner air, water, and soil.

In this section, we explore community dietary patterns, cultural preferences about food, and how nutrition science and dietetics relates to other values around food choices such as environmental and community impact.

Challenges

Fruits and Vegetables: Nine out of 10 Americans do not eat enough fruits and vegetables. Tompkins County residents are no exception, although we may be doing better than average. The USDA recommends five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Only 32% of our community survey respondents claimed to eat that many and 24% admitted to eating two or fewer servings per day. Tompkins has many of the indicators the CDC uses to measure availability of fruits and vegetables (farmers markets, farm to school programs, salad bars in schools, and the existence of a Food Policy Council), but many of these resources are used by a small minority of consumers.

Limited Access to Nutritious, Fresh, Culturally Appropriate Foods: Produce is challenging to distribute and keep fresh, so small retailers and many pantries opt for shelf-stable food options. These convenience foods do not fill the nutritional, cultural, or preferential needs of county residents. The options throughout the food environment are



similarly limited by infrastructure and business decisions. Ten percent% of survey respondents said that the food they wanted to eat was not available. When produce is available to consumers, many lack the familiarity, skills, time, or equipment needed to prepare, cook, and eat these foods.

Eating Out: Almost half of our meals are prepared by others. Added salt, sugar, and fat in restaurant and other prepared foods is difficult to identify and manage when ordering from a menu or picking up a quick meal. Even consumers who read labels to learn the nutritional content of prepared meals sometimes compromise in the moment to make quick choices from available options.

Chronic Illness: Across New York State, more than 10% of the population has been diagnosed with diabetes—double the rate just two decades ago—and another 4.5 million New Yorkers have prediabetes. Within the County, the rate of hospitalization for diabetes-related complications has doubled in the six years spanning 2008–14. Young people are also at increased risk. Heart disease, meanwhile, is now the second-highest cause of death in Tompkins County, with 138 deaths per 100,000. In its 2013–17 Community Health Assessment, the Tompkins County Health Department estimated that 55.1% of adults and 26.6% of school-age youths in the county were overweight or obese. These statistics suggest that more than half of

adults and more than one-quarter of school-age youth in Tompkins County are at risk for progression to diabetes and/or cardiovascular disease.

Opportunities

A State or County Policy on Food Service does not exist in New York or in Tompkins, although 10 other states have adopted them. Modeling a county-wide guideline would lead the way for other New York counties to follow, putting pressure on the state. These policies require the development of nutritional guidelines that apply to foods and beverages served or sold to adult populations in government-owned or -controlled facilities, including conferences and on- site or off-site events.

Farmers markets that accept SNAP, WIC, and nutrition incentive coupons vastly increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Tompkins has five or more markets each year. Cornell Cooperative Extension has helped smaller markets accept SNAP and promoted other nutrition incentive programs throughout the community. Financial support for these educational materials and SNAP services is needed every year.

Subsidized CSA shares from local farms increase fruit and vegetable consumption. For 15 years, Healthy Food For All has provided a growing number of farm shares at reduced to no cost for families with limited incomes. The burden of raising an increasing amount every year (currently over $200,000) falls on a single staff member at Cornell Cooperative Extension. The program needs a sustainable funding source. Municipalities in other states have taken on this role, using taxpayer funding to subsidize locally grown food for low-income families.

Farm to School programs increase fruits and vegetables availability and teach healthy eating behaviors through nutrition-based curriculum and hands-on learning experiences such as farm visits, school gardens, and healthy cooking lessons. Supporting our local program and encouraging participation through school boards would complement and expand the work already underway. Introducing a salad bar into a school lunchroom may also increase the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables consumed by students. Many schools have one in place, but others could be funded by local municipalities.

FOOD WASTE AND RECOVERY

Introduction

National studies show that an estimated 30–40% of all food produced (~130 billion pounds) is never eaten. At the same time, upwards of 40 million Americans struggle with food insecurity. Why is it that nearly half of America's food goes to waste when so many people struggle to have enough nutritious food to eat? Wasted food is a missed opportunity to feed the millions of Americans who struggle with food insecurity. Food is the single largest component of solid waste in landfill and incinerators—and a major source of the greenhouse gas methane. Farmers, retailers, and restaurants miss opportunities to profit when food is wasted.

Food waste occurs throughout the food system for various reasons:

Before Harvest
Crops are lost due to pests, drought, or bad weather; a shortage of farmworkers to harvest; or a surplus without a market.

After Harvest
Produce is discarded because it doesn't meet consumer expectations (size, color, shape, quality).

Processing
Edible parts like skins, peels, and fat are discarded.

Consumers
Food is wasted at home when consumers buy more than is needed, forget food in the fridge, or discard food that is past expiration but otherwise edible.

Restaurants
Serve large portions that often can't be finished in one sitting, and discard menu items past their prime.

Retail Grocery stores often keep shelves fully stocked for appearances, even if that means food spoils before it can be sold. Stores also discard food that is past its "sell by" date, even when food is edible.

In this section, we explore current food waste reduction and recovery initiatives in Tompkins County, the barriers we face, and the opportunities available to expand these efforts and implement new strategies.

Current Initiatives

Tompkins County Department of Recycling and Materials Management (TCRMM) has been implementing waste diversion programs for the past 35 years. TCRMM supports residents, businesses, schools, events, and organizations through various composting methods including home composting education and residential food scrap drop spots throughout the County.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County and TCRMM offer home composting education to residents in Tompkins County. The Compost Education Program engages in public outreach and education to increase public awareness of composting and the range of options available for reducing food waste.

Friendship Donations Network (FDN) rescues fresh, nutritious food that would otherwise be thrown away from stores, farms, and colleges and redistributes it to neighbors facing food insecurity throughout Tompkins County and beyond. FDN recovers unused food from dozens of donors and provides food donations to 50-plus distribution partners including free meal programs, food pantries, low-income housing communities, community organizations, and grassroots organizations.

Challenges

Access to food scrap drop spots can be difficult for people without bike or car transportation, especially those who live in low-income neighborhoods.

Lack of small- to medium-sized collectors and community composting sites limit composting options for residents and businesses.

Contamination, especially at events, public locations, and the front end of restaurants, is a challenge and requires education and facilitation to promote quality control.

Funding isn't sufficient to expand all aspects of food reduction and recovery, including wasted food prevention, small and moderate food scrap collectors, and processors.

Curbside food scrap collection is not currently available in any municipality, despite a successful, since-concluded pilot program in the City of Ithaca.

People hold misconceptions and need education and training related to composting. People often do not see the direct benefit, have had negative experiences due to incorrect practices, or simply do not know how to compost.

Having the space to compost outdoors is a challenge for many residents—particularly those who rent in the City of Ithaca (70% of the population).

Businesses are concerned about liability and food safety. Citing these fears, they refuse to donate all of the edible, yet unsalable food and instead opt for that food to be wasted, either ending up in the landfill, or in some cases composted.

Opportunities

The following opportunities to expand existing food waste reduction and composting efforts have been identified by TCRMM.

Expand drop spots and education to communities that have not been well-served thus far. This work will include assistance to new neighborhoods including "food scrap pop-drops" at places of work, apartments, mobile home parks, and both private and public spaces.

Work with the City of Ithaca and Cayuga Heights to include weekly curbside food scrap collection as part of residential trash pickup services.

Expand non-residential wasted food prevention tools such as "Lean Path" and food waste collection programs to more food service establishments (schools, nursing homes, grocery stores, and restaurants).

Expand existing efforts and build new relationships to increase the processing of food scraps into valuable compost and soil blends, to encourage businesses to use vermiculture and other composting techniques, and expand marketing of finished compost.

Leverage the forthcoming NYS FOOD Donation Law which bans food waste from large generators and will require businesses to donate edible food. Businesses must be supported in reducing surplus food from the source. Education is needed to prevent food rescue organizations and food distribution programs from bearing the burden of the excess food produced by businesses.

Support the proposed Federal Zero Food Waste Act to provide grant funding for the implementation of food waste measurement and prevention for small businesses as well as supporting the **Federal Composting Act** to fund infrastructure including food scrap collection and processing.

Promote local awareness of existing federal and state Good Samaritan laws which protect donors of edible food products.

Encourage home composting by implementing a "pay-as you-throw" fee structure similar to trash collection, which incentivizes residents to divert food waste from their personal waste stream.