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# An Investigation of Food System Localization Efforts in New York Municipalities: Projects, Practices and Policies

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**An Investigation of Food System Localization Efforts in New York  
Municipalities: Projects, practices and policies**

**Interview Report**

**Prepared for the NYS Health Foundation**

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**May, 2023**

# **An Investigation of Food System Localization Efforts in New York Municipalities: Projects, Practices and Policies**

## **Executive Summary and Key Findings**

This document is a component of a research project funded by the New York State Health Foundation from January 2022 to May 2023. The overall project goal was to better understand how we design and sustain resilient local food systems in New York from the perspective of elected officials. The project used three different data collection methods, interviews, a survey and spatial analysis. This document reports on the interview component of the project.

These are the main highlights from the interviews.

- Interviews were conducted primarily between February 2022 and July 2023, and included 38 full length conversations with town supervisors and village mayors.
- Access to local food varies, but food insecurity is generally considered to be an insignificant problem for most localities.
- Local food production in New York State continues to decline. There are fewer small farms, and many town officials consider the loss of small farms an issue of concern.
- Local food systems projects are rarely prioritized. However, as many food systems projects, such as pantries, community gardens and farmers markets are either low cost or have wider community benefits, they have proliferated. And these activities are often highlighted as important opportunities to build social capital.
- Collaboration matters. Having the structural mechanisms to support robust and evolving partnerships and engagement with internal and external collaborators is likely to improve outcomes. When infrastructure to support communication between officials is paired with active and in-person convening, robust partnerships tend to happen, with more measurable outcomes.
- Capacity to address food access and food insecurity is extended by collaboration, but to collaborate often requires some initial capacity. In the case of many rural places in New York State, there is very little initial capacity, which limits the power of collaboration.

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## **Introduction**

Arguments for a smaller, more local food system are long-standing, but have gained more traction in the face of massive farm bankruptcies (Huffstutter, 2020), processing facility closures (Valinsky, 2019) and, most recently, COVID-19-induced supply chain disruptions (Charles, 2020). While the agricultural land base in the Northeast has shrunk by nearly 70% (Griffin, Conrad, Peters, Ridberg, & Tyler, 2015), local producers witnessed a pandemic surge in demand as grocery stores were deemed unsafe, and local food was suddenly considered a better alternative (Karlin, 2020; Hadavas, 2020).

This has led to further support for robust investigations into the degree to which regions can become more self-reliant, suggesting that this could positively impact food security, economic development and ecological systems (Ruhf & Clancy, 2010; Ruhf, 2015). This trend has led to a diversity of approaches and intent (Griffin et al., 2015). Some scholars are immersed in self-provisioning studies of city regions (Thompson, Harper, & Kraus, 2008) and others focused on states (Peters, Wilkins, & Fick, 2007); additional research has focused on measurement of current local production (Conrad, Tichenor, Peters, & Griffin, 2017) and others with projected production (Peters, Picardy, Darrouzet-Nardi, Wilkins, Griffin, & Fick, 2016). Conner, Becot, & Imrie (2017) remark that spending food budgets locally can have a significant impact on the local economy, with numerous studies examining the economic benefit gained through investment in farmers markets (Hughes, Brown, Miuller, & McConnell, 2008), food hubs (Jablonski, Schmit, & Kay, 2016) and farm to school programs (Nurse, Thilmany-McFadden, & Gunter, 2011; Haynes, 2010; Tuck, Haynes, King, & Pesch, 2010). None of these studies have been performed in the midst of a crisis and as the fallout from ongoing COVID-19 spread continues to impact communities throughout New York State, exacerbated by the uncertainty of current and future climate challenges, it appears imperative that we reinvigorate efforts to address local food systems, and through the lens of municipal capacity.

For the purpose of this study, we focused on how municipalities have engaged in local food policy making. Granvik (2012), for example, presented a thorough evaluation of municipalities in Sweden, examining through survey analysis 218 municipalities' attempts to address localization of food systems; specifically, the investigation considered local policy, procurement guidance, communications with local producers and logistics. She found that 79% (113

municipalities) had already implemented one or more measures that promoted the procurement of locally produced food. As no similar studies have been replicated in the United States, this study sought to address this research gap.

Relatedly, there is growing support for a broad based food justice movement that rejects the inequities of conventional food systems. Notably Granzow & Beckie (2019), in their study of a neighboring Alberta, Canada food system initiative, suggest the need to balance support for incremental changes to the conventional system (which will not demand great effort nor great change, but will achieve small wins), with support of radical and transformative actions (which will often fail to diffuse or scale, but will continuously expand our acceptance of what is possible).

This project investigates how those forces - a pragmatic desire to ensure incremental improvements and a more radical demand for wholesale change - shape municipal response to food system localization.

### **Interview Results**

Interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2022. Based on a database of local municipalities in New York State, we sorted municipalities by county into their Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) region in order to attempt to sample from different regions throughout New York State. For this interview series, we selected the MidHudson Valley, the Capital District, the North County, Western New York and Central New York and conducted 38 hour-long interviews.

*Table 1: Interview totals by region.*

	March	April	May	June (and beyond)
Capital District	2	5	3	2
North Country		6	3	
Western New York				4
Central New York			1	1
MidHudson		2	2	7

Total	2	13	9	14
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The interview protocol is available in Appendix A. Appendix B provides additional interviewee information including our responsibility to maintaining their confidentiality and specifying data protection.

Food consumption.

Based on our interviews with municipal officials, we found that access to food varies considerably. For more than half of those we interviewed, food insecurity is not perceived to be a crisis that requires a policy response:

*“We try to be innovative and forward thinking. Food security hasn’t been a fire that has come up.”*

*“Nobody’s talking about food. What people are talking about wanting to do is hire an economic development director and director of housing...”*

In some regions, supervisors also shared their awareness of the inequity of the food insecurity problem, which often depends on the particular ethnic makeup of their place:

*“Food insecurity is working class - it is pretty silent - latin and mexican populations. [We have made] great strides in outreach to those populations. Used to be African American food insecurity - now it is latinx populations.”*

*“...there is an active food need, and a large undocumented immigrant population... lots of folks below the poverty line. Also students. School district partner[s] with us on food programs. And during COVID, [we needed] a lot more food - needed a lot more partnerships.”*

Complicating food insecurity further, there has been a continuous loss of small independently owned groceries over time, particularly in rural regions that historically relied on small general stores for staples:

*“People just kind of gave up and walked away because they weren’t getting the income. It wasn’t sustainable for them to have a little restaurant or little tiny grocery stores.”*



We also found that very rural places and very urban ones share similar struggles to provide adequate access to residents. Low access to grocery stores is characterized in the scholarship as “food deserts”, and supervisors also tend to characterize regions with food access concerns in that way as well.

For those in rural areas, respondents suggest that their residents have to drive farther than the historical norm, particularly if they need more affordable options, or use convenience stores to fill in the gap in access to groceries. Convenience stores rarely offer fresh or frozen produce, nor generally provide nutritious grocery options; and town officials are unlikely to garner the political clout to compel larger groceries to locate in their region with a strong economic incentive to do so:

*“...we're kind of at the mercy of the three or four chains [that] operate grocery stores in this part of the state.”*

One supervisor in particular has spent years actively recruiting potential grocers to her region; another New York State village mayor shared that his community has spent the better part of two decades trying to convince a large chain grocery to relocate within the village.

Moreover, in addition to convenience stores, a perceived gap in access to affordable groceries is often filled by Dollar General stores, a chain that has proliferated in New York State over the past decade. Many supervisors expressed some frustration about this reality, as these stores rarely offer healthy or fresh options:

*“Better than nothing. [The Dollar General] doesn't sell produce. Mostly canned and boxed. They do have a decent line of groceries.”*

*"90% [of residents] are for [the Dollar General] ... they are driving long distances for groceries [otherwise]. The only contention - the people who are living next to it. And the school, too."*

Many places have organized their own farmers markets as one response to access to healthy, nutritious and local food. Frequently, even if they have not created a farmer’s market, municipal officials are familiar with a location in a neighboring village or town. Still, farmer’s markets are not perceived as an answer to concerns about affordable food access, as they are widely perceived to be unaffordable to many. Farmer’s markets are also characterized as a suboptimal

market access point for small producers, as they are challenging to service and not a reliable income source. Often, a small community finds it challenging to lead what could be a fairly significant project. Furthermore, there is evidence that traffic at farmer's markets has stagnated.

*"No farmers market. Attracting vendors is hard - they would rather go to bigger places."*

Still, there are exceptions. Several town supervisors and village mayors told us that their farmer's markets have historically been well-supported and are robust contributors to the local economy:

*"[Our farmer's] market has been an economic catalyst! Most of the shops were closed on Sundays [before the market located there]."*

*"If you are going to have a successful farmers market - you have to have a good vendor with a good product. People want what they want."*

Relatedly, many New York State towns and villages report having community garden projects, and municipal officials are often excited to share their efforts. Like farmer's markets, they are often envisioned as an answer to diminishing social capital, not as a solution to food insecurity.

*"Yes, we have a number! Co-op garden - it isn't broken up into plots - everyone is growing and everyone is sharing the entirety of the garden. Shared harvest. It is also shared with the community garden."*

*"...most people have the ground around their homes to have a garden, but what we have done is we've thrown our efforts into our Community flower gardens so everywhere that we have a welcome sign, we have a Community garden!"*

When asked, supervisors and mayors also report that there are many food pantries, sometimes operated by the municipality, but also frequently managed in partnership with local churches and nonprofits. In many regions, even if the overall food insecurity rate is perceived to be low, access to the food pantry is indispensable, particularly during crisis:

*"There are well over 100 folks accessing the pantry... COVID exacerbated the problem, but the regional food pantry compensated for the increased demand."*

Some places - New York's North County region is a good example of this - there are regional networks that supply food for pantries. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were told that food insecurity issues actually improved in many places in New York.

*“During the pandemic, the stimulus checks helped. Supply of food was abundant.”*

Supervisors that we spoke to reported shifting their concerns from issues related to the pandemic, to the pressing concerns of home heating and the impact of inflation on their residents’ household costs.

### Food production.

Our interview participants were distributed across five different REDC regions, a very large potential universe of respondents, reflecting a significant proportion of New York State. Therefore, many of our participants represent rural regions; in fact, many had personal histories that involved agriculture in some way.

*“I grew up on a dairy farm...also raising pigs, chickens, turkeys, etc. Lots of direct sale ag.”*

As such, they were often very eager to describe historical trends in local land use, many of which they struggled to address, and the impact of changes in agricultural production.

*“...most of the farmland has been bought up by one family and that's to produce corn.”*

*“Dairies have gotten bigger and there are fewer of them.”*

*“We used to have farms - lots of small producers. Now we don't - only one or two left.”*

*“Two big dairy farms - over 600 each. Also a chicken farm. Several of these farms used to have farm stands - but they stopped doing that...”*

*“I think, years ago...which was back in the early 1900s [residents] had their own farms and they fed themselves. Could it be done [now]? I'm sure it could, but most of the farms that I know have been turned into housing developments.”*

Nonetheless, many officials shared with us their ambitions to leverage their assets, which, in rural places, is their ability to grow food. Often, they attempted to do this by addressing the gaps in the food processing system:

*"Can we subsidize farms to support a safety net for food? ...It could be a win win. If [we] could get a big enough grant, they could subsidize, store and process food for ongoing food insecurity or for catastrophe."*

*" [We have an [active] food scrap recycling program - [a neighboring town] did one in their town park - they thought that was great - and we replicated that model. We hired someone to figure it out. Partnered with [another local town]. [We also have] a bin at the farmers market, and compost give back days."*

*"We want to make it as easy as possible for farmers to diversify... because you really want to keep the farmer economically viable."*

Moreover, even when supervisors are not directly involved in solutions to production challenges, they often act as cheerleaders of what they perceive as important revitalization efforts.

*"The three [historically] biggest dairy farms ...[are] not milking a lot of big herds anymore, but they're raising cattle, they're growing grains for the local distilleries that have popped up... they've diversified. One guy, his family's got a creamery so they are shipping out some milk and getting it processed and then they're making ice cream and it's wildly successful."*

*"The [farm] families, you know, [are a] combination of both families aging out [because of] the cost of operations, [and] you know the limited access to markets, I would say. But... they have enjoyed a resurgence recently in specialty farming ... a lot of the farms have made that switch over to organic but also we have seen a fair amount of cannabis."*

*"[We] used to be an agricultural region, when I was a kid. There were more dairy farms. The farms they have now are beef and mixed agriculture. ...there's no longer a dairy farm here. But a lot of goat and sheep [farms] popping up - poultry and pigs, too."*

*"...there are a lot of startup farms - not a lot of experience, but they want a lifestyle change. Pastured poultry is a big one. Lots of folks without a land base, starting out with some small self-sufficient farming. I think many of these folks don't want to make a living off of it. But producing their own food has driven their desire to find a bit more land."*

*"Microbreweries are popping everywhere."*

Supervisors spoke of their efforts to engage with collaborators, a topic that will be covered in greater depth in the next sections. However, with regard to agricultural production specifically, many New York places spoke of their appreciation of their local Amish communities,

considering them a kind of revitalization force in their communities, as they often tread lightly on the land while contributing to the local food system. They frequently purchase and rebuild deteriorating homesteads, for example, and actively farm and conserve land.

*“Agriculturally, it is pretty simple here - most everything is close by. The Amish have contributed a lot to our own food access.”*

*“I’m happy to have [the Amish] in the sense that they saved a lot of farms from falling down.”*

*“The Amish and Mennonite farmers coming here has been a godsend. Many contractors. Woodworkers. Baked goods and produce. They have been a tremendous boost [to our community].”*

#### Food distribution.

We also asked about distribution, particularly the kinds of distribution and supply chains that enable local products to access local markets. We found little evidence of local food supply chains, nor much evidence of local sourcing. Indeed, many were perplexed by this question, and those who weren’t relayed that their region relied solely on the large national distributors, such as Sysco.

*“We don’t have a distribution of ANYTHING...food, doughnuts or auto parts!”*

#### Perceived future of the local food system.

When queried, the vast majority of respondents insisted that they are optimistic about the state of their local food system. They often described their residents as “resilient” and “thoughtful”. Having experienced the pandemic often further bolstered their belief in the strength of their communities, perceiving it as a challenge that they had successfully faced and overcome. There was often a palpable sense of pride expressed about their constituents, their landscapes and their collective ability to overcome challenges. When asked about their community’s ability to face future challenges, they were eager to explain why they were optimistic:

*“Local municipalities won’t be affected. Local communities did fine [during the pandemic.]”*

*"Yes... because our local people are creative and persevere and ... being able to do the things that...you know... it's rural communities tend to be a little more apt to be."*

*"People in [my region] are more self-sufficient. [People elsewhere] getting away from their roots. We should be educating more folks to become more self-sufficient."*

*"We are in good shape. Very fortunate - specialty meat and two groceries and two convenience stores. Farmer's markets not so much, but still okay. There was a big [pandemic] need - but we seem to be meeting needs now."*

Our respondents were frequently thoughtful about long range trajectories, too, carefully considering the state of the broader national and global food system and their place in it.

*"I am optimistic that the food supply won't get worse...Not so optimistic about the type of food choice... because, like I said, small grocery stores can only survive so long and the Dollar Generals in the world ...they're going to come on."*

*"I am [optimistic] with some hesitation. I mean, I do think you know, every year, I get a sense from our medical services and food pantry and whatnot that food insecurity is growing in our county even though [we] might be considered to be a typical suburban well off [place]...We know there are literally hundreds of families [that are food insecure]."*

Numerous supervisors also highlighted the need to address the quality of the food their residents have access to:

*"It's going to take local effort. It's not going to come from the top down, and it's not going to be New York state saying here you go we're going to make sure that your community gets ... fresh food."*

*"I mean one of the things that I toy with and I don't know how to do is: can I get the Dollar General to offer fresh food?"*

*"To have the brightest future, the community needs better access to better food."*

They also articulated their own efforts to balance difficult issues facing municipalities.

*"We can be more self-sufficient...my community came together...Just the rise of backyard gardens...lots of folks turned to their own growing. I saw it crop up -*

*and it was big. On our community facebook page, [the community] shared food - lots of leftovers."*

*"Realistically, there will be fewer sole income generating source farms in existence - ideally, I would want a 50 cow dairy to still be a viable economic model. From the perspective of a municipal leader, there will be a lot more small-scale stuff coming to fruition...and we need to support that."*

*"Right to farm laws maybe don't go far enough - they aren't treating the modern farmer - no one is getting into 200 acre farming - they simply can't."*

*"The gatekeeping of farming is problematic - we need to acknowledge that farming has gotten a lot more diverse. It looks like a lot of different things."*

*"You have to have the desire and the vision to want to save the farms. It is the biggest industry that we have...But it's also heritage."*

### Food projects.

As described above, towns and villages address food issues in multiple ways. Food production challenges associated with small producers and farmland development concerns tend to compel towns to initiate community garden and farmers market projects; food access challenges tend to produce pantry and food drive projects. In our sample of 38 full interviews, local elected officials were asked to describe the kinds of projects they were engaging in, and slightly more than half identified some of these conventional pathways. Seventeen elected officials could not name any food related projects that they or their town were currently engaging in, and for many, the issue often came down to what they could reasonably provide for residents, considering their capacity.

*"You know, without a good tax base and with a rural community... we don't have businesses, we don't even have a stoplight."*

*"If there were more money, we would engage in projects."*

Still, town officials were often eager to engage peripherally around the issue of food, capitalizing on food's ability to draw folks in regardless of their levels of food insecurity. Several spoke to us about their plans for park days, festivals and other events that serve as outreach to residents in an attempt to better understand their needs.

*"I'm doing a big day in the park, which is a big event at our town Park, a few miles down...we do it for the residents of the town... as well as other residents,*

*where we have fireworks...some food trucks. I've been planning that. That is probably where I want to get a better feel for what the community could need if I have a Town booth setup where I can find out... you know... if there's more services we can offer and I'm hoping to see more people by getting out there in the community....”*

*“Food can bring a community together, whether you're cooking, gardening or you're... at the farmers market...Because there's a connection when you're feeding people.”*

Local elected officials often paired programs together, seeking to find synergies that would benefit their residents. For those who had experienced pre-COVID issues with food insecurity, the pandemic was a way to leverage additional support for vulnerable populations:

*“Our neighbor is a [Native American] reservation, so we get free breakfast and free lunch. During COVID, so much food was distributed!...The lunch program requires a playground, which they have, so they expanded their summer program to feed over 50 kids. Some days 80 -90 kids!”*

*“There are alternatives to the delis and the convenience stores - [we have an] hispanic truck grocer. It's a huge van - an actual market! He has visited a number of times. Empanadas -specific to [local migrant] culture. Those products are unique and hard to find - and it comes to them.”*

*"Food isn't part of the conversation in town governance...we are much more focused on infrastructure, zoning and related issues. But...we work closely with Kiawanis on food distribution projects...for addressing food insecurity issues, [with] backpack programs."*

### Challenges.

This study was also interested in understanding whether municipalities are experiencing challenges, particularly with regard to food access and production efforts; whether those challenges were intractable problems, and how towns had been addressing them; and whether there were any factors that predisposed towns to more severe challenges. Twelve of our interview participants stated that they did not face any challenges to solving food security problems in their towns; many of these stated earlier that they did not perceive a significant food security problem, and so it did not require a solution. Nevertheless, others offer a long list of challenges that they face, including challenges associated with farmland protection (and



associated issues with infrastructure), politics, costs and quality of available food, as well as funding and resource scarcity.

Those communities who maintain a strong historic (or cultural) attachment to agriculture frequently viewed their options for to support farms and the farming community as a key challenge:

*“Whether it’s in NYS with the ag brewery or other initiatives, there is an effort to broaden agriculture. In the past it was a response to necessity - there was no nefarious plan to go into monocultures - it was what the markets drove. Now we ask how we can ask folks to diversify? What can we do to keep the land open and available? The breweries [for example] incentivize keeping land open.”*

*“We need some infrastructure...the county food systems coalition and all these nonprofits [supporting] farmers, we need just basic food infrastructure, mainly being refrigeration or freezer storage infrastructure....Because, as a small example, you have a farmers market, who is willing to work with its vendors to donate food at the end of the market day...But... the farmers markets done on Saturday, but the ...town food pantry also only happens on Saturday morning and so there's no refrigeration infrastructure to hold things until they can be distributed... Which is a massive problem. We need that sort of basic infrastructure to hold any sort of donations from farms.”*

In other cases, identifying the households who need additional food support was one of the biggest challenges:

*“[We] can’t get to the people that you really want to get to - [in] very rural areas. Those are the kinds of people that we are trying to get to.”*

*“There is certainly a percentage of our population, I would not say it's [around] 50% that eats at places like [local high end grocery] [and buys] pork chops at the indoor farmers market. There is a large percentage of our population... I would say, probably over 50%... that that simply can't afford to.”*

While we did not ask directly about the impact of political parties on local food systems projects, policies and practices, it almost always was addressed during interviews. Some supervisors expressed frustration at failed attempts to attract diverse populations into the policy process; others struggled to respond to competing needs that they perceived to be made more challenging by political priorities.

*“If I were to bring up if I were to use the term food security in a conversation, for example...that would be a red flag for some people.”*

*“Everyone tells you less is better [including] government, but then everyone wants you to provide all the services and keep taxes down. And when you go door to door the number one thing people say is don't raise my taxes and ...everything new adds [taxes]... or raises taxes.”*

*“We have a lot of poverty, but we are not considered under the poverty level because we have a lot of rich second homeowners. .... They could vote up here... because their vote [means] a lot more if they were voting on the blue line up here then down in the city. But the unintended consequence is that the really impoverished community that we live in no longer shows up as impoverished as soon as you get 10 people who are millionaires.”*

Several supervisors spoke at length about their concerns regarding the cost and quality of food available to their residents. They considered their own access of inferior quality to those of their (more urban) neighbors, and it was often perceived to be more expensive.

The most frequently cited challenge to municipal food systems planning was funding. Many places considered themselves unable to take on some of the challenges they faced because they did not have access to capital, resources, or programs to build better access. They were often reluctant to ask their constituents for more in taxes.

*“You know everyone's cost of living is going up everyone wants more money because their cost of living is going up... for us to generate more money, we have to raise taxes that in turn makes costs continue to go up it's a vicious cycle”*

*“We're a very poor village, so I can't really put much village money into these projects.”*

*“Money ... to start a grocery store! We really need a grocery store.”*

*“If there are programs, we haven't heard of them. Northern New York is a bit forgotten.”*

*“The initial investment [to opening a store] is huge. Hard to do. Just like being a dairy farmer. The problem is too high risk. Unless you have a co-op or a small general store - you can't compete with Stewart's. Their buying power with Pepsi is enormous.”*

Lastly, town officials often consider New York State regulations an obstacle. In some cases, they are in the midst of wastewater treatment facility construction or upgrades and experienced contentious interactions with state level officials. They were blunt in what they perceived to be institutionalized unfairness:

*“If you have enough money, you can get around the regulation.”*

*“Federal law lets people beat up on the village. NYS gives preference to religious institutions. [Villages] shouldn’t have to bend over backwards in, for example, the siting for cell towers. Takes away [power] from municipalities.”*

In other cases, they considered their own zoning codes outdated and were in the midst of rewriting them to better accommodate small producers and entrepreneurs or non-food-related issues such as affordable housing.

#### Tradeoffs and synergies.

Often, and particularly at the municipal level, managers are forced to multisolve in ways that occasionally result in trade-offs, but also occasionally produce synergies. This is a challenging question to pose to supervisors as it frequently compelled them to explain in detail about triggering events or experiences. Half of our participants offered no examples of tradeoffs. Five talked at length about the impact of the Dollar General grocery chain on their communities:

*“So they [Dollar General] have [expanded their selection] since they first came there ...they have changed to add more nutritional foods...or frozen foods.”*

*“We have a Family Dollar. They are a cheap solution for poor grade food. ...which is unfortunate. Some of this requires high regulations. We used to have a diner where the Family Dollar is - we lost it and gained a Family Dollar.”*

When Dollar General approached [our town], there was a lot of animosity. They did a lot of research - worried about what they are selling. We didn’t have zoning - a quarter of the parking lot is in the town - the rest was in the village. They demanded changes to design and got them - they forced them to give them money for sidewalks. More people wanted affordability. But others didn’t. Ultimately, they are stuck with a Dollar General."

*“There’s some acceptance for a venue [for food retail, etc.] - but you have to meet multiple needs.”*

One supervisor suggested that the goal of the town's budget should be to mitigate the problems associated with tradeoffs, to the best of that board's ability. They aim to avoid situations where they are forced to make uncomfortable tradeoffs by embracing appropriate and creative planning.

*“And I hate to say that, but it's a truism, and because first, a town, the municipality, doesn't own the land, we own some parcels of land because of something dump or whatever else you know but technically [...] we're supposed to be in the business of attraction, giving incentives.”*

Others addressed a perceived mismatch between their town's priorities and that of their county and economic development agencies:

*“Economic development has been rather disjointed and it's run by the county for the most part...one or two of the larger towns do have their own economic development agencies but they're rather limited in their funding and their resources. ...But the economic development enterprises within the county have been more focused on warehouse distribution centers... we're sort of a victim of geography when it comes to that.”*

Particularly in regions that are balancing support of small producers with access to affordable food, supervisors stated that that negotiating these tradeoffs is a way of life:

*“Most people want to shop local...but i'm actually one of the people that can't always afford it. I always try to support our local farmers and vendors...[but it is challenging.]”*

The land - how it is used, who can afford to own it, and how rules are created that shape future use - creates significant challenges for towns; many pointed out that there are embedded tradeoffs associated with the rapid expansion of renewable energy throughout New York State. While most are enthusiastic about the potential of renewables, they are often very concerned about the impacts solar fields and wind turbines have on their localities. Several in New York's North Country region explained to us that they have been asked to trade off their communities' well-being multiple times over generations: first as forests were cleared for farming, then when agriculture struggled against development. Now, the construction of renewables provides some solace to struggling farmers but at the expense of agriculture. One suggested that subsidies provided to solar and wind result in a disincentive to support the hydroelectric infrastructure already in place in their region.

Conserving land to retain agriculture also creates tradeoffs, as it limits where towns can steer economic development. On the other hand, limiting economic development to particular zones tends to make their communities more attractive. And attractiveness itself brings with it a suite of dilemmas, as real estate prices rise and residents find that they have been priced out of the community. Supervisors point out that finding the adequate balance is an unending struggle:

*“We can sell our property for more, but where do people go? How can we keep our highway guys employed, if they can’t afford to live here?”*

### Internal collaboration

While this study began as a way of examining local food system projects and policies, one of the more robust and complementary outcomes of our investigation is data we gathered about how stakeholders collaborate at the municipal level. Of those we interviewed, all reported having a traditional town or village board, which includes a town supervisor or village mayor and a board of council members. 8 of our interview participants do not have zoning, planning and zoning boards of appeal; the remainder did, but often expressed frustration at the challenges of keeping all boards adequately filled. Conversations with supervisors in the Tug Hill region of New York State suggest that at least one novel solution to the management of multiple boards is to regionalize zoning boards, particularly for smaller rural communities who do not regularly require zoning boards.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted how local governments engage with their constituents in some predictable ways, such as challenging the ways in which they would inform, share and engage with their constituents when in-person meetings were suspended. As will be discussed in more detail in a later section, external collaboration altered (sometimes for a significant period of time) the ways in which supervisors from neighboring townships engaged with one another.

Nevertheless, there were some unanticipated and positive collaboration outcomes as a result of the pandemic. The demographic changes wrought by pandemic disruption, in particular throughout the Hudson Valley region and specifically characterized by residents fleeing more urban areas and settling in rural or suburban communities, created some opportunities for replenishing pools of volunteers:

*“Well that's kind of interesting. We historically had problems getting volunteers, but what's happened with people selling their houses and new people coming in, we have ... new people that have moved into the area want to be involved and they're showing up to be on committees. We have more volunteers coming forward for committees than we have had in years. And we're delighted!”*

*“It's not so much just having people, but you have people with different backgrounds and... different strengths and....so it's really quite exciting!”*

*“[We have] no trouble getting people to sit on committees...maybe it's a multiplier effect of folks feeling welcomed.”*

Still, most of those we spoke with shared their ongoing struggles to recruit and retain volunteers, as well as their commitment to ongoing outreach efforts. Stated simply: often it is really hard to find volunteers. Paradoxically, for those supervisors who prioritize engagement with their constituents and consider a meaningful part of public service, volunteer recruitment is one the most challenging aspects of their role as well as one of the most critical predictors of effectiveness.

*“... connections are what makes it work.. connections are what make things go forward.”*

*“Getting volunteers is really hard...I have a core group [of volunteers] that supports me.”*

In some cases, supervisors have innovated to establish robust groups of volunteers who feel heard and supported in their efforts:

*“And so you have someone who's able to do the work of putting together all the agenda materials, take all the minutes...And I think that's pretty key... like providing at least that level of resource so volunteers aren't completely overwhelmed because they're already doing a lot, so I think that's important.”*

*“I make sure that [committees] are populated by volunteers that are seen and heard - they have big ideas and [they want to be] seen and heard. We can be more nimble, because we are smaller, but still, we can [also] be inefficient. ...I think about it all the time.”*

*“I love what I have been able to do...[It's] all about partnerships. Working together and partnerships. Listening should be the new word for government. I started a series of listening sessions - with the hispanic community, the*

*restaurant community. I ask people to come in and tell me what's on their mind."*

*"Hamlet planning groups formed because more and more people wanted to be involved. There are only so many seats for folks to contribute - so add more."*

Still, several long-serving supervisors suggested that they strive for a balance, particularly when it comes to volunteer engagement:

*"You can't really legislate it. And you can't really get in the way."*

*"But...no one wants to serve. There's obviously a demographic and generational shift in the community so we've lost a lot of our volunteer base."*

Several town supervisors suggested that the pandemic had also prioritized changes to how they engage with their constituents, particularly with regard to technology. They rapidly re-prioritized email lists and social media, and many supervisors shared the initial difficulty they faced in streaming their town board meetings through virtual platforms. Many of the innovations that were sharpened by the emergency context of a pandemic will likely remain; in practice, this means that there is enhanced access and transparency to government deliberations, but there are far fewer constituents showing up in person to board meetings.

*"You know, mostly you hardly see anybody at the board meeting, ... and now that we record meetings even [when] they don't show up, they can watch it later. Very lonely at board meetings."*

*"I mean...unfortunately... like everything else, we have very small community involvement, when it comes to town board meetings. Generally there's grumblings but there's no one to show up to speak [about] what they think should be done."*

One supervisor, having been in office for a long time and negotiating numerous complex issues around food access, food insecurity and the preservation of local food systems, has extracted some important lessons:

*"The one thing that I recognize is that the accessibility of government - the immediacy of government - at the local level is so important. It's not just government. It's community. It was very important for me to create stability. ...out of that comes positive things. You can think about things and grow and be sensitive. ...We don't have turf wars with the town. People feel that stability."*

## External collaboration

Overall, we found that those town supervisors who were actively engaged in collaboration efforts within their communities were also active in nurturing robust connections with their neighboring towns and external partners.

*“Collaboration is huge. The Association of Towns has trainings...usually in NYC... and the networking there is enormous.”*

*“[Our] board of supervisors meets every single Monday. We always call each other. We share often...we share employees. Our assessors are the same. We share code enforcement officers. We have each other's cell numbers.”*

*“I dealt with a pretty serious natural disaster in my first year. Lots of help available... My predecessors also work for the governor’s office. Everyone helped! A long term recovery group was available...the United Way, offering housing assistance and Catholic Charities provided help, too.”*

*“I think we have a good relationship with our county and the state officials, they do check on us on a regular basis, I know the county executive here.”*

*“[Our board of supervisors is] one of the best groups of people I have ever had the pleasure of working with.”*

*“I personally think that people here are much more collaborative by nature, I think it's a New York state thing.”*

Unlike for internal collaboration, technological changes wrought by the pandemic were often useful to those engaging with external partners and are likely to continue. Some boards of supervisors met in-person throughout the pandemic, as part of their effort to address an ongoing emergency, particularly around food access and food insecurity concerns. Even when meetings were forced to shift to remote platforms, they leveraged complementary technologies to communicate regularly, using either texting applications or email chains.

*“To be able to still participate in the meeting and texting immediately to see if we can get together and talk about that has, I think, also contributed to our greater degree of cooperation ... the higher degree of connectivity [makes it] easier to get in touch with each other.”*

*“There are some organizations [supporting collaboration] - town clerks association and town supervisors, highway - they meet quarterly. They share*



*information. There are email groups, too. If somebody has a question, they can compare notes.”*

Our interview pool contained at least 5 town supervisors that had been serving for more than 10 years, and there was evidence of mentorship among town supervisors:

*“I try to work with [newer supervisors] to help give them options and figure out how to do this so yeah we collaborate and it's been ...it's been successful on a lot of levels.”*

Nevertheless, for some local government leaders, collaboration carries with it risks (frequently associated with political party affiliation) or is just harder to manage, with little clear payoff:

*“[Collaboration creates] friction. Easier to go your own way.”*

*“We have our own little political entities - we are like fourth graders on a playground.”*

*“At the town and village level, it's good - at the board of supervisor level, it is a lot harder [to negotiate political differences]. I worry that politics makes it hard for him [to participate] at the county level.”*

#### County, State and federal policies.

Finally, we asked town officials about the kinds of county, state and federal policies that impacted their communities and their local food systems. Most did not consider the federal government a particularly important partner, nor did they consider federal programs particularly impactful on the local level. The exception were those town supervisors who manage rural, agricultural places. Inflation and gas prices are going to deeply impact the food and farming system, several suggest, and they insist that the government needs to address this, for the safety of our food supply. This would involve continuing involvement in agricultural commodity support as well as stronger support for smaller farms “...to make sure that [small farmers] are getting fair prices that will cover their expenses to keep their farms going.”

Their opinions of county and state policies were more nuanced, and were often perceived as moderately effective when it came to food systems work. There was appreciation, for example, about the scale of the problem faced by the counties when attempting large scale farmland

preservation work, but also of the reality that county government often serves multiple communities with competing interests.

*“The County is really only geared towards agriculture as an industry...and as an export industry at that.”*

*“I tend to do everything on such a small scale, to start with. I think New York State is great, but it's such a big complicated system.”*

*“I do think I would think it'd be lovely [to] have ... regional control over... food insecurity and have a more... comprehensive approach. But I'm also finding that sometimes it's best at the local level, because ... even [the] county may be just one level above that, but I think sometimes when we turn to them, we lose some of that direct connection.”*

The appropriate use of ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds was a topic of great interest to town supervisors and village mayors. Deliberations about how to use the funds - which were generally perceived as a welcome windfall to cash-strapped towns and villages - were enmeshed with concerns about using the funds properly and worries about accountability. Nevertheless, towns and villages were eager to figure out creative ways of using the funding to support people and projects.

*“[We used ARPA as a] rainy day fund. COVID was okay for rural people ... tourism skyrocketed, and sales tax revenues rose for two years straight.”*

*"ARPA money was a huge relief - I knew exactly how much the village was going to get. I called and told the town supervisor and he noted the allocations immediately...Came up with immediate projects. None that have to do with food, necessarily. Opens up money for other things, like food systems work."*

*“We got a lot of money - didn't really need it...Was supposed to go to COVID related losses. There was almost nothing we could justify. Plugging holes - but made out like bandits. Spent it on roads.”*

*“[ARPA] was definitely a boon... Kept services active during the height of COVID. The rest of the staff was halved. All the staff got paid, but couldn't be here. And we just couldn't do as much, so we saved money. It will help one of our major infrastructure projects. Grateful that we could use it....It could go to the new indoor farmers market, too.”*

*“Initially, first of all, I think it was great ... it's a big shot in the arm. I have seven water districts, five of them are pretty small. And I have a two sewer plants, and so when the ARPA rules came out, I focused the first batch of that money on upgrade all those plants like replacements to the water districts' backup generators. And, for example, storage tanks. [We would] never would have been able to afford on a rate basis those improvements, so to me, [ARPA] was a godsend.”*

*“I want to try to think of something that the Community needs to use it, [something] that's useful for everybody and then people can see the use of it. .... I'm a firm believer in let's do a proposal or let's make the community aware. [That's] one thing that I've tried to do...”*

### **Discussion and research insights**

This project was designed to better understand the degree to which New York State municipalities are localizing their food system: what are the projects, policies and best practices that enable them to design and implement successful and effective local foodsheds? This project component aimed to elicit qualitative information from a series of interviews with town supervisors and village mayors.

We collected data on a range of issues, including food access, production and distribution; perceptions of the future of local food; projects and challenges; tradeoffs; internal and external collaboration; and county, state and federal food policy.

Some of our conclusions are as predicted: all communities consider food security an important issue, although not all formally address it through projects or policymaking. We also found that very rural places and very urban ones share some access issues. For both, there has been a loss of small independently owned groceries; people have to drive further, particularly if they need more affordable options, and transportation is often a problem. The gap in access, in all regions, is filled with convenience stores, and dollar stores. Many supervisors expressed some frustration about this reality, as these stores rarely offer healthy or fresh options.

Many communities have organized their own farmers markets or know of a location in a neighboring village or town that hosts one. Importantly, many also warned us about considering them an answer to food access or security concerns, nor as a suitable response to challenges of market access for small producers. Despite efforts to make their products more equitable, they

are generally perceived as a luxury for those with higher incomes. Most of our interviewees report having community garden projects; similar to farmers markets, they are often envisioned and act as an answer to diminishing social capital, not as an answer to food insecurity.

When queried, we found a lot of food pantries, frequently run as a partnership with local churches and nonprofits. Some places - the North County is a good example of this - there are regional networks that supply food for pantries. During COVID, we were told that food insecurity issues actually improved in many places in New York. Supervisors that we spoke to were often more worried about the coming winter, fuel prices and inflation than they were during COVID.

We asked about distribution; rarely are there local food supply chains. Very little local sourcing. We also found little support for a hypothesis that chefs are agents of change in rural New York; still, there were pockets where the farm-to-table movement has become an essential part of a community's story, and is thus well-supported and, to a great extent, protected.

Supervisors were almost always optimistic about the future. Still, they rarely had money to invest in additional food systems projects, nor did they anticipate changes to their capacity to address food insecurity or food challenges.

Understanding the frequency, type and intensity of collaboration efforts on the part of municipal officials was a high priority for us. Many communities struggle with finding volunteers; some admit that it is just easier to accomplish things with fewer people involved. Several admitted that streaming their meetings on-line has resulted in even fewer people coming to board meetings – an example of digital governance providing a route for less transparent government.

On the other hand, there was about a third of our participant group that not only actively engaged with potential partners, they innovated to access them. We learned about hamlet working groups, in the Hudson Valley region; one of our participants in the Capital District region shared his amazement with a group of volunteers, all women in their 30s and 40s who have become an indispensable resource for him, as they are the ones eager to do the work of getting projects from ideation to completion.

We also learned about the power of intermunicipal cooperation, which seems to lead to more robust regional conversations about shared issues. This suggests that having structural support for collaboration in the form of boards of supervisors, cross municipal councils and associations, may lead to more capacity and more effective projects. In turn, having the experience with successful projects, even very small ones, acts to encourage additional collaboration and capacity building efforts.

We also found a range of engagement with county and state support agencies, though usually limited to outreach and education services, regional program facilitation, and access to funding. We found less engagement with local nonprofits than expected – very few spoke of active partnerships with nonprofit partners. However, there was often eager support of Cornell Cooperative Extension, particularly in rural areas, as they often act as ad hoc circuit riders across a wide range of issues, from food security to agricultural producer support.

County agencies are limited by their rules and capacity for outreach - but may overcome this by nurturing a history of shared problem solving with local collaborators. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Tug Hill, which even with their networks of collaborators on the municipal level goes to extraordinary lengths to also partner amicably with their county offices, freeing up some of that agency's capacity for additional support. In this way, collaboration creates capacity and often inspires deeper degrees of collaboration.

State agencies are often too far removed from local places to have an impact. (And, in some cases, the impact is decidedly negative. Sewer and water projects tend to produce a lot of contentious engagement with municipal officials, regardless of where you are in New York State! And much of it is rooted in the sheer expense of providing water in sewer for communities that are often small and not wealthy.) Nevertheless, individuals at agencies can often provide outsized impact. Frequently, we found that supervisors and mayors would complain about an agency, but then cite a specific person that they deal with and share how valuable this one individual is. Relationship building, amicable and incremental engagement, is often the single most important aspect of collaboration – and is coupled with the possibility of producing increased capacity. Federal actor engagement was limited to little direct collaboration with the exception of high impact projects.

To summarize, we found:

- Access to local food varies, but food insecurity is perceived by local government to be a small problem. And local food production in New York State continues to decline.
- Local food systems projects are rarely prioritized, but because many food systems projects, such as pantries, community gardens and farmers markets are either low cost or have wider community benefits, they have proliferated.
- Collaboration matters. Having the structural mechanisms to support robust and evolving partnerships and engagement with internal and external collaborators is likely to improve outcomes.
- Capacity to address food access and food insecurity is extended by collaboration, but to collaborate often requires some initial capacity.

### **Conclusions.**

This project component aimed to utilize qualitative data collection to better understand the degree to which towns and villages in New York State are addressing local food systems issues. We find that access to local food varies, and food insecurity is a small but persistent problem that is rarely comprehensively addressed. Still, the multiplier effects that result from food systems projects such as food pantry efforts, farmer's markets and community gardens tend to have important social capital impacts on communities.

Town administrators in New York are challenged in a number of ways. Local food production rarely contributes to the local food system in a measurable and significant way. While there are usually adequate grocery stores available to provision residents, this is not always the case, particularly in very urban or very rural places. Moreover, towns are challenged by the volume of trade-offs they face, including the proliferation of retail outlets that fail to offer healthy or fresh food options, the expansion of solar and wind facilities across farmland and the rising price of land.

Collaboration, and the ability to utilize the power of partnerships to secure additional capacity, is an important contributor to the effectiveness of projects across issues domains. Still, collaboration may be messy, time-intensive, and (occasionally) fraught with politics. In places

across New York, where town supervisors and village mayors are paid only small stipends for their time and expertise, collaboration may provide an important extension to capacity but can only be realized with the important structural supports necessary for it to succeed.

This project has some limitations. This particular project component offers some insight into town management as described through a sample of New York State supervisors and mayors, but it can only be as representative as the sample of people who were willing to speak with us. In order to collect 38 interviews, we sent about 400 emails to town offices throughout New York State. This effort was followed up by the same number of phone calls to those offices. We sent a final email request after about a week. Still, there are obvious limitations to this approach; we are only able to interview those who are willing to meet with us, and asking for an hour-long interview is often an insurmountable ask of very busy people. We made an effort to balance interviews across multiple regions, but we were more successful in some regions than others. It is possible that those who are more familiar with our university were more comfortable speaking with us, for example.

We were also eager to be representative across the rural-urban spectrum, and we were somewhat successful, interviewing several supervisors in more dense urban regions, a number of village mayors and many rural town supervisors.

To mitigate some of these challenges, this qualitative effort was followed up by a survey. (The results of the survey are available in the second part of this series.)

The results of this project will be disseminated directly to towns and villages. It was also shared in person through presentations at local conferences. Several academic papers will result from this effort, and are underway.

This study is currently being replicated at the University of Kansas at Fort Hayes, using our interview and survey tools. We are enthusiastic about replication, to better understand how regions elsewhere in the United States are addressing food insecurity, access, production and distribution at the level of towns and communities, as well as providing additional insight into local government efforts, support and effectiveness.

We are also in the midst of a complementary project exploring how collaborative governance mechanisms may impact project effectiveness. Early concerns that we could not find enough interviewees in our western New York regions led to a series of conversations with staff at the Tug Hill Commission (THC). THC assists in project development and offers technical support for 5 different “councils of governments” in the Tug Hill Region of New York State. Through their valuable assistance, we were able to begin a series of conversations with town supervisors in their region, inquiring about their own efforts to address food systems challenges, and observe their council and commission meetings as they considered regional projects. We are currently engaged in the development of a collaborative proposal with council and commission members in the region to further study and learn from their model of regional governance.



## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

[Greetings.]

[Begin with a brief overview of who we are.]

Before we start, I want to thank you for your participation in this project. I'm part of a multidisciplinary research team engaged in regional food systems research. Our team includes scholars from the University at Albany, SUNY Cobleskill and Johnson & Wales University. Our ongoing research is led primarily by several broad questions:

What is a successful regional foodshed?

What does it look like?

And how can we achieve that vision?

For this project, funded by the NYS Health Foundation, we want to ask you some questions about *\*your\** food system. Our goal is to better understand how we design and sustain resilient and vibrant local food systems in New York, by identifying the degree to which towns, cities and counties have begun to address localization of food systems. We are specifically interested in how you define your local food system, and the activities and projects they have developed as a result of your efforts.

Folks frequently ask about our outcomes: We are expecting to gather insights that could help policymakers develop better policy to promote more successful communities, and to inform our own inquiries into successful food systems.

Before we begin with the questions, I want to let you know that it is our commitment to you to keep your responses private, unless you want something different. We may use some of your comments to illustrate a point in the final report, always omitting your name, position or the name of your municipality. Your participation is voluntary, so feel free to not answer any question or to end the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions?

We will be trying to take notes, but I am sure that I will miss several details. To help complete our notes, we would like to record the session. Do I have your permission to record? (Recordings will be deleted after our final analysis is complete, but we will keep the transcripts of the conversations without identifiable data.)

Do you have any questions, before we begin?

We will begin by talking broadly about your local food system. For the purposes of our conversation today, I would like to use this working definition of a local food system:

A local food system is a collaborative network that integrates food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management.

1. I would like to start by learning more about you, your professional background and experience and your current position in the municipality.

[AR: Skip pre-interview survey. Confirm name, municipality and years in position. Is the supervisor a paid full time position?]

Let's talk now about your local food systems

### **Consumption.**

2. Where do members of your community usually get their food? Has it become easier or harder to access local food? Or have the locations of retailers changed?
  - a. Are there nearby grocery stores?
  - b. Are there convenience stores?
  - c. Are there other ways that your community accesses food?

### **Production.**

3. What are the characteristics of food producers in your community and what are their main products?
  - a. Are there many direct-to-consumer sales venues, like on-farm sales?

- b. Are there other actors - entrepreneurs, for example? - that provide new opportunities in the food system?

[Or, just ask: are you an agricultural region - do you have many farmers and other kinds of ag producers?]

### **Distribution.**

4. Is there an initiative in your community that helps local producers find additional markets?
5. Are there local food aggregators that work with producers in your area? Do they distribute locally?

[AR: An example is Hudson Harvest, which collects product from local producers throughout the Hudson Valley and as far up as Saratoga County and distributes to institutional partners, restaurants and to individuals. Interest has surged during the pandemic.]

### **Projects and policies**

6. What does the future look like for your local food system?
7. Are there changes that you anticipate that are of particular importance to municipalities?
8. Is the future of your local food system aligned with what you are hoping to see?
9. Has your community engaged in any projects (or policies) to support community access to food, support producers or distribution of food? How were they funded? And how successful have they been?
10. What are the key challenges you face, when considering how to craft policy? What tools or guidance do you wish you had, but don't?

[AR: I often ask, instead, what kinds of guidance do you wish were available from the county or the state?]

11. What issues, problems or trade-offs have you faced, when considering how to improve your community's access to food, or your community's ability to support producers?

[AR: Tradeoff examples include providing a Dollar General, which offers some food access, though not nutritious options, but permanently removing that land from ag production. Or deciding, now that it is not profitable to farm, to lease out to solar companies.]

### **Governance of local food systems**

12. Who are the main community actors participating in making policy or planning processes that impact your local food system?

[Supervisor leads a board. Who are the other boards? Do they impact food systems at all? Are there volunteer committees.]

13. How do they work together (rules procedures) in producing plans and policies?

14. Could you describe any projects that involve collaboration with other local municipalities or private actors in projects related to food production, consumption or distribution? such as mapping current productive capacity of a region, or identifying food insecurity?

a. If not, what are the main barriers for this type of collaboration?

### **Best practices.**

15. Can you think of examples of County, State or Federal policies, either in the form of regulations or incentives, or a mix of policies, that have shaped your ability to address consumption, distribution or production? How can they be better?

16. Have specific practices, for example, helped to encourage more young or beginning farmers?

17. Have changes in land use affected how you have shaped food system policies?

### **Closing**

Thank you. Is there any additional information that you would like to add? Is there any question that I did not ask and I should have asked?

If I have more questions, may I contact you? May we visit and meet you in person?

Would you suggest others in the community who might be helpful in this project?

[Repeat the contact information and don't forget the follow-up thank you email]

## **Appendix B: Information sheet for interview participants.**

**Overview:** You are being asked to take part in an interview about local food system policies and projects in your community. This conversation is part of an assessment to investigate the state of local food systems in New York State. The findings will provide guidance to municipal leaders interested in further developing their local food systems. This project is being conducted by researchers from the University at Albany's Center for Policy Research, and funded by the New York State Health Foundation.

**Interview process:** The interview will last approximately 1 hour. You will be asked to talk about how you define your local food system, your short and long term food system goals, and projects and activities that you may have engaged in. We are also interested in your thoughts on governance of food systems and whether there are some best practices that you would recommend. We will also ask you to fill out a brief survey, so we have basic information about the people participating in our interviews.

The interview will be recorded, which will be transcribed. This is so we have all the information we discussed in writing. [The recording will be deleted once we finish writing our report.]

**Participation is voluntary:** You can decide if you want to be interviewed or not. If you decide to participate, you may still skip particular questions.

**Risks and benefits of participation:** Taking part in this focus group may not benefit you personally, but we may learn new things that will help improve our understanding of local food systems, including the policies, projects and best practices that might better serve communities. Although some people like to talk about their experiences, it is possible that you might feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when discussing your personal experiences.

**Data is kept private:** Any information you provide will remain confidential, meaning we will not share your personal information with others. We will not write your full name or anything that could be used to identify you on any study documents. If you are worried that something you say might be repeated later, you do not need to say it.

**Questions?** Our research team is available to answer any question you may have about the interview. If you feel that you have been harmed or have additional questions later, please contact:

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### **Appendix C. Methodological Note**

Interviews were conducted over the course of 1 hour, recorded via Zoom. We used Zoom transcripts for the analysis. To summarize, we began by asking some demographic questions, then inquired about their community's access to food, whether there are any producers in their community, and how food is distributed.

We then asked about their impressions about the future of local food in their region: are they optimistic? We asked about any additional local food projects that had not already been mentioned, and what challenges they faced when pursuing these projects. In particular, are there specific trade-offs that they faced when trying to negotiate better food systems.

Finally, we asked about their government structure and how they engaged with both internal actors (such as their constituents) and external actors (such as other town supervisors or county partners). We ended by asking about any guidance they may have gotten from their county, state agencies, or the federal government that helped them in pursuing more resilient food systems.

Results were coded using a form of rapid qualitative analysis, which involved providing a coding template to several researchers, who would provide both summaries of responses and statements that supported each question (where useful and relevant.) The following section provides the results of each domain.