

AUSTIN TEXAS, USA

“PLANS WITHIN PLANS”: CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING FOOD SYSTEM REFORM

This food policy snapshot is based on interviews with Edwin Marty, Food Policy Manager for Austin out of its Office of Sustainability, and with Errol Schweitzer, Austin Food Policy Council Board Member and Former VP of Grocery for Whole Foods. Written by Krista Gehlhausen, Joseph Flores, Fatema Alzaabi and Jean Luis Sano Santana - LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin.

GLASGOW FOOD AND CLIMATE DECLARATION

The AUSTIN TRAVIS COUNTY FOOD POLICY BOARD is the City’s dedicated food governance mechanism. Since 2009, the Board — made up of Office of Sustainability staff members and appointed community representatives — has advised the Austin City Council and Travis County Commissioners Court on ways to improve access to nutritious and sustainably produced food. Though the Board has made over TWENTY FOOD-RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS in the last decade, its progress has been incremental and Austin’s food efforts have, historically, focused more on food access for residents. The recent resolution to develop a FOOD SYSTEM ACTION PLAN and the momentum surrounding the Climate Equity Plan has created an exciting opportunity to develop a comprehensive and equitable food system.

ENABLERS

LEVERAGING MOMENTUM FROM CRISES

COVID-19 dramatically exacerbated inequalities in the City of Austin. In February 2021, winter storm Uri compounded the vulnerabilities created by COVID-19, leaving Texans without power and water for weeks. These systemic crises spurred City officials to approve a resolution in June 2021, dedicated to strengthening food system resilience. This MANDATE will support and fund the creation of a community-driven Food System Action Plan that builds sustainable operational structures, food sector resiliency planning, and related food policies.

ENGAGING AUSTIN’S COMMUNITY IN FOOD POLICY

Austin’s COVID-19 task force engages various food sector actors, including food banks, food professionals, and food non-profits through a series of Healthy Food Access Meetings. The City also supports a range of nonprofits working in food policy. For example, the City has leased land to Urban Roots, a youth program that promotes urban organic farming.

Austin’s Climate Equity plan includes a strategy of community engagement called COMMUNITY CLIMATE AMBASSADORS. In this program, twelve climate activists from historically underrepresented groups engaged their networks to plan public transportation, housing, and fair labor policies. The board plans to institute a similar program, along with digital surveys and focus groups with local farmers, to develop new food policy.

INTEGRATING FOOD POLICY ACROSS DEPARTMENTAL LINES

Alongside developing an implementation plan for its Climate Action Plan, the City is exploring new ways to reach its food policy goals. The Food Policy Board intends to consult city staff to understand different departments’ food-related strategies, allowing better cross-departmental collaboration on food and climate policies. To circumvent funding challenges and to mainstream the city’s climate and food policy goals into department practices, departments will be expected to fund their internal food-related policies.

It is possible to overcome interdepartmental silos. The Austin Food Policy Board overcame cross-jurisdictional challenges to tackle the 4% of the City’s greenhouse gas emissions that come from discarded organics in landfills. The City’s Charitable Feeding Permit allows non-profits to distribute fresh produce and other perishable goods. During the program’s planning phase, there was a question of whether the policy would apply to Austin food pantries which fall under the jurisdiction of Williamson County’s health district. The Office of Sustainability was able to overcome this geographical ambiguity by developing an inter-departmental team with the City to bring charitable feeding actors together, and making a recommendation to Council. Ultimately, the City Manager enacted a RESOLUTION bringing the charitable permitting process to life.

“ Instead of creating this big plan that says the food system should look like this or that, we [...] think about where is the actual opportunity for intervention and [ask] ‘how do we translate what the community wants to see in their food system?’ ”

BARRIERS

POLITICAL INCONSISTENCY PLAGUES AUSTIN’S REFORM EFFORTS

Adopted in 2012, the IMAGINE AUSTIN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, created a vision of the City for the next 30 years, which included goals relevant to food policy. City departments have neglected to carry out many of these initiatives since incoming administrations tend to design new plans rather than implement those passed on by former council members. This political decision to delay the implementation of food policies in the city reflects the electoral dynamics around claiming the ownership and success of a project.

Conflicting political goals between the City of Austin and the State of Texas similarly undermine food system reform. The State government in Texas has often passed state LAWS to supersede local regulation. Austin’s food policy stakeholders expressed wariness of passing ordinances that would be undermined by the State government, like a sweet and sugar beverage tax, creating a chilling effect on city initiatives.

As Austin grows, more families are facing low disposable incomes and high rents, resulting in a lack of access to nutritious food. Many neighborhoods lack an efficient system for residents to commute to grocery stores. Austin’s tense relationship with the State, and barriers to integration at a local level, limits food system reform. However, this challenge has pushed Austin to integrate food policy across city departments to ensure change can take effect, and to develop community-driven plans to ensure accountability.

“ The main thing that concerns me with the state is that they will come in and prevent the city from doing things, which they continually do. It can be a really frustrating place to live... ”

FACT BOX

- The Climate Equity Plan, which addresses the intersection of food and climate, was adopted by Council on September 30, 2021. Its strategies include creating a community-driven food system through initiatives like food waste reduction and preserving 500,000 acres of farmland.
- Austin’s commitments to sustainability are reflected in its signing of the MILAN URBAN FOOD POLICY PACT in December 2016 and endorsement of the GLASGOW FOOD AND CLIMATE DECLARATION in June 2021.
- The Food Policy Board has a FOOD & CLIMATE WORKING GROUP that ensures alignment on sustainability goals, as well as a FARMS AND FARMERS WORKING GROUP.
- The City of Austin’s current food strategies include its COVID-19 FOOD RESPONSE, DOUBLE UP FOOD BUCKS, CHARITABLE FEEDING PERMITS, and the GOOD FOOD PURCHASING PROGRAM. These initiatives strengthen both food security and environmental health through incentivizing sustainable food purchasing and distribution.

