

PITTSBURGH PA, USA

CENTERING URBAN AGRICULTURE IN THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

This food policy snapshot is based on an interview with Shelly Danko+Day, Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Planner for the City of Pittsburgh.

GLASGOW FOOD AND CLIMATE DECLARATION

In Pittsburgh, where 1 in 5 residents face food insecurity and thousands of lots lie vacant and unused, the city is working to create a robust local food system with urban agriculture as a focal point. In 2014, Shelly Danko+Day was hired as Pittsburgh's first Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Planner. In addition to an active community-led Food Policy Council, having a dedicated food policy planner within the City has helped launch a wealth of urban agriculture policies and programs to develop a self-reliant and resilient local food system. Working across and beyond city and state institutions and learning from other cities have been critical to the success of urban food policies and programs in Pittsburgh.

ENABLERS

WORKING ACROSS CITY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS FOR INTEGRATED FOOD POLICIES

Numerous municipal departments were engaged in the development of the Adopt-A-Lot program, from real estate to the law department, and Pennsylvania State University was consulted to draft vacant lot soil testing policies. Since Pittsburgh signed on to THE MILAN URBAN FOOD POLICY PACT in 2015, the Pact has helped to help legitimize food policies when working with other city departments, alongside other national and international level commitments. This leverage also helped guarantee an entire chapter dedicated to food in Pittsburgh's 2017 Climate Action Plan.

LEARNING FROM OTHER CITIES IN THE REGION

Inspiration for new food policies in Pittsburgh has often been drawn from other cities in the region. This knowledge sharing has taken place informally through research and relationship-building, as well as formally through Pittsburgh's participation in the UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF THE MAYORS (USCM) Food Policy Advisor network. For example, in the Food Policy Advisors network, BALTIMORE'S HEALTHY FOOD PRIORITY AREAS served as an inspiration for FEED PITTSBURGH, a document that comprehensively outlines the problem of food insecurity in the city.

PLACING THE FOOD POLICY DEPARTMENT WITHIN THE APPROPRIATE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Planning was initially housed separately from the Sustainability and Resilience Department within the City. However, after four years of advocacy for organizational change, Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Planning was moved to the Sustainability and Resilience Department. This has allowed food policies to more seamlessly integrate with climate and related policies.

PITTSBURGH URBAN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD POLICY PLANNING

- In 2014, after years of community stakeholder engagement, Pittsburgh's Department of City Planning launched the VACANT LOT TOOLKIT and the ADOPT-A-LOT program, meant to jointly tackle food insecurity and the vacant lot blight in the city.
- Since 2014, 18 acres of vacant lots have been converted into food, flower, and rain gardens.
- Beyond urban agriculture, food system objectives are written into the Pittsburgh Climate Action Plan, laying out strategies through which Pittsburgh can reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These include initiatives and recommendations to improve Pittsburgh's food system such as eliminating food waste, improving food access and strengthening farmers markets, and promoting seasonal and local food.

BARRIERS

SCARCE METRICS AND DATA COLLECTION MECHANISMS

Food policy metrics and indicators are critical to secure funding, garner recognition, and evaluate performance. This has been a challenge in Pittsburgh, where data collection mechanisms and mandates are often missing from food policies. However, the City has started to prioritize this work, for example, through the Adopt-A-Lot program where urban farmers have started tracking their harvests and the number of people they serve. The City is now also working with THE NATURAL RESOURCE DEFENSE COUNCIL'S FOOD MATTERS CITIES PROJECT, using their Food Waste Calculator to estimate Pittsburgh's food waste and assess potential areas of impact.

LOW AWARENESS OF INTEGRATED FOOD SYSTEM POLICY

Despite the inclusion of food systems in PITTSBURGH'S CLIMATE ACTION PLAN, the Urban Agriculture and Food Policy Planning department still struggles with a lack of awareness and underestimation of its work in the City. There is a need to amplify the positive climate, socioeconomic, and environmental impacts of food policies in Pittsburgh to leverage and sustain political and financial commitments to them. There is also a need to clarify governance arrangements between the community-led Pittsburgh Food Policy Council and the City to ensure mutual support and learning. Pittsburgh's new priority to institute benchmarking and data collection mechanisms in food policies could go a long way to bring credibility and visibility to the department.

In Pittsburgh, engagement across city, state, and regional institutions has been crucial for the development of integrated urban food system policies. Appointing a dedicated urban agricultural and food policy planner within the City has been a major catalyst for public action around food across Pittsburgh. In addition to local integration, there is a need for more interconnected food policymaking between the local and the national level in the United States. Encouragingly, the USCM Food Policy advisors, including Danko+Day, met with the Biden transition team to discuss what urban food policies could look like in the country. There is room for national governments to take a more proactive and enabling role in scaling up and scaling out successful urban food policies, like Pittsburgh's urban agriculture policies.

“ An overarching challenge of my work has been proving my worth to the mayor, the city, and the city council. Looking for a champion that will work with me has been tough, but I think everybody who does food policy work has this problem.”

