

BOSTON MA, USA

A NEW FOOD FUTURE: CITY LEADERSHIP USHERS IN AMBITIOUS, CROSS SECTOR FOOD POLICY AGENDA

This food policy snapshot is based on interviews with Tali Robbins, Deputy Chief of Policy for the City of Boston and Jen Faigel, Executive Director of CommonWealth Kitchen. Written by Georgia Tamez, Jean Luis Sano-Santana, and Taylor Foody - LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin.

GLASGOW
FOOD AND
CLIMATE
DECLARATION

Boston's food policies have historically centered on improving health outcomes in the City. However, this narrow understanding of food solely as a health determinant hampered holistic policy actions to tackle issues of health equity, labor, economic mobility, and environmental issues that city residents face. Boston is facing mounting food security and climate change threats, jeopardizing future social, climate, and economic prosperity. The 2021 electoral victory of Mayor Michelle Wu, a former City Council member and an outspoken advocate for equity and integrated food policies, brings a promising wave of reforms to transform the Boston food system into a model for equity, opportunity, and sustainability. By amplifying community-led efforts to address food insecurity, labor justice, and climate change Boston's new administration seeks to build a more equitable, just, and sustainable city through the universal power of food.

“ I think it's a mistake to view food initiatives as solely health initiatives. Food is everything. It is climate, labor, economic opportunity, culture, health, and education. ”

ENABLERS

COMMUNITY-LED FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

For decades, Boston's community-based organizations have been instrumental in advocating for a more equitable and inclusive food system while addressing climate change and environmental inequality. These organizations operate across all parts of the food system: by promoting urban farms, creating dynamic food rescue organizations, providing affordable fresh produce at farmers' markets across the city, developing shared food business facilities, and creating food composting and recycling cooperatives. COMMONWEALTH KITCHEN (CWK), for example, is a non-profit incubator primarily serving food businesses owned by Black, Indigenous and other women of Color. CWK provides shared-use commercial kitchen space combined with food business education and technical training, and coordinated access to retail, wholesale and institutional food service markets. CWK also leverages this infrastructure to provide on-demand processing for regional farms, turning surplus produce into value-added products for farms to sell. CWK's comprehensive, vertically-integrated approach has been drawing substantial interest from communities across the U.S. looking to follow Boston's lead in leveraging the food industry for equity, economic mobility, and food security.

ONGOING COMMITMENT TO THE COMMUNITY

The new administration has a well-developed plan that makes intentional and innovative connections between food, equity, economic opportunity and sustainability. THE FOOD JUSTICE AGENDA FOR A RESILIENT BOSTON reflects an intersectional, community-driven approach to policy and program development. It uses the levers of public policy and institutional purchasing to promote equitable small business development and urban farming, improve food chain working conditions and expand access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally relevant, and local food, while simultaneously building worker power, promoting economic mobility, improving health outcomes, and meeting environmental goals.

INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION

The previous administration's Office of Food Access, which sat within the Health and Human Services Cabinet, focused almost entirely on food access. Under Mayor Wu, the office has been elevated to the OFFICE OF FOOD JUSTICE, with a much broader focus area, and integrated into the City's Environment, Energy, and Open Space Cabinet and plans to collaborate with the Economic Opportunity and Inclusion Cabinet. The new office will serve as an institutional hub to deliver holistic policy that links existing food insecurity measures with a broad range of policies, programs, and AMBITIONS. The multi-stakeholder effort will not only improve equitable and culturally relevant food access, and empower food-system workers, but also promote equity and resilience through zoning and land use, procurement policies, support for small business, and integrating this work into the City's overarching goals for sustainability. One of its first new initiatives was the February 2022 launch of GrowBoston: Office of Urban Agriculture.

FACT BOX

- Boston is recognized internationally for its efforts to slash emissions and slow the pace and scale of climate change in the city. The 2019 CLIMATE ACTION PLAN UPDATE set a goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050, with an interim goal of a 50% emissions reduction by 2030.
- Because of the City's vulnerability to flooding, Boston has identified climate change as a top strategic priority in its city plan IMAGINE BOSTON 2030 and has worked to improve its resiliency through research initiatives like CLIMATE READY BOSTON in 2016.
- In 2019, then-Councilor Wu spearheaded the passage of the GOOD FOOD PURCHASING PROGRAM (GFPP) ORDINANCE. This policy creates a more equitable system to transform public institutions' food purchasing mechanisms.

“ People who work in food related industries and civil society have a common understanding of food system challenges and are coming together to the table to try to solve them in a way that we've never seen before. ”

BARRIER

LACK OF HORIZONTAL COLLABORATION ACROSS CITY GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Historically, the responsibility for Boston's food-related policies have been spread across different local government departments. The Boston Food Access Office was, for instance, part of the Health and Human Services Cabinet. It coordinated efforts toward increasing food access and improving people's well-being and health. Yet, it overlooked the impact of the food industry in other areas such as climate change and environment, labor rights, small businesses, and community development.

Previous administrations struggled to find an organizational structure to adequately capture the multidimensional scope of the food system and to allocate appropriate responsibilities and accountability across departments. The City had fragmented food policy across multiple agencies, leading to confusion and inconsistent rules and license authorizations for farmers' markets, food trucks, and other small food-related businesses, and minimal coordination around procurement, land use planning, and zoning. The new administration is transforming this siloed organizational structure to implement an integrated food policy making approach, with a strong commitment to cross-department collaboration and accountability.

CLIMATE CHANGE THREATENS THE REGIONAL FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Boston ranks fifth among Massachusetts' commercial fishing port areas, but this seafood economy faces serious climate-related challenges. The rising level of ACIDIFICATION in the water around Massachusetts may stress and deteriorate the health of crustaceans such as lobsters, one of the top economically-relevant species in Boston's seafood economy. Additionally, investments are needed to build climate resilient PORT INFRASTRUCTURES such as docking spaces, parking, ramps for loading lobster traps and dredging.

Climate change could also cause food supply DISRUPTIONS, limiting Boston residents' access to food. Local fresh food distributors at the Boston Market Terminal and The New England Produce Center, the largest privately owned produce market in the U.S., are located in or near floodplains and are at risk of flooding. Similarly, around 94% of Boston's food arrives from distribution centers by trucks coming into town on Interstate-93. This highway, however, is at risk of coastal flooding due to coastal storms and global warming-fueled SEA LEVEL RISE. Cargo trains distributing from outside of New England are similarly at risk.

Despite being actively involved in multiple efforts to combat climate change and food insecurity over the years, while also promoting equity and economic mobility, previous administrations struggled to find a way to capture Boston's multidimensional challenges and push a comprehensive food agenda. Departmental fragmentation, poor coordination or accountability structures and heterogeneous priorities also hindered environmental development and has left Boston vulnerable to climate shocks. Michelle Wu's mayoral victory in 2021 has already led to departmental reform and all-encompassing and innovative plans to tackle the interconnected food, climate, labor, economic development and equity challenges. For example, the Office of Food Justice takes an intersectional approach, looking at food security through a social, economic, environmental, and racial justice lens. The plans and programs emanating from Wu's administration are poised to set a sustainable path towards food and climate justice in the city as well as a compelling road map for others to adapt.

