



# Leading the Way

## A Legacy of Food Systems Planning and Policy Work in Multnomah County, Oregon



Portland Farmers Market. Photo by Kimberley Hodgson.

Oregon’s Multnomah County has been actively involved in food systems planning and program development for more than a decade. Through a series of initiatives and programs adopted and funded by its Board of Commissioners, the Office of Sustainability and the Health Department, and grassroots support, the county successfully engaged community stakeholders in establishing a vision and action plan to achieve a healthy, equitable, and regionally prosperous food system.

Located in the Pacific Northwest, Multnomah County is the most populous county in Oregon, with an estimated 2014 population of around 776,700.<sup>1</sup> The county’s 466 square miles are home to Portland and Gresham – the state’s largest and 3rd largest cities, respectively. This makes Multnomah the smallest and densest county in the state, with 1,705 people per square mile recorded in the last Census compared to the state average of 40 people per square mile.<sup>2</sup>

The county’s small size and high density limit agricultural production, and statewide the region is seen more as a consumer of food and less as a producer. Nonetheless, Multnomah County’s agricultural sector ranks 19<sup>th</sup> among the state’s 36 counties in market value sold.<sup>3</sup> Over the last decade, the number of farms and total farm acreage in the county has grown slightly, as has the number of farms that market directly to consumers.<sup>4,5</sup> Reflecting size and density constraints, however, nearly half of all farms are nine acres or smaller in size.<sup>6</sup>

The county’s median household income and per capita income levels are slightly higher than in the rest of the state, but the percentage of residents living in poverty is also higher at 18.6

percent (versus the state average of 16.6 percent).<sup>7</sup> Food security has been a challenge for underserved Latino and African-American communities historically concentrated in northern pockets of Portland; due to gentrification, many are moving to the eastern parts of Multnomah County in search of affordable places to live. Reflecting these concerns, over time the county’s food policy focus has shifted to align with departmental priorities and strategies, particularly to address poverty, health disparities, and sustainability.

### FOOD SYSTEM PLANNING INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS

Through the efforts of engaged citizens, community organizations, and county government staff and officials, Multnomah County has seen a significant amount of local food system policy development and production efforts. These include the following initiatives and programs:

**Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council and the Multnomah Food Initiative.** In 2002, the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners approved **Resolution No. 02-093** establishing the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council (FPC). Initiatives of the 11-member council included working on the City of Portland’s urban food zoning code project, surveying regulatory barriers to food access and production within the County, and assisting with the development and implementation of the county’s Healthy Retail Initiative. FPC also spearheaded the 2009 adoption of a **resolution** creating the **Multnomah Food**



**Initiative**, an effort coordinated by the county’s Office of Sustainability and Health Department Chronic Disease Prevention Program.<sup>8</sup> The resolution acknowledged the county’s critical role in developing robust and equitable food system as part of its health and sustainability mission; its efforts to develop programs, policies, and community partnerships around healthy eating, food access, and urban agriculture; and its desire to create a shared vision and strategic plan to achieve food policy goals.<sup>9</sup>

**Annual Food Summits.** As part of the Multnomah Food Initiative the county organized a series of annual **Food Summits** from 2010 through 2013. More than 200 community partners, including nonprofits, businesses, faith organizations, schools, and local governments, came together over the course of four years to develop and implement the Multnomah Food Action Plan and explore themes of food justice.<sup>10</sup>

**Multnomah Food Action Plan.** This 15-year strategic **plan**, produced in 2010 by the county’s Office of Sustainability, was the first food action plan developed at a county level in the United States. It established 16 goals and 65 community-wide collaborative actions in four action areas – Local Food, Healthy Eating, Social Equity, and Economic Vitality.<sup>11</sup>

**Food Policy and Food Program Coordinators.** The county added two full-time county staff positions to address food systems-related issues. The Food Policy Coordinator position was created within the Office of Sustainability to oversee all food-policy related issues; the Food Program Coordinator was an agricultural specialist housed in the Office of Sustainability responsible for the CROPS program (see below). The Food Policy Coordinator is now housed in the Department of County Human Services. The Food Program Coordinator position still exists in the Office of Sustainability and is responsible for the CROPS program.



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**County CROPS. CROPS (Community Reaps Our Produce and Shares)** is a community farm created and managed by the Multnomah County Office of Sustainability. Developed on vacant county-owned property in 2009, the farm’s harvests of organic vegetables are donated to the Oregon Food Bank and distributed through local food pantries.<sup>12</sup> The CROPS farm also serves as the learning lab for the **Beginning Urban Farmer Apprenticeship (BUFA)** program run by Oregon State University Extension.<sup>13</sup>

**County Digs Program.** The Multnomah County Office of Sustainability partnered with the Division of Assessment, Recording, and Taxation on this **program**, which leases and donates tax foreclosed property to qualified nonprofit organizations for urban gardens or greenspace uses. To date, six community gardens have been created through the program.<sup>14</sup>

**Healthy Retail Initiative.** This **pilot project** of the Multnomah County Health Department’s Community Wellness and Prevention Program was funded by a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant. Between 2011 and 2014, the initiative helped 22 Latino, African, and African American neighborhood markets and corner stores increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables by providing technical assistance and funding for marketing and promotion of healthy food items, store improvements, and business development.<sup>15,16</sup>

**Institutional Food Purchasing Project.** In 2012, the County received funding through the Oregon Department of Agriculture’s Specialty Crop Block Grant Program to work with Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility to create this project, which works to connect large institutional food buyers to regional food networks for purchase of Oregon fruit, vegetable, and nut crops. This initiative implemented the actions recommended by the Multnomah Food Action Plan. The County helped initiate and co-convene the Institutional Food Buying Alliance, which monitored and supported the project, and provided educational sessions, project resources and materials development, and project evaluation for the initiative.<sup>17</sup> The Institutional Food Purchasing Initiative is now the NW Food Buying Alliance and is being led by EcoTrust with funding from Oregon Department of Agriculture. It is an ongoing project targeting local sustainable procurement for large institutions. The County still participates as a buyer.

**Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH).** In 2014, Multnomah County Health Department was named a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention REACH grant awardee. This County program supports policy change and programs seeking to improve health equity, particularly for the African American/Black community, by reducing the burden of chronic disease through preventable risk factors such as diet and nutrition. The REACH program is increasing access to healthy, culturally-relevant food through multiple settings including retail environments, child care centers, and faith houses. Food access and health equity are also being integrated into local transportation planning through Gresh-



am's first Active Transportation Plan that will help identify and prioritize bicycle and pedestrian projects that support access to health-promoting destinations such as grocery stores.

**SUN Child & Family Hunger Relief Project.** A component of the county's Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Service System, the county-funded-and-staffed **Hunger Relief Project** has partnered with the Oregon Food Bank in 2010 to establish 18 **SUN School Food Pantries** and provide hundreds of thousands of meals for SUN school students and their families. SUN also supports Growing Gardens gardening and nutrition education programming at three SUN school sites and Harvest Share distributions of fresh fruits and vegetables at four sites.

Forum hosts quarterly networking socials and shares local food system information with the community.

Multnomah County's early food system planning efforts saw great success in establishing a vision, creating an action plan, and implementing policies, programs, and projects to help shape the local food landscape. Though momentum has slowed and policy focus has shifted in recent years, the county continues to support efforts to improve food access and security for underserved residents and local food production remains important to the community.

## EVOLUTION

The county's involvement with food systems planning work has changed over time. Most significantly, the FPC was dissolved by the county in the summer of 2012 following the resignation of the FPC's chair and co-chair. A number of challenges diminished the FPC's effectiveness, culminating in the county's conclusion that the FPC was no longer relevant. These included differing interpretations and expectations of the FPC's role, powers, and goals by both FPC members and staff, leading to mutual frustrations on both sides; a growing tension between the city and the county that further frustrated productive activity; a changing food systems landscape in which other groups and organizations arose to take on an increasing part of the advisory role for which the FPC had been created; and the lack of strategic planning to reevaluate the FPC's roles and functions in the face of change.<sup>18</sup>

One year later, however, acknowledging the disproportionate impact of food insecurity and access on the county's most vulnerable communities, the Multnomah Board of County Commissioners created a Food Advisory Board with the adoption of **Resolution 2013-041**. The new body was charged with advising the Office of Sustainability on ways to leverage the local food system to improve community health, safety, equity, and prosperity, with appointed members' terms extending through April 2015.<sup>19</sup>

The Food Policy Coordinator position was dissolved in 2013, but was reclassified in 2015 as a limited-duration position within the Human Services department to document food-related program and policy work within the county and provide support on policy and program issues related to hunger and food insecurity.<sup>20</sup> The Food Program Coordinator position, now called Urban Agriculturalist, was filled toward the end of 2015 and is currently limited duration. Budget discussions are under way to see if the position can be made permanent. This staff position oversees the County C.R.O.P.S. farm.

At the grassroots level, interest in healthy food, food production, and access to food is strong within the community. Former members of the FPC formed the **Portland Area Food Forum** in 2013, a citizen-led collaborative effort to tackle food justice and food systems issues through project-based work, independent of local government bodies and policy-based discussions.<sup>21</sup> The



ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census QuickFacts: Multnomah County, Oregon. <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/41051,00>
- <sup>2</sup> IndexMundi, "Oregon Population per square mile, 2010 by County." [www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/oregon/population-density#map](http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/oregon/population-density#map)
- <sup>3</sup> 2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Multnomah County, Oregon. [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online\\_Resources/County\\_Profiles/Oregon/cp41051.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Oregon/cp41051.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> 2012 Census of Agriculture County Profile: Multnomah County, Oregon.
- <sup>5</sup> 2012 Census Volume 1, Chapter 2: County Level Data – Oregon. Table 2. Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold Including Direct Sales: 2012 and 2007. [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1,\\_Chapter\\_2\\_County\\_Level/Oregon/st41\\_2\\_002\\_002.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Oregon/st41_2_002_002.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> 2012 Census Volume 1, Chapter 2: County Level Data – Oregon. Table 8. Farms, Land in Farms, Value of Land and Buildings, and Land Use: 2012 and 2007. [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1,\\_Chapter\\_2\\_County\\_Level/Oregon/st41\\_2\\_008\\_008.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Oregon/st41_2_008_008.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Census QuickFacts: Multnomah County, Oregon. <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/41051,00>
- <sup>8</sup> Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council. 2011. *Year End Report 2011*. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/386369>
- <sup>9</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. 2009. *Resolution No. 09-110: Accepting the Recommendations of the Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council to Initiate the Multnomah Food Initiative*. <https://multco.us/file/28393/download>
- <sup>10</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. "Multnomah Food Summits." <https://multco.us/multfood/multnomah-food-summits>
- <sup>11</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. 2010. *Multnomah Food Action Plan*. <https://multco.us/file/36863/download>
- <sup>12</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. "County C.R.O.P.S." <https://multco.us/crops>
- <sup>13</sup> Oregon State University Extension. "2016 Beginning Urban Farmer Apprenticeship (BUFA)." <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/beginning-farmers/BUFA>
- <sup>14</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. "County Digs Program." <https://multco.us/multfood/county-digs-program>
- <sup>15</sup> Email, Becky Bodoni, Program Specialist, Community Wellness and Prevention Program, Multnomah County Health Department.
- <sup>16</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. "Multnomah County Healthy Retail Initiative." <https://multco.us/multnomah-county-healthy-retail-initiative>
- <sup>17</sup> Multnomah County, Oregon. 2014. "Information Board Briefing on The Institutional Food Purchasing Project." Agenda Placement Request, April 1. [http://multnomah.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=3&clip\\_id=808&meta\\_id=52687](http://multnomah.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=3&clip_id=808&meta_id=52687)
- <sup>18</sup> Amy Coplan and Monica Cuneo. 2015. "Dissolved: Lessons Learned from the Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5(2): 91–107.
- <sup>19</sup> Multnomah County. 2013. *Resolution No. 2013-041: Formation of the Multnomah County Food Advisory Board and Appointment of Members*. <https://multco.us/file/9305/download>
- <sup>20</sup> Multnomah County. 2015. "Food Policy Coordinator." Job Posting #6088-114, September 4. [http://agency.governmentjobs.com/multnomah/job\\_bulletin.cfm?jobID=1235216&sharedWindow=0](http://agency.governmentjobs.com/multnomah/job_bulletin.cfm?jobID=1235216&sharedWindow=0)
- <sup>21</sup> Coplan and Cuneo 2015.

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Recommended citation: Dilleuth, Ann. 2016. *Leading the Way: A Legacy of Food Systems Planning and Policy Work in Multnomah County, Oregon*. In Kimberley Hodgson and Samina Raja (Series Editors), *Exploring Stories of Innovation*. Growing Food Connections. 4p. Available on-line at: [growingfoodconnections.org](http://growingfoodconnections.org).