

STAFF REPORT

Date: September 9, 2025
To: Planning Commission
From: Dana Bowers, Associate Planner



Resolution No. R2025-015 Food System Plan

1 – Background

The City Council approved the development of a Food System Plan as part of the 2024 and 2025 Long Range Planning Work Programs. The intent of the Plan is to review the current food landscape in Tumwater and create a strategy to improve outcomes for the community. The City hired Rebeca Potasnik as a consultant to assist with the development of the Plan.

Because the scope of food security is broad, the project focuses on developing strategies that focus on improving outcomes for the following goals:

- How to provide healthy food for all members of the community;
- Reduce food waste; and
- Support local food production and processing.

The Planning Commission was briefed on the Plan on November 26, 2024, and conducted work sessions on February 11, 2025, April 22, 2025, and July 8, 2025.

The purpose of the September 9, 2025, work session is to review Resolution No. R2025-015 and the Food System Plan and to schedule a public hearing on September 23, 2025, to receive community input on the resolution and the plan.

2 – Methodology

All steps in developing the Food Systems Plan followed the principles below, which align with Tumwater's Vision and Values:

- **Equity.** A food system should support food security with an emphasis on those community members that experience the greatest inequities.
- **Sustainability.** A balance between environmental health, economic profitability, and social equity creates a resilient food system that meets current food needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

- **Stability.** All community members should have reliable access to sufficient, safe, appropriate, and nutritious food, even in the face of unexpected challenges.
- **Resiliency.** The food system should maintain its functionality and continue to provide food security and nutrition under various adverse conditions.
- **Efficacy.** The audience for the plan is Tumwater, therefore, the objectives and actions in this plan will be the areas where this level of government can have the most impact.

3 – Challenges and Opportunities

Seven sectors were selected to provide a comprehensive yet streamlined framework for analyzing the food system in the Community Food Assessment. More information about each sector can be found in the Assessment. They follow established models from other food system assessments, while being adapted to Tumwater’s local context. This structure captures the full cycle of the food system in a way that is relevant for city action and consistent with best practices. Challenges were identified for each of the sectors as a basis to identify needs and create goals for the Plan and are included in Chapter 2 of the Plan.

The chart below provides a summary of the challenges identified in each sector from Chapter 2 of the Plan and the opportunities that can alleviate the challenges from the Opportunities in Chapter 3. Consideration of the challenges should be considered with the key developments and current collaborations & resources in Chapter 2 of the Plan. In a similar manner, the opportunities should be considered with their specific goals and policies to provide the necessary context.

In some cases, there are no opportunities assigned because the identified challenge is not within the City of Tumwater’s authority to change or influence. Also, one of the limitations of this format is that while many opportunities align directly with a specific challenge, some respond more broadly to multiple cross-cutting challenges identified in the Plan. As such, not every opportunity has a one-to-one pairing in the chart, though all are grounded in the Community Food Assessment findings.

A. Land Use & Conservation

Challenges	Opportunities
Housing markets favor single family developments, increasing the value of land with access to utilities in urban growth areas and driving the pressure for development.	3.1.2. Explore partnerships to improve access to land, water, and infrastructure for food producers by supporting shared-use models, facilitating connections to underutilized private or public land, and leveraging programs such as land leases and technical assistance.
High farmland costs in the region create barriers for new and beginning farmers.	<p>1.4.3. Explore including food access as a design consideration for new developments including access to food retailers and spaces for urban agriculture/community gardens.</p> <p>3.1.3. Review existing land use regulations to identify barriers that disproportionately limit food production opportunities for low-income households and those on smaller lots.</p> <p>3.1.9. Explore opportunities to connect culinary entrepreneurship and food system innovation with arts and cultural events and technology funding streams, including vertical farming and agritourism.</p> <p>3.2.1. Partner with the Community Farm Land Trust and Thurston County to explore mechanisms such as urban growth area swaps and farmland easements for conserving high-value agricultural land adjacent to Tumwater’s Urban Growth Area, while supporting farmland transitions to new farmers from diverse backgrounds.</p>
The Growth Management Act prioritizes dense development in urban areas to protect rural area, which does not always readily accommodate food production in urban zones.	<p>3.2.2. Promote and expand access to food production on suitable underutilized lands within city limits by supporting programs such as those offered by community-based organizations, where feasible, and consistent with land use and environmental constraints.</p> <p>3.4.6. Consider local policy options, such as permit fee reductions, for food producers operating at small scale or using conservation practices.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
<p>Tumwater must continually navigate tensions between competing urban land use needs for housing, industrial and commercial development, conservation, and agriculture.</p>	<p>1.4.4. Explore opportunities to allow temporary or pop-up food distribution sites (e.g., food share hubs, mutual aid stands, gleaning events) through clear guidelines and permitting processes that balance flexibility with neighborhood and safety considerations.</p> <p>3.2.1. Partner with the Community Farm Land Trust and Thurston County to explore mechanisms such as urban growth area swaps and farmland easements for conserving high-value agricultural land adjacent to Tumwater’s Urban Growth Area, while supporting farmland transitions to new farmers from diverse backgrounds.</p> <p>3.2.3. Consider reviewing and amending development regulations to allow small-scale farm stands, including in residential neighborhoods, to support local growers and increase access to fresh food.</p> <p>1.4.1. Encourage walkable and bikeable neighborhoods with access to fresh food outlets, including farmers markets and grocery stores to reduce food deserts.</p> <p>3.2.4. Map locations where city-owned or managed resources (e.g., land, water access, infrastructure) are currently used for food production. Use this data to inform land use planning, resource allocation, and future urban agriculture initiatives.</p>

B. Processors & Producers

Challenges	Opportunities
<p>High farmland costs limit access for new and beginning farmers.</p>	<p>1.3.1. Engage with Thurston Conservation District to support community garden expansion, GIS studies for urban agriculture land identification, soil testing, and code review.</p> <p>3.1.7. Develop a comprehensive toolkit for aspiring and current local food producers, including farmstands, community gardens, p-patches, and backyard poultry—detailing permit requirements, best practices, available resources, and contacts for technical assistance.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Access to affordable water remains a significant barrier for urban farms and gardens.	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p> <p>3.1.2. Explore partnerships to improve access to land, water, and infrastructure for food producers by supporting shared-use models, facilitating connections to underutilized private or public land, and leveraging programs such as land leases and technical assistance.</p> <p>3.1.4. Support water access and explore potential rate reductions for urban agriculture, community gardens, and school gardens such as stormwater fee waivers, fire hydrant access, and subsidized or waived system development charges—recognizing their role in strengthening food security, fostering education and community resilience, supporting local economies, and contributing to emergency preparedness.</p>
Tariffs may increase the cost or reduce availability of critical farming inputs.	

Challenges	Opportunities
Agricultural employers report difficulty hiring and retaining workers.	<p>3.5.1. Foster workforce development and support new farmers by continuing to support educational activities through the Tumwater School District, including the Tumwater FRESH Program at Isabella Bush Park, alongside partnerships with New Market Skills Center and South Puget Sound Community College to build a skilled food and agriculture workforce.</p> <p>3.5.2. Foster workforce development and encourage new farmers by supporting programs such as Thurston Conservation District’s FarmLink and Farm My Yard programs and creating pathways for new farmers to access land, training, and technical support.</p> <p>3.5.3. Foster workforce development and support new farmers by supporting community-based organizations and existing commercial kitchens, such as Enterprise for Equity, ASHHO, and Our Community Kitchen, to offer business incubation and mentorship opportunities for beginning food processors and producers.</p> <p>3.5.4. Promote the economic viability of small-scale farming by supporting efforts to make small-scale and urban farming financially sustainable by exploring ways to reduce regulatory barriers, promoting cooperative models, connecting growers with local markets and procurement opportunities, and exploring access to business support services, microgrants, and relevant state or federal funding.</p> <p>3.5.5. Promote the economic viability of small-scale farming by encouraging creative models such as agritourism, culinary arts partnerships, and vertical farming that align with local zoning and community values.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Small-scale farmers often lack access to subsidies, which are typically tied to acreage or production volume, and time-intensive application processes often outweigh the benefit.	1.3.1. Engage with Thurston Conservation District to support community garden expansion, GIS studies for urban agriculture land identification, soil testing, and code review.
Many processors and producers lack access to affordable cold storage, which limits the ability to scale or diversify their operations.	1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure. 3.1.1. Collaborate with local, regional, and state partners, such as those involved in the Craft and Warehouse districts, to support and promote opportunities for local producers to access and expand markets.

C. Retail & Distribution

Challenges	Opportunities
Food costs have increased, and fresh local food is harder to access.	1.3.2. Expand partnerships for edible landscaping and urban fruit and nut tree planting in public spaces including parks and along pedestrian corridors with scheduled community care and harvest days. 1.3.3. Build relationships with homeowner associations to better understand their needs and to provide support for rule changes that would allow home food gardens and remove barriers to climate-resilient landscaping which conserves water for food production. 1.5.4. Support existing pop-up food distribution efforts as part of community emergency response capacity.

Challenges	Opportunities
<p>The Tumwater Farmers Market is under-resourced, with limited operation and an outdated web presence.</p>	<p>1.1.5. Use Tumwater’s communication channels to increase access to and visibility of food assistance programs (e.g., food banks/pantries, SNAP, Market Match, SUN Bucks) and to promote food bank satellite locations and donations.</p> <p>3.4.5. Strengthen local markets through support of local food hubs by educating and engaging the community with the model and explore providing distribution sites on city-owned property.</p>
<p>Federal programs like Farm to School face funding uncertainties.</p>	
<p>Cold storage capacity remains limited across the distribution network.</p>	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p> <p>1.5.2. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by collaborating with Thurston County Emergency Management to integrate food security into disaster preparedness plans including identification of nearest non-impacted supply chains and ensuring food storage, recovery, and redistribution plans are part of emergency response frameworks.</p> <p>3.3.1. Support regional partnerships to develop shared-use food infrastructure, such as processing, cold storage, and commercial kitchen facilities, by leveraging city assets and pursuing state, federal, and philanthropic funding opportunities. Evaluate the feasibility of repurposing existing sites in Tumwater, including underutilized or public facilities, where appropriate.</p> <p>3.3.2. Explore strategic investments and partnerships with food hubs to expand regional aggregation and distribution capacity that supports small- and mid-scale producers and improves food access.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Direct-to-consumer retailers, such as farmers markets, food hubs, and farms, face barriers to accepting electronic benefit transfer (EBT), including administrative burdens and technology costs.	<p>3.1.1. Collaborate with local, regional, and state partners, such as those involved in the Craft and Warehouse districts, to support and promote opportunities for local producers to access and expand markets.</p> <p>3.4.8. Encourage farm-to-table connections by collaborating with regional food system partners to support initiatives that help local restaurants, bakeries, caterers, and butchers access regional ingredients. This may include promotional campaigns, networking events, or technical assistance</p>

D. Waste Reduction & Recovery

Challenges	Opportunities
Enforcement of the Organics Management Law relies on self-reporting, with no immediate penalties for non-compliance.	<p>2.1.4. Promote food waste reduction among local businesses through campaigns that highlight cost savings, environmental benefits, and compliance with Washington’s commercial organics recycling requirements—while encouraging participation from businesses of all sizes, including those not subject to the mandate.</p> <p>2.3.1. Ensure composting systems are used at all Tumwater public facilities and programs.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
<p>Leadership changes have slowed regional coordination on food waste diversion and rescue initiatives.</p>	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p> <p>1.5.3. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by developing and coordinating policies and staffing models for rapid response food systems during future crises, including sourcing, safety, and volunteer mobilization.</p> <p>2.1.3. Collaborate with regional partners to develop and distribute customized educational materials and mailers to residents and businesses focused on source reduction.</p> <p>2.2.1. Participate in and promote Food Waste Prevention Week and related events at the Tumwater and regional level.</p> <p>2.3.3. Reinvigorate regional food rescue initiatives by identifying historic and resident-led models and new opportunities.</p> <p>2.3.4. Support the creation of a regional, centralized database or platform to connect food waste producers with organizations that can redistribute food to those in need.</p>
<p>Inadequate cold storage capacity limits food rescue operations.</p>	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Edible food is often discarded due to cost or logistical barriers when supply chains fail.	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p> <p>1.5.3. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by developing and coordinating policies and staffing models for rapid response food systems during future crises, including sourcing, safety, and volunteer mobilization.</p> <p>2.2.4. Include food waste prevention as a component of relevant grant funding criteria such as neighborhood matching grants.</p> <p>2.2.5. Offer workshops on food storage, preservation, and meal planning to help individuals and businesses reduce food waste.</p> <p>3.3.2. Explore strategic investments and partnerships with food hubs to expand regional aggregation and distribution capacity that supports small- and mid-scale producers and improves food access.</p>
Packaging contamination prevents some food waste from being composted.	<p>2.1.2. Partner with Thurston County Public Works and food assistance organizations to reduce edible food waste at transfer stations by creating clear donation guidance and outreach for truckers and other supply chain actors, addressing common barriers like time pressure, lack of information, and logistical challenges.</p> <p>2.3.2. Partner with Thurston County Public Works to educate businesses and residents on proper composting practices to reduce contamination and increase participation.</p>
Short meal periods in K–12 schools lead to uneaten food and higher waste.	<p>2.1.1. Support local schools to reduce food waste by providing a minimum of 20 minutes of seated lunch time, which improves nutrition and reduces plate waste.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Food diversion in schools often depends on individual staff initiatives rather than system-wide practices.	1.2.2. Promote partner led, community-based initiatives such as cooking classes, gardening workshops, and nutrition education tailored to underserved populations.
Most Tumwater schools rely on reheating and serving pre-prepared meals which produce more packaging waste than scratch cooking.	3.4.1. Educate and engage the community on the value of local food by coordinating public education efforts highlighting the health, environmental, and economic benefits of local food systems, including the role of regenerative agriculture in climate resilience and carbon sequestration.

E. Access & Security

Challenges	Opportunities
Rising food prices strain household budgets and food access.	<p>1.1.3. Support farmers to become certified to accept EBT/SNAP benefits from customers.</p> <p>1.1.6. Continue to support food access through senior meal programs, city-sponsored events, and youth programs where allowable, and prioritize the inclusion of fresh, seasonal, and culturally relevant local foods, particularly in services benefiting low-income or vulnerable populations.</p> <p>1.4.4. Explore opportunities to allow temporary or pop-up food distribution sites (e.g., food share hubs, mutual aid stands, gleaning events) through clear guidelines and permitting processes that balance flexibility with neighborhood and safety considerations.</p> <p>1.5.4. Support existing pop-up food distribution efforts as part of community emergency response capacity.</p> <p>3.4.7. Assess opportunities to align City purchasing practices where applicable with values-based criteria such as local sourcing, environmental sustainability, and equity. Where Tumwater’s procurement is limited, promote public awareness of these values through communications and support similar efforts by partner agencies, when feasible.</p>

<p>Awareness of available resources and programs is low.</p>	<p>1.1.2. Work with regional partners to make free and subsidized community garden plots available citywide and prioritize funding for low-income households.</p> <p>1.1.5. Use Tumwater’s communication channels to increase access to and visibility of food assistance programs (e.g., food banks/pantries, SNAP, Market Match, SUN Bucks) and to promote food bank satellite locations and donations.</p> <p>1.4.2. Support siting the Tumwater Farmers Market near a community gathering area.</p> <p>1.4.5. Develop and maintain a GIS map of free food pantries, neighborhood-based food distribution sites, food bank satellites, and other free food distribution sites to support coordination, identify service gaps, and improve visibility for those seeking food assistance.</p> <p>1.5.6. Map existing food production, storage, and distribution resources within Tumwater to support internal planning and emergency response coordination.</p> <p>1.5.7. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by supporting increased financial resources for community-led organizations working to enhance food security in Tumwater and the surrounding region.</p> <p>2.2.2. Offer community compost giveaways and food waste education events through the Department of Parks and Recreation and other community programs.</p> <p>2.2.3. Create and promote engaging social media campaigns and signage to inform the public about food waste prevention best practices and available composting programs</p> <p>3.1.5. Facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities among local growers, processors, and market operators to strengthen community connections and business viability.</p> <p>3.1.7. Develop a comprehensive toolkit for aspiring and current local food producers, including farmstands, community gardens, p-patches, and backyard poultry—detailing permit</p>
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Challenges	Opportunities
	requirements, best practices, available resources, and contacts for technical assistance.
Culturally appropriate food options are limited.	3.1.7. Develop a comprehensive toolkit for aspiring and current local food producers, including farmstands, community gardens, p-patches, and backyard poultry—detailing permit requirements, best practices, available resources, and contacts for technical assistance.
Donations from large food companies may include highly processed or near-expired items, which do not always meet nutritional or cultural needs.	
Regional food assistance efforts lack coordination.	<p>1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.</p> <p>1.5.2. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by collaborating with Thurston County Emergency Management to integrate food security into disaster preparedness plans including identification of nearest non-impacted supply chains and ensuring food storage, recovery, and redistribution plans are part of emergency response frameworks.</p> <p>1.5.3. Improve emergency preparedness and climate resilience by developing and coordinating policies and staffing models for rapid response food systems during future crises, including sourcing, safety, and volunteer mobilization.</p> <p>1.5.5. Assess cold storage needs and explore opportunities to expand infrastructure such as shared-use refrigeration at community centers, food hubs, or partner facilities—while supporting efforts to increase capacity and ensure reliable access during emergencies.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Thurston County Food Bank patrons in Tumwater report needing more staples like milk, eggs, and fresh produce.	<p>1.1.1. Partner with the Thurston County Food Bank to establish a satellite brick-and-mortar food bank in Tumwater near the new Tumwater Community Center.</p> <p>1.5.4. Support existing pop-up food distribution efforts as part of community emergency response capacity.</p>
Limited hours, days, and locations of assistance programs can be barriers.	<p>1.1.4. Work with interest groups to identify and address barriers to consistent scheduling to support increased weekly operations of the Tumwater Farmers Market during its core season and explore off-season openings.</p>
Many small farms and markets face administrative and technical barriers to accepting Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), limiting access for individuals who rely exclusively on federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.	<p>3.1.1. Collaborate with local, regional, and state partners, such as those involved in the Craft and Warehouse districts, to support and promote opportunities for local producers to access and expand markets.</p> <p>3.4.4. Strengthen local markets and values-aligned public purchasing by identifying existing barriers and exploring mechanisms and partnerships to support the Tumwater Farmers Market’s scale and sustainability, such as operational funding, expanded schedules, improved signage, and vendor subsidies.</p>

F. Public Health & Nutrition

Challenges	Opportunities
The Tumwater School District lacks a central kitchen; each school handles its own food preparation and storage. Infrastructure limitations in individual school kitchens constrain their ability to incorporate fresh, locally sourced foods.	1.5.1. Advocate for regional funding and coordinate cross-jurisdictional planning, investments, and grant applications for shared infrastructure.
Meal programs often struggle to integrate donated or rescued food while meeting nutrition standards.	<p>3.3.1. Support regional partnerships to develop shared-use food infrastructure, such as processing, cold storage, and commercial kitchen facilities, by leveraging city assets and pursuing state, federal, and philanthropic funding opportunities. Evaluate the feasibility of repurposing existing sites in Tumwater, including underutilized or public facilities, where appropriate.</p> <p>3.3.2. Explore strategic investments and partnerships with food hubs to expand regional aggregation and distribution capacity that supports small- and mid-scale producers and improves food access.</p>
Rising food prices make it harder for people with low incomes to afford fresh, nutrient-dense, local foods.	<p>1.2.3. Continue to support funding for Tumwater school garden maintenance and education.</p> <p>1.3.2. Expand partnerships for edible landscaping and urban fruit and nut tree planting in public spaces including parks and along pedestrian corridors with scheduled community care and harvest days.</p> <p>3.4.7. Assess opportunities to align City purchasing practices where applicable with values-based criteria such as local sourcing, environmental sustainability, and equity. Where Tumwater's procurement is limited, promote public awareness of these values through communications and support similar efforts by partner agencies, when feasible.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Language barriers limit access to nutritional information, food sources, and program details.	<p>1.2.2. Promote partner led, community-based initiatives such as cooking classes, gardening workshops, and nutrition education tailored to underserved populations.</p> <p>1.3.2. Expand partnerships for edible landscaping and urban fruit and nut tree planting in public spaces including parks and along pedestrian corridors with scheduled community care and harvest days.</p>
Many processed foods contain increasingly high levels of sugar and sodium, which can negatively impact health and condition people's taste preferences to crave more salt and sugar in their diets.	<p>1.2.1. Integrate food, gardening, and nutrition learning opportunities into city sponsored programming with incentives to participate, such as classes offered through the Department of Parks and Recreation and at community events.</p>

G. Education & Workforce

Challenges	Opportunities
School gardens often lack stable funding and rely on volunteers, including non-staff community members.	<p>1.2.3. Continue to support funding for Tumwater school garden maintenance and education.</p>

Challenges	Opportunities
Youth lack exposure to local, seasonal foods in school cafeterias. The Tumwater School District’s lack of a central kitchen limits scratch cooking, food preparation flexibility, and the ability to process and store local ingredients, contributing to reliance on heat-and-serve meals and restricting nutrition quality. These challenges are compounded by a federal reimbursement rate that has not kept pace with rising food costs.	<p>1.2.1. Integrate food, gardening, and nutrition learning opportunities into city sponsored programming with incentives to participate, such as classes offered through the Department of Parks and Recreation and at community events.</p> <p>3.4.2. Educate and engage the community on the value of local food by celebrating local food and producers through storytelling, city-sponsored events, informational signage, and communications platforms—focusing on systems and practices rather than promoting specific businesses.</p> <p>3.4.3. Raise awareness of the broader impacts of food choices by educating residents about the social, environmental, and economic costs of industrial food systems and the value of local purchasing. Strategies may include community events such as a local food or film festival, themed messaging on city social media and newsletters, and interactive booths at public gatherings like the Tumwater Farmers Market or Arbor Day celebrations, for example.</p>
Regional farm employers face persistent labor shortages caused by seasonal work, low wages, and a lack of qualified or interested applicants.	<p>3.4.2. Educate and engage the community on the value of local food by celebrating local food and producers through storytelling, city-sponsored events, informational signage, and communications platforms—focusing on systems and practices rather than promoting specific businesses.</p>

4 – Timeline

Meeting	Date
Planning Commission Public Hearing	September 23, 2025
City Council Work Session	October 14, 2025
City Council Consideration	November 3, 2025

SEPA review will not be required for this plan as the plan is considered a procedural action per 197-11-800 (19) WAC.