



DRAFT JULY 2026

Welcome to the Dane County Food System Action Plan!

The **Dane County Food System Action Plan** is a community-centered initiative to create a blueprint for a stronger Dane County food system. This project used a collaborative, inclusive community engagement process to integrate the voices of stakeholders from across the food system: local producers, food retailers, institutional buyers, community-based organizations, and everyday eaters. The goal is to provide a shared vision for policy change, resource allocation, and infrastructure investments as well as strengthening the relationships, networks, and leadership needed to support a healthy and thriving Dane County food system for many years to come.

There are many potential users for this plan who can help implement the recommendations within:

- **Elected officials** who can help change policy and invest resources
- **Local government staff for Dane County and its municipalities** that can implement programs and planning activities across government departments
- **Non-governmental community organizations and collectives** that organize our community efforts
- **Educational entities** from K-12 to higher education that can play a role in research and education about food systems and skills
- **Food businesses** that make up the fabric of our local economy
- **Consumers of food**—that is, *all of us*—have experiences with the food system as eaters. Our preferences and needs create the demand that shapes what is produced and sold.

What is a food system?

A **food system** includes all of the people, institutions, places, and activities that play a part in feeding us all. No single entity is responsible for the food we eat at every stage. Understanding how different foods move from where they are grown or produced to our plate and beyond, also known as **supply chains**, illustrates that feeding a community involves much more than just farmers and grocery stores.

Food systems – The individuals, businesses, processes, and infrastructure involved in feeding people.

Supply chains – The network of people, activities, and infrastructure needed to produce and distribute a product.

The UW–Madison **Community & Regional Food Systems**

Project developed a framework to visualize how food systems function (Figure 1).¹ The stages of the supply chain (right inner circle), the “enabling environment” that surrounds it (right outer circle), and the values driving it (left circle) combine to define what the food system looks like in a specific location. While supply chain sectors from production to distribution, consumption, and so on tend to be represented in most food systems, the policy, environmental, and cultural conditions of the enabling environment and the values that a community applies to food may vary from place to place.

¹ University of Wisconsin–Madison: Evaluating Innovation & Promoting Success in Community & Regional Food Systems Project. USDA NIFA AFRI Award 2011-68004-30044

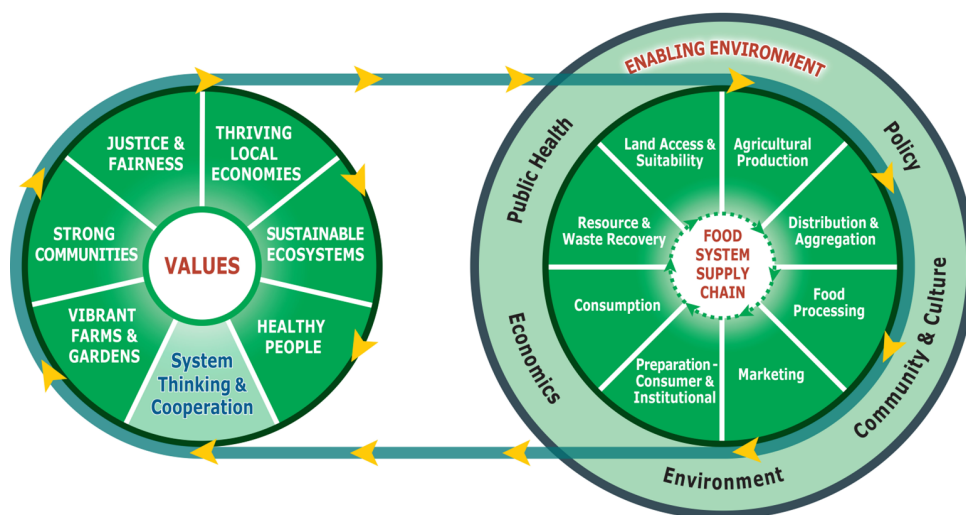


Figure 1: Food System Framework - UW-Madison Community & Regional Food Systems Project

For example, food production is influenced by policies that dictate land access, impacts of climate change, and the local market price of specific products. Meanwhile, community values for low chemical inputs, fair wages to workers, and sufficient access to retailers that sell local products can also influence producers' decisions of what to grow and sell. Food systems exist on multiple levels of society and do not simply stop at county or state boundaries. Depending on the scope, a food system may center on a very small or very large geographic area, and one food system may exist within another. For the purposes of this Plan:

- **Local food systems** refer to food grown, raised, or produced in Wisconsin and sold directly to consumers in Dane County with minimal intermediaries. This can be through farmers' markets, CSAs, farm stands, or direct sales to locally owned restaurants and retailers. Dane County's local food system is comparatively well organized, and serves as a model for local food systems across the country.
- **Regional food systems** refer to food grown within Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest and distributed through small and mid-scale wholesale channels to grocery stores, institutions, restaurants, and food businesses that need consistent volume. Unlike the local food system, Dane County's regional wholesale market is less organized. The wholesale relationships that would connect mid-sized farms to grocery stores, hospitals, schools, and restaurants lack the aggregation, distribution, and coordination needed to function efficiently; this is the **missing middle infrastructure** referenced throughout this plan.
- **National and international food systems** are the large-scale supply chains through which most Dane County residents currently access the majority of their food, moving products from across the country and world into local grocery stores and restaurants regardless of where they were produced.

Foods from other regions or countries that are imported into Wisconsin represent these national and international systems. Some of these markets may relate to the sale of **commodity foods**.

Missing middle infrastructure – A lack of mid-scale infrastructure for connecting regional growers and consumers. This could include storage, distribution, or retail space.

Commodity foods – Crops grown for national and global feed, fuel, and processing markets rather than for direct human consumption in the region where they're grown. In Dane County the primary commodity crops are corn and soybeans.

While the focus of this Action Plan is on the local and regional food systems that connect in and around Southern Wisconsin, Dane County is not independent from larger systems and shouldn't aim to be. Control over national and international systems is largely beyond the scope of individuals in Dane County, but increasing the strength of our regional food system will naturally reduce the reliance on those larger systems.

Still, Dane County is deeply interconnected with neighboring counties, states, and beyond through consumer preferences, availability of products, and economic relationships. A significant volume of food sold in Dane County arrives weekly by truck from Milwaukee, Chicago, and other distribution hubs within the region. Products grown in our area may be exported to other places just as foods that aren't typically produced in Southern Wisconsin may be imported. These layered food systems are the reality of a globalized food environment, and the systemic challenges we are facing here cannot be fully removed from the larger structures that the Dane County food system resides within.

Project Background

Dane County has a long history of valuing its connection to food. This has generated a highly engaged citizenry with significant support from policymakers and elected officials who understand that a healthy, productive, and vibrant food system makes our community strong and drives our economy. As Dane County continues to be one of the centers of growth both demographically and economically for the state of Wisconsin, it has become clear that a visionary approach is needed to understand the gaps and future needs of our food system.

Food system coordination is provided in multiple segments of the community. The state government, centered in Madison, provides structures for a variety of health and agricultural efforts. The University of Wisconsin generates research and deeper understanding through Extension services and faculty in multiple departments. Local food councils oversee government functions. A variety of nonprofit organizations work to address food access, business development, growing space challenges, and agricultural production. And community-led groups have emerged to provide spaces for individuals, business owners, and food service or agricultural workers to make their voices heard, leading to the need for a food system plan to align the work.

This plan builds upon efforts that have come before it, including:

- [The 2011 Southern Wisconsin Food Hub Feasibility Study](#): Dane County commissioned this study to understand how investing in food system infrastructure could improve access to local food.²
- [The 2013 Healthy Food for All Children Community Plan](#): United Way Dane County convened the development of this plan to address child hunger from a food system lens.³
- [The 2018 Madison Terminal Market Report](#): commissioned by the City of Madison to determine what infrastructure is needed to help the regional food system reach its potential.⁴
- [The 2023 Pandemic Food System Study](#): designed to examine the role of Dane County investments in food security following the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵
- **The 2025 Healthy Food For All Food Crisis Action Plan**: developed by Healthy Food For All, FEED Kitchens, and the Northside Planning Council to outline ways to improve food access during future crises.⁶

²Southern Wisconsin Food Hub Feasibility Study (2011). Dane County Planning and Development Department.

³Healthy Food For All Children Community Plan (2013). United Way of Dane County.

⁴Madison Terminal Market Report (2020). Agricultural and Community Development Services.

⁵Pandemic Food System Study (2023). SIFT Consulting, LLC.

⁶Healthy Food For All of Dane County. Food Crisis Action Plan (2025).

Each of these past efforts highlighted the need for coordination among parties to support a stronger food system. This message has resonated with local leaders who have advanced action toward this plan in several ways:

- **2018:** [The City of Madison Comprehensive Plan](#) contained multiple food systems goals, including: *Work with Dane County and other municipalities to develop a regional food systems plan.*
- **2020-2022:** The Madison Food Policy Council and Dane County Food Council began jointly exploring Food System Action Plan development in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Early 2023:** [REAP Food Group](#) and other partners were awarded a **USDA Regional Food System Partnership (RFSP)** grant to develop a community engagement and partnership process.
- **Late 2023:** Dane County contributed additional funding to build on the RFSP project to develop the Dane County Food System Action Plan.
- **2026:** [The Dane County Strategic Plan](#) was released, furthering alignment with the economic and farmland preservation goals of this plan.

Project Timeline

The project consisted of three main phases.

Phase 1: Project Development & Literature Review (November 2023-January 2025)

Beginning in November 2023, the Project Team developed the following values to guide the project:

- **Collaboration**
- **Sustainability**
- **Health**
- **Vibrance**
- **Resilience**
- **Equity**

These values were used to inform process and decision-making amongst the Project Team and align understanding of the intentions behind undertaking this process.

Additionally, the following objectives were identified:

1. Explore existing and innovative approaches to strengthen food systems
2. Learn about the food system experiences of the people of Dane County
3. Develop strategic actions for systems change
4. Distribute the plan to the community

To achieve the first objective, the Project Team conducted a review of food system plans from across the United States and beyond. See **Appendix A** for a list of food system plans that informed this document.

The Project Team also began early planning for the later project phases that would address the remaining objectives: the community engagement process was designed, the [Dane County Food System Action Plan](#) website was created to share information about the project with the public, and initial plans for final plan distribution were outlined.

Phase 2: Community Engagement (February-August 2025)

In early 2025, the Project Team initiated a comprehensive community engagement process using a variety of strategies to collect public input. The goal was to understand the community's existing food system needs, experiences, and challenges while engaging people to envision the changes they want to

see in the future.

In addition to sessions facilitated by Project Team members, funds were made available for community members to host engagement activities within existing organizations, communities, and networks. See **Appendix B** for more information about the community engagement process.

Activities included:

- 14 in-person community presentations held across the county
- 63 community gatherings attended by Project Team and Community Navigators
- 1,500 responses to prompts at events and focus groups with key stakeholders and members of underrepresented communities
- 600+ consumer survey responses
- 100+ agricultural producer survey responses

In total, feedback included input from 3,205 people across 15 different municipalities (Figure 2).

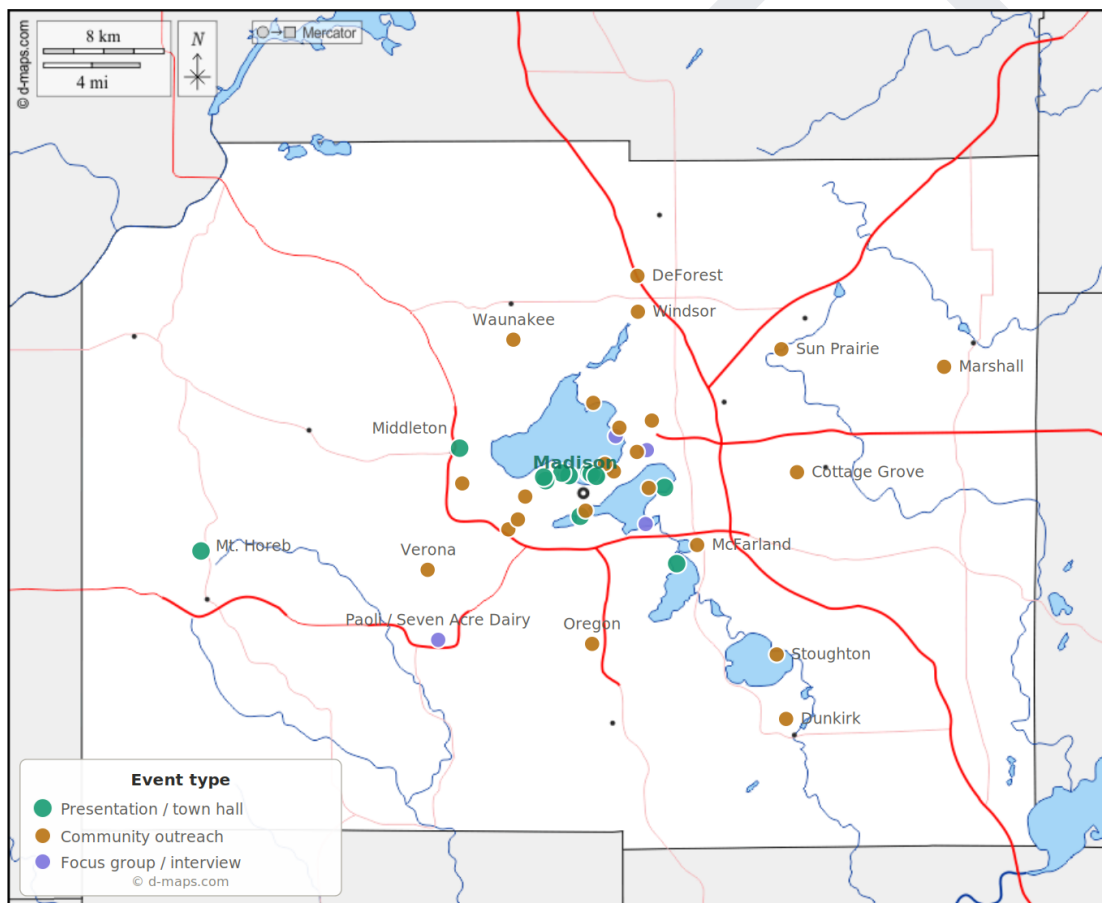


Figure 2: Community engagement activity locations

Phase 3: Data Analysis and Plan Development (August 2025-June 2026)

The Project Team, alongside partners at Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin and UW-Madison Extension, analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data collected from the community engagement process. To uphold the project's values of health, resilience, and equity, an additional focused analysis of the input from individuals experiencing food insecurity was completed to ensure that the experiences, needs, and interests of people who are currently struggling within our existing food

system were not obscured in the aggregate data.

Information gained from these analyses was used to inform development of the goals, strategies, and actions being recommended by this Plan. Draft goals and strategies were shared with key stakeholders, including the Madison Food Policy Council, Dane County Food Council, Dane County Food Collective, local government staff, and leaders of key food system nonprofit organizations. Feedback from these sessions further refined the goals and strategies.

How to use this plan

This document is divided into two main sections:

1. **The Story of Our Food System** - Using the visions and themes that emerged from the community engagement process to explore the existing conditions in the Dane County food system across three primary areas: production, consumption, and infrastructure. The challenges facing our food system are presented as an argument for why this Plan is necessary.
2. **Planning for Action: Goals & Strategies** - Expanding from the shared understanding of where things are now, the plan will introduce recommendations for the future.

As you read this plan, you are invited to think about where you see yourself. At times, the scope of the system of the changes it needs may seem enormous, but through the collective power of the people within this system, **a stronger food system that better meets all of our needs can be achieved.**

The Story of our Food System

Dane County is home to one of the most vibrant and celebrated regional food systems in the United States. From the Dane County Farmers' Market on the Capitol Square to award-winning farm-to-table restaurants, a world-class dairy industry, an extensive gardening culture, and deeply rooted support for local food, the County's food identity is a source of great community pride. However, beneath the surface lies a set of persistent, structural challenges that, if left unaddressed, threaten to erode the foundations of that identity.

This project's community engagement process revealed a population with a clear and consistent set of priorities. People want food that is fresh, local, affordable, and reflective of their culture and values. When asked what a thriving food system looks like, respondents across backgrounds described strikingly similar **visions**:

- The ability to purchase food close to home
- Access to community gardens, shared meals, and healthy food options
- A food economy that supports farmers, business owners, and their employees
- Choices that reflect the diversity of the County's cultures and cuisines

The analysis also revealed **five themes** that describe the challenges and concerns of the people who live in our food system:

1. **Affordability** - Amid an ongoing cost of living crisis, many families are forced to make hard choices related to food. The economic forces behind **food insecurity** extend far beyond Dane County and have recently pushed more families into unfamiliar territory where health and nutrition are secondary considerations to simply having enough.
2. **Disparity** - Access to food and the land that produces it is shaped by race, employment, housing status, language, culture, and more. Despite many celebrated aspects of our local food system, navigating a fragmented food system places disproportionate burdens on many households.
3. **Consolidation** - Large financial and corporate entities, grocery giants, and commodity producers are increasingly absorbing farmland, infrastructure, and the trusted retailers that support the growth and sale of diverse local products.
4. **Emergency preparedness** - The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of national supply chains and revealed the critical role that local producers and emergency food networks play in maintaining access during the next health, climate, economic, or political crisis.
5. **Excessive waste** - Food waste represents a double failure: an environmental burden and the inefficiency of connecting what is, at times, perfectly edible food to people who could benefit from it.

Food insecurity – The condition that occurs when at least one person in the household experiences insufficient or uncertain access to food at some point in the year.

At the highest level, our food system consists of three major components: **production, consumption, and infrastructure**. *What we make, what we eat, and how they connect*. By using the above vision and themes as lenses to help understand the existing conditions in each of these three areas, we can build toward recommendations for change.

PRODUCTION

To drive through Dane County in any direction is to be surrounded by cropland, livestock, farmers' markets, and the physical and social infrastructure of communities that are deeply connected to food production. Yet our agricultural sector is also under pressure, narrowing the path for the small- and mid-scale producers who form the backbone of the local food economy.

The food system in Southern Wisconsin exists as it does due to geological phenomena that occurred over thousands of years. As ancient glaciers slowly moved across the region, they flattened the land and brought fertile soil to what is now Dane County and eastern Wisconsin, while the areas to the west remained untouched—a rocky and rugged area known as the Driftless region. Humans eventually settled into what is now Southern Wisconsin—first Indigenous Americans whose foodways were integrated with the surrounding environment and much later European settlers whose agricultural traditions evolved to dominate the modern landscape. While both geographic areas are suitable to the sizable dairy and livestock industries in Wisconsin, the flatter eastern part of the state is ideal for the row crops that later became monocultured commodities while the hillier Driftless region better lent itself to crop diversity and smaller farms that require different techniques to succeed.

Dane County Production at a Glance	
Agriculture-related jobs	14,170
Total farms	2,284
Acres of Farmland	506,668
% Dane County land in agriculture	66%
% of Production in Commodity Crops	95%
Dane County Farmland Lost since 2001	17%
Dane County Median Age	36.0
Average Farmer Age	56.7

Production strengths

Today, Dane County's agricultural sector is one of the major economic and cultural engines of our community. With over 500,000 acres of agricultural land—representing approximately 64% of the county's total land area—and annual agricultural sales exceeding \$500 million,⁷ Dane County ranks among the most productive agricultural counties in the United States. Part of this success is owed to the University of Wisconsin–Madison's legacy as a land-grant institution with a long tradition of **Cooperative Extension** programs that have supported generations of proud farming families and cultivated a strong farming culture in the state.

Direct-to-consumer – A retail model where products are sold directly to the end user, bypassing retailers.

Over time, Dane County has embraced innovation and now benefits from a remarkable ecosystem of *direct-to-consumer* and local retail sales:

- Over twenty farmers' markets operate across ten different municipalities, including the Dane County Farmers' Market, the largest producer-only farmers' market in the United States.⁸

⁷2022 Dane County Farmland Preservation Plan (2022). Dane County Planning Department.

⁸Dane County Farmers' Market. <https://www.dcfm.org/>

- More than a dozen farms offer **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)** shares, serving thousands of residents annually.
- A layered marketplace of restaurants, retail outlets, on-farm sales operations, and growing institutional wholesale markets allows a diverse array of producers to find customers and build sustainable businesses.

This arrangement has led to a robust local food system featuring many successful farms and food businesses with deep ties to their customers and communities. This success has led to a strong desire among producers to grow their business. In our producer survey, 55% of respondents said they would like to expand their sales through new market channels. When asked what would help them do so, the most common answers were networking support (55%), increased land access (27%), and access to capital (23%).

Conservation policy has helped protect the land that makes this production possible. Dane County's water and soils, protected by the County's ecological goals and its [Farmland Preservation Plan](#), comprise a natural endowment of exceptional quality. Successes include:

- The [Dane County Conservation Fund](#) has committed up to \$10 million in 2026 to support land and easement purchases.⁹
- Agricultural Enterprise Areas, such as the *Yahara Pride* and *Blooming Grove* designations, allow farmers to enter preservation agreements in exchange for tax credits.
- The Town of Dunn stands as a national model for land conservation.
- Collaborative efforts with organizations like Groundswell Conservancy have protected nearly 14,000 acres across the region.¹⁰
- The City of Madison's inclusion of **urban agriculture** as an allowed use for **land banking**, and the county's 4,000+ community garden plots across 47 acres reflect a long tradition of using public space for urban food production.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – A model of direct consumer sales where customers purchase an up-front share in a farm's annual production and then receive distributions of products as they are harvested throughout the season. This provides much-needed financial flexibility to farm operators.

Land banking – A strategy to acquire land for future development.

Urban Agriculture – The production of food within cities and suburbs.

An array of collaborators have emerged to support producers. Academic research is led by UW–Madison's Extension faculty and institutes like the [Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems](#) and [Kaufman Lab](#). Nonprofit support organizations like the [Farley Center](#), [Rooted WI](#), [FairShare CSA Coalition](#) and [REAP Food Group](#), provide critical land access, technical assistance, and networking support. Advocacy organizations like the [Wisconsin Farmers Union](#) and the [Farm Bureau](#) work to improve policy and resources for the agricultural sector. All of these networks contribute to strengthening the sector's social and organizational infrastructure.

⁹Dane County Executive Melissa Agard Releases 2026 Executive Budget (2025). Dane County Parks. <https://www.danecountyparks.com/PressDetail/11712>

¹⁰ *Conservation work in Dane County*. Groundswell Conservancy. <https://www.groundswellconservancy.org>

Production vulnerabilities

Despite these assets, the agricultural sector faces systemic pressures that threaten its future:

- Over 95% of Dane County's agricultural acreage is devoted to corn and soybeans grown for livestock feed and fuel rather than human consumption.¹¹ This commodity-dominated model requires intensive chemical inputs and produces concentrated excess phosphorus whose runoff degrades water quality in the Yahara Watershed and undermines the soil health that sustains long-term productivity. This challenges the core principles of *sustainable agriculture*.
- Farm expenses surged by 32% between 2017 and 2022, squeezing farmers between rising costs and volatile global markets.¹²
- Farm consolidation is occurring at an alarming rate. Over the past 25 years, Wisconsin has seen a 26.4% drop in total farm numbers (Figure 3). Locally, Dane County lost 76,355 acres of agricultural land, 17% of its total between 2001 and 2021, with approximately 76% of new development occurring on high-quality soils.¹³ As profit margins shrink and land prices rise—up tenfold from 2001 to 2024—land is increasingly being acquired by large financial entities or permanently converted to non-agricultural use.
- The average age of a Wisconsin farm producer has risen steadily to 56.7 years,¹⁴ with many farmers not having reliable healthcare or retirement funds. The lack of affordable land makes succession and transition to the next generation of farmers difficult, especially when the alternative is selling valuable Dane County land to developers or commodity producers for a potential windfall.
- Inconsistent weather patterns due to climate change and the seasonality of growing food through long Midwest winters threaten the reliability of the local food supply.¹⁵
- Some area farmers report that when they do not have the ability or capacity to get products to consumers, they will “plow under” crops with excess yields at the end of a season while others choose to plant less than they could out of a similar calculation.
- Despite urban agricultural policies existing on paper, many remain administratively complex and underutilized in practice while short-term leases on publicly-owned lands may lack the security needed for producers to invest in infrastructure or soil health.¹⁶

Sustainable agriculture – An integrated system of farming practices that meet current food and production goals without sacrificing the future environment, soil quality, public health, or economic viability.

¹¹Elliot, S., Groendyk, J., and Niland, L. Dane County Pandemic Food System Study (2023). Prepared for Dane County Food Council by SIFT Consulting, LLC

¹²Census of Agriculture - Wisconsin (2022). United States Department of Agriculture.

¹³Hadacek, J., & Deller, S. (2022). Wisconsin Farming: Insights from the 2022 Census of Agriculture. UW–Madison Extension.

¹⁴*ibid.*

¹⁵*ibid.*

¹⁶Haines, A.L., *What Does Zoning Have to Do with Local Food Systems?* (2018). Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development.



Figure 3: Decline in Wisconsin farms over time

Agricultural workforce

The pressures facing our farms are compounded by stark racial, ethnic and gender inequities. Over 99% of agricultural enterprises in Wisconsin are white-owned.¹⁷ Racial minority, female, and veteran farmers face disproportionate barriers to accessing land, capital, and technical assistance. Language barriers and the absence of multilingual resources further exclude many current and prospective producers.

Migrant and immigrant labor has become a critical part of the agricultural workforce at many farming operations. Undocumented Latin American immigrants perform roughly 70% of all labor on Wisconsin dairy farms, a labor force critical to the success of the state's multi-billion-dollar dairy industry.¹⁸ This is a fragile social framework; these workers face intense geographic isolation, lack the legal right to hold driver's licenses in Wisconsin, and are navigating rapidly changing immigration laws and enforcement. Housing challenges for farm laborers recently prompted Dane County to allocate an unprecedented \$8 million for farmworker housing.¹⁹

Conversely, small-scale, local vegetable and meat operations face a different but equally acute workforce bottleneck. Highly diversified, direct-to-market systems rely heavily on manual tending, harvesting, and localized processing and cannot be easily mechanized. These operations are exposed to surging domestic farm labor costs that rapidly erode razor-thin profit margins.

Unfortunately, financial and social burdens carry human costs that extend beyond balance sheets. Economic instability, social isolation, and lack of access to rural healthcare have contributed to a farmer

¹⁷ Census of Agriculture - Wisconsin (2022). United States Department of Agriculture.

¹⁸ Kulwiec, A., & Ibarra, A. Dairy Workers Study: Legal and Community Needs Assessment (2023). University of Wisconsin-Madison School for Workers & Legal Action of Wisconsin Farmworker Project.

¹⁹ Sanchez, M., & Jameel, M. Officials Approve \$8 Million for Housing for Immigrant Dairy Workers in Wisconsin. Sheriff's Office Will Try to Close Language Gaps. (2023). ProPublica.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/wisconsin-dane-county-immigrant-housing-dairy-farms>

suicide rate of 43.2 per 100,000, significantly higher than the general population.²⁰ This crisis, largely invisible in public discourse, represents profound human tragedy and a structural threat to the county's agricultural identity.

Predicting the future

The dominance of commodity crop production in Dane County is the product of decades of federal agricultural policy that has made growing corn and soybeans for global markets the most economically rational choice for many producers. Federal crop insurance programs, commodity price supports, and agricultural subsidies in the Farm Bill are calibrated to the scale and risk profile of commodity agriculture. Historically, this has provided a strong financial safety net for farmers, although recently even these forces have demonstrated vulnerability to mercurial geopolitical forces and international trade policy. While support for commodity producers exists, a farmer growing produce for a regional wholesale market has no equivalent backstop when a crop fails or prices fall.

Dane County cannot reverse these trends alone; improving these conditions will require state and federal policy change that centers diversified local production as the cornerstone of a healthy food system. This will lead to strategic investment in the regional infrastructure needed to make wholesale markets economically competitive and more resilient in the face of disasters.

Despite the rich assets of our community, economic volatility, loss of farmland, dominance of commodities, and social challenges for farmers show that our agricultural sector is vulnerable to disruption. By championing a holistic food system that intentionally cares for the land, animals, and people who make our food, this plan seeks to safeguard Dane County's rich farming heritage for many years to come.

²⁰ Eisenreich, R., & Pollari, C. Addressing Higher Risk of Suicide Among Farmers in Rural America. National Rural Health Association.

CONSUMPTION

Dane County residents are passionate and intentional about their food choices. In a time when affordability is on the minds of most Americans, that choice is heavily driven by cost. 78% of consumer survey respondents identified **affordability** as a primary consideration when buying food. For respondents who reported experiencing food insecurity, this jumped to 90%. Meal planning, cooking from scratch, and navigating a fragmented local food system all require investments of time that compete with work, caregiving, and the other demands of daily life.²¹

Dane County Consumption at a Glance	
Total county population	588,347
Food insecurity rate (2024)	10.7%
Average Monthly FoodShare participation (2025)	44,874
% of food scraps in total Dane County landfill material	20.7%

Health was another commonly cited influence on the relationship with food, with 88.2% of respondents valuing healthy eating. However, this again intersected with affordability—a recurring theme was the frustration of wanting to eat well and locally but finding that the food system makes it unnecessarily difficult and expensive to do so. Of food insecure respondents to the consumer survey:

- 52% indicated that healthy foods are too expensive
- 35.2% reported eating healthy foods “sometimes” or “never” compared to 10.7% of food secure respondents
- 18.3% reported a “hard” or “very hard” time accessing healthy foods compared to just 1.3% of food secure respondents

Cultural connection was also important. Family recipes, cultural traditions, and the shared experience of a good meal was as important to community engagement respondents as health and nutrition. When asked what food reminds them of home, individuals named chicken and rice, beans, pasta, soul food, curry, tacos, egg rolls, goulash, and dozens of other dishes, a portrait of a community with diverse food identities. Unfortunately, a shortage of culturally relevant food options and a lack of language-appropriate outreach for nutrition programs can lead to food access that differs based on zip code and neighborhood boundaries.

The desire for local, healthy, and culturally-connected food translates into consumer behavior that is stratified by income. Based on survey data, 74% of households earning \$100,000–\$150,000 indicated a preference for farmers' markets, compared to just 20% of those earning under \$20,000. Meanwhile, 38% of households earning under \$20,000 and 26% of those earning \$20,000–\$34,999 were more likely to rely on dollar stores, gas stations, and convenience stores as food sources while those preferences didn't register among any individuals in the highest income brackets. Grocery retail was the great equalizer: 97% of survey respondents indicated that grocery stores are a preferred shopping destination, with locations like Woodman's or Aldi's being destinations that support shoppers at all income levels.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is the most devastating food system inefficiency, reflecting consumers who find it financially difficult to participate in the typical food access pathways. In 2024, 10.7% of Dane County residents—over 60,000 individuals—struggled to access consistent nutrition. Critically, 42% of the food insecure population earns too much to qualify for federal benefits from the **Supplemental Nutrition**

²¹ Clark-Barol, M., Gaddis, J.E., & Barrett, C.K. *Food agency in low-income households: A qualitative study of the structural and individual factors impacting participants in a community-based nutrition program* (2021). Appetite.

Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as **FoodShare** in Wisconsin), leaving them in a chronic state of instability without a clear safety net.²² While food insecurity data is no longer being published by the federal government,²³ emergency food partners point to a clear and continuous rise in need since 2022; Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin reports a doubling of demand at its member agencies in that time period.

The populations at the greatest risk are also those that are most under-served by the current system. Historically, food insecurity across all households in Dane County has held below state and national averages, however Dane County has greater racial and ethnic disparities with more Black and Hispanic/Latino households struggling to have enough food than their national counterparts. Households with a person with a disability, single mothers, children, seniors, full-time college students, veterans, and people with limited English proficiency also face heightened vulnerability to food insecurity.²⁴

The expiration of pandemic-era universally-free school meals and enhanced SNAP benefits in 2022 eliminated support precisely when inflation began to make food more expensive. In 2025, additional program and eligibility changes to nutrition assistance programs like SNAP and other benefit programs like Medicaid have created new challenges for household financial security that will lead to more food insecure households in the long run.

Institutional Buyers

In recent years, local institutions have played an increasing role in the evolution of the local food movement. This represents a different type of consumer: the businesses and organizations that buy large volumes of food have the buying power to create stable market opportunities that can sustain mid-to-large-scale agricultural operations. Collaborations such as the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative and Foodshed Partnership are helping bridge the gap between small farms and these wholesale buyers.

School nutrition programs are one place this institutional pipeline is growing. Districts including Madison Metropolitan School District, Monona Grove, Mt. Horeb, and more have partnered with organizations like REAP Food Group and Rooted WI to build farm-to-school programs with strong public support. The challenge is acquiring local products during the winter months of the school year, as well as, meeting stringent food safety requirements, and low budgets for food that schools operate on.

Other community pillars are similarly invested in local food. UW–Madison and UW Health’s Food is Medicine philosophy has integrated fresh produce into patient recovery and employee wellness programs to support preventative care and improve health outcomes for conditions like metabolic and cardiovascular disease. These institutions further align cafeteria and vending procurement policies with the national principles of the Good Food Purchasing Program. Corporate campuses like Epic Systems and Abbott (formerly Exact Sciences) have signaled steady or increasing interest in local sourcing, creating significant potential demand. Both of those companies have explored their own farming and gardening for employees.

²² Heckman, N., & Suri, D. *Food Insecurity in Dane County* (2025). Public Health Madison and Dane County & Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin

²³ USDA Terminates Redundant Food Insecurity Survey. September 20, 2025.

<https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/09/20/usda-terminates-redundant-food-insecurity-survey>

²⁴Pathak, A., Richards, R., & Jarsulic, M. *The United States Can End Hunger and Food Insecurity for Millions of People* (2022). Center for American Progress.

Waste & Recovery

Waste occurs at every stage of the supply chain, from field losses and processing byproducts to retailer discards and household food scraps. The scale of food waste in our region is staggering. In 2020 alone, Wisconsin disposed of approximately 615,500 tons of wasted food and 238,500 tons of food scraps in landfills, a volume whose greenhouse gas impact is equivalent to adding approximately 592,000 passenger vehicles to the road for a year. Locally, 20.7% of the material in the Dane County Landfill is organic food scraps with 11.9% is considered “wasted food” and 8.8% non-edible food scraps.

Current composting infrastructure, while growing, does not come close to meeting residential or commercial demand. Both dense urban areas and rural communities remain without accessible options. Previous composting initiatives by the [City of Madison](#) and [UW–Madison](#) struggled due to challenges with contamination and access to biodigester facilities, leaving a legacy of skepticism about large-scale efforts. Nonetheless, these entities are continuing to refine their approaches with new innovations like **food waste kiosks** and **farmers’ market drop-off points** that expand community access to composting.

The logistical challenges of fresh food recovery are immense. Fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy all spoil rapidly unless stored in specific conditions. These products require attention to food safety protocols and intensive coordination for timely delivery. At the same time, the sheer volume of food waste generated by corporate food retail, events, and individual households, continues to outpace the growth of recovery and composting networks, ensuring that progress in diversion remains offset by growth in waste. Through the community engagement process, a number of people identified **school food waste** as a concern, and more work may need to be done with both school districts and the State of Wisconsin to meet nutrition standards and meal requirements while also reducing unwanted food given to students who will immediately throw it away.

Recent changes to the **gleaning** networks in Dane County have left local agencies with new responsibilities for food recovery. In response, emergency food organizations have developed coordinated efforts to gather products from farms and businesses. [Healthy Food For All](#), [The River Food Pantry](#), [Badger Prairie Needs Network](#), [Wayforward Resources](#), and [Second Harvest](#), among other organizations, leverage partnerships with major corporations and restaurants to redirect surplus from landfills.

Gleaning - gathering food that would otherwise be wasted from farms, retailers, and businesses for the purposes of getting it to people who can use it.

Reducing food waste is a priority that resonates deeply with Dane County residents. 59% of consumer survey respondents identified it as one of the most important issues for their community. The upcoming Dane County Sustainability Campus, which will replace the existing landfill, promises to be a transformative hub for connecting waste diversion with large-scale sustainable processing. This facility, combined with Dane County’s potential to host the state’s largest anaerobic digestion and biomass energy facility, could allow the region to convert organic waste into a reliable source of green energy. Other programs like [Healthy Food for All](#) and [Brainplate Grows](#) partner with local events and restaurants to ensure that surplus food can reach those in need or be diverted to compost. Multi-year partnerships, such as Dane County’s relationship with [Purple Cow Organics](#), provide the stability needed to change community behavior. A growing ecosystem of private composting services like [Green Box](#), [Earthstew](#), and [Curbside Composter](#) offer residential and commercial options, and farmers’ market compost drop-off sites have shown increasing utilization every year they have operated.

Each of these initiatives provides an opportunity to close the loop on our food system, turning consumer food waste back into food production as additions to healthy soil.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Storage, Processing, and Distribution

It is easy to think that food moves directly from the farm to the grocery store or directly to the dinner plate, yet there are many intermediate stages. Some products require processing, others require cold, frozen or dry storage, and transportation is involved at every stage. These inputs are then built into the cost of the food we purchase. The infrastructure needed to bring food to consumers may be unseen by the average consumer, but it is critical for making sure our food system can operate efficiently while reducing waste and loss. If producers and consumers are the heartbeat of our food system, then the storage, processing, and distribution infrastructure are the connective tissue.

Dane County Infrastructure at a Glance	
Number of Supermarkets	98
Number of Convenience Stores	159
Number of Farmers Markets	29

Dane County is currently experiencing an expansion of local processing and storage infrastructure with the opening of the The [Madison Public Market](#) and the [Foodshed Partnership](#) in 2026. These spaces have potential to be a boon to small producers while creating new opportunities for business incubation and enhancing the connections between local producers, retailers, consumers, and wholesale buyers.

Shared commercial kitchen facilities like [FEED Kitchens](#), [The Hub](#), the [Pasture & Plenty Makeshop](#), and the [Stoughton Area Community Kitchen \(STACK\)](#) serve the demand for processing space by small-scale producers, food carts, and **value-added** products. [Bread & Butter, LLC](#) will be a new addition to this landscape in 2027. While entrepreneurs are able to use these facilities to build their businesses and scale up their operations, space is limited. FEED Kitchens in particular identifies year-round waitlists and 24-hour demand.

Value-added – Additions or changes made to a product that can increase its value to the end consumer and therefore merit a higher sale price. With agricultural products this can refer to combining multiple raw ingredients, preserving, or adding flavor to increase shelf life, divert waste, and increase sales potential.

Last-mile distribution – The final segment of a supply chain, moving products from an storage or aggregation facility to the end user.

Investments from government sources reflect the need for more infrastructure. In 2026, the State of Wisconsin announced nearly \$50 million for rural road improvements supporting agricultural transport, alongside \$10 million for the [Food Security Initiative](#). The federal **Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure** grant program supported middle-of-supply-chain processing and aggregation projects. Locally, the City of Madison’s [Healthy Retail Access Program](#) has invested in infrastructure enhancements to existing facilities that support a healthy retail ecosystem.

Despite these advances, there remains a critical missing middle to our food system infrastructure. While small community kitchens and massive facilities serving multinational food corporations both exist, there is a shortage of the mid-scale, regional aggregation centers, processing facilities, cold and frozen storage, and **last-mile distribution** fleets that would allow local producers to

reliably supply institutional buyers. The continuation and expansion of funding that builds this type of infrastructure is critical. Without this investment, importing food from distant suppliers is more cost-effective than sourcing locally, undermining the economic viability of the entire local food system.²⁵

²⁵*Madison terminal market report.* (2020). Agricultural and Community Development Services. Prepared for the Madison Food Policy Council.

Food Businesses and Restaurants

The food business and restaurant landscape is an economic engine and a defining feature of Dane County's identity. This is another form of infrastructure: the physical locations that consumers visit to purchase food in its many forms. The success of these businesses is essential for a thriving food economy.

Dane County entrepreneurs benefit from a network of support. Organizations like FEED Kitchens, the Food Finance Institute, Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC), Common Wealth Development, REAP Food Group, The Urban League, UW–Madison Extension, and Urban Triage provide financial literacy, strategic planning, and professional development among other forms of skill building and technical assistance. Programs like Dane Buy Local and the Farm Fresh Atlas strengthen community support for local businesses and products. Business collaborations have led to innovative solutions for rising costs, such as shared leases between compatible businesses like Madison's Northstreet brewery/bakery/cafe.

The hospitality industry in our area has shown remarkable post-pandemic resilience, with restaurant and bar sales reaching record highs in recent years, while employment rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels.²⁶ Tourism generated over \$450 million in food and beverage spending in Dane County in 2024 (Figure 4).²⁷



Figure 4: Wisconsin restaurant & bar employment - year over year August seasonal peak

²⁶Recovery continues for restaurants and bars. (2023). Wisconsin Policy Forum. <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/recovery-continues-for-restaurants-and-bars/>

²⁷ Wisconsin tourism economic impact (2024). Travel Wisconsin. <https://industry.travelwisconsin.com/research/economic-impact>

The farm-to-table movement that began fifty years ago with restaurants like L’Etoile has grown into dozens of establishments throughout the County, supporting food preferences and channeling millions of dollars annually to local farmers. Unfortunately, these businesses are also navigating the existential challenge posed by consolidation and rising costs. Food carts, disproportionately owned by racial minorities and women, face particular barriers to technical assistance, production space, and capital.²⁹ Meanwhile, for businesses considering brick-and-mortar locations, larger developers increasingly dominate commercial real estate. This is seen most acutely in downtown Madison where retail space averages above \$21 per square foot, but increasingly throughout the county where locally-owned food businesses are being priced out. State Street and other high-density commercial corridors that once featured independent establishments are now seeing an influx of chains. When kitchen build-outs can require hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital investment, creative financing solutions are needed to create new business opportunities.

Grocery & Retail

The retail food landscape in Dane County reflects the county's prosperity and demand for choice. The county is home to over 81 supermarkets and grocery stores including regional chains like Festival Foods, and the employee-owned Woodman's. This is alongside big-box and club-format stores like Walmart, Target, Costco, and Sam's Club. ALDI's expanding footprint—six locations with a seventh under construction in Waunakee—reflects the rapid suburban growth reshaping the County. It is at stores like these that the vast majority of the county purchases the majority of their food.

Beyond the regional chains, Dane County is home to a network of locally-owned and community-rooted grocery stores that offer something the mainstream retail landscape cannot: greater ties to the producers, cultures, and communities of Southern Wisconsin. Willy Street Co-op, with its three Madison-area locations, anchors this landscape as a member-owned business with a decades-long commitment to local sourcing. The Jenifer Street Market and Regent Market Co-op are beloved neighborhood institutions that emphasize local procurement. Brennan's Market combines Wisconsin cheese, a full-service butcher, and locally curated specialty foods. Other small retailers, like the Vitruvian Farm Store and forthcoming Grandad's Farm Stop, offer year-round access to certified organic produce alongside over 700 products from local farmers and makers.

Culturally-specific grocers, a number of which have benefited from the City of Madison's Healthy Retail Access Program, add yet another dimension. Stores like Asian Midway Foods, Luna's Grocery, Madison Oriental Market,

FOCUS: Woodman's

Dane County's love affair with Janesville-based Woodman's reflects the retailer's strong connection to the community and success as a model for large-footprint supermarkets that make one-stop shopping possible for most families.

With individual locations averaging over 230,000 square feet, these are some of the largest grocery stores in the country. The three Dane County locations serve thousands of shoppers each day.

Consumer surveys indicate Woodman's is the preferred shopping location for households across the income spectrum. While the business only operates 20 stores in Wisconsin and Northern Illinois, it has ranked 3rd best out of the 81 largest U.S. grocery chains.²⁸

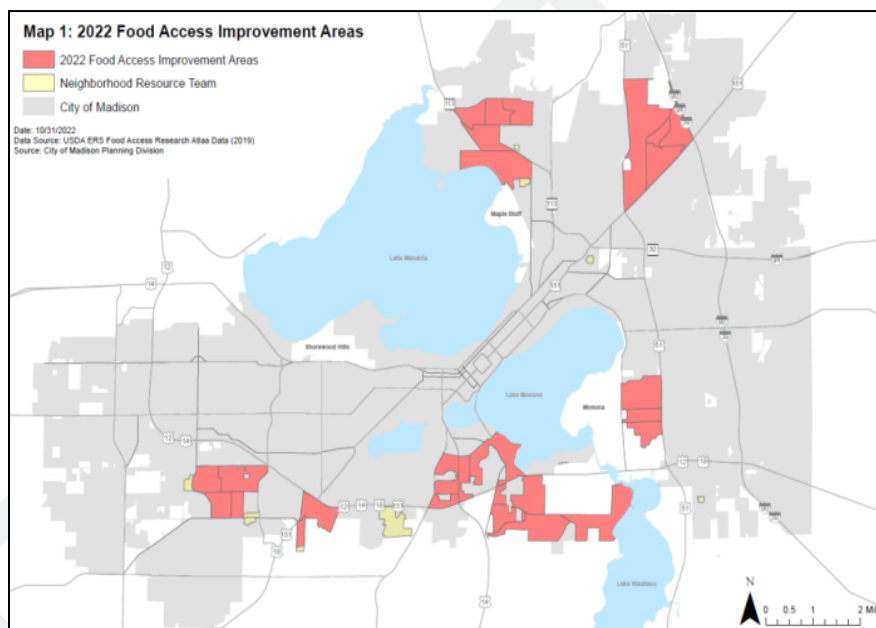
²⁸ National study ranks Woodman's as third best grocer in nation. (2026). InBusiness Madison. <https://ibmadison.com/national-study-ranks-woodmans-as-third-best-grocer-in-nation/>

²⁹ Hammer, D., & Malual, J., *Entrepreneurs of color in Wisconsin: Bridging the gap in resources to mobilize potential* (2020). Community Development, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2020.1854803

Little Tibet Market, and others serve as community anchors providing culturally-relevant ingredients that mainstream chains may not carry. In total, all of these retailers reflect a retail landscape of local ownership and cultural diversity.

Despite skewing towards households with higher incomes, CSAs and farmers' markets are a unique retail opportunity that support local producers. Dane County residents support CSAs at rates comparable to much larger metropolitan areas and the Dane County Farmers' Market remains one of the busiest public spaces in the region. Smaller farmers' markets throughout the county are well attended. In order to address equitable access, nutrition incentive programs like FairShare CSA Coalition's Partner Shares and Community Action Coalition of South Central Wisconsin's Double Dollars, seek to increase access to these pathways for people to use nutrition benefits at these retailers.

Beneath this vibrance, the landscape is fragmenting in ways that leave many residents under-served. Convenience stores far outnumber full service grocery stores, especially in areas where food insecurity is high. For many low-income residents a Kwik Trip or other gas station convenience store may be the closest and most accessible food option. The Madison [Food Access Improvement Map](#) identifies areas of higher poverty where people live greater than a mile from the nearest supermarket. County-wide, over 25,500 low-income households and over 2,600 car-free households are located more than a mile from a supermarket or large grocery store, in a county where public transit coverage is limited outside of Madison.³⁰



Rising commercial rents and well-funded national chains are displacing independent operators with local ties. In recent years, long-standing, locally and regionally-owned grocers such as Festival Foods, Metcalf's Market, Fresh Market, and Piggly Wiggly have been acquired by larger corporate entities, reducing opportunities for highlighting local products.

In addition to the rising cost of rent, the labor market poses a complex challenge for food businesses. Retail and service staffing remains a persistent crisis despite post-pandemic wage increases. Difficult working conditions, inadequate benefits, and the perception of food service work as a "thankless" profession have fueled a workforce exodus that limits the sector's capacity to meet consumer demand.

Emergency Food

Dane County's hunger prevention strategies are led by a sophisticated network of emergency food providers. Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, Community Action Coalition, and Healthy

³⁰ USDA Food Environment Atlas. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas>

Food for All, among others, have evolved beyond food distribution to become pillars of community food security. Each of these organizations distributes food to the 50+ food pantries throughout the County, including those serving clients county-wide like Badger Prairie Needs Network, Wayforward Resources, River Food Pantry, St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry, and the Goodman Community Center. Other pantries have smaller service areas and target specific neighborhoods or zip codes in areas like Waunakee, Sun Prairie, Stoughton, and Mount Horeb or through mobile pantry distributions organized by Second Harvest.

In the pursuit of acquiring enough food to serve our community, these organizations practice food recovery across the entire supply chain: partnering with major corporations, local farms, restaurants, and the general public to collect donated and surplus food. Second Harvest's Farm to Foodbank Initiative exemplifies the kind of cross-sector collaboration that simultaneously supports local agriculture and improves emergency food quality. Healthy Food For All's Buy One For a Neighbor program at various farmers' markets is another example of the intersection of supporting farmers, addressing food security, and using the experiences tied to buying and sharing food to build community.

Pantries and food banks consistently operate beyond capacity, constrained by funding, space, and staffing. In some cases, a lack of sufficient cold and frozen storage prevents emergency food providers from accepting and distributing large quantities of fresh, perishable produce. This forces a reliance on shelf-stable and nonperishable alternatives. Other facilities are simply too small to carry the volume of produce required to meet client needs. Meanwhile, the number of staff, volunteers, and donations needed to make this safety net operate effectively requires constant effort to maintain.

The recent decline in government support has left emergency food organizations in an increasingly precarious position just as demand has shot up and inflation has increased the cost of all food. As prices go up, businesses are more vigilant to not waste as much food, and individuals with tighter budgets may be less inclined to donate food or money.

The Shape of a System in Transition

The production, consumption, and infrastructure of our food system are complex and multi-faceted, yet the challenges that face each of these areas overlap and intersect. Currently, our food system is shaped by the potential to produce significant amounts of food yet the vast majority of the land is used for commodity crops. Meanwhile, structural challenges have emerged related to the rising costs of farmland and lack of necessary infrastructure to sustainably support small and mid-scale producers. This is leading to an insufficient supply of local food for some segments of the population and persistent food insecurity for others.



Through this analysis, **three Core Tensions** have emerged, highlighting the structural issues facing our food system. These are the economic and logistical challenges that the Dane County Food System Action Plan hopes to address.

Core Tension #1: Agricultural Abundance vs. Rising Food Insecurity

Dane County's production and consumption landscapes are a study in stark contrasts. On one hand, fertile soil and agricultural traditions allow for significant food production. On the other hand, much of that soil is not being put into food production for the tens of thousands of people struggling to reliably have enough healthy, affordable food to eat. Producers throughout the region are capable of growing more food for humans—as opposed to commodities—but are not in a position to do so because of misaligned financial incentives and the lack of infrastructure needed to connect this food with the people who can use it.

Food banks and pantries were historically designed for short-term crisis intervention, but systemic factors such as low wages, high housing costs, inadequate childcare, and limited healthcare have made food insecurity a chronic experience for many. Unfortunately, emergency food infrastructure remains under-resourced relative to the persistently high level of demand. Cold storage deficits, space limitations, staffing/volunteer demands, and gleaning networks in transition mean that Dane County is tenuously positioned to respond to the next climate, economic, or political crisis.

Without addressing the root causes of food insecurity and the underlying infrastructure needs that would allow for better connections between producers and consumers, the emergency food system will continue to absorb demand it was never designed to meet and the structural inequities will remain unresolved. Increasing storage and distribution opportunities and reducing the waste of edible food would help reduce food insecurity, connect our agricultural abundance to those who need it most, and ensure future resilience.

Core Tension #2: Disconnected Local Food Supply and Demand

Dane County residents have an extremely high level of interest in the production and sale of local food. Farms and farmers' markets are viewed as more than just producers and retail locations; they are a source of social cohesion and community-building. While higher-income households might have plentiful access to local foods, it is the institutional buyers who can provide the most stability to regional food systems.

Unfortunately, there remains a disconnect between the institutional demand for local food and the food system's capacity to meet it. Despite high potential production capacity, some of the institutions that *want* more local foods are unable to find enough to meet specific uses. They are then forced to work with national distributors to import the products they need. At the same time, consumer waste and farm losses remain a reminder of the inefficiency in our system. Simply put, good food is not making it to the end users who want it.

This is a frustrating paradox: a county with thousands of acres of farmland where the vast majority of production is exported to commodity markets rather than feeding local residents, even as institutions and consumers actively seek more local food. Developing the social and physical infrastructure that more efficiently and effectively connects local products with local buyers will help to improve these outcomes.

Core Tension #3: Community Control vs. Consolidation

Consolidation is reshaping every sector of the Dane County food system. Larger financial entities and commodity growing operations are absorbing farmland that once supported the small-scale production of a diversity of products. Multi-state corporate food processors and global distributors are crowding out the mid-scale retail options that local producers need to sell their products.

With each instance of consolidation, control over product availability, pricing, retail shelf space available for local products and proximity of access transfers further out of our community. Consolidated markets create risk averse producers that are more inclined to grow commodity and monoculture crops with heavy chemical inputs or livestock and dairy operations that use hormones and antibiotics to ensure high yields. Food deserts emerge when larger entities decide to close stores that are underperforming compared to national metrics, whereas a local operator may be more committed to making a neighborhood business work.

Over time, consolidation changes what is available for consumers to buy, reshapes taste preferences, and permanently alters the demand for local products. As consolidation accelerates, competition declines, and food prices increase.

Investing in locally-owned infrastructure, products, and businesses will ensure those assets resist the forces of consolidation and reflect our community's food system values.

The Core Tensions that define our food system represent potential threats to a thriving future if left unresolved, yet they also present opportunities for intervention in reshaping our food system to better serve us all.

Planning for Action: Goals & Strategies

The analysis of production, consumption and infrastructure, combined with extensive community input, led to the development of **seven goals** for areas of food system improvement:

1. **Collaboration**
2. **Production**
3. **Access**
4. **Infrastructure**
5. **Efficiency**
6. **Resilience**
7. **Prosperity**

Within these goals, unique strategies and actions provide a roadmap for the future. These strategic recommendations are intended to align individual and organizational strategies, maximize collective impact, and secure the funding, programming, and policy changes necessary to achieve our shared vision. The hope is that with these actions as a starting point, new collaborations, partnerships, and connections will emerge in our community that inspire even more action and innovation.

Implementation of this plan will occur through three pathways:

- **First**, through the embedding of these recommendations into the daily work of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses that make up the food system workforce of our community.
- **Second**, through coordinated efforts to track and monitor progress by the Project Team and local food councils, who will in turn be held accountable by key food system organizations and advocates.
- **Third**, through members of the community lifting up components of the work and bringing it to life.

Individual activity tracking will be developed as part of activity implementation, and examined in connection with key community-level data like the food insecurity rate, farm production metrics, and measures of grocery and retail access.

Goal 1: Collaboration

Creating a more interconnected local food system by building social infrastructure that fosters opportunities for collaboration

Food system work in Dane County is decentralized across a number of entities, organizations, and individuals. While there is no “Food Department” in any branch of local government, there are a number of stakeholders in Dane County that are dedicated to improving parts or all of our food system through programs and initiatives that support our community’s food system needs.

The primary goal of this food plan is to increase **collaboration** across all food system partners. This will be achieved by strengthening existing relationships and inviting new voices—particularly those who have

been historically excluded—into ongoing work, combining local government support with grassroots community momentum.

The various stakeholders in our food system, be they government, nonprofit, private business, or individual consumer, may not all have the same motivations. Consumers may see affordability as the most important outcome of a stronger food system, while producers and food business owners may need to see the true costs of their labor priced into the cost of food. Understanding these incentives will create more opportunities to find partnership and alignment on areas of common interest. By developing more pathways for community engagement and increasing connectivity between the agencies, organizations, and individuals involved in food system leadership, we can have a larger collective impact and a greater likelihood of improving food system outcomes.

Strategies

1.1. Align food system backbone organizations

Food-based nonprofit organizations in Dane County have historically operated with some degree of independence from one another. This plan calls for the creation of a “backbone” network of organizations outside of local government that can provide shared leadership and structure for the advancement of food system goals and priorities. A **collective impact** approach across organizations will lead to enhanced communication and partnership, ultimately creating new opportunities for innovation despite the competitive and shifting resource landscape.

Actions:

- A. Integrate Food System Action Plan goals and strategies into work and strategic plans of backbone organizations.
- B. Strengthen shared functions and pursue funding opportunities based on collective impact.

1.2. Connect plans that address or relate to food systems work

Previous planning efforts have identified food system activities. Often, these plans have focused on parts of the food system but rarely have they connected across multiple sectors. This Action Plan seeks to connect and elevate past efforts and create a framework to support future planning efforts.

Actions:

- A. Build Food System Action Plan recommendations into future plans and planning efforts, including organizational strategic plans, city/county plans of work, and future comprehensive planning efforts.
- B. Monitor emergence of new plans and related documents for future updates to the Dane County Food System Action Plan.

1.3. Align food systems advocacy efforts

Survey respondents indicated they feel disconnected from information about the food system and unable to directly influence decisions. In order to create ongoing community engagement opportunities, we must develop new structures and enhance existing methods of collecting community input to inform decision-making of policymakers. Creating a social infrastructure that

supports relationship-building, resource-sharing, learning, and collaboration will lead to new advocacy opportunities that support implementation of this Plan.

Actions:

- A. Enhance opportunities for residents to engage with the Madison Food Policy Council and Dane County Food Council, both as prospective members and as community members interested in these topics.
- B. Promote public involvement in community-led organizations like the Dane County Food Collective.
- C. Identify more local food system leadership opportunities for systemically-excluded community members.
- D. Strengthen opportunities for ongoing public engagement, input, and feedback on food system projects and programs.

1.4. *Increase focus on food systems across local government*

Food systems touch many areas of local government, including departments focused on economic development, public health, streets, engineering, land use, parks, and more. State agencies, many of which are located in Dane County, also have expertise in these areas. While there is no food department to oversee interconnected food systems efforts, there are opportunities to increase collaboration across agencies. Over time, interdepartmental collaboration will lead to stronger relationships and connections, and partners can in turn use this Plan to inform their decision-making.

Actions:

- A. Develop a food system intergovernmental collaborative, where staff across multiple agencies can convene to monitor progress on Food System Action Plan goals and implementation.
- B. Create a Food Policy Director position within the City of Madison or Dane County government.
- C. Explore greater partnership and shared leadership between Madison and Dane County food councils.

1.5. *Increase communication, data-sharing, and education*

A deeper public understanding of current conditions and potential impacts of future changes in the food system will drive increased investment. Achieving this will require consistent, transparent, and evidence-based communication from trusted sources. Currently, information is decentralized across a variety of agencies and organizations including local, state, and federal government offices; nonprofits that monitor different supply chain sectors; and analytics from private businesses that move or sell food products. Strategic alignment of communication channels, data sharing, and educational materials across partners will improve the opportunities for coordinated action.

Actions:

- A. Identify key data sources and metrics for monitoring the implementation and progress of the Dane County Food System Action Plan.
- B. Increase shared communications amongst government agencies, non-profits, businesses, and the general public in relation to food systems needs and progress.

- C. Invest in information technology to track metrics, increase communication, and report on progress.
- D. Create opportunities for food system leadership and skill development.

Goal 2: Production

Increasing production of food in Dane County, prioritizing the needs of local consumers

The future of Dane County's agricultural sector lies in its ability to transition away from production for global commodity markets toward a resilient, human-centric local food economy. The vision is an agricultural system that develops new farmers and supports independent operations specifically dedicated to growing food for human consumption. Diversifying our **production** can protect producers from macro-economic trends, climate change, and other challenges of monoculture while also strengthening our community food security.

Central to this transition is the opportunity for institutional integration. "Farm to institution" programs create tremendous opportunities to directly benefit local producers by increasing demand for their products. Expanding these efforts beyond the schools, hospitals, and the select few businesses that currently participate will create reliable, high-volume markets and the financial security necessary for farmers to diversify away from commodities and grow food for people instead of livestock feed and fuel additives.

Dane County must continue to lead in conservation and land access innovation by scaling existing success stories. Expanding access to land will increase innovation and output while providing entry points for new and historically underserved producers who are currently priced out of the private land market.

Strategies

2.1. Increase land access for local food production

Survey responses indicate that one of the largest barriers to entry for careers in agriculture is access to land. Private ownership of existing farmland in a community where property values have risen sharply in recent years makes it difficult for those interested in entering the field to get started unless they have inherited property or have the capital to make an initial investment. Beyond subsidizing the cost of land ownership, some local solutions that have already been attempted include activating publicly-owned land for food production and models of collaborative farming.

Actions:

- A. Increase access to larger agricultural plots on City- and County-owned land for local food production.
- B. Create and expand access to collaborative farming opportunities where individual or organizational land owners work with those seeking land access.
- C. Increase support for programs designed to offset costs for systemically-excluded populations, such as organic certification or new farmer initiatives.

- D. Encourage application of best practices for urban access to green and growing space to new housing and business developments.
- E. Expand opportunities for urban agriculture on public land, and private spaces like lawns and rooftops.
- F. Expand community gardens for personal use or to meet the need of food pantries.

2.2. *Increase support for small farm owners*

Large producers are important to the health of Dane County's agricultural economy as exporters, employers, and drivers of investment in technology and innovation. Still, agricultural subsidies and crop insurance programs often encourage large entities to focus on monoculture commodity crops and at the expense of diverse, local products that grow well in our region. Given national trends toward farm consolidation and the rising costs of farm ownership that are increasingly leading to bankruptcy, it is imperative to increase local efforts to support small farm owners.

Actions:

- A. Develop programs to offset fixed costs of farm ownership and expansion.
- B. Provide connection to existing resources for technical assistance on agricultural topics, particularly through UW–Madison Extension resources.
- C. Survey producers on needs for technical assistance that are not currently available.
- D. Develop farmer training and farm incubation projects to support growth of agricultural skills and reduce barriers to entry for those interested in learning the field.
- E. Raise awareness of opportunities to provide public comment and input on federal rulemaking and legislative processes like the Farm Bill.

2.3. *Expand market access for local foods*

One way to increase the economic viability of local agriculture is to support innovation in the development of new marketplaces and increasing access to existing markets for the sale of local products. This can include lightly processed or raw produce, dairy, and meat. It can also include support for value-added services and functions that can extend the life of local products and make them more viable for sale in institutional or retail spaces. This type of innovation previously helped develop and expand CSAs as a tool to diversify farm revenues, and continued innovation can help to stabilize revenue streams for producers.

Actions:

- A. Expand "farm to institution" initiatives that create linkages between local producers and schools, hospitals, food pantries, and other businesses.
- B. Support development of skills and investment in equipment for value-added production methods that can increase storage or appeal of local products.
- C. Strengthen connections between local retailers and local producers.
- D. Support growers and value-added producers to partner with marketing programs like Something Special from Wisconsin and Dane Buy Local.

2.4. *Increase consumer experiences with regional food products*

Sustainably increasing the supply of local food requires an accompanying increase in demand so that producers can be profitable and sustain their operations. Taste preferences, particularly in children, can be expanded through exposure to different types of foods. For older children and

adults, this can also lead to training on how to prepare and preserve foods that thrive in our region.

This strategy comes at a time of reduced resources for this work. The 2025 elimination of the SNAP-Education program, including FoodWise in Wisconsin, caused a significant reduction in resources for nutrition education in Dane County. Still, some educators remain with UW–Madison Extension Dane County as part of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Broader initiatives to improve exposure to local foods will require additional programming and support from other institutions including nonprofits, school districts, and University of Wisconsin resources.

Actions:

- A. Expand local investments in school-based nutrition education programs.
- B. Increase distribution of resources and training for families to learn how to prepare local ingredients.
- C. Create a website that hosts digital resources available to consumers related to accessing nutritious local food.

Goal 3: Access

Improving access to affordable, healthy, and culturally-relevant food

While increased grocery bills tell part of the story, the cost of food is built from inputs at every stage of the supply chain. Barriers to access can also include travel distances, awareness of retail options, and availability of fresh, healthy, culturally, and dietarily appropriate options. Resident focus groups reinforced these themes: food purchasing is difficult for people with limited transportation and the lack of grocery stores in some neighborhoods results in the need to travel to multiple stores to get specific products. In a time with declining federal support for hunger prevention, these forces continue to drive more people to participate in emergency food.

Improving **access** can involve addressing the costs of food production and the proximity of retail locations that offer the food people need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw rapid innovation to create online tools to organize food delivery, change policy, and invest in community food access. While those resources are no longer available, this response demonstrated that it is possible to move the needle on food insecurity if the public rallies behind the solutions needed to do so.

It is also important to tie hunger prevention strategies to other social initiatives. One emerging strategy is the integration of "Food as Medicine" approaches, where medically-tailored meals and fruit and vegetable prescriptions are treated as essential healthcare that can lower costs and prevent illness. Other efforts can make the connection between preventing hunger and a strong economy with a productive workforce; emergency preparedness; and public health, security, and safety.

Strategies

3.1. *Reduce barriers to healthy food in systemically-excluded communities*

Increasing access to healthy food will require solutions tailored for specific neighborhoods and communities. People living in areas that have greater access to affordable options will be able to prioritize nutrition more than those living in places where fresh and healthy food options are not present. Achieving greater access will lower costs associated with poor health, increase the productivity and wellbeing of our workforce, and improve quality of life for the people of Dane County amid the current cost of living crisis.

Actions:

- A. Support increased investment and technical support for local programs that enhance retailer opportunities to procure and sell healthy food.
- B. Increase SNAP and WIC availability at retailers of all sizes to bring down costs and encourage stocking of the key items needed for a healthy diet.
- C. Provide technical support to emergency food providers that are interested in improving healthy options.
- D. Increase access to growing space and initial costs like seeds/starts, soil, and containers or raised beds that can help households grow some of their own food at home or in the community.

3.2. *Reduce the costs of producing and selling local food*

The largest driver of food costs are the labor and other inputs needed to produce food. Local investment in farm innovation and technology to reduce input costs will increase productivity, which can stabilize food costs and even create opportunities for local producers to gain more market share as they are able to meet institutional demands. There are also costs associated with selling food that get passed onto consumers, including costs of licensure or inspection, transportation, and more. Addressing these inputs will bring down food prices and increase access for everyone.

Actions:

- A. Explore ways to reduce costs for first-time business owners or scale fees based on projected revenues.
- B. Offset the cost of labor for small farm and food businesses by investing in social safety nets like affordable farmworker housing, affordable childcare, or healthcare options.

3.3. *Expand child nutrition initiatives*

The meals served to children at schools and daycares increase household food security by offsetting the demands of feeding children at home. Research shows that when children are well fed, they will score higher in academic testing, improve mental health, and reduce negative behaviors. Nutrition is critical during early developmental windows and ensuring children have access to good nutrition during these periods can help them meet learning milestones. Childhood also presents an opportunity to introduce new foods and create lifelong habits around food and nutrition. Expanding preference alongside nutrition education can encourage families to try regional foods and increase demand for those products.

Actions:

- A. Align school nutrition programs with larger public health goals of food security and dietary/chronic disease prevention while also connecting to benefits like behavior and learning.
- B. Support districts in maximizing the number of students who can access free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches.
- C. Increase participation in nutrition programs during out-of-school periods like afterschool and summer.
- D. Develop state expansions of child nutrition programs such as increased school meal reimbursements or universally-free meals.

3.4. *Increase access to federal nutrition programs*

Federal nutrition programs, including SNAP (FoodShare), WIC, senior nutrition programs, and more serve to support various segments of the population to buy the food they need. While eligibility criteria and benefit amounts are controlled by the federal government, the state and county agencies that manage cases in our area can continue to explore ways to improve user experiences. Improving nutrition program participation may also be possible by addressing common barriers such as lack of awareness of eligibility, insufficient benefit amounts, individual stigma around using public benefits, or the inability to participate due eligibility restrictions.

Actions:

- A. Explore state submission of federal waivers that could reduce barriers to application, participation, or program complexity.
- B. Increase support for nutrition incentives that can enhance the buying power of individuals using FoodShare and other programs, such as Double Dollars.
- C. Expand use of Senior Farmers' Market Vouchers.
- D. Increase education efforts around public benefits and where they can be used.
- E. Increase the number of vendors that accept different forms of benefit currency.

3.5. *Increase skills for personal food production, preparation, and preservation*

Historically, many families have looked to offset or reduce costs by growing their own food, prioritizing bulk cooking from whole ingredients, and using preservation methods to limit spoilage and waste. Focus group input reflected a desire for places to grow food, while 45% of survey respondents were interested in education on this topic and 49% expressed interest in access to community garden space. Individual control over one's food needs can provide a level of security for families during the growing season. Unfortunately these opportunities are time intensive and not always a viable solution for some families.

Actions:

- A. Engage school districts with nutrition education to replace resources lost with the recent elimination of SNAP-Education/FoodWise.
- B. Expand food pantry, community center, and school garden locations.
- C. Create educational pathways to learn culinary and food preservation skills, and subsidize costs of household equipment for students and families that have completed training.

Goal 4: Infrastructure

Enhancing the capacity of our regional food system

Dane County's food infrastructure is currently at an inflection point, defined by the upcoming launch of landmark facilities and the mounting pressures of market consolidation. The county is fortunate to have existing and emerging pillars of innovation to support the **infrastructure** demands of our food system. Unfortunately, these facilities alone will not be sufficient to meet the future needs of a growing community. Continued investment in food systems infrastructure will strengthen our economy, apply downward pressure to prices, and make Dane County more resilient to future threats.

Despite recent successes, long-term sustainability will remain a challenge as the need for shared infrastructure outweighs the currently available facilities. Commercial kitchen space for entrepreneurs and food repackaging remains a high need, as does operational support for equipment and facility maintenance at locations that prioritize accessibility. With new opportunities shadowed by economic threats like inflation and consolidation, new infrastructure investments today will pay significant dividends in the future.

Strategies

4.1. Support and optimize existing food system infrastructure

Dane County has existing assets that provide community-wide food system benefits. Strengthening and amplifying existing resources for storage, commercial kitchen space, and food business incubation will encourage entrepreneurship and expansion of infrastructure functions to fill community needs.

Actions:

- A. Inventory existing infrastructure and the demand for services to project capacity needs.
- B. Support expansion of existing facilities to meet the high level of demand.
- C. Develop systems to network and connect existing businesses with similar operations so they can share functions and services to reduce costs.
- D. Align institutional, governmental, and community policy and resources around the need for infrastructure investments.

4.2. Expand local storage capacity

Storage and distribution limitations hinder the growth of production capacity and consumer access to local products. New facilities for aggregation, including cold and dry storage, will allow small and mid-sized producers to store excess product, sell it wholesale, and extend the life of products that can be sold during non-peak seasonality. Advancements in season-extension infrastructure and processing—such tools for bulk freezing, vacuum sealing, or drying—will further allow the system to manage production gaps in winter or during climate-driven crop failures.

Actions:

- A. Increase access to decentralized spaces for medium-term cold and dry storage for the aggregation of local farm products.

- B. Advocate for state, federal, and private investment in new facilities that allow retail and institutional buyers to aggregate produce from a variety of farmers in order to fulfill their orders.
- C. Invest in proven and innovative technology to extend the growing season.

4.3. *Seek efficiencies in local distribution*

The 2020 Terminal Market study commissioned by the City of Madison identified an opportunity to improve last-mile distribution in the Dane County area. In the 2022 evaluation of recipients of Madison's Healthy Retail Access Program funding, multiple small and mid-sized retailers reported high costs of time and funds associated with frequent trips to Chicago and other locations to procure specialty products. To the degree that it is possible, businesses should explore ways to streamline shared distribution and transportation challenges.

Actions:

- A. Enhance distribution networks to create efficiencies in driving and route logistics for small farmers looking to offload products.
- B. Coordinate logistics for similar businesses to share transportation and distribution costs for recurring trips for specialty products.
- C. Explore innovative solutions to address last-mile distribution challenges, such as refrigerated lockers or local distribution points.

4.4. *Increase production space availability*

Commercial kitchen and production space for packaging and preparation of hot food is a limitation for many segments of the food system. From producers looking to find places for storage for mass produced products to entrepreneurs seeking to pilot new business ideas, access to production space is a constant challenge.

Some restaurants and faith-based institutions have kitchens that could function to support food businesses or recovery efforts during non-peak use hours. Similarly, some school buildings may have production spaces that are underutilized after school, on weekends, or in the summer. Forming relationships between those who need access to space and the existing spaces in our community that may support their needs can increase capacity on production.

Actions:

- A. Inventory underutilized production spaces that could be activated during periods of low activity such as a restaurant in the morning, faith institution on a weekday, or school in the summer.
- B. Invest in new and expanded spaces for processing of products to improve storage or create value-added products that have a longer shelf life.

Goal 5: Efficiency

Reducing and diverting waste in our food system

In a region defined by high production, the management of surplus food and organic waste represents a critical intersection of environmental stewardship, resource management, and social responsibility. By

redirecting high-quality food away from landfills and back to the community or the land, Dane County has the opportunity to transform an environmental burden into **efficient** resources for energy, nutrition, and health.

Unfortunately, the sheer volume of waste continues to outpace the current capacity of recovery and compost networks, which have the difficult job of managing food waste, ensuring safe food handling protocols for recovered food, and avoiding contamination of inorganic or non-compostible products in diversion programs. Stronger policy interventions and a stabilized gleaning network will reduce the environmental impact on our landfills and ensure that our community is strategic about reducing waste.

Strategies

5.1. Support individuals and organizations to reduce food waste

Community engagement input identified significant interest in reducing food waste from both businesses and individuals. For both groups, wasted food represents wasted money. Efforts to increase efficient food resource management therefore increase financial stability.

Actions:

- A. Share educational materials about the scope of community food waste in home and public settings.
- B. Provide materials to business operators to understand the financial and environmental benefits of reducing waste and donating food.
- C. Bolster training, education, and resources for schools to address cafeteria waste.
- D. Raise awareness of public resources and training on food preservation skills.

5.2. Increase capacity for food recovery efforts

While edible food that is discarded represents inefficiency in the food system, it also represents a significant source of potential donated food for the emergency food system. Providers can often accept fresh produce and other unadulterated foods, depending on condition and expiration. Prepared food can also be salvaged in some occasions through programs that are able to safely transport and repackage items. Gleaning is another form of food recovery where excess food and leftover or imperfect crops can be recovered from farms or businesses when it can no longer be sold. These strategies are critical for directing food that would be wasted to people who can benefit from it.

Actions:

- A. Update local materials that outline the legal, safety, and other considerations for donating food.
- B. Invest in the coordination of community-wide gleaning efforts with organizations such as Healthy Food For All, Second Harvest, and Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens.
- C. Support connections with producers and organizations looking into storage and processing capacity, like the FoodShed Partnership.
- D. Strengthen the coordination of the existing gleaning networks to improve logistics and more efficiently capture more food.

5.3. *Invest in tools to reduce commercial food waste*

One reason restaurants and grocers may choose to put food in the dumpster is that they don't have clear alternatives to get rid of it and they have continuous new stock coming in that requires limited shelf space. Developing new ways to help businesses connect with each other and with places that can glean or pick up their excess food can help offset commercial waste.

Actions:

- A. Develop tools for business-to-business inventory management to limit waste before food expires.
- B. Implement community-wide investments in volunteer recruitment for gleaning and processing of food that can be recovered for emergency food providers.
- C. Develop processes to repurpose bulk food that is close to expiration for use as livestock or animal feed.

5.4. *Divert organic material from the landfill*

Food is often thrown away when other options are not possible or the products are too close to expiration to be donated. This material ends up in the Dane County landfill where it can contribute to the creation of emissions like methane. Many strategies for diversion of organic waste from landfills are emerging in our community, including biodigesters, home compost, and public food scrap recovery stations. In many cases, this organic material can be collected and used for compost that can strengthen the soil for gardens and farms.

Actions:

- A. Expand promotion of existing food scrap drop-off locations.
- B. Develop programs to offset some of the costs for home composting operations.
- C. Work with homeowners and landlords to increase home composting opportunities, especially for renters.

Goal 6: Resilience

Strengthening our preparation for future food system challenges

Our food system is so large that it is vulnerable to threats from many directions. It operates in a fragile equilibrium that can easily be disrupted. We may not know what the next crisis will be, but advance planning can help us be **resilient** in the face of the unknown.

Climate change will present a clear challenge, as floods, droughts, high heat and other severe weather events can impact crop production and the agricultural workforce, while also introducing new pests and invasive species into our area. Meanwhile, political and economic volatility can cause shutdowns that disrupt nutrition assistance. For each of these potential threats, the question becomes: how can we tap into the capacity of our regional food system to keep people in Dane County fed during a crisis?

Strategies

6.1. *Strengthen and diversify supply chains by increasing local food production*

During pandemic-related supply chain disruptions, certain products became hard to find in grocery stores or prohibitively expensive for families that relied upon them. In response, strategies were developed to increase local production and invest in local producers to supply the emergency food system with fresh produce sourced from Dane County. This approach supported farmers while also increasing the availability of healthy, local products for food insecure members of the community.

Actions:

- A. Expand and make permanent programs that purchase local food for emergency feeding organizations, such as Dane County's Farms to Foodbank Initiative or the state's Food Security and Wisconsin Products Grant Program.
- B. Strengthen local production and supply chains for products that are imported into the region, when possible.
- C. Improve connection between Dane County's regional food system and neighboring regions to enhance coordination, reduce the supply chain points of failure, and increase redundancies of key functions during emergencies.
- D. Increase community-wide food production and donation through initiatives such as Grow Your Own, victory gardens, food pantry/faith-based gardens, and the national Plant a Row for the Hungry campaign.

6.2. *Align food system planning with emergency preparedness goals*

The strength of our food system can be measured by how successfully it is able to react to unanticipated challenges. Different threats can put unique pressure on supply chains and disrupt food access. Using existing tools for emergency preparedness in and out of local government will improve response and create new opportunities to bring resources into the area to support disaster recovery efforts.

Actions:

- A. Connect strategies from production and infrastructure goals into longer-term community-wide emergency preparedness goals.
- B. Expand membership of Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD) to include emergency food organizations, mobile food businesses, and agricultural producers.
- C. Identify Community Resiliency Hubs and ensure they have food distribution plans in place.
- D. Build off the success of FEED to Go and other initiatives to develop plans for deployment of mobile food businesses and grocery delivery to reach areas of the community that could be cut off from access to food in an emergency.
- E. Prepare for unique crises that would tax the system such as community-wide shortages of key products like infant formula, dairy, meat, or shelf-stable protein options.
- F. Inventory the critical food resources in our community and map out scenarios for community responses if one or more were made unavailable (e.g. flooding in a supermarket or fire at a food pantry).

6.3. *Anticipate the needs of a growing Dane County population*

Dane County's rapidly growing population will create new challenges to sustain existing levels of services and community food access, with those challenges amplified for emergency food providers and food insecure households. Population growth will occur through increased density in existing urban areas as well as continued suburban growth outside of Madison. New supermarkets, retail food outlets, and emergency food providers will need to be established to serve larger suburban population centers. Emergency food providers will need to plan for continued growth and the reality that even low levels of food insecurity can cause greater demand in a county with more people.

Actions:

- A. Identify future demographic trends and population growth to project future needs of emergency food providers.
- B. Connect municipal development plans with Food System Action Plan goals to align future development with food access considerations.

6.4. *Increase availability of food, funding, and volunteers for emergency food providers*

The most prominent organizations working to resolve household food crises for the people of Dane County are the network of shelters, food pantries, and food banks that make up our emergency food system. These organizations are the safety net for thousands of families in Dane County each month and yet they have seen tremendous growth in recent years that is, in many cases pushing capacity and stretching resources to the limit. The community response and support for these organizations will need to be elevated to meet future demands.

Actions:

- A. Develop coordinated strategies across all food access partners for community-wide donation campaigns of both financial resources and food.
- B. Support strategies for strengthening the capacity, training, and retention of volunteers while also recruiting new volunteers to offset the aging volunteer workforce.
- C. Develop and expand anticipatory mutual aid strategies and infrastructure such as direct person-to-person aid for food insecure families.

Goal 7: Prosperity

Improving opportunities for sustainable food system careers

Building a food system that better serves Dane County requires more than increasing production or improving access. It requires ensuring that the economic benefits of a thriving local food system flow back to the people doing the work. Shared **prosperity** can be achieved by creating pathways into food systems careers that are sustainable, well-compensated, and enrich the lives of the farmers, business owners, and workers that make local food systems possible. This approach will not just create a healthier, more productive workforce but also a thriving economy.

A food system in which workers earn living wages, entrepreneurs have genuine pathways to ownership, and businesses are accountable to their communities rather than to distant shareholders is not just more equitable, it is more resilient, more innovative, and more capable of weathering economic pressures.

These strategies provide a counterbalance to consolidation: a deliberate investment in the people and ownership structures that promote a food economy that is local, democratic, and places community first.

Strategies

7.1. *Reduce barriers to successful food business entrepreneurship*

There are a variety of up front costs required to develop a food cart, brick and mortar store, restaurant, product line, or other food business. While rent and labor costs are to be anticipated, there also can be other accumulating costs for business startup, taxes, technology needed for inventory control, and so on. When possible, programs should be developed to reduce the barriers to entry and help more entrepreneurs get started.

Actions:

- A. Support innovative business plans that account for fair wages while keeping customers aware of the true costs of consumption.
- B. Develop no-interest or forgivable loans and grant programs to offset startup fees for first-time food business owners.
- C. Help new businesses navigate the competitive commercial rent marketplace in Dane County by encouraging creative partnerships such as lease-sharing ventures, rental of commercial kitchen space in faith-based institutions, or connecting businesses to more affordable spaces in rural Dane County.
- D. Expand finance, marketing, and product development programming for small-business owners and entrepreneurs.

7.2. *Improve labor conditions and wages in food service and agriculture*

The true cost of producing and serving food involves more than the agricultural inputs. Hours of work involved in production and sale of food also factor into its retail price. Unfortunately, if priced too high it will displease customers but if it is priced too low, workers are not compensated fairly and businesses may be understaffed. This leads to employers finding it difficult to provide paid time off for illness, childbirth, or personal need. It also leads to producers applying environmentally costly inputs like pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers to boost farm yields and reduce manual labor costs. Creating sustainability in food system careers requires that these competing pressures are addressed. This will improve the long-term health of farmworkers and reduce foodborne illness, as employees would be less likely to go to work when sick. Reducing inputs to the minimum necessary will reduce potential health and environmental impacts for employees and consumers.

Actions:

- A. Provide living wages and benefits for farm laborers, food service workers, school food service, and other full- or part-time roles.
- B. Share impacts of overuse and incorrect application of chemical inputs such as pesticides on human health among farm-owners in the region.
- C. Expand programs that support farmworker housing in Dane County.
- D. Increase access to affordable healthcare, child care, paid family medical leave, and similar programs.
- E. Help employers and employees navigate “benefit cliffs” to set employees up for long-term financial success.

- F. Increase awareness of innovative ownership models like worker cooperatives, employee ownership and profit-sharing models that can be mutually beneficial for businesses and employees.

7.3. *Develop sustainable career pathways in food systems*

Despite other employment trends, there is typically a consistent demand for workers in food system roles. Some prospective workers may require vocational training to develop valuable and relevant skills. Training opportunities for programs like FEED Bakery and Madison College's culinary arts program expand opportunities for people to enter different types of food service work. Investing in these opportunities will allow businesses to find and retain quality employees while giving those employees the skills needed to grow within an organization.

Actions:

- A. Invest in vocational training, youth employment opportunities, and other professional development for agricultural and food service workers.
- B. Expand access to training and certificate programs in culinary arts, agricultural sciences, and related fields at the high school, technical school, and university levels.
- C. Improve access to health care, childcare, paid time off, and other employment benefits.
- D. Build personal finance programming for agricultural and food service workers and connect workers to community resources.

7.4. *Strengthen the food economy for farmers, small-business owners, and their employees*

Farmers and food businesses contribute greatly to the economic and cultural fabric of Dane County. Their continued business viability is essential for ensuring a sustainable food economy and healthy food system. As Dane County continues to grow, so too does the potential customer base for these businesses. Building new ways to connect farms and businesses with potential customers and markets will create new pathways for sustainable business growth.

Actions:

- A. Support value chain coordination across the supply chain from farming to composting activities.
- B. Invest in shared information technology that supports efficiencies in distribution, routing, and logistics including online marketplaces, ordering platforms, route optimization and distribution logistics, and enterprise resource planning software.

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Appendix A: Literature Review Summary

The Dane County Food System Action Plan was developed on a foundation of research into existing food system assessments, regional food plans, and peer-reviewed literature. Prior to community engagement, the Project Team conducted an extensive literature review that analyzed dozens of reports on local and regional food systems with particular focus on Dane County's agricultural, economic, and social context.

Review of Food Plans

The Project Team began the literature review process by gathering contemporary food plans from other cities. One key resource was the article [*Planning the foodshed: Rural and peri-urban factors in local food strategies of major cities in Canada and the United States*](#), which provided initial insight into other areas of the country that have undertaken similar efforts.

Through this research, the following community food system plans were identified:

- [Eating Here: Greater Philadelphia's Food System Plan](#) - February 2011
- [Calgary Eats! A Food System Assessment and Action Plan for Calgary](#) - May 2012
- [Food & Agriculture Policy Action Plan - City of Riverside, California](#) - May 2015
- [Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan](#) - September 2015
- [Metro Vancouver Regional Food System Action Plan](#) - 2016
- [Denver Food Action Plan](#) - June 2018
- [City of Phoenix 2025 Food Action Plan: Healthy Food For All](#) - January 2020

These plans provided insight into the different ways of communicating about food systems, how to organize context and recommendations, and the formatting and graphic design methods to make the information accessible while providing the necessary context. This also allowed for comparative understanding of different frameworks that could be used to inform the Project Team's shared understanding of the Dane County food system.

The review led to an initial outline of the Food System Action Plan and informed the organizing principles of the community engagement process. It also led to the development of the Dane County Food System Action Plan webpage that would serve as the hub for project updates and public communication during the planning process and ultimately as an interactive home to the content of the final Plan.

SWOT Analysis

Beyond municipal food plans, a variety of other reports and resources were used to enhance the Project Team's understanding of local food system conditions in a variety of sectors in Dane County and beyond. These materials are listed below.

To process this large volume of information, the Project Team developed a comprehensive Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis across the sectors of the food system, and became the analytical backbone of the planning process. The SWOT analysis served multiple functions:

- Establishing a shared understanding of Dane County's food system assets and vulnerabilities before beginning the community engagement process, ensuring that engagement activities were designed to test, deepen, and challenge the picture emerging from the literature.

- Developing themes to inform the goals, strategies, and actions presented in this plan.
- Organizing of supplementary materials used in the community engagement process, such as community engagement presentations
- Providing the evidentiary grounding for the existing conditions narrative
- Identifying key questions for the community engagement process.

Together, the literature review, SWOT analysis, and research process gave the Project Team an evidence-based starting point—grounded in both national research and local conditions—from which to design the community engagement process. This allowed for the development of a Food System Action Plan reflective of Dane County's unique food system context, challenges, and aspirations.

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Appendix B: Community Engagement Process

One of the core elements of this project was its comprehensive and inclusive community engagement process, which was used to serve dual purposes: (1) gather input about the Dane County food system from the people who live and work within it, and (2) forge new connections, relationships, networks, and collaborations that can be used to advance food systems work in the future.

The USDA Regional Food Systems Partnership (RFSP) grant established the following following objectives which initially established the scope of the project's community engagement process:

1. Collecting and analyzing information from past planning processes, existing plans, and concurrent studies assessing the functionality of the South Central Wisconsin regional supply chain.
2. Building a trust-based network of diverse collaborators, with whom to co-create and implement a community-driven, regional engagement process that incorporates the voices of producers and consumers who have been historically excluded from past planning processes.
3. Building upon the recommendations of the Pandemic Food System Study to complete an inclusive community engagement process and thorough assessment of the South Central Wisconsin regional food system.

This led to the development of a multi-faceted approach. The goal was to use a variety of engagement opportunities and formats to generate authentic opportunities for input that would appeal to more people. This included:

- Public presentations
- Focus groups
- Community-led sessions
- Community Navigator outreach
- Consumer and producer surveys

These activities were used to solicit input on the current state of the food system, desired changes for the future, and to achieve the second RFSP objective. Individuals who were connected through the engagement activities were offered the opportunity to stay informed on the project and have received updates about its progress. These networks will be further engaged to support implementation.

Public presentations

Between February and September 2025, the team carried out 14 in-person community presentations that reached over 630 individuals. These events were advertised through social media and host venue contact lists. This included town hall events that were open to the general public and other events that were held in conjunction with specific collaborators and their existing audiences, such as faith-based institutions and events organized around racial justice topics.

The format of each event varied based on venue and audience, but typically involved an informational presentation about the Food System Action Plan from one or more members of the Project Team followed by facilitated discussion with members of the audience. Feedback was recorded via note-taking and flip-charts. Responses were later coded for identification of themes.

Analysis of these events indicated that access, equity, and affordability were primary issues, followed closely by health and sustainability. Many people want food options that are more affordable and close by that can meet a variety of dietary preferences. Thematically, respondents' relationship to food prioritized family, community, and local sourcing.

Focus groups

To gather input from key stakeholder groups and underrepresented demographics, the Project Team coordinated specific community engagement focus group sessions. Through surveys and other engagement activities, individuals were offered additional opportunities to identify if they would be interested in supporting additional engagement activities. REAP Food Group and Second Harvest Food Bank were able to host focus groups for farmers and individuals experiencing food insecurity, including some sessions held in Spanish.

Community-led sessions

To achieve the community-building objectives of the RFSP grant while expanding engagement opportunities beyond existing relationships and networks, an innovative and decentralized approach was developed to equip community collaborators with the tools to host their own engagement sessions for groups of their own choosing. This increased authentic conversation while also developing leadership skills.

To support this, the Project Team developed a digital engagement toolkit that collected resources needed to host a session and facilitate a discussion about the Dane County food system. This included facilitation guides, printable flyers, and instructions for gathering and submitting session feedback. Individuals and organizations could apply for up to \$1500 to cover the cost of supplies needed to host an event, including food, gift cards, childcare, transportation, or print materials.

More than 25 community groups facilitated a session, allowing for greater input from groups that have been historically excluded from participation in food system planning such as racial/ethnic minorities, immigrants, people with language barriers, low-income residents, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities.

Community Navigator outreach

In order to further expand outreach, the Project Team invited a group of Community Navigators who were able to attend community events to share information about the Food System Action Plan project

and solicit real-time feedback from members of the public. A Community Navigator Coordinator guided and supported the team of Community Navigators to attend dozens of events including community meals, environmental and sustainability summits, public park gatherings, and festivals across 10 different Dane County municipalities.

This strategy served multiple goals:

1. Sharing about community food systems and the Food System Action Plan
2. Gathering input about the local food system via in-person suggestions and online surveys
3. Directing individuals toward other engagement events and opportunities
4. Enhancing relationships across different parts of the community
5. Building skills and expertise on food systems topics among the Navigators

Key feedback from the Navigators included one individual saying it forged “deep community engagement—building connections between people, neighborhoods, and the vital resources they need to thrive.” Another navigator shared that their “lived experience and leadership are essential to shaping a food system that reflects the real needs and strengths of the people it serves. Together, we’re creating space for collaboration, conversation, and collective action to ensure everyone in Dane County has access to healthy, culturally-meaningful food.”

Consumer and producer surveys

Two online surveys were developed to collect direct feedback on subjects related to food systems in Dane County. Surveys were made available online and shared via QR codes at in-person community engagement events, virtual meetings, and other settings. Surveys were open from February through Late August 2025.

Consumer survey: Soliciting input from the people who live, eat, and work in Dane County. This included 50+ questions:

1. Respondent demographics
2. food preferences and eating habits
3. Retail preferences
4. Open-ended questions regarding local food system experiences and involvement in Food System Action Plan implementation

With 650+ responses, the consumer survey data offered insight into consumer experience in the Dane County food system. Survey respondents included Dane County residents outside the city of Madison (as well as within), and representation across multiple ethnicities and races, various living situations, employment categories, and income levels.

Agricultural producer survey: Soliciting input from farmers and producers in Dane County and surrounding counties. This included 40+ questions about demographics, food production goals, retail operations, and challenges or needs.

The responses to the producer survey provided valuable insight into the gaps and opportunities for enhancing and expanding local food production and agricultural operations.

As survey responses were collected, the Project Team monitored demographics in real time to help inform targeted outreach for other forms of engagement and Community Navigator support.

Data analysis

Survey analysis was conducted by the Project Team, with additional support from Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin and UW-Madison Extension. Additional qualitative data analysis was used to collect themes from in-person events and open-ended survey questions.

In addition, Second Harvest compared the aggregate survey results and to the responses of individuals who indicated they were experiencing food insecurity. This allowed for explicit focus on the unique experiences, needs, and interests of people experiencing food insecurity, which otherwise may have been obscured in the full population. Elevating these voices was a key goal and aligned with the Project Team's identified values for the Food System Action Plan.

UW-Madison Extension contributed additional development of survey result cross-tabs, which were used by the Project Team to inform goal and strategy development as well as understand consumer preferences.

Glossary

Agrihood – A neighborhood with a working farm integrated into its urban or suburban surroundings that provides or sells its crops and other agricultural products to neighborhood residents and the surrounding community. (Source: Task Force on Farmland Preservation)

Commodity foods – refers to crops—primarily corn and soybeans in Dane County—grown for national and global feed, fuel, and processing markets rather than for direct human consumption in the region where they're grown.

Community gardens – An area of land or space managed and maintained by a group of individuals to grow and harvest food crops and/or non-food, ornamental crops, such as flowers, for personal or group use, consumption or donation. Community gardens may be divided into separate plots for cultivation by one or more individuals or may be farmed collectively by members of the group and may include common areas maintained and used by group members.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – A model of direct consumer sales where customers purchase an up-front share in a farm's annual production and then receive distributions of products as they are harvested throughout the season. This provides much-needed financial flexibility to farm operators.

Direct-to-consumer – A retail model where products are sold directly to the end user, bypassing retailers.

Farm Bill – The main federal legislation that dictates U.S. agricultural policy which is traditionally reauthorized every five years. This includes subsidies, US Department of Agricultural funding, and nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Farm stand – An open air stand for the seasonal sale of agricultural produce produced on the same Property.

Farmers' market An indoor or outdoor establishment involving sale of farm products, personally prepared food and handcrafted goods.

Farmland Preservation – A land use term typically encountered in rural areas, where programs offer tax credits to incentivize keeping farmland in production and protected from development.

Food insecurity – The condition that occurs when at least one person in the household experiences insufficient or uncertain access to food at some point in the year.

Food security – Access to sufficient food for a healthy and active life for all household members at all times.

Food systems – The individuals, businesses, processes, and infrastructure involved in feeding people. Food systems operate at multiple levels of society and connect and intersect based on geographic, economic, and cultural dimensions.

- **Local food systems** – Food sold to consumers in the same county or multi-county area that it was grown, raised, and produced. Farmers' markets, CSAs, farm stands, or direct sales to locally owned restaurants and retailers comprise local sales.

- **Regional food systems** – Food grown and distributed within a single or multi-state area through small and mid-scale wholesale channels to grocery stores, institutions, restaurants, and food businesses that need consistent volume.
- **National and international food systems** – The large-scale supply chains that move products from across the country and world into local grocery stores and restaurants regardless of where it was produced. Foods from other regions or countries that are imported into Wisconsin represent these national and international systems.

Gleaning - gathering food that would otherwise be wasted from farms, retailers, and businesses for the purposes of getting it to people who can use it.

Land banking – A strategy to acquire land for future development.

Last mile distribution – The final segment of a supply chain, moving products from an storage or aggregation facility to the end user.

Market garden – An area of land managed and maintained by an individual or group of individuals to grow and harvest food crops and/or non-food, ornamental crops, such as flowers, to be sold for profit. (Source: Farmland Preservation Task Force)

Missing middle infrastructure – A lack of mid-scale infrastructure for connecting regional growers and consumers. This could include storage, distribution, or retail space.

Supply chains – The network of people, activities, and infrastructure needed to produce and distribute a product.

Sustainable agriculture – An integrated system of farming practices that meet current food and production goals without sacrificing the future environment, soil quality, public health, or economic viability.

Systemically-excluded – Groups of people with a common identity who have not typically participated in civic decision-making processes commensurate with the proportion of the population they comprise. These groups have often experienced discrimination or marginalization. (Source: Farmland Preservation Task Force)

Urban agriculture – The production of food for personal consumption, market sale, donation, or educational purposes within cities and suburbs. This could be through growing plants in community gardens, market gardens, edible landscapes, and more or keeping animals like chickens or bees.

Value-added – Additions or changes made to a product that can increase its value to the end consumer and therefore merit a higher sale price. With agricultural products this can refer to combining multiple raw ingredients, preserving, or adding flavor to increase shelf life, divert waste, and increase sales potential.