

# 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 Smittick, Food Connector at the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment. 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

Denver possesses a strong food and agricultural economy as well as ambitious climate goals. Denver's support of community-based projects has allowed the City to facilitate greater food local autonomy, improve equity, and enhance decision-making. For example, the design of the CLIMATE PROTECTION FUND, the 2030 DENVER FOOD VISION, and the FOOD ACTION PLAN with its supplementary initiatives, FOOD MATTERS and FOOD IN COMMUNITIES, were all heavily influenced by Denver residents. Through regular budgeting and voter-approved projects, the City continues to support the community and prioritize climate and food-related initiatives.

## ENABLERS

### PIONEERS IN A VOTER-APPROVED CLIMATE FUND

Reforming Denver's food and climate policy requires deep commitment and democratic engagement from City residents. Unlike most cities in the United States, the State of Colorado limits local and state governments in how much revenue they can collect and how they can spend it. Per the 1992 Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR) Amendment, all tax increases must be approved by voters. In a growing City like Denver, where urbanization is increasingly weakening social and climate resiliency, TABOR presents major hurdles for the expansion of funding available to social services or environmental improvements. Fortunately, however, Denver has recently had ample interest from City residents to bring climate-related initiatives to the ballot box.

In 2020, Denver residents approved the CLIMATE PROTECTION FUND, a sales tax that raises about \$40 million annually for projects to combat the effects of climate change, with a focus on equity and environmental justice. Following voter approval, the Office of Climate Action, Sustainability and Resiliency released the Climate Protection Fund Five-Year Plan, which outlines a framework to build an environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable city. The plan prioritized neighborhoods that have been significantly impacted by climate change, namely heat vulnerability, and a legacy of environmental racism. One of the Fund's objectives is to create a more resilient food system by: (1) encouraging local agriculture, thereby increasing resilience to climate-related supply disruptions while supporting the local economy, and (2) identifying and assessing invasive species and other threats to local natural resources, including vulnerabilities of local food pantry infrastructure to extreme weather events.

### STRATEGIC FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY-CENTERED PROJECTS

By nature of TABOR's financial limitations, Denver's civil servants have had to be strategic in the way that they have funded initiatives to enhance the City's food system. The City has built two alternative sources of funding: public-private partnerships and project-based budgeting. Food in Communities, a public-private partnership aimed at encouraging community-driven solutions to food insecurity, was created by three local public health agencies: the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment (DDPHE), Tri-County Health Department (TCHD), Jefferson County Public Health (JCPH), Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council, and local community food coalitions. Food in Communities' project selection varies depending on the neighborhood, but is aligned with the priorities outlined in Denver's Food Vision as well as its 2014 Climate Action Plan. Many of the community projects are related to building climate-smart agricultural practices (EAST DENVER FOOD HUB), food procurement and distribution (EMERALD GARDENS), and enhancing the level of equity within the City's food system through the inclusion of marginalized communities (ROCKY MOUNTAIN WELCOME CENTER).

The City also worked around the funding bottleneck posed by TABOR by getting Denver residents' approval vote to fund projects individually. For example, while the HEALTHY FOOD FOR DENVER KIDS (HFDK) program initially considered including both children and parents as direct beneficiaries, HFDK ultimately chose to focus solely on children to ensure wider voter approval. Once approved in 2018, the program called for a 0.08% increase in sales and use tax to generate an extra \$11 million of project funding per year over the next decade. Between August and October 2020, HFDK funded projects served locally grown produce for a total value of \$43,432.30, rescued 770,075 pounds of food from the landfill, and initiated 32 new gardens/farms.

“ Budgeting for projects is ultimately decided by the community. The City Council or Mayor can't just increase the budget or request extra funds, everything has to go before a city or state ballot initiative for a vote. This encourages democratic engagement but isn't always simple.”

“ In Denver, we're thinking about meeting immediate food needs today, this week, and this month. But we're also taking a food forever approach and asking 'how do we change the system so that we're not just perpetually supporting the emergency food system?' ”

## BARRIER

### UNSUSTAINABLE FUNDING SOURCES

The City of Denver funds the Denver Food Matters and Denver Food in Communities pilot projects through public-private partnerships. Since 2018, the City has managed a budget of over \$2.2 million in grants from government and private sources, like the Rockefeller Foundation, to implement the Food Action Plan. But the time-limited nature of this financial strategy challenges the long-term execution of its programs. This reliance on grants also requires resources for fundraising and development, diverting those 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 new hires 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 to promote Denver's self-sufficiency and sustainability. Food Matters and Food in Communities reflects the City's willingness to prioritize the community's voice in identifying projects that address their most pressing needs. Denver residents' increasing concern over climate change also led to the Climate Fund's creation – through a voter-approval process per the TABOR Amendment – and its five-year plan to build an environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable city. While the TABOR Amendment encourages democratic engagement, it 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 levels of community goodwill and engagement that have made previous efforts a success.

## FACT BOX

- The 2030 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's needs and selecting and directly funding projects that can address them.
- As a part of Denver's 2020 FIVE YEAR CLIMATE ACTION PLAN, the City aims to use 100% renewable electricity for its food pantries and food waste collection initiatives by 2030. The City also continues to work to deliver on its 2014 CLIMATE ACTION PLAN commitments, including strengthening Denver's food and agricultural systems to adapt to changing conditions.

