Integrating Food into Urban Planning

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Edible Providence
Integrating local food into urban planning

Katherine Brown and Sheila Deming Brush

Since 2003, Providence, Rhode Island, a small United States city, has successfully integrated food concerns into urban planning and policy implementation. As a result Providence has already seen a marked increase in local production opportunities, distribution outlets, food waste composting and food security initiatives and is poised to make significant additional advances in the coming years. Figure 3.1 illustrates the bounty of one of Providence’s many productive community gardens.

This chapter studies the confluence of factors that drove the inclusion of food in urban planning and policy implementation. How did food advocates take advantage of the Planning Department’s increased emphasis on citizen participation to promote food system thinking within city government? What roles did supportive city planners and elected officials play in facilitating this change? What conditions within city government and within the NGO community fostered the productive collaboration between community interests and municipal decision-makers? By addressing these specific questions as it narrates the work of the last 15 years, the chapter offers insights into the driving forces behind Providence’s food planning and policy development to date and suggests both the city’s potential for additional progress and the challenges that must still be addressed.

3.1. The growth of Providence

On the eastern seaboard 95 km south of Boston, Providence is the capital and largest city in the nation’s smallest but second most densely
populated state. In 1636, Narragansett Indians granted English colonists land use rights to establish Providence on the eastern bank of the Providence River at the head of Narragansett Bay. From that time onwards the city's physical and economic development benefited from its natural harbour and a river system that provided access to resources in the hinterlands and a powerful energy source to drive the city's industrial development.

Through the early 1800s, Providence grew from rural hamlet to prosperous seaport to early industrial and financial centre and overland transportation hub. During the 1800s, the city experienced a period of...
rapid industrial expansion, and the availability of work in the quickly expanding factories attracted waves of immigrants, first from England, Scotland and English- and French-speaking Canada, and later from Ireland and Italy. The city’s population doubled between 1865 and 1880 and doubled again between 1880 and 1910. By 1900, Providence was the twentieth-largest American city. It reached a population peak of 250 000 in 1940.

Unfortunately the growth of the nineteenth and early twentieth century did not continue. Providence’s industrial base eroded steadily after World War II, the population shrank to a low of 156 000 in 1980, and the city entered a period of urban decline. Like other American ‘rust belt’ cities, Providence was faced with dire need for both physical redevelopment and economic repositioning. Although the city’s downtown physical revitalisation in the 1980s and 1990s combined historic restoration with major redesign and new development, this physical revitalisation was slow to attract new business. Only now is Providence beginning to see significant new economic growth.

However, the city is not without multiple assets, including historic and walkable neighbourhoods, renowned universities, regional health care centres, an increasingly vibrant arts and cultural scene and a port that serves as a regional distribution point for fuel, salt and raw materials. The city has continued to attract new immigrant populations, who bring energy and entrepreneurial spirit. Of Providence’s current 179 000 residents, nearly half are Hispanic/Latino, Asian or African. And, paradoxically, in an otherwise built-out city, abandoned industrial buildings and blighted housing stock opened up acres of vacant land – some of which provided an essential ingredient for subsequent food sector development.

3.2. Urban planning up to 2000

Providence’s original colonists laid out narrow house lots along the eastern bank of the Providence River and used land on the west side of the river as common ground for raising crops and grazing animals. Through the early 1800s, physical growth continued to centre on the area along the river. Farms ringed the built-up part of town and supplied produce and meat to those in the town centre. As manufacturing boomed in the 1800s, factory expansion and housing construction rapidly consumed what had once been open land within the city limits.
Increased demand for public services and recognition of problems from unplanned growth led elected officials and civic leaders to take steps to begin to guide the city’s ongoing development. In 1901, the City Board of Park Commissioners was created to ensure that open space would be available for the thickly settled city population. In 1913, the City Plan Commission was organised and, in 1923, the city adopted its first zoning ordinance.

During the 1940s, the City Plan Commission was reorganised and provided with professional staff, and the Providence Redevelopment Authority was created. Between 1946 and 1953, the City Plan Commission developed a city master plan, published as a series of separate reports. A second master plan was produced in 1964 and updated in the 1980s. In addition to these master plans, the city produced a number of separate plans relating to neighbourhoods and to the downtown centre.

In 1988, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the State Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act. This legislation required municipalities to develop a local comprehensive plan, mandated specific content for local comprehensive plans, and required each municipality to bring its zoning ordinance into consistency with its local comprehensive plan. Providence’s first local comprehensive plan, adopted in 1993, guided the city’s development for the next 15 years.

The state legislation did not require, nor did the city’s 1993 local comprehensive plan include, any discussion of food, but this is not surprising. As the American Planning Association (APA) stated in its Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning, adopted in 2007, ‘planners have paid less attention to food issues when compared with long-standing planning topics such as economic development, transportation, the environment, and housing’. The APA suggested several reasons behind the lack of attention to food issues:

1. a view that the food system – representing the flow of products from production, through processing, distribution, consumption, and the management of wastes, and associated processes – only indirectly touches on the built environment, a principal focus of planning’s interest;
2. a sense that the food system isn’t broken, so why fix it; and
3. a perception that the food system meets neither of two important conditions under which planners act – i.e., dealing with public goods like air and water; and planning for services and facilities in which the private sector is unwilling to invest, such as public transit, sewers, highways, and parks.
From 1945 through 1992, Rhode Island farms and land in farms had decreased by about 80 per cent, and the remaining farmland was under strong development pressure. Providence, and Rhode Island as a whole, was part of the industrial food system. Providence imported virtually all food from outside.

Food production and food waste composting within the city were limited to the occasional backyard gardener, 12 community gardens and a 1–1.5-hectare market farm. Providence’s once active food warehousing and market district had virtually disappeared. Until 2002, there was only one farmers’ market in Providence where Rhode Island farmers sold directly to customers. Beyond recognition that some of Rhode Island’s restaurants were gaining regional attention, state and local officials did not view food production, processing and distribution as economic drivers. Nor were rising food insecurity and diet-related health concerns widely understood.

Beginning around 2003, however, a number of factors combined to draw city government attention to the importance of providing increased opportunities for community gardening and urban agriculture. This ultimately led to the inclusion of broader food system considerations in city planning and to the adoption of city policies supportive of local food initiatives.

3.3. Contributing factors

3.3.1. NGO and citizen capacity to influence city planning efforts

In the early 2000s, Providence witnessed a nascent groundswell of community support for the local food system, which reflected the increasing public interest in local food in many cities across the US and in other countries. Supporters in Providence included food growers, many of whom were recent immigrants who brought their agricultural know-how from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean; young adults who embraced the local food movement and urban gardening; and environmentalists whose sustainability goals overlapped with urban agriculture.

This upsurge in interest was inspired and urged on by the work of Providence’s earliest food-related NGO, the Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT). Founded in 1981, SCLT was the first and remains the nation’s only community land trust (CLT) that is uniquely dedicated to urban agriculture. As Rosenberg and colleagues relate in ‘Beyond Housing: Urban Agriculture and Commercial Development by Community Land Trusts’, CLTs in the United States exist in many forms with the common purpose of holding land in order to address a range of community needs. Most CLTs have focused on affordable homeownership. SCLT’s nearly
four-decade-long dedication to urban agriculture has been a notable exception until recently, when a number of other CLTs expanded their goals to include agriculture.

SCLT's unique focus on urban agriculture was shaped by the conditions in Providence: the availability of vacant lots in residential neighbourhoods, and a large immigrant population that lacked access to culturally appropriate food and often already possessed the skills to grow food. Responding to the possibility of revitalising blighted neighbourhoods and providing opportunities for residents to grow the foods to which they were accustomed, by 2003 SCLT had already established 10 community gardens and one 0.3-hectare market farm inside Providence and managed a 20-hectare farm just outside the city limits.

Concerns about gaps in the local food system also led to the establishment of several additional NGOs that complemented SCLT’s agriculture programmes, and by 2003 Providence’s NGO community had developed the organisational capacity necessary to mobilise community constituencies and engage with city government.

In keeping with its mission of creating community food systems where locally produced, affordable and healthy food would be available to all in 2004, SCLT took the lead in advocating for Providence’s local food system when it launched the Providence Urban Agriculture Task Force (UATF). SCLT’s leadership brought to the table three elements: on-the-ground evidence of the benefits of urban agriculture with their gardens and farms, a network of growers who provided a ready constituency of support, and a recognition of the importance of municipal policy change if the food system was to make significant advances.

SCLT’s goal for the UATF was to coalesce NGO and community interests to ensure city residents had access to affordable, fresh, locally grown and culturally appropriate food. In keeping with SCLT’s system-wide perspective and the priorities of their funding source, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Project grant programme, UATF members organised around a food system model, seeking long-term citywide systemic changes. Interpreting ‘urban agriculture’ broadly, they collaborated in identifying policies and projects to increase the amount of food raised in Providence and surrounding municipalities; to facilitate healthy food access, especially for low-income consumers; to integrate food with housing and community development; to compost food waste; and to negotiate farm-to-school purchasing agreements between the Providence School Department and Rhode Island farmers.

UATF’s 40 members included farmers, gardeners, NGOs, food and health professionals, environmentalists and city and state staff and
Table 3.1  Urban Agriculture Task Force NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FarmFresh RI</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Fosters farm viability and urban consumers’ access to farm-raised goods: farmers’ markets, online distribution service, food access.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KidsFirst</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Pioneered Rhode Island’s farm-to-school programme.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hmong United</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Supports the Hmong community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Alliance of Rhode Island</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Assists newcomers: resettlement, gardens/farms, farmers’ market booths.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island Food Bank</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Coordinates food deliveries to emergency food sites statewide.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elmwood Foundation</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Community development corporation (CDC): affordable housing, youth garden.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation</td>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>CDC: affordable housing, Sankofa Urban Agriculture Village.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olneyville Housing</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>CDC: affordable housing, community gardens, edible landscaping.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitat for Humanity</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>CDC: affordable housing, backyard gardens.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Council of Rhode Island</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Environmental protection advocacy, compost education/advocacy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groundworks Providence</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Environmental restoration, community gardens/greenhouse.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Environmental justice issues, healthy corner store initiative.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Katherine Brown and Sheila Brush.
policy-makers. The members’ diverse individual agendas included public health and nutrition, food security, housing and community development, environmental protection, youth betterment, anti-poverty and racism, immigrant and refugee resettlement, farm viability and economic development. Food provided their common ground. Table 3.1 lists key NGOs participating in UATF, illustrating the breadth of interests and organisational capacity that were mobilised.

3.3.2. City support of citizen participation in planning

In 2003, Providence’s Department of Planning and Development (Planning Department) began to map out the process for creating a new local comprehensive plan. Whereas previous plans had been developed using a top-down approach, this time neighbourhood associations and community residents called for a planning process that incorporated input from citizens across the city. In response, the Planning Department announced that its plan development process would include a citywide charrette in the autumn of 2006, after which an interim local comprehensive plan would be adopted. The process continued with a series of neighbourhood charrettes in 2007–9, and culminated in neighbourhood plans and a final local comprehensive plan.

The Planning Department’s emphasis on public engagement provided an ideal opportunity for UATF members to garner municipal support for the policy changes they were advocating. They focused their efforts on incorporating language into the neighbourhood plans and the comprehensive plan which would increase food production in Providence by enabling the development of new community gardens and market farms on city-owned property.

One of the UATF’s first steps was to invite Mayor David Cicilline to visit SCLT’s City Farm and speak with UATF members. Cicilline remembers his visit as a turning point in his own understanding of the value of growing food in the city:

At City Farm, seeing Dominican, Laotian, Haitian, and white interns working together, I understood immediately how powerful food gardens and farms in the city can be. These youth were learning environmental stewardship, growing food for their families, and improving blighted lots. I was impressed to see how much food could be grown in a small space. I remember thinking here’s a win–win model we can use all over the city.6
Other UATF efforts included publishing *Urban Agriculture in Providence: Growing Our Community by Growing Good Food*, which made the case for including urban agriculture in the new comprehensive plan; issuing a white paper for planning professionals entitled *Planning for Appropriately Scaled Agriculture in Providence*; and proposing for the Planning Department’s consideration draft language in favour of increasing food production within the city.

UATF also spread word about the Planning Department’s charrettes among food advocates and helped empower non-English-speaking growers to present their interests at those public charrettes. This reinforced the Mayor’s and Planning Department’s growing recognition that community gardens and other local food initiatives were a priority for many residents. As David Everett, one of the city’s planners who staffed the public charrettes remembers, ‘Many at the City level didn’t acknowledge urban farmers as much more than a fringe element, and even I came to realize the network was larger than I’d imagined.’

Garry Bliss, then director of community development, summed up the effectiveness of the UATF’s engagement with the city’s planning process as follows:

> What the pro-urban ag folks did is a textbook example of effective engagement with municipal government. Their outreach helped policy makers and staff understand what urban ag could do. They offered successful on-the-ground examples so urban agriculture was not an abstraction. Their efforts complemented the government’s process.

### 3.3.3. Consistent leadership vision

Three different mayors have led Providence since 2003. David Cicilline (now US Congressman Cicilline) governed from 2003 through 2010; Angel Taveras from 2011 through 2014; and Jorge Elorza has served as mayor since the beginning of 2015. There has also been turnover in the City Council, which is responsible for legislative actions. These changes in leadership notwithstanding, once the initial commitment to addressing food issues was established, subsequent administrations and councils continued the city’s food initiative momentum and followed a trajectory that moved from a focus on local food production at a neighbourhood level to a systems-level perspective. The mayors not only continued to
build on the goals, organisational changes and programmatic strategies initiated by their predecessors, but in many cases retained key personnel.

During this period, US cities, and mayors in particular, were taking a lead on climate change and sustainability issues. Providence’s mayors and several council members were among those who committed to work on these critical issues. Not only did sustainability and climate change provide a larger policy umbrella under which food system issues could be treated, but food issues were often easier to discuss with the public than more complex subjects such as climate change and alternative energy.

In 2008, Mayor Cicilline issued Greenprint Providence, a report summarising the city’s vision to ‘reduce global warming, pollution and to position Providence as a leader in the rapidly growing green economy’. The report’s section on ‘Open Space’ stated, ‘community gardens and urban agriculture build community, foster cultural identity and connections, engage residents in the stewardship of land, and provide affordable produce’.11

3.3.4. New approach to City Hall structure

During this period, there was recognition within City Hall that complex issues such as environmental sustainability could most effectively be addressed through the involvement and collaboration of multiple departments. Budget limitations and a sharp decrease in federal support required the city also to partner with the private sector in order to accomplish its goals. These needs led to creative office restructuring. Two new offices – Sustainability and Healthy Communities – created during this period related directly to the city’s commitment to food issues.

In 2008, the City Council passed an ordinance that established the Environmental Sustainability Task Force and created the position of sustainability director. The ordinance responded to growing concern about sustainability and signaled the city’s increased readiness to invite ongoing NGO and academic participation in planning and policy-making. It directed the Task Force to work with the Office of Sustainability, the Mayor, the City Council and other city departments to coordinate and provide public accountability, transparency and accessibility regarding the city’s environmental agenda and to propose innovative, achievable environmental initiatives.

Former City Council member Seth Yurdin, who introduced the ordinance, states that it illustrated the growing awareness within city government that a city the size of Providence did not have the resources to bring on staff or consultants to tackle increasingly complex issues like
environmental sustainability. Instead, the city would need to tap into private sources of knowledge and expertise.\textsuperscript{12} The Task Force enabled city government to bring together multiple interests and experts’ perspectives under the umbrella of sustainability.

From the first, local food system advocates have been represented on the Environmental Sustainability Task Force, ensuring that food issues are brought to the city’s attention. As former Task Force co-chair and Mayor Elorza’s current chief of staff, Nicole Pollock recalls, ‘Food has always been a big piece of environmental sustainability and Task Force members have consistently articulated it as a critical topic area for the City to address.’\textsuperscript{13}

In 2012, Mayor Taveras established by executive order the Healthy Communities Office. Healthy Communities is charged with soliciting community input, establishing creative partnership across city departments and with the city’s NGOs and leveraging funds to create healthier outcomes for city residents. Its responsibilities include food system changes to improve nutrition and increase access to healthy foods. Like the Sustainability Office, Healthy Communities demonstrates the city’s commitment to innovative structures within government to address system-wide responses to complex problems. As Peter Asen, former director of the Healthy Communities Office and Director of Partnerships and Development for Mayor Elorza observes:

There was a general recognition that the City could and should look beyond its traditional core functions like picking up trash, fixing roads, running schools, etc. Sustainability and Healthy Communities are part of a trend in Providence of seeing the role of government less narrowly to include broader issues of well-being.\textsuperscript{14}

### 3.4. City planning and policy documents supportive of local food

#### 3.4.1. Providence’s comprehensive plan

As mandated by state law, Providence’s local comprehensive plan and the Zoning Ordinance are formally adopted by the City Council and guide zoning and development decisions and city policies. As such they are key documents for establishing the city’s planning and funding priorities. In 2007, following the active engagement of food system advocates in public planning charrettes, the city published \textit{Providence Tomorrow: The
Interim Comprehensive Plan and, between 2009 and 2010, it published a series of neighbourhood plans to summarise the findings of the Planning Department’s neighbourhood charrettes and to prioritise recommended actions. Both the Interim Comprehensive Plan and most of the neighbourhood plans discussed the importance of providing community gardens and farming opportunities.

Providence Tomorrow: The Final Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2014, built on the foundational work contained in the Interim Comprehensive Plan and the series of neighbourhood plans. Developed in-house, the Final Comprehensive Plan provides even more robust treatment of food system objectives and strategies relating to various components of the food system. Multiple comprehensive plan elements incorporate strategies to promote food production in the city, to include gardens and farms in community revitalisation efforts and to use food businesses to build the city’s economy.

The plan’s Sustainability Element includes strategies to:

E. Establish guidelines and amend regulations as necessary to promote appropriately-scaled, hand-tended agriculture, including community gardens as a temporary or long-term use of surplus or temporarily vacant City property and Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) property, providing neighborhood access to healthy, affordable foodstuffs and promoting stewardship and remediation of land …

H. Establish a goal that every Providence resident live within a ten-minute walk of a community garden.

I. Promote CSA (community-supported agriculture) co-ops and the health benefits of local produce.

J. Investigate innovative solutions to provide accessible and affordable water service for community gardening as needed.

K. Support ‘vertical farming’ whereby existing buildings and other structures can be used for growing.15

The Sustainability Element also calls for ‘maintaining and supporting existing and proposed recycling and composting programmes, supporting the establishment of a sustainable regional or municipal composting facility, and amending regulations as necessary, to support composting programs’.16

The Business and Jobs Element recognises urban agriculture as part of neighbourhood economic development and includes a strategy
of identifying and preserving ‘areas suitable for urban agriculture’. Its strategies for neighbourhood economic development include, ‘Using a variety of public and private funding sources, [to] strengthen financial and technical assistance programs that support small business and neighborhood revitalization, such as Neighborhood Markets’. Other strategies include ‘Support farmers’ markets to supply locally-grown food to residents of the city’ and ‘Support the creation of a citywide marketplace for locally-produced food and crafts’. Recognising further ‘Provision’s role as the economic center of the state’, the Business and Jobs Element presents a strategy to ‘Support local agriculture through farm-to-school and farm-to-government programs that link local farmers to schools and encourage government purchasing of local produce’. The Comprehensive Plan’s People and Public Spaces Element includes five specific strategies relating to community gardening:

A. Work with residents and community groups to identify viable community garden sites.
B. Open at least one community garden per year in a public park.
C. Expand community gardening opportunities on under-utilized park land.
D. Investigate ways to identify and match potential park-owned garden sites with growers.
E. Establish a goal that every Providence resident live within a ten-minute walk of a community garden.

Finally, the comprehensive plan’s Land Use Element calls for identifying ‘city and/or state-owned open spaces best suited for urban agriculture’, ‘amending regulations as necessary to facilitate urban agriculture’ and ‘amending regulations as necessary to promote a system of farmers’ markets throughout the city’.

3.4.2. Zoning Ordinance

The City’s new Zoning Ordinance, adopted in 2014–15, permits plant agriculture by right in 16 of the city’s 20 zoning districts and permits mobile food sales (with a temporary use permit) in 14 districts, and farmers’ markets (with a temporary use permit) in 17 districts. Use standards are provided in all cases. Apiaries, aquaculture/aquaponic facilities,
chicken coops and coldframe structures are permitted as accessory structures in all districts unless specifically prohibited by the ordinance. The definitions section also notes that ‘light industrial uses’ include aquaculture/aquaponic facilities.

3.4.3. Providence’s Consolidated Plan

The City also referenced community gardens in another essential planning document – the Consolidated Plan. In order to receive certain federal funds, the city is required to prepare a Consolidated Plan, in which it sets forth its priorities for housing and community development. Providence’s 2005 and 2010 Consolidated Plans identified community gardens as a community development strategy, and thus facilitated the distribution of federal funding to promote community gardens.

3.4.4. Sustainable Providence Food Plan

The 2014 Sustainable Providence policy document includes ‘The Sustainable Providence Food Plan’. The Food Plan is not a planning document per se and does not have the force of law. However, it deserves mention in this chapter because of its strong expression of the administration’s commitment to a strengthened food system and the metrics it provides to measure progress.

The Food Plan was developed via a series of open meetings with community partners. Ellen Cynar, Director of the Healthy Communities Office, acknowledges the conceptual influence of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council. By 2014, the Food Policy Council was directing attention across the state to all components of the local food system.21 ‘Many of the community partners were involved with the Food Policy Council so our Food Plan readily adopted the four clear buckets of a food system.’22

Providence’s Food Plan sets goals for production, processing, distribution and consumption and incorporates equity and environmental considerations. It states,

Providence is part of a local and regional food system and has a critical role to play in ensuring that this system: A) Provides every Providence resident with access to safe, affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food; B) Cultivates a healthy environment in Providence by striving for zero waste, adopting ecologically sound and sustainable practices, and
ensuring healthy, fair, and just working conditions and wages; C) Contributes to the state and city’s economy by supporting long-term economic development opportunities in the food sector.\(^{23}\)

### 3.4.5. Economic Development Cluster Strategy

One final document should be mentioned. In November 2015, the Department of Economic Development released the City of Providence’s Economic Development Cluster Strategy, which identified the food cluster as one of the areas on which Providence’s economic development efforts should concentrate. Referring to the Food Plan and the Economic Development Cluster Strategy, Planning Deputy Director Robert Azar stated, ‘While these aren’t planning documents like a comprehensive plan, I foresee us incorporating elements of both documents into the next iteration of the comp plan.’\(^{24}\)

The Economic Development Cluster Strategy report notes, \(^{25}\)

There is a concentration and growth in the entire regional food-related supply chain from farms to food processing to food sales and more. The state as a whole and the city in particular has opportunities to realize additional economic benefit from this cluster as national trends towards locally sourced products and global food security trends drive local opportunities.

The report recommends feasibility research for a co-packing facility with refrigerated distribution space and space for food manufacturing, processing and sales businesses; improved services, incentives, programmes and zoning to support food-based businesses; workforce training; and outreach to private equity firms, highlighting food as a unique opportunity.

Since the report’s release, the city has begun to develop specific proposals to implement the report’s recommendations, including strategic direct investments through the Providence Business Loan Fund in Farm Fresh RI for its new food and agriculture campus; transferred property and provided brownfield cleanup support through the Providence Redevelopment Agency for the Urban Greens Food Co-op; supported the creation of the Pilot Works, a new food incubator; and made direct workforce training development and Tax Increment Financing fund investments in Gotham Greens, an organic
greenhouse company. Table 3.2 lists in chronological order the policies described above.

### 3.5. Examples of city–NGO collaboration to achieve food goals

#### 3.5.1. Community gardens in public parks

Under Mayor Cicilline’s administration the Board of Parks Commissioners approved language that permitted community gardens in city-owned parks. This enabled the Parks Department to work with neighbours and NGOs to establish community gardens in city parks. Retired parks superintendent Robert McMahon explains the influence of public input for this decision:

> There was neighborhood push-back when community gardens were first suggested for the Parks Master Plan in the 1990s – worries about rats in the compost and dealing with gardeners’ squabbles. But in 2004, when the first neighborhood requested a community garden and a councilman gave us money, it turned out to be a great way to bring new people to the park. Success breeds success and soon neighbors were asking for community gardens in other parks.26

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**Table 3.2  Planning documents and policies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Planning and policy documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Board of Parks approves community gardens in parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Consolidated Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Providence Tomorrow: Interim Comprehensive Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Greenprint Providence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Consolidated Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Chicken ordinance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Providence Tomorrow: Final Comprehensive Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Sustainable Providence Food Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>City of Providence Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 2014–39 No. 513, effective 24 December 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Economic Development Cluster Strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Katherine Brown and Sheila Brush.
The Parks Department’s model is to provide a community garden in a public park only when the neighbouring community requests the garden. The Parks Department covers capital costs for fencing, garden beds and water lines, and assumes ongoing responsibility for water, repairs and compost. Neighbours must commit to helping with the initial garden build-out and to taking responsibility for ongoing garden management. NGOs support this effort by mobilising neighbours and providing community education, collaborating on grant applications for funding, and partnering with the Parks Department on community events. By 2018, the Parks Department had responded to neighbourhood requests to install 12 community gardens and one fruit orchard.

3.5.2. Lots of Hope

Launched in 2012, Lots of Hope is a collaboration between the Sustainability and Healthy Communities Offices, the Planning Department and food advocates. Whereas community gardens make it possible for city residents to grow food for their own families or to sell, with Lots of Hope the city and partnering NGOs offer people larger plots with the explicit opportunity to grow food to sell. The initiative seeks ‘to institutionalize urban agriculture and position the City as an urban agriculture advocate to help farmers navigate ... bureaucratic challenges associated with acquiring land’.[27] The programme aligns with the city’s goal of creating a community food system where locally produced, healthy and affordable food is accessible to everyone.

Using the Planning Department’s inventory of city-owned vacant lots, the Lots of Hope project team used lot size, orientation to the sun, tree canopy coverage and other factors to identify lots appropriate for urban agriculture. The project has created four urban farms to date, leasing land and greenhouse space to market growers and community gardeners with limited resources. Lots of Hope received a direct budget investment for financial year 2018, signaling the city’s ongoing commitment to the programme.

3.6. Conclusion

Since 2003, Providence has made significant strides not only in integrating food into urban planning and policy but also in implementation. Local food initiatives provide cost-effective, tangible ways for the city to respond to the expressed needs of an engaged and diverse constituency
of residents and NGOs. Throughout Providence, vacant lots and parks have been transformed into 52 community gardens and 18 market farms; residents now have access to fresh food at nine farmers’ markets, groceries, school lunchrooms and restaurants; and 5000 tonnes of food waste have been composted on a regular basis by the Compost Plant, a new enterprise established in 2014. Table 3.3 and Figure 3.2 document this progress.

The speed with which the city has integrated food into urban planning and the direction that food policy has taken in Providence owe to several factors. The city’s community-inclusive planning process first provided the opportunity for well-organised NGOs and community advocates to draw attention to the positive revitalisation, environmental and social impacts that community gardens and market farms had already started to have on urban neighbourhoods. Once the initial commitment to addressing food issues was established, successive mayoral administrations and councils continued the city’s food initiative momentum. Municipal consistency of vision can be seen in planning and policy documents, most notably the current local comprehensive plan – Providence Tomorrow – and the city’s Zoning Ordinance. The comprehensive plan and the Zoning Ordinance established the foundation that the city needed to launch its work.

Finally, in order to understand fully the approach that Providence is using to address food issues, it is important to note that several city offices and departments besides the Planning Department play important roles. The Sustainability and Healthy Communities Offices were created to enable the city to better address complex systemic issues and to encourage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3  Local food metrics</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community beds</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market farms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonnes of food waste diverted from landfill for compost</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers’ markets</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Providence school district food purchases that are locally sourced</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Katherine Brown and Sheila Brush.
the private sector to contribute expertise and resources to city initiatives. Their work relating to food includes policy documents that, though not planning documents per se, are important because they expand public–private collaboration, provide policy guidance and recommend specific implementation strategies and progress indicators. The Department of Economic Development’s focus on the food sector highlights opportunities to significantly expand food-based businesses in the city. Thus, coordinated effort by the Planning Department and other offices enables the city to work comprehensively to strengthen Providence’s food system components – from production to processing to distribution to access to food waste reuse – and to address food system issues at a systemic level.

Additional planning work will be essential to advance new strategies and recommendations. The commitment of elected officials, the planning work of the past 15 years and effective collaborative processes

**Figure 3.2** Community gardens and farmers’ markets in Providence, 2003 and 2016. *(Source: Providence Planning and Development GIS Lab)*
between city staff and private sector interests have created a strong foundation for future urban planning initiatives.

3.7. Neighbourhood case study: the West End and the Sankofa Initiative

The West End neighbourhood vividly encapsulates many of the city’s recent changes relating to food as a force for community and economic development.

The West End is Providence’s largest and most densely populated neighbourhood, with 22,343 people per square mile. Seventy-five per cent of West End residents are Hispanic, Black or Asian. Twenty-five per cent are foreign born.

The West End’s historic housing stock ranges from Victorian mansions to triple-decker working-class homes. After decades of decline, recent community redevelopment efforts have returned much of the neighbourhood’s housing to relatively good condition. Small shopfront businesses line the neighbourhood’s commercial streets, but the West End is by no means economically flourishing. The median household income is US$33,878, with an unemployment rate of 9.7 per cent; 41.4 per cent of West End residents have vehicle access and 33 per cent receive federal food assistance (SNAP).

By the 1980s, most of the neighbourhood’s manufacturing companies had closed, leaving many acres of abandoned and polluted land where factories once stood. The Planning Department’s re-zoning of this land to mixed use in the late 1990s enabled the West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation (WEHDC) and others to begin the steady process of revisioning this neglected part of the West End for new housing and other purposes.

Since the early 2000s, the WEHDC and others have recognised food as a driver of neighbourhood betterment. Southside Community Land Trust had already created five community gardens in the West End in the 1990s. After 2003, food production increased with the addition of nine new community gardens established by SCLT, WEHDC and other NGOs. New market farms (one of them part of the city’s Lots of Hope programme) now sell produce to local restaurants. In 2013, Cluck!, a farm and garden supply business, opened in the West End to serve Providence’s urban food growers.

The neighbourhood includes 41 corner markets, a pavement tropical fruit stand business and Farm Fresh RI’s Armory Parade Street Farmers Market. Nonetheless, food access remains a problem for residents –
particularly access to fresh and culturally desirable produce. Furthermore, food insecurity continues to plague the West End. Many families report they are not able to afford a balanced diet. The West End’s nine food pantries, three congregate meal sites and homeless shelter routinely operate at full capacity.

In 2011, the WEHDC launched its Sankofa Initiative to ‘foster the cultivation of land, lives and community’.

In 2014, the WEHDC established the Sankofa World Market as an outdoor venue for neighbourhood residents to sell and buy locally produced food along with value-added food products and artisan wares. In 2015, WEHDC documented the neighbourhood’s food access and security challenges in a comprehensive Sankofa Food Assessment with the Rhode Island Department of Health. In 2016, the Sankofa Initiative augmented its existing gardens with the cultivation of an additional 1500 m$^2$ of land for community gardens and market farms next to WEHDC’s 50-unit, US$15 million low-income Sankofa Apartments. The project will include a community kitchen, a greenhouse and other season extension infrastructure (to expand the growing season for urban farmers) as well as composting and food storage facilities. The Sankofa Initiative will ‘create new opportunities for West End residents to grow, market and sell local and culturally appropriate foods, value-added food products and other artisan wares and to create increased opportunities for meaningful connections among residents’.

Notes

3. APA, ‘APA Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning’.
5. Started in 1996, the United States Department of Agriculture’s Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP) funds community-based multi-sector collaborations to fight food insecurity by strengthening the self-sufficiency of low-income communities to meet their food needs. Community Food Projects take a whole food system perspective to develop long-term, system-wide solutions. https://nifa.usda.gov/program/community-food-projects-competitive-grant-program-cfpcgp


13. Nicole Pollock (Chief of Staff to Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza), interviewed by Katherine Brown and Sheila Brush, Providence, 8 January 2016.

14. Peter Asen (former director of the Providence Healthy Communities Office and Director of Partnerships and Development for Mayor Jorge Elorza), interviewed by Katherine Brown and Sheila Brush, 8 January 2016.


16. City of Providence, Providence Tomorrow, 34.

17. City of Providence, Providence Tomorrow, 54.

18. City of Providence, Providence Tomorrow, 55.

19. City of Providence, Providence Tomorrow, 93.

20. City of Providence, Providence Tomorrow, 126, 129.

21. Founded in 2011, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council is a non-governmental, statewide collaboration of stakeholders from all food system sectors. It creates partnerships, develops policies and advocates for improvements to expand the food system’s capacity and ensure that it is accessible, equitable and sustainable. http://rifoodcouncil.org

22. Ellen Cynar (Director, Healthy Communities Office, City of Providence), interviewed by Katherine Brown by phone, 10 January 2016.


24. Robert Azar (Deputy Director of Planning and Development, City of Providence), email correspondence, 27 April 2016.


27. Healthy Communities Office City of Providence, Lots of Hope. An Urban Agriculture Assessment with the City of Providence (Providence: City of Providence, 2014), 6, https://www.providenceri.com/efile/5537


33. Sankofa Initiative, Sankofa West End Community Food Security Assessment, 5.

34. Sankofa Initiative, Sankofa West End Community Food Security Assessment, 7.