Community-Led Urban Agriculture Policy Making: A view from the United States

The practice of growing food for sustenance and sale is anything but new to city dwellers in the United States, and this is also true for the role of city policy in urban agriculture. As early as the late 1800s, officials in a number of cities, including Buffalo and Detroit, established agricultural programs to support the cultivation of urban land to address unemployment and hunger following an economic recession (Raja, Picard et al. 2014). Yet shifting planning and societal attitudes in the mid-1900s removed agriculture as a permitted land use in urban areas, trading food production for other types of land use. The romance of the City Beautiful movement which emphasised grandeur, for example, overlooked the importance of functional urban food practices, including production and butchering, in American cities. This was also the start of an era of industrialisation in the food industry, with Americans experiencing the advent of processed and convenience foods. The urban food system – including urban agriculture – was not seen as paramount to the quality of city life. This attitude carried into urban planning practices and policies for decades. In recent decades, the role of city governments in urban agriculture has been somewhat tenuous. Some city governments, motivated by neoliberal ideas of development, view urban agriculture as a temporary use of land. Still, many city dwellers hold a drastically different view on urban agriculture, and these views are quite heterogeneous.

Urban agriculture in US cities is most compelling as a movement of resistance. Yet a growing contemporary discourse presents urban agriculture as a desirable neighbourhood amenity attractive to millennials and economically upwardly mobile populations. This popular and often elitist narrative masks the origins of, and city dwellers’ heterogeneous views about, urban agriculture. For many residents, especially in low-income neighbourhoods, urban cultivation remains a tactic of resistance and of reclaiming blighted vacant land in the face of local government negligence toward addressing urban challenges such as food insecurity, crime, deteriorating built environments, etc. Other residents view urban agriculture as a community-building opportunity, especially when the practice brings together people of diverse backgrounds. Yet many others, such as new immigrants, practice urban agriculture as a means to provide food for themselves. For some immigrants, cultivation is also a marker of their agrarian identities from their countries of origin. No matter the motivation, urban agriculture initiatives, ranging from small-scale community gardens to large-scale commercial agricultural operations, have proliferated steadily across the United States in the last fifteen years.

As enthusiasm for urban agriculture has grown, city governments have had to take notice. In particular, city government planning agencies, which are charged with the responsibility for preparing and implementing official plans and policies, have had to grapple with residents’ burgeoning...
interest in urban agriculture. Some city governments have responded favourably by creating supportive policy environments that amplify the efforts of urban agriculture advocates, while other city governments remain averse to urban agriculture (Hodgson, Caton Campbell and Bailkey, 2011). City governments where policy support is relatively strong for urban agriculture include those of Baltimore (see also article on p25 (Whitton, Lecese and Hodgson 2015), Buffalo, Cleveland (Fodor and Hodgson 2015), Madison, Minneapolis (Hodgson and Fodor 2015), New York, San Francisco and Seattle (Whitton and Hodgson 2015). Yet these cities are exceptions. Many other municipal governments remain apathetic about the potential of urban agriculture, and offer limited policy support for urban agriculture even when it is being practised across their city. Cities’ policy support, which depends on a variety of factors, is greater when there are strong community collaborative networks and a champion within city government (Raja et al. 2014).

In the subsequent sections, drawing on a national survey, we explore broad trends in how and why local governments and planners across the United States are engaging in urban agriculture. For more depth, we highlight case examples from two cities – Buffalo, New York, and Madison, Wisconsin – where community-led interest in urban agriculture has laid the groundwork for city government policy reform. We conclude with a discussion of what challenges might be encountered in creating city policies that sustain urban agriculture, and outline potential ideas for the future.

**National survey results**

In 2014, the Growing Food Connections project, a partnership of researchers and the American Planning Association (APA), conducted a national survey to gauge the extent of local governments’ engagement in using public policy to strengthen food systems. The survey was administered to members of the American Planning Association, the largest professional association of planners in the United States. The full report of this national survey is available at: http://growingfoodconnections.org/research/state-of-food-systems-planning-in-the-us/. Here we summarise the results. The data extracted represents responses of only those APA member respondents who work for or on behalf of local and regional governments.

Survey results suggest that food is no longer “a stranger” to the local government planning agenda, but that much work remains to be done. About 75% of respondents report that, in their current position, they have no to minimal engagement in food systems planning. Fewer than 7% of respondents report either that food systems work is a top work priority, or that they are significantly engaged in the work. Respondents’ limited familiarity with food systems planning is a plausible explanation for their low level of involvement in the work. About 50% of respondents reported that their familiarity with food systems planning was non-existent (9.2%) to minimal (49.8%).

This lack of familiarity with food systems planning is not the only explanation for why planners in the United States appear to be lagging in their engagement in food systems planning. Results from the APA survey point to a number of other hindrances, as displayed in Figure 1. Respondents point to lack of resources and no reference to food systems planning in their job description as key reasons for their personal limited engagement in food systems planning. In open-ended responses respondents noted that higher levels of government, such as federal and state governments, provide no mandate for engaging in food systems planning. The absence of state and federal mandates for food systems planning is a reflection of the overall structure of how planning unfolds in the United States, where consid-

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**Figure 1. Local Government planners’ perception of hindrances to their personal engagement in food systems planning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindrance</th>
<th>Not a hindrance</th>
<th>Minimal</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Significant</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited personal interest in food systems issues (n=1160)</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited personal awareness of food system issues (n=1160)</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited community interest in food systems (n=1163)</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited personal training in food systems planning (n=1148)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited grant funding for food systems work (n=1157)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited political support for food systems in the community where respondent works (n=1165)</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited relevance of food systems in job description (n=1149)</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited availability of resources for food systems planning in the community where respondent</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2014 APA Members’ Survey, University at Buffalo, Growing Food Connections Project
erable planning power rests in local levels of government in many states. Other respondents’ comments suggest that planners have a rather narrow view of planning as a profession, overemphasising design guidelines, regulatory frameworks and more traditional planning sub-topics, and this may hinder their engagement in urban agriculture and food systems. Such a narrow view is curious given planning’s claim to be a broad, interdisciplinary field. Overall, although food is beginning to gather attention, structural reform, which would include food systems planning as a core function of planning, has yet to come to fruition – and the urban agriculture food movement continues to depend on the work of extraordinary leaders within city governments. Until city governments, and indeed all levels and sectors of government, recognise the importance of urban agriculture for civic life, and until they commit public resources including staffing, physical infrastructure and funding, urban agriculture will remain a marginalised activity.

Leadership in policy reform
Although the US survey results reported in the earlier section paint a somewhat dismal picture of planners’ engagement in food systems planning, as noted earlier, many cities are witnessing considerable policy action in support of urban agriculture and food systems. Below we report two unique cases – Madison and Buffalo – with markedly different trajectories over the last fifteen years. The city of Madison, a fairly progressive affluent city in the Midwest, was a leader in the food movement in the US, whereas Buffalo, a post-industrial gritty city witnessed a rise in the urban agriculture movement as a response to severe urban decline. While Madison has matured, and some would argue, plateaued in its effort to address food injustices, Buffalo is just coming into its own.
Slow and Steady: Emergence of urban agriculture policy in Buffalo, New York

Jennifer Whittaker

Buffalo, New York, a post-industrial city with a population of about 260,000, is located on the Great Lakes, in the Northeastern part of the United States. A nineteenth century industrial leader, Buffalo played a historic role in the national, and indeed global, food system. In the 19th and early 20th century, grain grown in the country’s Midwest arrived at Buffalo’s ports from where it was transported, along Erie Canal, to the country’s Eastern seaboard and to the rest of the globe.

At one point the city was the number one grain port in the world, thanks in part to the invention of mechanised grain elevators. The flourishing grain industry (and other industries) led to rapid growth, with the population soaring to about half a million people in 1940. The city’s prominence in the global food system continued until 1959 when the opening of an alternative transportation route, the St Lawrence Seaway, meant Buffalo no longer a hub for the grain industry (Raja, Picard et al. 2014, One Region Forward 2014).

Throughout the middle to latter part of the 20th century, the city faced significant economic decline as major industries relocated, factories closed, and a great deal of industrial land became vacant, but with contaminated soils. Today, the city is rated the sixth most segregated metro area in the country, unemployment rates are persistently high, and nearly 30 per cent of residents live in poverty. Social inequalities are worsened by a physically deteriorating neighbourhood environment (One Region Forward 2014). Similar to Buffalo’s historic efforts to provide food in times of economic hardship, such as through fully functioning urban farms during the Great Depression, some residents are growing food on the city’s vacant public and privately owned land.

Buffalo’s current thriving urban agriculture landscape, featuring nearly 100 community gardens, numerous urban farms, and an increasing number of food production-based businesses, is grounded solidly in community-led efforts to reclaim neighbourhoods destroyed by short-sighted policy and planning decisions that redefined certain neighbourhoods and built highways through others. Current urban agriculture efforts reflect the diversity and energy of a post-industrial city now recreating itself with limited, or glacially slow, municipal government support. Historic African American neighbourhoods are home to thriving community gardens, new Americans are raising plants and produce native to their countries of origin, community organisations are operating urban farms that employ neighbourhood youth, and private entrepreneurs are building hoop houses on vacant lots and selling produce to local restaurants. Elsewhere we have highlighted how these collective community efforts, based in ordinary, incremental and persistent practices, have transformed limited-resource communities and rebuilt the local food systems with little municipal government support (Raja, Picard et al. 2014).

The sustenance of community gardens signals community engagement in urban agriculture; without community interest, community gardens are unlikely to endure. Buffalo’s community gardeners can be found tending gardens located in nearly every neighbourhood of the city, producing food in areas underserved by healthy-food retailers, beautifying vacant lots once trash-filled and overgrown, and planning block club parties and neighbourhood events in the park-like spaces they have created. In numerous instances, community gardens have sprung up in response to derelict conditions in neighbourhoods and have been a stimulus for positive change over time.

Sadly, in exchange for their labour, community gardeners have not received unequivocal support from local government agencies. The community-led campaign for land access and land tenure for community gardens has morphed depending on municipal leadership, but is currently hindered by persistent municipal inaction and foot-dragging. Residents want legal access to a number of the nearly 16,000 vacant lots, over 4,000 of which are city-owned, a right the city neither outright supports nor denies in a timely manner. Community gardens on much city-owned land used to operate under a master lease agreement held by Grassroots Gardens of Western New York (GGWNY), a not-for-profit community gardening organisation. In addition to being a signatory to the lease agreement on behalf of city’s gardeners, GGWNY also provides liability insurance to gardeners. In the last lease agreement, which expired in 2010, gardeners would be given a meager 30-day notice to vacate property if the lot
were sold. After the lease expired, GGWNY tried in 2011 to create a new, fair lease agreement which would allow gardeners protection for the full growing season from March to November if the lot were to be sold. The city will not adopt this proposed lease and has simply extended the 2010 lease allowing only 30 days protection. In essence, community gardeners on public land are currently operating with an insecure land tenure arrangement by which the city has the right to take over the land at any time with only 30 days notice to community gardener members.

Municipal government has been particularly slow to grant land access requests in neighbourhoods with significant racial and economic disparities – reinforcing the ongoing municipal disinvestment even in the face of grassroots resident action. Citing potential food safety and public health concerns, municipal government has both ignored the positive benefits of community gardens and shed their own public responsibility to care for public lands. Deliberative action on the part of community gardeners, who have continued to maintain a gardening presence regardless of land tenure, has contributed to municipal government consideration of urban agriculture as a legal land use within their yet-to-be approved zoning ordinance. Boldfaced illegal gardening has ignited resident involvement in the political process – empowering residents to demand a fair lease agreement with the city for their gardens. Concerted advocacy work for a fair lease, with the leadership of GGWNY, continues to unite residents from diverse neighbourhoods around a common goal.

While community gardeners have advocated for policy change on urban growing across the city, non-profit urban farming projects too have incrementally nudged for change by engaging in farming practices both legal and illegal. By choosing to operate under-the-radar (or more likely, overlooked) gardening facilities – chicken coops, aquaponics systems, greenhouses and rows of produce – one non-profit organisation, the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP), used ostensibly illicit action to prompt the city to reconsider its outdated zoning bylaws that disallowed many urban agricultural practices. MAP established itself within the city’s west-side community and demonstrated the potential for urban agriculture as a tool for community-building, youth employment, and healthy food provision. As MAP gradually assembled more and more vacant lots within the neighbourhood, coalescing into a fully functioning urban farm, urban agriculture became a visible normalised practice in the city (Raja, Picard et al. 2014).

Community organisations’ on-the-ground practices in conjunction with their work to reform policy, which lasted for more than a decade, has led to a new era for urban agriculture policy in the city of Buffalo. A timeline of action is available at http://growingfoodconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/06/RustbeltRadicalPolicyBriefDraft_Final_2015_6.22.pdf, and here is a short list of policy reforms:

- creation of a city-county food policy council, one of only two recognised and codified into law in New York state (Raja and Whittaker forthcoming);
- development, by the regional transportation agency, of a regional sustainability plan which, for the first time in the history of the region’s official plans, includes a regional food systems assessment that describes action for improving viability of local agriculture and reducing food insecurity (Raja, Hall et al. 2014);
- passage of a legal ordinance that allows, with some requirements, raising of poultry within city boundaries;
- agreement between the city government and a commercial farmer to allow the use of public land for Wilson Street Farm, a commercial farm;
- establishment of a rooftop community garden on a public market owned and operated by the city;
- inclusion of urban agriculture as an important practice within the city’s new (proposed) land use plan which is expected to be adopted by elected officials this spring (Raja and Whittaker forthcoming);
- inclusion of urban agriculture as a permitted land use within most zones identified within the city’s new (proposed) form-based zoning ordinance/bylaw which is expected to be adopted concomitantly with the land-use plan.

These changes in urban agriculture policy in Buffalo have been instigated by community organizations and should ultimately lead to lasting reform.

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Early Innovation, Deliberate Pace: Urban agriculture policy and planning in Madison, Wisconsin

Madison, Wisconsin, the state capital and home of the flagship campus of the University of Wisconsin - Madison, is a rapidly growing Midwestern city of 245,000, steadily expanding across the rich agricultural land of Dane County. Many Madison residents are newcomers to Wisconsin, having first come as university students, or more recently to join the city’s growing high-tech industry. Wisconsin’s traditional reputation as America’s Dairyland endures, with the result that new and long-time Madisonians alike see close connections between their urban lives and the surrounding rural and periurban farmlands. This awareness, coupled with a largely progressive political bent at the grass-roots and local government level, has resulted in a high level of awareness of and participation in the national local-food movement. Dozens of community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms operate within 50–75 miles of the city, and Madisonians can visit one of several farmers’ markets operating any day during the six-month growing season.

This commitment to local farms, coupled with the lack of a large inventory of vacant parcels – as is often found in other, older industrial or shrinking cities (such as Buffalo) – means that urban agriculture within Madison’s municipal boundaries is not particularly widespread. Although Madison has an active community gardens network, dedicated urban farming is not associated separately, but rather is nested within the larger local food movement. Thus, Troy Community Farm, at 5 acres the city’s largest urban farm, is largely seen as a hyper local participant within the Madison CSA market (comprised of otherwise non-urban farms) and not as an example of urban farming per se.

Despite its outward prosperity, Madison shares with other US cities the presence of a growing, food-insecure underclass composed largely of people of colour, a fact that until only recently was overlooked by the city’s white, highly formally educated, generally affluent majority (not coincidentally also the primary supporters of local food efforts). Recent studies have revealed deep social and economic disparities in Madison based on race, resulting in positive and generally productive examples of civic self-examination over the past two years. City government – particularly Mayor Paul Soglin, who has become a national leader in food advocacy among his mayoral colleagues, and the Madison Food Policy Council created by the Mayor in 2012 – has worked to bring disadvantaged segments of Madison’s population into discussions on good food access, including healthier retail choices, and in-school meals of better quality. Urban farming – but to a greater extent, community gardens – have also been part of these discussions. Madison’s effective system of public committees led by citizens and staffed by city employees is the current bedrock of food system advancement, although representation from low-wealth residents and people of colour in this system of governance is limited.

In particular Madison’s community gardens, while long-thriving, lacked until recently an institutional base that saw their value in the aggregate, and not solely as individual elements in the city’s neighbourhood fabric. In 2014, when a regional anti-poverty group decided to end its management of the majority of Madison’s community gardens, a citywide community gardens support group formed as a partnership among Community GroundWorks (the non-profit organisation that manages Troy Community Farm), Dane County UW Extension and city government. Known as The Gardens Network, this group is now responsible for improving the individual and collective viability of Madison and Dane County’s 60 community gardens, which cover some 50 acres of land and are used by over 2,000 households. Among other goals, The Gardens Network facilitates both the stability of existing gardens and the creation of new ones in ways that maximise community value. The group convenes annual citywide gatherings of community gardeners to network with supporting institutions (such as university extension) and provide technical services (gardenning workshops, leadership trainings and access to liability insurance).

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Challenges, resources, and ideas for future

The two case examples above, Buffalo and Madison, offer a stark contrast in how urban agriculture emerges and how municipal governments respond in the United States. In many ways, the historic and economic contexts of these cities explain why and what type of urban agriculture has emerged, and how public policy has responded. In 1940 Buffalo was home to nearly half a million residents, and a prominent hub in the global grain/food system, while Madison was home to barely 70,000 people in a Midwestern, largely agrarian landscape. Although the population size in both cities today is quite similar, about a quarter million, emergence of urban agriculture in Buffalo is a reaction to severe urban decline while in Madison its emergence reflects residents’ aspirations for a greener, more sustainable city. Recognising these distinctly different motivations (though they need not be mutually exclusive) is essential for developing thoughtful, historically relevant urban agricultural policy.

Matching the trajectory of food movements with appropriate municipal plans and policies – Depending on the trajectory of the food movement, cities may need to develop different responses to support urban agriculture. In Buffalo, where urban agriculture was not recognised in municipal policy until recently, an important first step was to establish a governance structure—e.g., a food policy council—and participatory planning processes that facilitate community engagement in municipal policy. In the case of Madison, where there is a long history of urban agriculture, it is imperative for municipal government to continually examine the degree to which equity and public interest in municipal policy are being protected over time. In other words, the policy response has to match the needs within the urban agriculture movement.

Growing Food Connections among low-resource farmers and low-income consumers – Like Madison and Buffalo, a number of cities are exploring how to best support urban agriculture. Many are exploring how to connect small and medium-scale agriculture with food-insecure consumers. Growing Food Connections (GFC), a national research project, is documenting the ways in which innovative local governments, or Communities of Innovation, are using policy to strengthen connections among the two vulnerable sectors in the food system. These lessons are being shared with other communities that are primed for change, or Communities of Opportunity. Resources developed by GFC are available to cities nationwide, and globally at growingfoodconnections.org. A key among these resources is a searchable policy database that contains the actual adopted policies from across the United States. Although these policies cannot be simply replicated elsewhere in a cookie-cutter fashion—in fact, we strongly discourage that—these examples do point to possible ways for local governments to support food systems.

Necessity for multi-sectoral partnerships – Community residents understand the assets and challenges in their urban food systems through their lived experience. At the same time, residents (and their advocates) may not have the resources to build on the assets or address challenges. As seen in the case studies from Buffalo and Madison, multi-sectoral partnerships between civic groups, public agencies and—when appropriate—the private sector can create networks that can amplify assets to strengthen urban agriculture.

Building policymaking capacity among residents – Related to the above, given the limited amount of knowledge and resources on food systems planning, especially in low-resource communities, it is essential that food advocates, including philanthropic organisations and academic partners, focus on empowering communities to engage in the political and policymaking process themselves. Until communities lead (rather than only participate) in policymaking processes, the policy tools will remain irrelevant at best.

Addressing structural disparities – Urban agriculture in many cities, such as in Buffalo, is emerging as a response to structural disparities. Therefore, unless urban agriculture policy addresses structural disparities, policies will have no long-term benefit for communities. For example, it is shortsighted to focus on simply setting aside land for community gardens in a low-income neighbourhood where residents work two jobs to make ends meet and may not have the time to engage in volunteer gardening efforts. In such a case, economic empowerment programs must complement urban agriculture programs (in Buffalo for example, teenagers participating in urban farming are paid for their time through a city employment program). In other words, on-the-ground urban agricultural practices to create change must be amplified and supplemented with citywide policies that address structural disparities in urban food systems.

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