DENVER CO, USA

FOLLOWING THE COMMUNITY’S LEAD: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING THE FOOD LANDSCAPE

This food policy snapshot is based on interviews with Laine Cidlowski, Food System Administrator at the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment and Wendy Smitz, Food Connector at the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment. Written by Georgia Zetar, Jean Liu-Steiner, and Taylor Foody - LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin.

FOOD LANDSCAPE

DENVER

The City of Denver funds the Denver Food Matters and Denver Food in Communities pilot projects through public-private partnerships. Since 2009, the City has managed a budget of $7.2 million to generate an extra $11 million of project funding per year over 5 years. This reliance on grants also requires resources for fundraising and development, shifting resources away from program activities. Additionally, when grant funding periods end, the City loses highly knowledgeable and skilled employees, having to train and build up the capacities of these few when more funds arrive. Fortunately, because of the success of the Food in Communities program, the original three-year pilot project duration was extended by an additional two years.

Through projects such as the Food Action Plan and its supplementary initiatives, the City focuses on the community as an agent of change. While the TABOR Amendment encourages democratic engagement, it also forces the City government to be strategic in framing projects to secure people’s votes and support. Future City-driven projects around food and climate will need to consciously coordinate and synthesize existing efforts to maintain the level of community goodwill and engagement that have made previous efforts a success.

FACT BOX

The 2020 Denver Food Vision plans to develop neighborhoods as complete food environments with community-defined food amenities and infrastructures. This guiding framework also addresses climate-related issues such as land use, including preserving farmland for active agricultural production. Food in Communities, a public-private partnership, is a unique cross-county project that positions community members as leaders and experts tasked with identifying their respective neighborhood needs and selecting and directly funding projects that can address them.

As part of Denver’s 2020 FVP, the CLIMATE ACTION PLAN, the City aims to use 20% renewable electricity for its food pantries and food waste collection initiatives by 2020. The City also continues to work on the 2030 CLIMATE ACTION PLAN commitments, including strengthening Denver’s food and agricultural systems to adapt to changing conditions.