



Multi-level Governmental Support Paves the Way for Local Food in Chittenden County, Vermont



Downtown Burlington's City Market Onion River Co-op offers food access opportunities to typically underserved populations.

Image Source: <http://ncsustainabilitycenter.org/communities/market-helps-revitalize-downtown-burlington>.

In Vermont, a strong Dillon's Rule state and one of the most rural states in the United States, a combination of state, regional and municipal-led planning and policy initiatives are paving the way for food systems change in Chittenden County. State entities - including the Health Department and the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, and local entities - including the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) and the City of Burlington municipal government, are actively engaged in improving access to healthy food, supporting food production and related farm enterprises, food processing, and workforce training. These entities have employed various policy and planning levers to support and enable the innovative food systems work of leading non-profits and organizations in the community.

Chittenden County is located in northwestern Vermont. About 350,000 acres in size, the diverse landscape includes a mix of farms, forests, water bodies, small cities, suburban areas, and villages.¹ Home to approximately 160,531 residents, or about 26% of the state's population (626,562), it is the state's most populous county.² Of its 19 municipalities, the City of Burlington is the largest in the county, as well as in the state, with 42,211 residents.³ Buels Gore is the smallest with 30 residents.⁴ The state's largest higher education institution, University of Vermont (UVM), is located in Burlington. UVM includes 9,958 undergraduates, 1,371 graduate students, 459 medical students and 1,364 full- and part-time faculty.

Unlike many rural areas in the U.S., the county's population is growing at a higher rate than the state and the New England region. Although the county is predominantly white (89.9%), its demographic diversity is increasing faster than the rest of the state. Between 2007 and 2013, the county's Hispanic or Latino population grew from 7.4% to 9.7%, compared to 4.8% to 6% for the state. The

county's Black population also increased from 2,409 in 2007 to 3,851 in 2013. The county is also a refugee settlement community and over 50 languages are currently spoken across the county.⁵

As a Dillon's Rule state, Vermont state government dictates the powers and authority of local governments. According to the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, "despite its tradition and reputation of direct democracy and robust local control, Vermont has one of the most centralized governments in the country."⁶ Both municipalities and counties in the state are limited in their powers to affect community change. Dissimilar to county governments in most U.S. states that provide a range of services related to transportation, health, parks, planning, law enforcement, education, etc., Vermont county government functions are limited to providing minimal services to the courts and sheriff's and high baliff's offices.⁷ As a result, state government agencies, regulations, initiatives and programs more directly influence municipalities than in other states.

The Vermont State Department of Health provides health services to Vermont municipalities through its 12 district offices. The Burlington District Office serves all municipalities within Chittenden County, providing maternal and child health, refugee health, school health, environmental health, and emergency preparedness services.⁸ The Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) - a regional planning organization - provides regional land use, transportation, emergency management, energy, water quality, natural resources, economic development, governance, education and outreach planning and technical assistance to the county's 19 municipalities.⁹



Chittenden County has a long history of agricultural production. Its 587 farms¹⁰ primarily produce dairy and vegetables, as well as beef, berries, and maple syrup,¹¹ and nearly 200 farms market food directly to consumers.¹² Between 2007 and 2012, the number of farms decreased by 1%, while the acreage of farmland and the average size of farms decreased by 12% and 11%, respectively. Despite these decreases, the average market value of products sold per farm increased 26%: from \$56,958 in 2007 to \$71,951 in 2012.¹³

County farmers face a number of challenges including access to land, markets and certified processing facilities, difficulty competing with mass-produced products from other areas in the country, and retaining farmland in the face of development pressures. There is often greater monetary value in developing farmland rather than maintaining it as a farm. Despite these challenges, Chittenden County residents are very supportive of locally produced goods, including food. There is great community support for farmers markets, farm-to-institution programs, and farm-to-restaurant activities. Chittenden County is also home to the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, one of the oldest organic farming associations in the United States; the UVM Food Systems Initiative that promotes food systems research, teaching, and outreach;¹⁴ the Intervale Center - 350 acres of privately and publicly owned agricultural land in Burlington and a publically supported farm incubator (see section below for more information); and extensive smaller scale community and backyard gardens. The farmers and gardeners grow a wide range of crops, vegetables, and flowers, and raise poultry, goat and pigs.

Obtaining access to farmable land is one of the county's and city's main food production challenges. The Burlington municipal government is trying to address this issue by providing plots and lease agreements for interested gardeners. However, finding arable land of a sufficient size remains a challenge for the city's farmers. Frequent flooding, including on Intervale lands, also makes urban food production difficult; however, a 2015 survey of Intervale farmers indicated that the benefits of farming in this area (access to a large market, good soil, and a community of supportive farmers) far outweigh the flood risks.

While the poverty rate in Chittenden County is lower than the national rate, it is increasing. In Burlington, over 25% of the population lives below the poverty line, well above the state average of 11%.¹⁵ According to Hunger Free Vermont, about 1 in 7 children (or about 14%) in the county are food insecure. This figure is estimated to be a bit higher in Burlington. The county's most underserved residents include low-income residents, children younger than school age that cannot access the free breakfast or lunch programs offered by schools, and residents of parts of Burlington, the City of Winooski, and the Town of Milton. In Burlington, the city's most underserved populations include people of color, seniors, immigrants, and refugees. Burlington's residents access the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

at rates of 15% and 12%, respectively.¹⁶ Food access barriers in Burlington are exacerbated by a public transportation system that does not serve all parts of the city and only runs on certain days of the week.

Despite these challenges, municipal government, non-profit, and business actors within Burlington's food system are mindful to locate food assets such as community gardens, farmers' markets, and affordable grocery options in underserved areas. These locational strategies reduce food disparities. Burlington is also home to the City Market Onion River Co-op, the top grossing food co-op in the U.S., which has a strong affordability mandate. The number of ethnic food stores offering culturally appropriate foods is also growing. Immigrants and refugees have also benefitted from the **Pine Island Community Farm's Vermont Goat Collaborative**, a partnership program between the Vermont Land Trust and the Association of Africans Living in Vermont that supports new immigrants in the raising and slaughtering of goats and chickens for meat.

To address the existing challenges, foster the community food system, create green and sustainable jobs, and increase access to healthy food, the CCRPC and the Burlington municipal government have taken important steps to plan for the future of their community food system. These actions have taken various forms including working directly with non-profit and community partners on policy innovations, offering staff support to community-based work, and integrating food system goals and actions into official plans.

Plans

Along with introducing policy that specifically enables community-led work, food systems priorities have also recently figured into official government plans.

- Vermont Farm to Plate Plan, 2009.** While a state-wide plan, the Vermont Farm to Plate Plan has been an instrumental resource to regional and municipal governments on agriculture and food systems issues. In 2009, the Vermont State Senate, House, and Governor signed the Farm to Plate Investment Program into law and tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund with the creation of a 10-year food system plan. The purpose of the Farm to Plate Plan is to "increase economic development in Vermont's farm and food sector; create jobs in the farm and food economy; and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters."¹⁷ The plan includes 25 goals to support all aspects of the food system, provides a number of high priority policy recommendations and actions, and uses results based accountability to measure the impacts of plan implementation.¹⁸ Many local government leaders, including those from Burlington and Chittenden County, either sat on Farm to Plate working groups or contributed to their work. In conjunction with this plan, the Vermont State Legislators established the **Vermont Working Lands Enterprise**



Initiative, which has provided over \$3 million in grants since 2012 to “fund forestry and agriculture projects that enhance Vermont’s communities, economy and culture”.¹⁹

- Chittenden County Environment, Community, Opportunity, Sustainability (ECOS) Plan, 2013.** In 2010, the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) received a \$1 million grant from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities Project (with co-sponsorship from the EPA and U.S. DOT) to develop a long-range regional, sustainability plan for Chittenden County. The three-year community planning process culminated in the ECOS Plan, which combined the Chittenden County Regional Plan, the Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy into one plan, allowing the CCRPC to better coordinate and align common objectives and actions. Plan steering committee members included representation from all 19 municipalities in the county, as well as 40 non-profit, institutional and governmental agencies and organizations. Three of the eight high priority strategies, several priority actions, and a number of community indicators support local food systems. As part of plan implementation, the CCRPC provided \$50K in funding for a project called **New American Food**, a revenue-generating, culinary job skills training project to “prepare unemployed refugees...for jobs in the food preparation and processing industries”; and \$50K in funding to **Path to Sustainability**, “a series of initiatives to transform South Burlington into a community that will be a leader in sustainable food production, housing and quality of life, transportation and transit-oriented development, energy efficiency, natural resource protection, and economic vitality.” The plan also explicitly calls out the need to support food processing industries, value-added product markets, and workforce training; protect existing farmland; improve access to healthy food; support new agricultural and homestead operations; and support implementation of the statewide **Vermont Farm to Plate Plan**.
- Open Space Protection Plan, 2014.** Burlington’s 2014 Open Space Protection Plan offers an inventory of different types of open space land, including urban agriculture. The plan deals with accessibility to these spaces by residents as a tool for identifying underserved neighborhoods as well as open space protection opportunities. One of the key indicators specifically analyzes the proximity of residents within a ½ mile of a community garden. The plan also identified prime agricultural soils for food production and opportunities for new community gardens.
- Burlington Municipal Development Plan, 2014.** The 2014 updated Burlington Municipal Development Plan includes articulation of food as a priority and basic need of Burlington’s residents that is essential for sustainability. The agriculture sector is highlighted as an opportunity for new business development and entrepreneurship.

Government Staff Support

Regional and municipal government staff helped launch and support a variety of food systems initiatives in collaboration with community.

- Burlington Food Council, 2003.** Priorities around fresh, healthy, local food – particularly in schools – emerged during a 2002 town hall meeting convened by the **City of Burlington’s Legacy Project** steering committee. The Legacy Project exists to implement the **City of Burlington’s Legacy Plan**, first adopted in 2000 and then updated in 2010, which outlines a vision and plan for Burlington’s social, environmental, and economic health. This gave way to the establishment of the Burlington Food Council (BFC) in 2003. The City of Burlington’s Legacy Project staff gave the BFC administrative support between 2006 and 2008 in addition to the council’s rotating volunteer coordinator. The council’s first project and resultant guiding document was a Community Food Assessment for Burlington. The council was also involved in a youth-developed food action plan for the Burlington School District as well as the City of Burlington’s Urban Agriculture Task Force.
- Hunger Council of Chittenden County, 2006.** In 2006, Hunger Free Vermont, a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to providing nutrition education and expanding access to nutrition programs that nourish Vermont’s children, families, and communities, piloted the launch of the Hunger Council of Chittenden County. The CCRPC supports this group by hosting and facilitating meetings in their offices. In addition, the Community Health Improvement Director for the University of Vermont Medical Center, the Health District Director, the Community Improvement Director for United Way, and the Executive Director of CCRPC, regularly attend Council meetings to better understand the issues around food security, and assist with data collection. These 4 community leaders and the Hunger Council are currently working to transform the group from one that focuses on the sharing of information to one that is more action-oriented.
- Burlington School Food Project, 2008.** The Burlington Food Council eventually evolved into the Burlington School Food Project (BSFP) with the support of a 3-year United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant. The BSFP convenes stakeholders to implement school food programming and supported the creation of a 2011 Wellness Policy that incorporates farm-to-school goals into the Burlington school system. Although the Burlington School District is the lead on the project, municipal government was involved in the early stages of launching the initiative through its Sustainability Program and in enabling farm-to-school programs.



Support for Agriculture

Beyond the official plans already mentioned, the CCRPC and Burlington municipal government have supported area farmers throughout Chittenden County in a number of ways:

- Intervale Center, 1988.** The City of Burlington municipal government is one of over 20 official partners with the Intervale Center, a non-profit established in 1988 to improve the viability of farming, the health of water and lands, and people's ability to engage and celebrate their local food system. The municipality was also a key driver for the establishment of the center alongside Will Raap,²⁰ a local garden store owner, and introduced zoning forbidding commercial and residential development in the area.²¹ The municipal government has been a key collaborator on several policy fronts with the Center including access to land. For instance, the Intervale Center purchased 179 acres of land from the City of Burlington in 2007 and collaborates on a land management plan for the area. The Intervale Center is also embedded in the aforementioned City of Burlington Legacy Plan. A municipal staff person sits on the Center's board, directly participating in the organization's governance. City staff have also helped provide road access to Intervale farms. Today, Intervale continues to support farmers across the state of Vermont through its many projects and programs, including the food hub and farms program.
- Listening Forum for Chittenden County Farmers and Local Decision Makers, 2005.** In recognizing that agriculture is important to the region's character and economy, the CCRPC and the Vermont Planners Association (VPA) sponsored a listening forum in 2005 to learn about the issues facing regional farmers and agricultural enterprises. Both farmers and local decision makers were invited to learn from each other. In small group settings, participants were asked to explain the opportunities and challenges for farming in the county. This forum revealed a number of factors related to land access and land costs, property taxes, access to farmers markets, transportation, regulations, farm suppliers and services, and farm transition.
- Penny for Parks Fund, 2008.** Penny for Parks was introduced in 2008 as a funding strategy for capital improvements to parks through its own dedicated tax with one cent of the tax rate going to the fund. Community gardens receive 5% of the total raised as a steady public investment strategy in these urban agriculture spaces. A total of eight of the 61 projects funded through Penny for Parks in the last two years are community garden improvements.
- Urban Agriculture Task Force, 2011.** Burlington City Council created the Urban Agriculture Task Force in 2011 with the mandate of creating urban agriculture policy for Burlington. [A report with the task force's recommendations](#) was submitted to Burlington City Council in September 2012

outlining a path for regulating, governing, and supporting urban agriculture. City Council tasked the Planning Commission and Board of Health with implementing these recommendations.

- Urban Agriculture Zoning Regulation, 2014.** Following the advice of the Urban Agriculture Task Force, Burlington City Council amended the zoning ordinance in 2014 to allow urban agriculture on private land. Overall, these changes reduce barriers to urban agriculture and provide exemptions to encourage urban agriculture as a defined use.

Food Access Policy

In addition to food production policy, the Burlington municipal government has used its urban land base towards achieving food access goals.

- City Market – Burlington's Food Co-op and City Market Vacant Property Lease, 2002.** The Onion River Co-op, now City Market Onion River Co-op, entered into an agreement with City of Burlington staff in 2002 to open a grocery store on vacant city-owned land. This allowed the store to expand from 6,000 to 16,000 square feet and to introduce more affordable pricing for Burlington's lower income residents. The municipality was particularly interested in a grocery retail option that would serve groups like seniors, people with mobility challenges, and newcomers, and ensured that the City Market was able to meet these communities' needs. Staff from Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office have also been very supportive by helping the co-op secure grant funding along with providing technical assistance to the co-op.

Other state and municipal government efforts to support community food systems work in Chittenden County include:

- Burlington Area Community Garden Program, 1972**
- Burlington Farmers Market Concession and Licensing Agreement, 2012**
- Animal Boarding Zoning Regulation, 2014**
- Agricultural Economic Development: Local Land Use Planning and Its Effect on Diversified On-Farm Enterprises, 2015**



- ¹ Chittenden County Environment, Community, Opportunity, Sustainability (ECOS) Plan, 2013, <http://www.ecosproject.com/>
- ² US Census 2014 estimate
- ³ US Census 2014 estimate
- ⁴ US Census 2012 estimate
- ⁵ 2014 Annual ECOS Report, <http://www.ecosproject.com/2014-annual-report>
- ⁶ "Self Governance." Municipal Policy Paper No. 5. Vermont League of Cities and Towns. October 2014. Available at http://www.vlct.org/assets/Advocacy/2014-5_self-governance.pdf.
- ⁷ Vermont Public Radio, "Why for Vermont County Government?", Jane Lindholm & Ric Cengeri, October 6, 2014, <http://digital.vpr.net/post/whyfor-vermont-county-government#stream/0>
- ⁸ Vermont Department of Health, http://healthvermont.gov/local/district/district_office.aspx
- ⁹ Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission FY16 Annual Work Plan and Budget, http://www.crcpcvt.org/UPWP/FY16%20UPWP_ADOPTEDBUDGET_20150520.pdf
- ¹⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, 2012 US Census of Agriculture, Table 1, Vermont County Summary Highlights, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Vermont/st50_2_001_001.pdf
- ¹¹ Agriculture and Chittenden County Communities: A Listening Forum for Farmers and Local Decisionmakers Topic: What is Needed for Agriculture to be Successful in Chittenden County? April 20, 2005
- ¹² United States Department of Agriculture, 2012 US Census of Agriculture, Table 1, Vermont County Summary Highlights, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Vermont/st50_2_002_002.pdf
- ¹³ 2012 US Census of Agriculture County Profile, Chittenden County, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Vermont/cp50007.pdf
- ¹⁴ University of Vermont Food Systems Initiative, <http://www.uvm.edu/foodsystems/>
- ¹⁵ US Census State and County Quick Facts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/50/5010675.html>
- ¹⁶ Becot, Florence and Jane Kolodinsky. Burlington Healthy Food Assessment, Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, 2014. <https://www.uvm.edu/crs/reports/2014/BHFA%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Vermont Farm to Plate Plan, <http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/plan/>
- ¹⁸ Vermont Farm to Plate Plan, Chapter 2: Getting to 2020: Goals and Indicators, <http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/getting-to-2020>
- ¹⁹ Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, <http://workinglands.vermont.gov/node/734>
- ²⁰ Berman, Elizabeth A. "Creating a Community Food System: The Intervale Center." University of Libraries Faculty and Staff Publications. University of Vermont ScholarWorks. Paper 32. 2011. <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=libfacpub>
- ²¹ Daly, Brian. "Farming the Floodplain: Farm Incubation in Burlington's Intervale." Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Urban Nature and City Design Course, http://architecture.mit.edu/class/nature/projects_12/pdfs/BrianDaly-Intervale.pdf

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP

PROJECT LEAD



PROJECT CO-LEADS



cultivating
healthy
places



PROJECT PARTNERS



American Planning Association
Making Great Communities Happen

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS Community of Innovation Feature

AUTHORS

Kimberley Hodgson
Cultivating Healthy Places

Zsuzsi Fodor
Cultivating Healthy Places

Maryam Khojasteh
University at Buffalo

CONTRIBUTORS

Jill Clark, Ohio State University
Julia Freedgood, American Farmland Trust
Samina Raja, University at Buffalo

SERIES EDITOR

Kimberley Hodgson, Cultivating Healthy Places
Samina Raja, University at Buffalo

PROJECT COORDINATOR

Jeanne Leccese, University at Buffalo

DESIGN & PRODUCTION

Brenda Stynes, University at Buffalo

Recommended citation: Hodgson, Kimberley, Z. Fodor and Maryam Khojasteh. 2015. Multi-level Governmental Support Paves the Way for Local Food in Chittenden County, Vermont. In Kimberley Hodgson and Samina Raja (Series Editors), Exploring Stories of Innovation. Growing Food Connections Project. 5p. Available on-line at: growingfoodconnections.org/research/communities-of-innovation.