

CASE STUDIES: PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MD

Prince George's County Food Equity Council: Taking on Food Swamps through Policy Change

Prince George's County, Maryland is an urban area located thirty-five miles south of Baltimore City. The county spans 500 square miles and borders Washington, DC. It is one of the highest-income African-American-majority counties in the country.

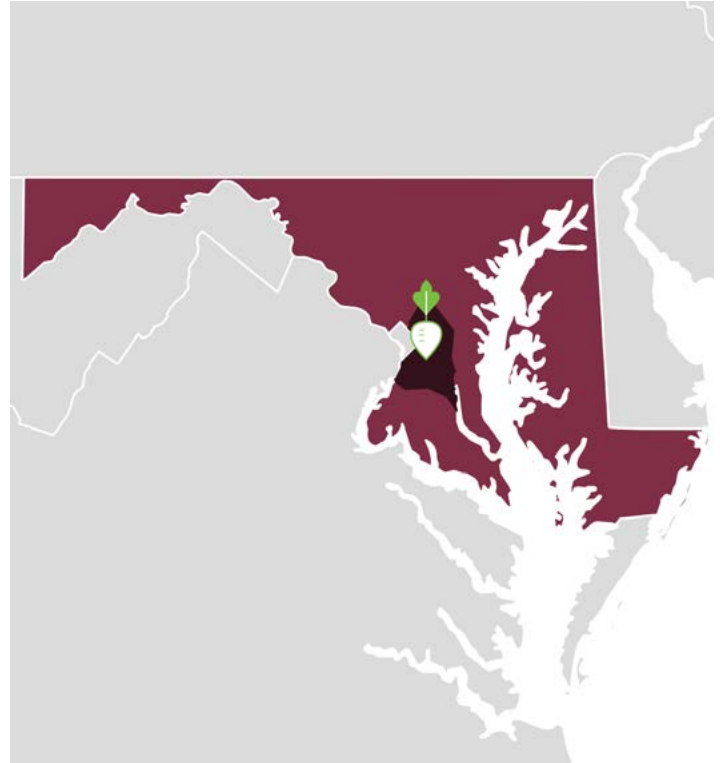
THE PROBLEM

Food swamps in the most urban areas of Prince George's County

A food swamp is a place where unhealthy foods are more readily available than healthy foods. Unhealthy foods include those that are dense in calories, high in sodium, and high in sugar.¹

While Prince George's County has higher rates of weight-related chronic diseases than the state overall, there are also health inequities that exist within the county. In 2015, the Prince George's County Planning Department released a food system study, "Healthy Food for All Prince Georgians," describing these disparities. The report showed that residents living in the most urban areas and inside the Capital Beltway² have much higher rates of diet-related illnesses relative to people living in other parts of the county. Individuals in these communities also have lower income levels and higher rates of food insecurity.³

In these neighborhoods, the challenge is not in accessing food, but rather the prevalence of unhealthy food outlets (e.g. carry-outs, fast food and full service restaurants, gas station and convenience stores) relative to healthier alternatives (e.g. grocery stores carrying high-quality fruits and vegetables). Unhealthy food venues account for approximately 55 percent of all food retail outlets in these communities.⁴ Moreover, the number and location of prepared food outlets make them more easily accessible than food retail stores that offer groceries. The Prince George's County Food Equity Council (FEC) uses the phrase "food swamp" to describe the food environment within these areas of the county.



KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

| | |
|---|---|
| Population: ¹ | 908,049 |
| Land Area (in sq. mi): | 500 |
| Race/Ethnicity: ² | 19.2%-White 64.5%-Black or African American 4.1%-Asian 14.9%-Hispanic/Latino (of any race) |
| Population by Age: ² | 23.9%-under 18 years 66.7%-18-64 years 9.4%-65 year and older |
| Education: ³ | 85.6%-High school graduate or higher 31.1%-Bachelor's degree or higher |
| Median Household Income: ³ | \$74,260 |
| Population in Poverty: ³ | 9.6% (compared to 10% statewide and 15.8% in the U.S. as a whole) |
| Low Income and Low Food Access: ⁴ | 43% of census tracts (94 tracts) |

THE POLICY SOLUTION

Establishing a Food Equity Council

Since its launch in 2013, the FEC has pursued multiple policies to address inequities in the local food system associated with food swamps and lack of access to healthy food. The county's FEC is one of the only food policy councils in the U.S. that intentionally includes the term "equity" in its name. The FEC's founding members were intent on emphasizing the equity focus of their work. The mission of the FEC is "to promote health, economic opportunity, food security, and well-being, especially among communities that have been negatively impacted by the current food system...cultivating justice and economic opportunity from farm to fork."⁵

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY: Uplifting Community Voices

The FEC provides a forum for community engagement in Prince George's county and a platform to amplify the voices of those most affected by policies focused on achieving equitable food access. Similar to the makeup of other food policy councils, the membership includes representatives from a broad coalition of anti-hunger, direct service, and advocacy groups, grocery stores, government agencies, community-based organizations, civic associations, urban and rural farms, agricultural service providers, universities, and health care providers. Yet, the FEC is independent of the Prince George's county government. Although the county council endorsed the mission of the FEC and receives an annual progress report, the group operates in what founding FEC member and director of Maryland Hunger Solutions, Michael Wilson, describes as a "more democratic, inclusive and thoughtful manner."⁶ The independent nature of the FEC has allowed it to remain committed to both racial and economic equity in a way that is responsive to the needs of the community. It is this core value of equitable access to healthy food across the food system that has been the driving force behind much of the recent policy change efforts in Prince George's county.

IMPROVING MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF FOOD ACCESS POLICY

Taken together, these policy change efforts address multiple dimensions of food access that advance equity in diet-related health outcomes.⁷ Table 1 outlines the food access issues addressed by the FEC's healthy food policy work.

| POLICY NAME | SUMMARY | FOOD ACCESS DIMENSION ADDRESSED | FOOD SYSTEM STAGE |
|---|---|--|---|
| Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to Health | Provides technical assistance and grant funding to farmers' market managers for technology and reporting requirements associated with accepting SNAP benefits at farmers' markets; funds an outreach and education campaign and double value coupon program. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordability Accommodation (types of payment accepted) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get (i.e., facilities, activities, and practices that affect people's ability to obtain and consume healthy food) |
| Urban Agriculture Tax Credit Urban Farm Definition | Establishes a property tax credit for real property used for agricultural purposes and permits farming in residential zones by expanding the definition of urban farms. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability (i.e. Physical presence) Accessibility (geographically) Acceptability (i.e., culturally acceptable foods) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grow (i.e., harvesting produce raising/keeping animals or insects, and access to resources, such as land) Process (i.e., turning produce, honey, meat, fish, and other animal-related foods into forms ready for sale) |
| Healthy Vending on County Property | Requires that at least 50% of food and beverage products sold in vending machines on county property must meet nutrition standards; that healthy products be stocked in positions with highest selling potential; and that products be comparatively priced or less expensive than unhealthy options. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability (i.e., physical presence) Affordability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get (i.e., facilities, activities, and practices that affect people's ability to obtain and consume healthy food) |

Timeline of Events

2012

SEPTEMBER: Prince George's County Planning Department releases the report "Urban Agriculture: A Tool for Creating Economic Development and Healthy Communities in Prince George's County"

2013

OCTOBER 26: Food Equity Council officially launched (FEC was incubated and is currently housed within the Institute for Public Health Innovation)

2014

APRIL 5: Maryland General Assembly passes Urban Agriculture Property Tax Credit bill

SEPTEMBER 9: SNAP to Health bill enacted by Prince George's County Council

2015

JANUARY 1: SNAP to Health bill initial effective date

NOVEMBER: Prince George's County Planning Department releases "Healthy Food for All Prince Georgians" Food Systems study

NOVEMBER 17: Prince George's County Council passes Urban Agriculture Property Tax Credit bill

2016

JULY 19: Prince George's County Council enacts an expanded definition of urban farming and designates it as an allowed use in more of the county's zones

2017

AUGUST 2: Healthy Vending on County Property bill signed into law

Over the last four years, the FEC collaborated with many key stakeholders, Prince George's county council and county government officials, and community partners to ensure the successful passage and implementation of policies in three primary areas: 1) SNAP/EBT access at farmers' markets, 2) urban agriculture, and 3) healthy vending. The information included below provides a brief history of FEC's involvement in each initiative and highlights how the FEC maintained a focus on equity throughout each policy process.

SNAP to Health: SNAP/EBT access at farmers' markets

» BRIEF HISTORY:

After initial passage in 2014, the SNAP to Health bill was defunded by the county in response to a budget deficit. Although the county Health Department was the lead organization implementing the legislation, the FEC quickly became involved in advocating for reinstatement of its refunding. During the county's 2015 budget hearing sessions, farmers' market managers, farmers and the FEC testified in favor of the ordinance and the county reallocated \$25,000 in funding to the program (initially funded at \$100,000). In subsequent years, through the efforts of the FEC and others, the program regained all but \$25,000 of its initial allocation. In 2017, the county council approved spending from the program for a double value coupon program.

» MAINTAINING AN EQUITY-FOCUS & INCLUSIVE POLICY PROCESS:

The original SNAP to Health ordinance provided technical assistance and grant funding to farmers' markets interested in accepting SNAP/EBT benefits. The legislation aimed to improve the availability of fresh produce in neighborhoods with the least access, yet it did not address the affordability of healthy foods at the markets. Through the FEC's partnership with county officials, government agencies, and anti-hunger organizations, the recent addition of the double value coupon program increases SNAP recipients' purchasing power for fruits and vegetables. This development enhances the equity focus of this policy and invests in the health of low-income residents.

The FEC worked for an inclusive decision-making process by assisting urban farmers and the managers



Courtesy: Prince George's County, MD Food Equity Council

of the county's markets in drafting public testimony and engaging in advocacy efforts to restore funding to the SNAP to Health program. This enabled County officials to hear directly from local farmers most impacted by this legislation. Yet, while farmers were at the SNAP to Health policymaking table, the FEC struggled to find the best way to engage individuals experiencing poverty and lack of access to healthy food. It caused the FEC to continually evaluate, in the words of Michael Wilson, "how to engage people in such a way that they don't become bystanders in efforts that are supposed to both empower and support them."⁸ This challenge is not unique to the FEC, and something that should be considered when engaging in community planning and healthy food policy work.

Urban Agriculture Tax Credit and Urban Farm Definition

» BRIEF HISTORY:

The FEC's focus on urban farming stemmed from feedback the group received from residents and key stakeholders during the initial strategic planning process. Eco-City Farms⁹, one of the organizations leading efforts to create the FEC, and the Prince George's County Planning Department were also early supporters of urban agriculture¹⁰ in the county. Through the expansion of urban farming, the FEC hoped to improve access to healthy food and provide additional economic opportunities for residents in the Capital Beltway. Working with a variety of partners (e.g., Soil Conservation District, University of Maryland Extension, Prince George's county) and under the leadership of Councilwoman Mary Lehman, the group decided that passing an urban agriculture property tax credit was the first step toward the goal of expanding urban farming in the county.

The urban agriculture tax credit ordinance passed in 2015, making Prince George's county the second county in Maryland, behind Baltimore City, to enact legislation enabling an agriculture property tax credit. Just a year before, the Maryland General Assembly adopted a bill authorizing Maryland counties and the City of Baltimore to implement a property tax credit for urban land used for agricultural purposes.¹¹ Yet, the FEC's work was far from over. The county's current urban farm definition was a barrier to implementing the agriculture tax credit because it limited urban farming to non-profit farming ventures. So the FEC and core partners turned their attention to advocating for expanding the urban farm definition. Their primary objectives were to include for-profit operations and change preexisting zoning laws to

allow farming in more zones. Initially, there was resistance from some members of the county council concerned that their constituents would be unhappy if an urban farm moved next to them. But in 2016, the Council enacted an expanded definition of urban farming and designated it as an allowed use in more of the county's zones. Specifically, the ordinance: (1) expands the definition of urban farming to include for-profit ventures that cultivate flowers, fruits, or vegetables, and/or engage in beekeeping, agricultural education activities or composting; and (2) allows urban farming in rural, open space and residential zones up through the R-55 zone, as well as the R-18 zone so long as the urban farm is no larger five acres.¹²

"When it was all said and done, the bill passed unanimously through county council. Now 73 percent of all the land in the county is zoned for urban farming, so we feel that's really exciting."

-Sydney Daigle, Director of the FEC¹³



Courtesy: Prince George's County, MD Food Equity Council

» MAINTAINING AN EQUITY-FOCUS & INCLUSIVE POLICY PROCESS:

Before the urban farm legislation passed in 2016, "there was only one farm in all of Prince George's county able to take advantage of the urban agriculture tax credit," shared Kim Rush Lynch, Agriculture Marketing Specialist with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension. This contributed to inequities in the local food system, further disadvantaging urban farmers and limiting the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, especially cultural varieties of produce, in communities most impacted by health disparities. The FEC along with multiple partners and County Councilwoman Mary Lehman took on these equity challenges collectively and committed to addressing this

issue over a course of a few years through multiple pieces of legislation and a zoning ordinance change. Similar to healthy food policy work in communities across the country, Prince George's county realized that a narrow urban farm definition was a barrier in advancing urban agriculture in the county and took the necessary steps to address it.

While the FEC was heavily involved in the policy process for both urban agriculture bills, the policy drafting process for the urban farm legislation required a particular emphasis on inclusivity. The FEC met with urban farmers in the county to see what types of farming were occurring on their properties already and what they were interested in doing in the future. The FEC understood that it was vitally important that the urban farm definition that passed was appropriate and was open enough to allow for innovation. The government agencies tasked with implementing these policies—Finance, Planning, and the Permitting, Inspections, and Enforcement departments, as well as the Soil Conservation District—were also at the table providing input and technical expertise.

Healthy Vending on County Property

» BRIEF HISTORY:

"An Act Concerning Healthy Vending Requirements" was reintroduced in early 2017 after a similar bill died in a county council committee in 2016. With Sugar Free Kids Maryland leading the organizing and policy drafting efforts, the FEC engaged its members through action alerts and providing testimony in favor of the bill. After clearing the county committee process, the healthy vending ordinance was approved unanimously by the county council in July 2017.¹⁴ Long-time FEC supporter, County Council Vice-Chair Dannielle Glaros provided leadership on the bill. Since 2015, similar legislation has passed in Baltimore City, Howard and Montgomery Counties, and by the Maryland-National Parks and Planning Commission.

» MAINTAINING AN EQUITY-FOCUS:

This policy levels the playing field for what types of products are available in vending machines on government property, requiring healthy products to comprise at least 50 percent of the offerings. In terms of equity, it not only affects children and families in communities with limited access to healthy foods, but it also directly benefits county employees who may be working in the evening or early morning and only have access to food from a

government vending machine. The product pricing feature further impacts equity by requiring that healthy products be comparatively priced or less expensive than unhealthy options.

Additionally, this ordinance aligns with the FEC's effort to counteract food swamps in the Capital Beltway; the bill increases healthy choices in vending machines, rather than contributing to the glut of unhealthy options. It also reduces the marketing of unhealthy options by setting advertising requirements for the outside of the vending machines and ensuring that only healthy choices are placed at eye level where children can best see them.

ANTICIPATED POLICY IMPACT

These policies represent the FEC's commitment to equity within the local food system—increasing access to healthy food for those most impacted by health disparities and improving economic opportunities for urban farmers. Specifically, it is anticipated that these policies will lead to an increase in SNAP recipient purchases of fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets, a larger availability of culturally appropriate produce through urban farm operations, and a greater consumption of healthy vending products on government property.

The full economic benefits to urban farmers have yet to be seen. Anecdotally, however, community members are taking advantage of the SNAP to Health and urban agriculture ordinances. One example is Rosa Linares' Home Farm. Rosa immigrated to Prince George's county from El Salvador. She started a small farm on her land. Initially she just grew for herself and her friends and family. Then one day, Rosa showed up at the farmers' market with a basket of El Salvadoran greens and found that they were enormously popular. Now Rosa is a vendor at the farmers' market growing and selling crops that are popular in the El Salvadoran community.

An unintended consequence stemming from the urban agriculture legislation is the impact that these types of policies may have on gentrification within Prince George's county. Because urban farms require land in denser, more residential areas typically used for housing, the presence of urban farms may drive up property costs and cause low-income individuals to face additional barriers to affordable housing. Although there is no evidence of this phenomenon to date, the FEC is currently thinking through how it would address this negative impact on equity.

LESSONS LEARNED

Some key lessons and best practices were shared by the experts we spoke with for this case study. These lessons include:

- **Pay attention to how existing zoning laws can impede healthy food policies.** Advocates should think through all the ways that a bill interacts with existing legislation and regulation and find individuals with the appropriate technical expertise to assist with the policy drafting process.
- **Build strong relationships with city/county departments and look for continued opportunities to work together.** There are opportunities that come through increased partnerships with government agencies. In the case of the FEC, relationships built over time continue to assist with current work around a zoning ordinance rewrite¹⁵ and in ongoing efforts to support the county's farmers' markets
- **Continually engage the community and always ask for feedback.** For the FEC, best practices for engagement include preparing individuals for bill hearings, asking members to submit written comments on specific pieces of legislation, hosting annual Food Equity forums, and soliciting feedback from members in order to engage as a collective voice throughout all stages of the policy process.
- **Capitalize on the dynamic that exists between neighboring counties or cities.** Policy innovations can be shared across local jurisdictions. In the case of Prince George's county, policy changes in other counties helped spur local action.
- **Where possible, "bundle" healthy food policies with economic or environmental benefits for wider appeal.** Because local governments have limited resources, the FEC realized that broadening the support for healthy food access policies was an effective strategy to help build appeal among decision makers.

ABOUT THE HEALTHY FOOD POLICY PROJECT

The HFPP identifies and elevates local laws that seek to promote access to healthy food while also contributing to strong local economies, an improved environment, and health equity, with a focus on socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups. HFPP is a multiyear collaboration of the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law School, the Public Health Law Center, and the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut. This project is funded by the National Agricultural Library, Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Additional Acknowledgments

This case study relies heavily on information provided during interviews and subsequent communications with Sydney Daigle, Director, PRINCE GEORGE'S County Food Equity Council, (7/27/2017); Kim Rush Lynch, Agriculture Marketing Specialist, University of Maryland Cooperative Extension (9/6/2017); and Michael J. Wilson, Director, Maryland Hunger Solutions, (10/5/2017). The Healthy Food Policy Project (HFPP) collaborators thank these individuals for their contributions. We have not included citations to the information they have contributed throughout the body of this case study, but have relied upon it unless another source is indicated. Prince George's county photos are included, courtesy of the Prince George's County FEC.

The HFPP also thanks its Advisory Committee members for their guidance and feedback throughout the project. Advisory Committee members are: Dr. David Procter with the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University, Dr. Samina Raja with Growing Food Connections at the University of Buffalo, and Kathryn Lynch Underwood with the Detroit City Planning Commission. Previous advisory committee members include Pakou Hang with the Hmong American Farmers Association and Emily Broad Leib with the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic. Renee Gross, JD, served as a project consultant from 2015-2018.

Notes

¹ Rose, D., Bodor, J. N., Swalm, C. M., Rice, J. C., Farley, T. A., & Hutchinson, P. L. (2009). Deserts in New Orleans? Illustrations of urban food access and implications for policy. *Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan National Poverty Center/USDA Economic Research Service Research*.

² The highway that encircles Washington D.C.

³ Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and Prince George's County Planning Department, *Healthy Food for All Prince Georgians: An assessment of access to healthy food in Prince George's County, Maryland* (November 2015), <http://www.mncppcapps.org/planning/Publications/PDFs/304/Cover%20page,%20Introduction%20and%20Executive%20summary.pdf>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Prince George's County Food Equity Council, *Our Mission* (last accessed October 16, 2017), <http://www.pgcfec.org>

⁶ Telephone interview with Michael J. Wilson, Director, Maryland Hunger Solutions (October 5, 2017).

⁷ Caspi, C. E., Sorensen, G., Subramanian, S. V., & Kawachi, I. (2012). The local food environment and diet: a systematic review. *Health & place*, 18(5), 1172-1187. (This journal article outlines five dimensions of food access: Availability (presence of certain types of food outlets near people's homes), Accessibility (travel time and distance), Acceptability (cultural preferences), Affordability (food prices and worth relative to cost), and Accommodation (store hours and types of payment accepted).).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Eco City Farms, About Us (last accessed October 18, 2017), <http://www.ecoffshoots.org/about-us/> (ECO City Farms is a not-for-profit, multicultural, inter-generational, Certified Naturally Grown, urban teaching farm in Prince George's County, MD.).

¹⁰ Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and Prince George's County Planning Department, *Urban Agriculture: A Tool for Creating Economic Development and Healthy Communities in Prince George's County, Maryland* (September 2012), <http://www.mncppcapps.org/planning/publications/pdfs/259/Urban%20Agriculture%20Report%202012.pdf> (Urban agriculture is the activity of growing plants and raising animals in and around urban areas. Typically, urban agriculture uses intensive production methods that recycle nutrients, improve soil, and encourage plant and animal growth without using hazardous chemicals. Its products are processed, distributed, and consumed within the same urban area in which they are produced.).

¹¹ Community Law Center, *Urban Agriculture Law Project* (last accessed October 31, 2017), <http://communitylaw.org/urbanagriculturelaw/propertytaxcredit>

¹² Emily Blackner, *County Council Expands Urban Farming to Residential Zones*, THE SENTINEL (July 27, 2016), http://www.thesentinel.com/pgs/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2755:county-council-expands-urban-farming-to-residential-zones&Itemid=766 <http://www.pgccouncil.us/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=119&ARC=205>

¹³ Telephone interview with Sydney Daigle, Director, Prince George's County Food Equity Council (July 27, 2017).

¹⁴ Sugar Free Kids Maryland, *Prince George's County Unanimously Passes Healthy Vending Legislation* (last accessed October 18, 2017), <http://www.sugarfreekidsmd.org/prince-georges-county-unanimously-passes-healthy-vending-legislation/>

¹⁵ Prince George's County Planning Department, *Zoning Rewrite Urban Agriculture Tour* (last accessed October 16, 2017), <http://zoningpgc.pgplanning.com/2016/05/13/urban-agriculture-walking-tour/>

Key Demographics Table Notes

¹ Source: Vintage 2016 Population Estimates: Population Estimates

² Source: 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts

³ Source: 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Profiles

⁴ Source: 2015 USDA/ERS Food Access Data