
MEMORANDUM

Date: July 8, 2025
To: Planning Commission
From: Dana Bowers, Associate Planner



Food System Plan: Addressing Food Insecurity and Access to Food

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 the following subjects:

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

During the first phase of the project, the consultant created the attached Community Food Assessment. The Assessment included literature review and interviews with key knowledge leaders to determine the current state of Tumwater's food system and identify needs within the community.

The second phase of the project included developing draft goals and policies that will guide the strategy to improve Tumwater's food system. The draft goals and policies are included in the staff report for the Planning Commission's review and discussion are intended to be attainable and relevant to the City.

The third phase of the Food System Plan will provide the complete food systems plan with background information and a strategy to implement the Plan.

The consultant will present the findings of the Community Food Assessment and will ask the Planning Commission for input on potential goals and objectives.

Methodology

All steps in developing the Food Systems Plan followed the guiding 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.

Community Food Assessment

The goal of the Community Food Assessment is to provide a summary of Tumwater's food landscape to determine the strengths already present, developments currently underway, and challenges that provide barriers to success. This work will ensure that City efforts complement the strengths of community partners and work together to remove obstacles.

Interviews and a survey were conducted to gather information from community leaders in the following roles:

- Local Food Producers and Processors
- Food Access and Security
- Education and Workforce Development
- Land Use and Conservation
- Public Health and Nutrition
- Food Waste Reduction and Recovery
- Food Retail and Distribution

These roles define the topics that will be addressed in the report. Key developments, key challenges and current collaborations and resources will be identified for each of these roles. Knowledge leaders were also interviewed for Policy and Government and Community Advocacy

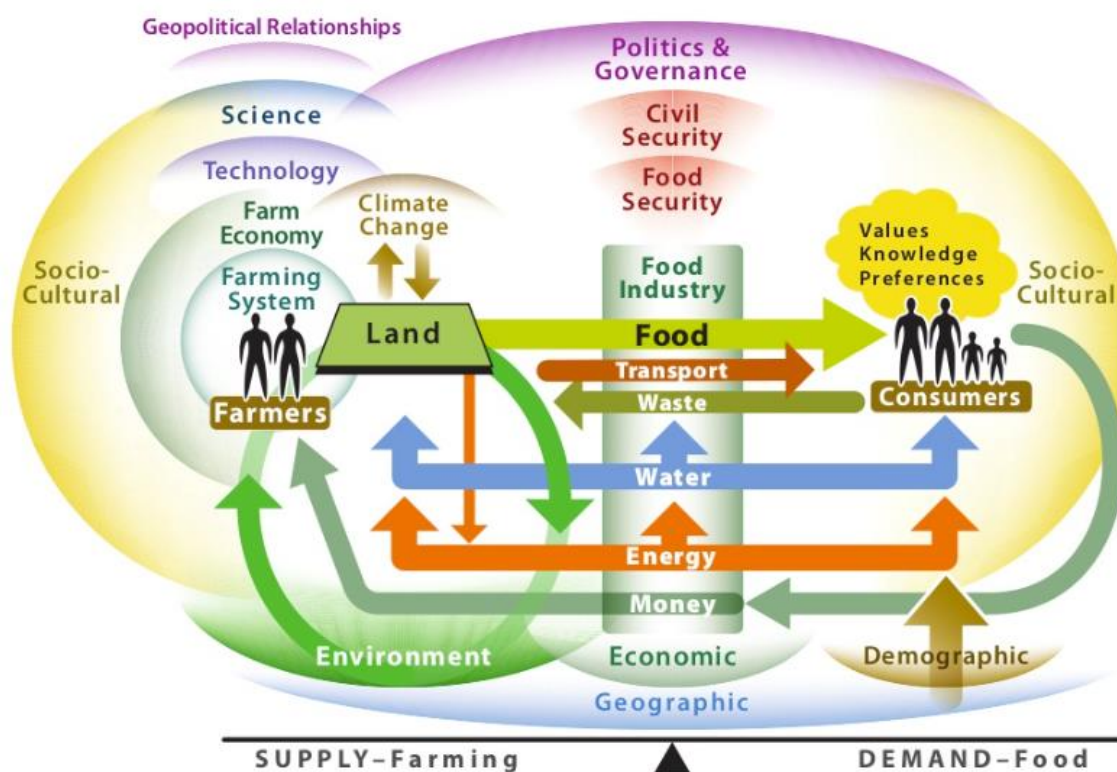
and Food Justice. Since these topics are interwoven between each of the roles, they will be included throughout the report. Since many of these topics are interrelated, there are many key knowledge leaders who have roles in more than one topic area.

The Warren Family on Hoadly Loop Road SE was contacted for participation as an expert in distribution by our consultant. The family was provided with information about the project in person and have not reached out to participate in the survey or interviews.

Overview

The food system is complex and integrates many other systems and inputs to meet the nutritional needs of people. The graphic below demonstrates the interconnected nature of the food system.

Figure 1. Food System Map – Basic Elements. Source: shiftN



When any one part of the system is in jeopardy, the other parts also decline. Issues that affect economic vitality impact the food system. Rising costs of living create pressure on households to further constrain spending. Since grocery budgets are more flexible than housing, utilities, and insurance, people with budget constraints often make choices to limit their grocery spending.

Many factors can influence the cost of food, such as water availability, gas prices, land prices, and lease rental for commercial spaces. Some of these factors can be intensified by local policies and regulations which balance many different community needs. While considering off-site impacts,

the City should consider regulatory barriers that may cause lack of services for community members.

For example, this lack of services creates an issue for both producers and consumers because livestock cannot be butchered at the best time, increasing the feeding costs or reducing the quantity of meat produced for the consumer. Producers must transport their animals further to get the services they need, and it increases the cost as well.

Food security has been a topic of discussion and collaboration in Thurston County since 2007. Many efforts have grown and faded since then due to funding opportunities. In 2019-20, as organized efforts pivoted around closures and changes to service models, pop up food distribution and localized models also provided food during the pandemic.

Local Food Processors and Producers

Producers face many challenges in our region. Development has increased the cost of farmland as demand for housing and other urban development increases. Access to water for urban farms and gardens that may not have water rights has led to increasing costs for those who are connected to City utilities, which in turn increases the cost of production.

While City codes permit urban agriculture and protect the right to farm, there are also barriers to farming lifestyles in an urban setting. Storage for feed, waste management, and accessory uses are difficult to navigate in smaller urban spaces. While local farms have better proximity to markets, low density development may not provide enough economic incentive to create urban agriculture in urban spaces.

Food Access and Security

Food insecurity is a daily concern for low- and middle-income households and is a growing concern for many communities as the costs of living increase. Challenges around not having resources for culturally appropriate, nutritious food, have intensified since pandemic-related food programs have expired. On the other hand, private food pantries and other mutual aid models expanded during the pandemic and have largely remained in operation.

While federal food benefit systems are in place, some who need food assistance face eligibility or other social barriers. For those who are eligible for food benefits, the rising cost of production stretches food dollars thin. Other services that do not restrict eligibility such as food banks are serving more community members. More than 10% of Tumwater residents used the food bank at any Thurston County location in 2024, 61% of whom were 18-60 years old.

Several programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs and Women Infants and Children program that are funded federally and operated by state agencies aid families with

incomes under an eligibility threshold. In some cases, these funds can be allocated for use at local food vendors like farmers markets or local grocery stores, which helps the local food network increase their market and meet the rising costs of production. Free pantries and other local food assistance experienced a resurgence during the pandemic with many of them persisting and providing services to the community that have an important role in food rescue and waste reduction.

While efforts to support local food systems with federal programs are in place, education and assistance are needed to remove behavior-based barriers to fresh nutritious food. Some local vendors also have a technological and cost barrier to accepting different forms of payment, limiting only certain vendors from participating and reducing the market for those producers.

Education and Workforce Development

Knowledge about how to produce, preserve, prepare, and recover nutritious food is essential to developing a thriving local food system. Efforts to restore this knowledge and prepare a workforce for the local food industry is pivotal for a sustainable system. School gardens can be an important place to start talking about nutrition as exposure to new foods can be limited to family culture and knowledge.

Public Health and Nutrition

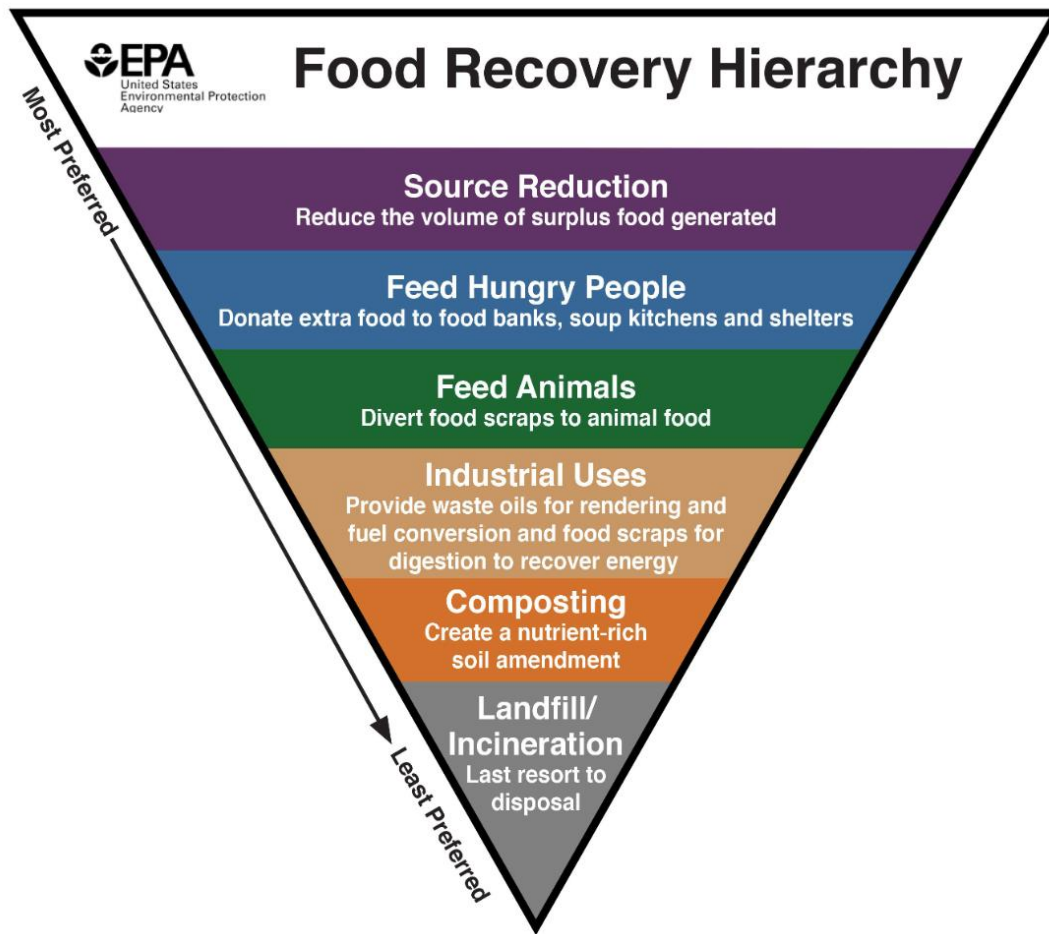
Health and nutrition are closely related and contribute to healthier communities. Stress from food insecurity can lead to health issues like psychosocial and academic issues, particularly in children. There are also social barriers to nutritional food like access to culturally appropriate foods, language barriers, and nutritional education.

Tumwater School District prepares and serves meals for students during the school year to make up for shortfalls and provides meals during summer months at designated school sites. In the past year, eligibility rose 3.5% for free and reduced-price lunch programs to 33.24%. With rising costs of food and a lag in federal and state funding to meet the need, school districts cover the gap in funding.

Food Waste Reduction and Recovery

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency identifies food recovery through a hierarchy that establishes the most preferred methods to least preferred methods based on effectiveness. The Food Recovery Hierarchy is included below as Figure 2.

Figure 2. Food Recovery Hierarchy. Source: EPA



Diverting food waste is a strategy for greenhouse gas emission reduction and Washington State passed mandates that start in 2022 and will phase in separation for food waste. Challenges such as packaging contamination, short meal periods, and lack of cold storage often cause barriers for diverting food from the landfill to other useful ends.

Food Retail and Distribution

Food hubs collaborate with many different producers to combine resources from multiple different sources creating local scale markets and increasing fair prices for both the consumer and producer. These hubs extend the capacity of any one producer to provide more flexibility for the consumer, however access is still limited and not as flexible as large retailers. Some hubs that are funded with grant dollars face uncertainties as programs shift and priorities at the federal and state level change.

Goals and Policies

Draft goals and policies focus on the project scope outlined by the City Council to provide healthy food for all members of the community, reduce food waste, and support food production and processing.

Goal 1 Provide access to fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate food for all members of the community.

- 1.1 Expand access to healthy, culturally relevant, and affordable food from both local and non-local sources across all neighborhoods.*
- 1.2 Enhance public education and outreach related to the local food system.*
- 1.3 Increase opportunities for individual and community food self-reliance.*
- 1.4 Support infrastructure, zoning, and land use policies which impact food access.*
- 1.5 Strengthen regional food system collaboration.*

Goal 2 Reduce food waste.

- 2.1 Collaborate on strategies to prevent food waste at all stages of the food system.*
- 2.2 Partner with Thurston County to increase community-wide food waste education and engagement.*
- 2.3 Work with partners to expand food recovery and redistribution systems.*

Goal 3 Support local food processing and production.

- 3.1 Reduce barriers and provide incentives for local growers and producers.*
- 3.2 Support access to land for local food production by historically underserved and aspiring farmers, and coordinate with partners to conserve agriculturally viable lands in appropriate areas.*
- 3.3 Strengthen local food system infrastructure.*
- 3.4 Promote local food purchasing and community engagement.*
- 3.5 Form partnership to increase local food production capacity.*

Questions to Consider

The following questions help guide a discussion about what the Planning Commission would like in the Plan. Feedback about the direction of these goals and policies is helpful to ensure they are

aligned with Council’s vision for this work. Staff and consultants can complete assessments of feasibility and provide strategies to accomplish the goals given current city resources.

- What challenges are most important to you?
- What challenges should be alleviated first?
- What key challenges do you see that were not captured by a goal or policy?
- What regulations unintentionally hinder food production, processing, retail, or recovery?
- What changes would you like to see in Tumwater's food system?
- Have you seen practices in other municipalities that would meet Tumwater’s needs?

Timeline

The term of the project is until December 2025. The timeline below provides the project schedule, which will conclude work on the Food System Plan by September 2025.

Deliverables	Expected Completion
Community Food Assessment	May 2025
Food System Plan’s Goals and Objectives	July 2025
Food System Plan Complete	September 2025

The contractor is scheduled to present the complete plan to the Planning Commission on September 9, 2025.