

Michigan Local Food Council Network  
ORGANIZING FOR MICHIGAN GOOD FOOD

# Kent County Food Policy Council:

GREAT GROCER PROJECT



**MICHIGAN STATE**  
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Regional Food Systems

## Introduction

The [Michigan Local Food Council Network](#) (MLFCN) is coordinated by Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and brings together food councils to build their individual and collective capacities to work on food and food policy issues, operate effectively, and engage their communities through peer-to-peer learning.

The main roles of the MLFCN are to:

- foster a space for local councils to network with one another;
- connect local councils to statewide and national policy information, issues, and actions;
- assist local food councils with capacity building, including hands-on training; and
- connect local policy information, issues, and actions to other parts of the state.

In 2022, the MLFCN launched a series of workshops, the Advocacy Campaigning series, as a lead-in to a more intensive learning experience, the Policy Advocacy Learning Cohort (PALC). The PALC was designed for local food councils (LFCs) who had identified an organizing issue to advocate for in their communities, were in the beginning stages of building a base to support an issue to be further refined by community participation, and/or were ready for action planning.

The PALC centered grassroots organizing as a strategy for LFCs to advance equitable food policy. Based on the [Life Cycle of an Organizing Campaign](#), participating councils focused on base building and issue selection phases of campaign development. The *Life Cycle of an Organizing Campaign*, published by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, is a tool for organizers and leaders to see the steps in pulling together a successful campaign. The PALC also provided an opportunity for the participating councils to apply for funding for their community engagement.

## About the Kent County Food Policy Council



Supporting Grand Rapids and the surrounding area, [Kent County Food Policy Council \(Kent County FPC\)](#) participated in the PALC. Formed in 2021, the Kent County FPC brings together residents, organizations, agencies, and businesses. Its members envision a thriving economy, equity and sustainability for Kent County residents through a food system rooted in local communities and centered on good food. According to the [Michigan Good Food Charter](#), good food is defined as food that is accessible, equitable, fair, healthy, diverse, and sustainable.

## Expanding Great Grocer Project from Grand Rapids to Kent County

At the outset of the PALC, the Kent County FPC considered the different needs in the communities of their constituency. After some exploration, they decided to utilize funding support to expand on member Bree Bode's efforts with the [Great Grocer Project \(GGP\)](#). Originating in Detroit, the GGP supports the development of healthy retail environments through interviews with grocery store management, employees, and customers about challenges and successes in the store. Some data had already been collected in the city of Grand Rapids, and there was a desire to gather data from stores throughout the county. Multiple kinds of data were collected for the project, including a Nutrition Environment Measure Survey in stores and surveys with customers and store staff.

To expand their understanding of community needs, the GGP hired seven fellows to collect data in Kent County grocery stores outside of Grand Rapids. These community fellows participated in surveying customers and employees in the stores. As part of the project, they were trained to enter local grocery stores and communicate that they understand that local businesses are part of a thriving community and that they want to hear what challenges employees and customers have to help make improvements.

### PROJECT HIGHLIGHT

The GGP hired seven fellows to collect data at Kent county grocery stores.

The PALC catalyzed conversations that informed the decision to expand on the GGP efforts throughout Kent County. Kent County has a unique geography made up of a city center (Grand Rapids), suburbs that are peri-urban as well as peri-rural, and rural spaces. The PALC funding provided an opportunity to expand data collection to the rest of Kent County, to broaden the understanding of the healthy food retail landscape.

Before the creation of the Kent County FPC, community members, researchers, health department staff, and non-profit leaders who were

engaged in Kent County's food systems work via coalitions informed the lens through which the Kent County FPC would operate. For example, coalitions centered on food and nutrition, improving racial and ethnic approaches to food systems, and corner store food access projects. These coalitions established a food systems social network which included relationships between grocery store owners and current Kent County FPC members. While Kent County FPC itself was newly formed in an official capacity when the PALC began, the council members felt positioned to expand the GGP efforts throughout Kent County given their long standing social networks.

Alongside the GGP, Kent County FPC completed a [food systems assessment](#) and will be using it to create a food systems plan for Kent County. The data collected from the GGP and the policy briefs created from that data contribute to a holistic view of the county food landscape. This assessment aims to help better understand the potential opportunities and current barriers that exist within the regional food system and lay the foundation for policy recommendations in the upcoming Kent County Food System Plan (2024). The food systems assessment outlines specific assets, gaps, and barriers to thriving food systems and enables Kent County FPC to make specific asks to community members (e.g., people who live in a specific zip code,

county or city council representatives, business owners, etc.) to engage with projects related to waste recovery, growing and harvesting, processing and distribution, and/or food access. As Kent County FPC lays the groundwork for a thriving food council and food system, the council members involved with both projects seek to deepen their community engagement.

## Successes

- Honing in on the GGP created an opportunity for fellows to gain new skills, connections, information, and perspective about their local food system. This illuminated new ways for them to be involved in shaping the Kent County food system. All fellows walked away with new research skills and real time insights on the ways their community stores are Great Grocers as defined originally by Detroit Food Policy Council [here](#).
- Fellows expanded the data available from Grand Rapids, to more stores across Kent County. This contributed to shaping a countywide policy brief that will make suggestions for further advocacy efforts.
- During this phase of the project, project leadership collaborated with a local artist who interpreted the policy brief into art using a digital drawing. The artist's depiction makes the impact of the project more accessible to the broader community. To spread the word about the GGP work, the artwork will be embedded on traditional policy briefs, as well as shared on postcards that can be used in a target policy campaign.
- In order to do the project well, rather than just to complete it as planned, the council and community members working on the project demonstrated flexibility by continuously adjusting their timeline as the project unfolded.
- The council members who engaged with the PALC applied their learning to council development by sharing back resources and learnings. In particular, PALC participants shared a tool they were introduced to with the rest of the council, [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#). This tool is designed to support organizations to assess how much they are merely informing a community of their work versus how much they are actively collaborating with and deferring to community voice and power. This knowledge sharing is crucial to building up the institutional knowledge and memory of the local council.

## Challenges

Although the PALC experience offered benefits to participating councils, there were also challenges. Throughout the cohort, many tools were shared, turning attention to the breadth of resources available for community organizing and engagement, rather than their depth. This made it difficult for participating councils, like Kent County FPC, to apply all of the concepts successfully and consistently.

“I can sit here now and say there were a lot of really good things that we were introduced to. Some feedback on doing this again: It’s important to create more roots and space and time for one of those tools to be done with a lot of depth and commit to a year of learning that can feel really slow,” said Bree Bode, a member of Kent County FPC. “In evaluation, there is a concept of thinking fast and slow. So much unlearning has to take place after being exposed to different ways of thinking when translating new, even familiar material to be practically applied. It’s not just about doing it and saying we did it, but being able to create some sort of quality effort through the learnings.”

This created a challenge in how the PALC participants were able to share back information with the council. Because the cohort covered such a wide range of topics, there wasn’t an integrated path to report back information with the council.



How do you create buy-in among people? And then once you’ve created it, how do you translate that into something that is going to be practically implemented?”

**BREE BODE, KENT COUNTY FPC MEMBER**

Another prominent challenge was the lack of capacity from the council, project staff, and volunteers. Originally, the project sought student volunteers for data collection, but after retention issues, the team reoriented their efforts to seek community members to volunteer as fellows. “Ending up with community fellows in some ways is like we have people who are not doing this because they’re in a class for a semester, for a grade, but because they really are invested in the community, in the project. That stuff is exciting to me, that we ended up there even though it was a bit of a difficult path to get there,” said Emily Madsen, a member of Kent County FPC.

This also raised questions like, “How do you create buy-in among people? And then once you’ve created it, how do you translate that into something that is going to be practically implemented?” said Bode.

## Lessons Learned

One of the biggest lessons emphasized by the GGP is that in community organizing, it takes people power to build people power. This can be a challenge for organizations with limited staff capacity, especially if they rely heavily on volunteer labor to increase their capacity. Finding ways to invest in recruitment, onboarding, and leadership development of community members committed to the long-term work of organizing is necessary for the base building phase of a policy campaign.

### TAKE AWAY

It takes people power to build people power.

There was also a big learning curve for the PALC. Participants would have benefited from a narrower training scope and more one-on-one support, like coaching, to implement each tool. [Coaching](#), unlike training, focuses on supporting people to observe and normalize worries and doubts that prevent action in the face of uncertainty, and shift the focus of their attention onto their vision and values so they can take consistent action with more ease. It is a great way to meet people where they are, hone in on their specific vision, and support them to move beyond their challenges and stay in action consistently.

## Next Steps

Data collection from 26 grocery stores and 11 interviews with store owners in Kent County were completed. Focus groups with community members that live in the same area as the stores that data is being collected for are underway and to be completed in October 2023. With this information, the GGP will be able to complete a policy brief including countywide policy requests to support improvements to grocery retail environments that promote community health. Concurrently, Kent County FPC was working on its Food Systems Plan, which was completed in September 2023. Together, the GGP and the Food Systems Plan will offer opportunities for community members to tailor the future efforts of the GGP to influence local food systems work.

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