

CASE STUDY:

Washtenaw County and City of Ann Arbor, Michigan



WASHTENAW COUNTY AND ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN AT A GLANCE

Population: 354,240 (Washtenaw County); 117,025 (Ann Arbor)^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 705.97 (Washtenaw County); 27.83 (Ann Arbor)^b

Median Income: \$59,055 (Washtenaw County); \$55,003 (Ann Arbor)^c

Population in Poverty: 15.4 percent (Washtenaw County); 22.1 percent (Ann Arbor)^d

Additional Resources: [Ann Arbor Greenbelt Program Reports & Plans](#); [Ann Arbor Sustainability Framework](#); [Washtenaw County Public Health – Healthy Eating](#); [Washtenaw County Office of Community & Economic Development Reports](#); [Washtenaw County Food Policy Council Agenda](#)

a U.S. Census Bureau, 2013.

b U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

Located 30 miles outside of Detroit in southeast Michigan, Washtenaw County’s approximately 700 square land miles span urban, suburban, and rural communities. Its 28 municipalities range from small villages and townships to its county seat of Ann Arbor, which is home to the University of Michigan and accounts for about a third of the county’s population. The county’s residents are approximately 72 percent Caucasian, 12 percent African American, 8 percent Asian, and 4 percent Hispanic.

Though Michigan was hit hard by the Great Recession, Washtenaw County’s economic profile includes several positive indicators. Per capita and household income statistics exceed those for Michigan and the US, and the county’s unemployment rate is the second-lowest in the state. Manufacturing employment, which reached a high in 2001, fell by more than 57 percent by 2011, but demand persists for jobs in health care, information technology, and renewable energy sectors.¹ A culture of entrepreneurship has also emerged, supported by such entities as Ann Arbor SPARK, a nonprofit regional economic development organization encouraging business acceleration, attraction and retention.

But within the county, significant disparity exists between municipalities, some of which report income and employment data lagging behind both the county and state averages. The far eastern part of the county, which includes the city and township of Ypsilanti, also includes the county’s most extreme patches of low-income and low-food access and perhaps as a result, significantly higher rates of food assistance enrollment and the most concentrated activity around emergency food distribution.²

Despite tough economic challenges, Michigan has gained attention for its activities around local and regional food systems development, and Washtenaw County is home to many organizations providing leadership in this field like Growing Hope in Ypsilanti, the Fair Food Network and the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, and the southeastern Michigan-focused Food System Economic Partnership. As local governments have begun to formally adopt priorities related to food systems, partnerships like these, along with an engaged resident base, have been instrumental in their development and implementation.

Food Systems in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County: Then and Now

Historic public market

Some food systems activities within the county have deep historic roots.



Ann Arbor Farmers Market, open year-round.

Source: Courtesy of Ann Arbor Farmers Market

The Ann Arbor Farmers Market, which has been in operation since 1919, is among the oldest markets in the country and is currently managed through the city’s parks and recreation services unit. The market effectively functions and is treated much like a city park, providing a lively, visible gathering place for residents of Ann Arbor and surrounding communities.

The traditional Saturday market operates year-round, at peak season featuring 70 to 80 produce, meat, fish, and dairy producers; approximately 20 vendors offering baked or other prepared foods, including coffee and honey; and another 25 to 30 artisans. Approximately 30 total vendors remain through the winter season. The daytime market is also open Wednesdays during the months of May through December. Most recently a seasonal Wednesday evening market has been added. This new venture has attracted a number of new farm and food entrepreneurs, with approximately half in operation for less than a year and a high rate of women-owned businesses.

Taking advantage of the IT infrastructure within the office located onsite, the market has been accepting food assistance benefits through an EBT terminal for close to a decade and has more recently expanded electronic transactions to include tokens for purchase by credit card. The city currently employs a full-time market manager and additional part-time staff who oversee market operations. The market manager collaborates with an appointed Public Market Advisory Commission that provides the perspectives of vendors, customers, and neighborhood residents on decisions regarding market operations and improvements.

Preservation for local agriculture

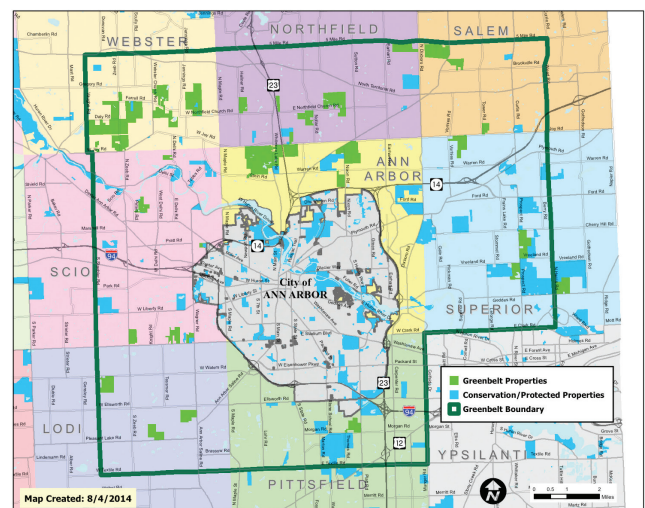
Along with the long-standing market for local and regional producers, it follows that agriculture is a part of the county’s history; however, agricultural land use has decreased by more than 60 percent since 1940, with 170,154 acres currently in production as of the most recent Agricul-

tural Census in 2012 (down from 458,240 in 1940).³ Within the county, more than a dozen public and private preservation programs, many of which collectively make up the “Preserve Washtenaw” consortium, have emerged in response to development pressures on farmland and other types of open space and natural habitats.

Since the founding of the state’s first land trust—the Washtenaw Land Conservancy (now known as the Legacy Land Conservancy)—in 1971, private conservation efforts have successfully protected land and raised public awareness of development consequences and alternatives. Early attempts to initiate complementary, publicly-funded programs in the county were met with political challenges, but advocates honed in on specific municipalities where they identified champions within local government and anticipated stronger community support. Ann Arbor, for example, was willing to consider extending and expanding a parks acquisition millage to include land preservation if voters agreed.

Voters did, thus the Greenbelt program was established in 2003 by city of Ann Arbor millage and is administered through a partnership with a national nonprofit called The Conservation Fund. Funds generated by the 30-year, 0.5 mill tax levy are used toward the purchase or protection from development of land within the 13-square mile Greenbelt boundary that extends through eight surrounding townships. Three of these townships—Ann Arbor, Scio, and Webster—have passed and in some cases renewed their own millages in similar support of land preservation.

In 2009, three years after the adoption of its first strategic plan for the Greenbelt, the city’s Greenbelt Advisory Commission amended its strategic priorities to specifically acknowledge an interest in supporting farmland for local food production, in recognition of such associated economic opportunities as direct to consumer sales. To date, more than 4,300 acres have been protected through the Greenbelt Program, and at least eight protected farms are currently



Ann Arbor Greenbelt map.

Source: www.a2gov.org



A community health advocate provides a fresh food box to a program participant.

Source: Washtenaw County Public Health Department

producing specialty crops for local markets.

Public health programming and cross-disciplinary planning efforts

Within the past decade, food systems topics have been incorporated into efforts of several county and city departments, with public health emerging as a key champion and partner. Between 2005 and 2012, Washtenaw County Public Health received funding from the Michigan Department of Community Health’s Building Healthy Communities initiative aimed at chronic disease prevention.

As a part of this project, the department piloted a program called Prescription for Health, through which select local medical clinics and food pantries serving low-income community residents distributed tokens that could be used to purchase fresh produce at participating farmers markets. With renewed funding from the Kresge Foundation, the program has expanded to include additional county clinics and markets.

Through the Building Healthy Communities initiative, department staff worked with a diverse network of partners, including some nontraditional to the public health field, enacting policy and environmental changes to improve healthy food access and physical activity of county residents. Sharon Sheldon, program administrator, believes the initiative laid a foundation for communicating across disciplines.

The Office of Community Economic Development (OCED), for example, bought into the connections between food systems, community health, and economic outcomes and emerged as an ally. Recognizing food access as a part of community resiliency in its successful application for a 2011 HUD Sustainable Communities Challenge Grant, OCED identified “support for local food businesses and urban agriculture” as one of six major priority areas. Implementation strategies being pursued include workforce development

programs to link underemployed individuals with agribusiness and food system jobs, as well as development of a commercial kitchen incubator.

Meanwhile, Ann Arbor recently completed a two-year process to develop and adopt a sustainability framework as a core component of its master plan. As part of this process, city staff and advisory commission representatives reviewed more than 20 of the city’s plans, studies, and resolutions for their connections to elements of sustainability (i.e., environment, equity, and economy). In the resulting framework, which synthesized 200 existing recommendations into a more manageable set of overarching goals, local food emerged as one of just 16 priority areas.⁴

The Washtenaw Food Policy Council: Advancing a Comprehensive Food Policy Agenda

In 2012, following a series of discussions at county board working sessions and, prior to that, among public health staff and community-based food system organizations and advocates, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution creating the Washtenaw Food Policy Council as an official advisory body. Upon its creation, the board also seated its initial 15-member roster according to draft bylaws, appointing representatives from various food system professions and viewpoints, including an at-large community member and a member of the county board.

Working over the next two years as one united group and through several focused policy action teams, along with operating assistance from a local community foundation and in-kind support from the health department, the council conducted outreach toward development of a comprehensive policy agenda. This 23-item platform, inspired in part by the goals of the [Michigan Good Food Charter](http://www.michiganfood.org/) (<http://www.michiganfood.org/>), recommends various types of actions by county, state, federal, institutional, municipal, and school board stakeholders in support of its mission to increase and preserve access to safe, local, and healthy food for county residents.⁵

Approved by the council in July 2014, it was then approved by the county board the following November. Later that month, the board also passed two resolutions directly in support of the policy agenda, amending the county procurement policy in favor of more environmentally-friendly foodservice ware and packaging, and giving preference to locally-produced food, other goods, and services. The OCED and the Office of Water Resources’ Solid Waste Division assisted in the development of these amendments.

The council has both the ability and the charge, according to County Commissioner and Food Policy Council member Yousef Rabhi to look at the county as a community and take a broad view of issues. He acknowledged the inequities related to food access and health across the county, particularly in the eastern part, and noted that those underrepre-

sented or underserved should be advocated for strongly.

In general, the establishment of the council and its ongoing work should elevate the collective understanding of how food systems intersect with so many facets of local government. According to Rabhi, given the council's ability to achieve success in a more limited amount of time, its organization may also serve as a model for consolidating other interest groups that advise the board.

Opportunities for Local Government Management

Funding for food system development

As local governments in Michigan and elsewhere contend with decreased state revenues, depressed property values, and increasing legacy costs, financial support for what may be perceived as discretionary activities around food systems may be challenging to justify. In both the city of Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County, the local governments have maintained commitments, even in recent years.

Until July 1, 2014, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market annual operating budget historically operated as an enterprise fund, separate from the general fund. As a result, however, of changing Governmental Accounting Standards Board principles regarding recording liabilities for unfunded pension amounts, combined with market-operating expenses outpacing revenue as a result of increased programs and administrative support, the Ann Arbor City Council approved the city administrator's budget, moving the market operating budget to the general fund. In 2014, city staff worked with the Public Market Advisory Commission to implement an increase in vendor fees to rebalance the market's finances and become more in line with vendor fees at other markets.

Washtenaw County has taken advantage of century-old statewide legislation, Public Act 88, which enables the county board to levy millages in support of agricultural or industrial economic development—among a shortlist of eligible activities—without requiring full voter approval. Since 2009, the county has annually approved an economic development millage, most recently at the rate of 0.7 mills for a total exceeding \$1 million. These funds offset activities that would have been borne out of the general fund.

Putting investments in perspective

It is an important step for government departments and for elected officials to realize the connections between food systems and their functions and priorities. It is another to effectively communicate this connection to their constituents. Examples of positive communications can be found in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw:

- More than 10 years since its inception, with a significant bulk of acquisitions completed, the Ann Arbor Greenbelt has intensified its efforts to raise community awareness of its impacts. This includes development of signage and

other marketing materials and annual community tours of protected properties.

- The Washtenaw OCED, which administers the Act 88 millage revenues, has commissioned research on the economic benefits of a local food economy to continue making the case for investment to policymakers and to the private sector. Specifically, one report looked at economic impacts of a 25 percent shift toward the purchase and consumption of local food and food services. Another looked at the potential for expanding agricultural production, processing, and distribution in Washtenaw and the surrounding counties.

In both of these examples, where millages were involved, it was particularly helpful to talk in terms of actual dollars, at least in this community context. Sarah DeWitt, Ann Arbor Farmers Market manager, noted that it's significant to be in a community that generally values local food. Ginny Trocchio, project director for the Greenbelt added that the average Ann Arbor homeowner is paying about \$100 per year in support of its land preservation activities. For many, though certainly not all, that seems reasonable.

Look for low-cost, no-cost and win-win opportunities

Farmers markets in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County are involved in several creative strategies and partnerships to promote accessibility by consumers who in turn support their vendors.

- **Support food assistance beneficiaries.** For several years, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market and others in the county have partnered with the locally-headquartered Fair Food Network to offer the Double Up Food Bucks program, a nationally-recognized incentive program that expands the value of food assistance benefits for shoppers purchasing Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables.

Similarly, the Prescription for Health program in Washtenaw County works to improve the eating habits of residents at risk for chronic disease, and participants consistently report consuming, on average, an additional cup of fruits and vegetables each day. And again, the prescriptions are redeemed at local farmers markets, which themselves are economic opportunities for local and regional producers. The four Ypsilanti and Chelsea markets participating in the 2014 season reported that a total of \$65,000 in food access benefits, including SNAP dollars and various incentive programs, were used toward purchases from their vendors, which include approximately 60 small businesses.

Also using dollars from an internal city grant program, the Ann Arbor Farmers Market purchased an iPad for use in offering point of sale translation services through an online application. The majority of translations are done in Chinese or Russian, and these customers are using food assistance benefits to make their purchases. The ability to provide communication support, particularly in the use of food assistance benefits



Prescription for Health staff at the Depot Town Farmers Market in Ypsilanti.

Source: Washtenaw County Public Health Department

and incentives, reduces barriers for those who might otherwise be deterred from accessing the market.

- **Foster other strategic partnerships.** While much of the programming offered by the Ann Arbor Farmers Market is initiated and implemented by the market staff and its volunteers, the market also leverages its status as a community-gathering place and attracts partners whose activities generate additional traffic and support. Examples include the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, Washtenaw County Public Health Department, and 826 Michigan, a youth enrichment organization. The Downtown Development Authority also provided funding for installation of a solar energy demonstration project on the market roof.

Lessons Learned

- **Partnerships with key community groups and representatives with extensive food systems expertise have**

expanded capacity and accelerated change. Local governments are well-advised to identify assets in their own communities and explore how their financial or political support can build on existing efforts.

- **Clarity of roles and purpose has been helpful.** While those involved with farmers markets, land preservation efforts, and other food systems planning, policy, or programming initiatives often share mutual interests and can collaborate effectively, clarity of roles and purpose has both maintained appropriate boundaries and enabled success of respective activities.
- **Tracking impacts is important.** Food systems planning, policy, and programming in the city and county have provided opportunities to support food access, health, and economic security of vulnerable community residents. It will be important to continue tracking the impacts of these strategies and to refine and expand them based on findings.
- **Communicating the outcomes and benefits of governmental support for food systems activities,** including alignment with established priorities around economic development, environmental sustainability, and social equity will help to further community awareness and buy-in.

Endnotes

- 1 *Washtenaw County Economic Vitality Report.* Washtenaw County Office of Economic Development: January 2014. <http://bit.ly/1zo8f8e>
- 2 *Washtenaw County Food System Maps.* Washtenaw County Food Policy Council: October 2014. <http://bit.ly/1AT7f0j>
- 3 *County Profile: Washtenaw County, Michigan.* National Agriculture Statistics Service, United States Department of Agriculture: 2012. <http://1.usa.gov/1CJ5Qsq>
- 4 *Ann Arbor Sustainability Framework.* City of Ann Arbor: February 2013. <http://bit.ly/1FtTOXq>
- 5 *Washtenaw County Food Policy Agenda.* Washtenaw County Food Policy Council: July 2014. <http://bit.ly/1zo8ss7>

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March 2015

Acknowledgments

This case study appears in:

Goddeeris, L., Rybnicek, A. and Takai, K. 2015. Growing Local Food Systems: A case study series on the role of local governments. International City/County Management Association.

The authors wish to thank Rick Morse, Associate Professor of Public Administration and Government at the University of North Carolina School of Government at Chapel Hill, and Andrea Fox, Director of the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities, for their review and comments, as well as ICMA's Beth Payne for her editing support and Kirie Samuels for design and layout.

Funding for this project was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Food & Community program.



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