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, departments will be expected to fund their internal food-related policies.

ENABLERS

LEVERAGING MOMENTUM FROM CRISIS

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 response exposed various food sector silos, 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 fur rabor policies. The board plans to institute a similar program, along with digital surveys and focus groups with local farmers, to develop new food policy.

FACT BOX

- The Climate Equity Plan, which addresses the interaction 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 MIAMI 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.

BARRIERS

POLITICAL INCONSISTENCY PLAUGUES AUSTIN’S REFORM EFFORTS

Adopted in 2012, the AUSTIN URBAN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, created a vision for 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 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.

As Austin grows, more families are finding 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 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.

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. Through 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.

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