



# Sustainability Action Plan for the City of Bloomington, Indiana: Following up on policy and action for local food and agriculture

## 1. Executive Summary

The following report details the City of Bloomington’s progress in accomplishing its local food and agriculture goals detailed in their [2018 Sustainability Action Plan \(SAP\)](#). This document also serves to complete a food policy analysis objective as outlined in the Indiana Farm Connect USDA Local Food Promotion Program grant (LFPP) that the City is a partner on.

Despite unforeseen challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, the City has progressed in accomplishing action items in the SAP. This report provides an update for each action item, highlighting both the work of the Local Food Coordinator (LFC) and other City employees. The assessment finds the City has achieved five of 22 action items, progressed toward seven of 22 action items, and not met 10 of 22 action items.

Conducting this assessment included interviews with City of Bloomington employees, and these interviews provided personal insights as to the execution of the SAP. This report will conclude with recommendations to build upon the completed achievements of the LFC and City in accomplishing the action items of the SAP.

## 2. Introduction

In 2018, the City of Bloomington became a partner in a statewide USDA Local Food Promotion Program grant, Indiana Farm Connect. One objective for this grant was to examine policy implementation strategies already in place among municipalities around the United States and to assess whether any policy would be applicable for Bloomington.

After conducting interviews with nonprofit food policy organizations and comparable midwestern communities, the City elected not to adopt its own food purchasing policy but to instead focus on implementation for its existing Sustainability Action Plan (SAP), which includes a full chapter of policy objectives related to local food and agriculture. The following report examines the City’s

progress in meeting its own food policy objectives as detailed in the SAP.

The SAP was developed in collaboration with the Gnarly Tree Sustainability Institute in 2018 to create the City’s first formal sustainability planning effort. It is focused on goals and actions to address pressing environmental issues, with a view towards economic prosperity and social equity. The SAP includes seven chapters. Chapter four, Local Food and Agriculture, specifically outlines three major goals: 1) increase healthy, local food access; 2) increase the number of food gardens in the community; and 3) increase the percentage of food that large institutional buyers purchase from local farms. As part of its commitment to the Indiana Farm Connect LFPP grant, the City hired a Local Food Coordinator (LFC) to lead efforts related to the third goal from 2019-2021. Other local food objectives were intended to be led by the City’s Assistant Director of Sustainability and other City staff in collaboration with relevant community organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the City’s capacity to accomplish many goals outlined in the SAP. However, the pandemic response provided supplemental funding through the City’s Recover Forward fund. These recovery funds supported the goals of the LFC and allowed for continuation of certain activities during the pandemic.

This report will provide information on the City of Bloomington’s progress in meeting each action item within the SAP local food chapter. This will include actions delayed due to the pandemic or not met, actions in progress, and actions completed. Additionally, the report will offer recommendations for the City of Bloomington regarding the progress and accomplishment of the SAP local food objective.

### 3. Methods

This report was completed in collaboration with the LFC, City of Bloomington, and Indiana University. To assess the progress of the SAP, City staff in the Economic and Sustainable Development, Parks and Recreation, and Housing and Neighborhood Development departments were consulted to provide necessary information as to the status and progress of SAP action items. This included interviews with staff in which themes from the interviews were reviewed to form recommendations for the City.

### 4. City of Bloomington Sustainability Action Plan

On October 31, 2018, the Bloomington City Council approved the SAP, creating the City’s first formal sustainability planning effort. Chapter 4, “Local Food and Agriculture,” consists of three goals with several actions outlined to meet those goals. Each action has a set timeframe for completion between 2019 and 2021, totaling 22 actions outlined. After the plan was approved in 2018, the City conducted an audit of the plan after its first full year of implementation. Though some actions outlined for “Local Food and Agriculture” progressed after this first year, many were not specified in this secondary progress report. To assess the progress of all actions in Chapter 4, interviews were conducted in the summer of 2021 with the Assistant Director of Sustainability and other employees from the Housing and Neighborhood Development, Parks and Recreation, and Economic and Sustainable Development departments to understand each action item’s current progress.

The goals outlined in Chapter 4 of the Sustainability Action Plan can be found with detailed progress updates in Tables 1, 2, and 3 at the end of this report (pages 6, 7, and 8, respectively). Below is a summary table indicating which goals have been achieved, are in progress, or have not been met.

Table 4: Action Item Progress Summary

Action Item Status	Action Items	Share of Action Items
Achieved	Goal 4.1: 4.1.a Goal 4.2: 4.2.a, 4.2.d Goal 4.3: 4.3.a, 4.3.b	5/22, 23%
In Progress	Goal 4.1: 4.1.b, 4.1.c, 4.1.d Goal 4.2: 4.2.b, 4.2.c Goal 4.3: 4.3.c, 4.3.d	7/22, 32%
Not Met	Goal 4.1: 4.1.e, 4.1.f, 4.1.g, 4.1.h, 4.1.i, 4.1.j Goal 4.2: 4.2.e, 4.2.f, 4.2.g Goal 4.3: 4.3.e	10/22, 45%

*\*In Progress – this designation represents action items that shifted due to community input, pandemic or other issues, as well as the unclear status of an action item. This unclear status could mean that no one is assigned to oversee the goal, or the City no longer intends to pursue this goal.*



Community raised garden plots at Switchyard Park, a part of the City’s Sustainability Action Plan. Photo courtesy of Rundell Ernstberger Associates

## 5. Insights from City of Bloomington Employee Interviews

Preparation of this report included data collection from various employees with the City of Bloomington involved in the implementation of the SAP. This included representatives from the Housing and Neighborhood Development, Parks and Recreation, and Economic and Sustainable Development departments. The interviews provided several insights as to the unanticipated challenges when executing the SAP action items.

### 5.a: *Dual role of Sustainability Action Plan and Climate Action Plan*

After the SAP was approved by City Council in October 2018, the City followed the SAP with a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. This goal was accompanied by the creation of the City of Bloomington Climate Action Plan (CAP) to recommend strategies for reaching these emission reduction targets. The CAP was approved by the City Council in April 2021.

The CAP has a similar structure to the SAP, with eight separate chapters for different components of climate action, including a chapter for Local Food and Agriculture. Although there are inherent differences in the plans (achieve environmental sustainability versus greenhouse gas reduction), it is not immediately clear how they work together and complement one another. Some employees also expressed concern about redundancies with the plans. After an initial comparison of the SAP and CAP's Local Food and Agriculture chapters, most action items are different. However, some action items in the CAP overlap with the SAP. For example, SAP's Action Item 4.1.a (to develop a recurring community food access survey) is essentially the same as the CAP's Goal B1 (to conduct a food security assessment for the City). This overlap can be beneficial, as some goals of the CAP are achieved through the SAP; however, the City should evaluate and communicate how these plans complement one another and work together.

### 5.b: *Communication and Collective Action Challenges*

Inherent in any strategic action plan are the limitations of communication and collective action. The City of Bloomington is not immune to these challenges. The SAP includes collaboration with several other City departments and nonprofit stakeholders. City employees expressed challenges in both collaborating to implement and monitor the SAP action items. Some employees expressed confusion over who exactly was responsible for

monitoring the progress of an action item. Although the Economic and Sustainable Development Department oversees the strategic direction for sustainability in Bloomington, other employees are crucial in ensuring the delivery of the action items promised. However, there seemed to be no formal meeting or collaboration mechanism specific to monitoring the SAP. The City does an excellent job of collaborating across departments through a monthly Climate Action Team, which unifies department representatives across City Hall to discuss sustainability. However, these meetings are not specific to SAP information gathering. The City could benefit from implementing a set monitoring structure for the SAP and particularly a monitoring structure focused on progress of local food efforts within the City.

### 5.c: *Accurate Weighing of each Action Item*

One City employee who was interviewed for this report, expressed the challenges of monitoring a goal when an action accomplished the "spirit" of the goal but not in the method outlined in the SAP. For example, several action items seek to increase access to healthy and fresh food. Many City departments and partner nonprofit agencies are accomplishing this aim; though not necessarily through the development of a SMART goal as outlined in an action item. If the aim is being accomplished, then the spirit of the action item is considered achieved for the purpose of this report, however, communicating this to constituents presents a challenge. While this plan is just an outline for the City, constituents rely on the SAP to understand how the City is strategically accomplishing its broad objectives. Identifying ways to accurately depict the true progress of an action item is difficult if the achievement uses methods outside the proposed plan.

Another limitation of the SAP is the equal weight of all action items when some actions are more multi-faceted than others. Timelines in the SAP were designed to address short versus long-term work on a goal, but perhaps they fall short of describing the level of work and time it takes to achieve these goals. Initial assessment of the completion of the SAP (how many items are achieved) does not fully capture the work completed to achieve one goal compared to another. For example, facilitating a tour requires less effort and resources than developing a program. However, each goal is weighed the same when marking it as achieved, in progress, or not met. Devising a more accurate measurement system that accurately captures the level of resources and work required in each action item would allow for a more accurate portrayal of the City's progress on achieving the goals of the SAP.

### *5.d Acknowledgment of Community Partners*

The City mentioned many community partners working on issues outlined in this plan, but not working in conjunction with the City on the SAP. These partners included those working in food insecurity, garden education, jobs training and assessment.

## **6. Recommendations for the City of Bloomington**

Below are recommendations for the City of Bloomington based off insights from employee interviews and assessing the progress of Chapter 4 of the SAP.

### *6.a: Implementation of Sustainability Dashboard*

Although strategic plans are allowed a degree of flexibility, residents and constituents have displayed through city surveys and engagement with City Council a high degree of interest in the City's progress in achieving sustainability. These plans are only a guiding framework; however, the City should continue investing resources in establishing a sustainability dashboard to show progress on these goals. Though the 2019 progress report provided a useful update for the progress of the SAP, having a dedicated liaison for each chapter of the SAP to update a dashboard based off the goals and actions of the SAP would be an immensely useful tool internally and externally for residents.

### *6.b: Structured Reporting Process and Community Input*

In addition to the first recommendation, the City would benefit from a set collaboration structure to mitigate some of the challenges with collective action. Formalizing who will be the appropriate liaisons for the SAP internally and externally could ensure that the appropriate contacts continually monitor the progress of each action item. It would also allow for enhanced accountability if an individual or representative (rather than a whole department) was responsible for monitoring an action item and reporting its progress during a set period.

Although these plans are meant to ebb and flow with the lived reality of executing the plan, City Council members and residents are keen and eager to see how these plans are actualized. Maintaining an ongoing feedback loop, rather than updating the progress of a report at one point in time, could mitigate the challenge of seeking updates and progress of several action items at once. A priority of the current mayoral administration is citizen

engagement; moreover, City employees are willing and interested in achieving the SAP. A formalized structure for monitoring the implementation that is crafted by City employees who are aware of what meeting and accountability structure would work best could offset the burdensome task of getting multiple status updates at once.

Community input could occur at more than one level. Increasingly, public entities are learning how to capture and act on the collective community input of lived experiences. For the food system, this would include those most affected by poor access to healthy food, those utilizing emergency food assistance, and traditionally marginalized groups whose voices may not reach City Hall when meetings occur. In addition to the eater stakeholders, community input in the form of an Advisory Board consisting of nonprofit, public, and private entities, as well as community members, may help the City create a vision for its role in the local food system and economy more accurately represents local voices and best meets the community's needs. This is increasingly important as the City considers achieving the new goals set forth by the Climate Action Plan for carbon neutrality.

### *6.c: Consideration of the City of Bloomington's role in the local food system and establishment of a permanent role dedicated to local food system development*

The City of Bloomington has fostered the development of a community food system for many decades, primarily through the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market. However, food systems are far more complex and have public, private, and nonprofit actors supporting and transacting in ways that can positively and negatively impact our economy, social wellbeing, and environmental "foodprint." As a major public entity working in our community food system, the City will need input and advice to determine their role moving forward. The data on racial and social disparities for healthy food access, food insecurity, and social determinants of health cannot be ignored. Local and regional food systems are built on trust and transparency, and whatever role the City takes moving forward, it will need to be clear. A humble approach with a willingness to approach food system issues with an expanded lens is a good start. True partnerships with agencies and individuals with expertise in the community who live and breathe these issues daily will be critical for accomplishing climate or sustainability action goals and plans. Coordination of this commitment will need to come from staff who are devoted to this topic





Customers gather at Rose Hill Farm Stop for their market and café. Photo courtesy of Carol Kruger/Herald Times

and who can see alignment between climate action and the day-to-day experience of all food system stakeholders in our community. As noted in her book, *Wealth Creation*, Shanna Ratner states, “By working from the ground up with an eye toward the larger system we can learn what has to change from the top down to support shared prosperity.”

The data collection for this report elevates the importance of establishing a permanent LFC role in the City of Bloomington. The LFC has been involved in most of the SAP “Local Food & Agriculture” goals that have made progress over the past several years, especially those under Goal 4.3, focused on economic development. Since 2019, the LFC’s work has culminated in the formation of a new agricultural cooperative with more than 35 member farms and the opening of a new Farm Stop, which establishes basic community infrastructure for local growers to aggregate and connect with area food buyers. None of this would have been possible without dedicated staff time for building relationships, connecting people, and gathering resources. Going forward, a

permanent LFC position, in coordination with a community food system advisory board, will be needed to continue developing partnerships and programs to ensure community input is heard as the City engages in the long-term, complex process of food system development.


 Leatherman, K., Beyer, R., Smith, J. 2022. *Sustainability Action Plan for the City of Bloomington, Indiana: Following up on policy and action for local food and agriculture*. 8p.

Table 1: Progress of Goal 4.1

Goal	Description	Status	Results
4.1.a	Develop an annual community survey designed to evaluate changes in healthy food access over time.	Achieved	In partnership with the City of Bloomington Economic & Sustainable Development Department, the Bloomington Food Policy Council hosted discussions in 2019 and developed a survey tool to measure food access and gather community input on food access barriers and strategies to address these barriers. This was a three-page survey in which the City worked with the Herald Times, a Bloomington newspaper, to distribute the survey to a random sample of 6,000 households. The City received 563 surveys after distribution and worked with the Indiana University Critical Food Studies Lab to analyze the results. Although this initial survey was achieved, there is no existing structure for survey implementation over time and the final report from the first survey has not been published or distributed to the public yet.
4.1.b	Develop a food system asset map of existing groups and efforts related to the functional food system and social support services.	In Progress	In 2019, the LFC and Assistant Director of Sustainability worked with an intern in the City's Economic and Sustainable Development department to create a food asset map. Data for this resource included information on food assistance, food retail, community gardens, institutions, farm supplies, food distributors, food producers, composting organizations, advocacy groups, and technical support organizations. Although the food asset data is compiled, it still needs to be converted to a map and disseminated to the public for use.
4.1.c	Coordinate community efforts to address root causes of food insecurity, healthy food access, productive reuse of vacant land, and economic opportunities and education around the local food system.	In Progress	Increased rates of food insecurity prompted by the pandemic shifted this action item. The Bloomington Health Foundation, in conjunction with the Hoosier Hills Food Bank, formed a food insecurity working group in 2020 to formulate a response to rising rates of hunger in Bloomington and surrounding areas. This working group included City representatives from the Community and Family Resources Department and continues to meet as the pandemic evolves. Primary functions of this group include assessing the state of food insecurity and access in Monroe County; however, the action is still in progress as no assessments of vacant land and economic development have taken place at this time.
4.1.d	Design and host quarterly, community Healthy Food Fairs, where people can sign up for SNAP and MCCSC food programs, learn about local food resources, etc., and supplement fairs with a web presence to provide access to all resources in one spot.	In Progress	This action item has not been accomplished as originally conceived. A related effort in progress through the City's Parks and Recreation Department includes the grant "Parks as Community Nutrition Hubs: Expanding Access to Healthy Food" in which the Banneker Community Center is to develop a "Nutrition Hub" and collaborate with other food agencies in the community to expand nutrition services and provide access to affordable and healthy food. This grant initiative does connect residents to healthy food; however, the original objectives of this action have not been met.
4.1.e	Evaluate the development of a SMART goal for increasing access to healthy, local food per the results of the 2019 survey and baseline development.	Not Met	Although the first food access survey was administered, it has not been utilized yet to establish a SMART goal for the City to increase access to healthy and affordable food.
4.1.f	Implement the Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy community program to improve access to healthy, affordable foods by working with small food retailers.	Not Met	This action item has not been met.
4.1.g	Establish a refrigerated food truck program to transport healthy foods to food deserts.	Not Met	This action item has not been met.
4.1.h	Collaborate with convenience stores to expand healthy food offerings.	Not Met	This action item has not been met.
4.1.i	Recruit organizations located in/near food deserts to host community gardens and/or pop-up farm stands.	Not Met	The action item has not been met.
4.1.j	Determine the potential for produce prescription program to enable doctors to prescribe produce for health issues experienced among individuals with low access to healthy, local food, and implement if feasible.	Not Met	The action item has not been met. Though no feasibility study has occurred for a produce prescription program, in the summer of 2019, the City-managed Bloomington Community Farmers' Market (BCFM) did run a MarketRx program in collaboration with Volunteers in Medicine (VIM). Patients at VIM with a medical diagnosis of diabetes or obesity were eligible to attend a series of four weekly sessions about Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES). During the second week, patients had an opportunity for orientation to the BCFM and were provided a voucher that could be redeemed for \$30 dollars of MarketRx. Participants were encouraged to use this voucher at the BCFM prior to the end of the 4th class, during which they had the opportunity to give feedback and share stories regarding their experiences. At the completion of the series, participants were eligible for an additional \$30 voucher, supporting continued access to locally sourced farm-fresh produce through the BCFM. Six cohorts of 10-person classes were scheduled to occur between May and October 2019, resulting in the distribution of \$3,600 in MarketRx vouchers. The funds for this program came from a grant secured by the Bloomington Parks Foundation. Although this pilot project with VIM has been completed, the feasibility of a broader produce prescription program has not been evaluated to date.

Table 2: Progress of Goal 4.2

Goal	Description	Status	Results
4.2.a	Establish a 2019 baseline for the number and size of gardens in the community used to grow food for personal consumption or sale, and a mechanism for tracking this data moving forward.	Achieved	For the Bloomington Parks and Recreation Community Garden Program, there were 191 out of 221 available garden plots rented in 2019. In 2020, 241 out of 241 available garden plots were rented, constituting a 26 percent increase in garden plot rentals. In the summer of 2020, the City's Economic & Sustainable Development Department conducted a "Monroe County Garden Survey", in collaboration with Purdue Extension. The survey included questions about the number and size of gardens in the community, and the purpose of garden production, as well as questions about yield, barriers limiting production, and impacts of climate change. The resulting data was shared with Purdue Extension and Indiana University. This survey template could be utilized for tracking data about food gardens in the future.
4.2.b	Develop a consultation and implementation program to create additional gardens at community locations interested in sponsoring a garden for individuals affiliated with their organization (e.g., churches, neighborhood associations).	In Progress	As discussed for action item 4.1.d, the Banneker Community Center received a grant "Parks as Community Nutrition Hubs: Expanding Access to Healthy Food" to create a "Nutrition Hub" and as a condition of this grant, the Banneker Community Center must develop garden spaces at the center for low-income and underserved Bloomington residents. This includes partnering with other area agencies to encourage additional produce growth.
4.2.c	Evaluate the development of a SMART goal for increasing the area of food gardens in the community, per the results of the 2019 survey and baseline development.	In Progress	Like action 4.1.e, a SMART goal for strategically increasing food gardens has not been formalized. However, the City has progressed toward the increase of food gardens since the implementation of the SAP. Evidence of this includes the addition of 39 garden plots at Switchyard Park.
4.2.d	Add 39 raised garden beds at Switchyard Park.	Achieved	This action is achieved. The Switchyard Park Community Gardens opened in 2020 and rented all 39 of its raised beds to the public in 2020.
4.2.e	Place a garden in all committed elementary schools and other organizations and provide consultation on establishment and maintenance.	Not Met	This action item is not met.
4.2.f	Collaborate with Bloomington Housing Authority (BHA) to ensure public housing residents have access to sufficient gardening space, tools, and other resources needed to be successful.	Not Met	This action item is not met.
4.2.g	Facilitate a guided tour of farms and gardens within city limits to inspire and encourage acceptance of vegetative alternative practices.	Not Met	This action item is not met.

Table 3: Progress of Goal 4.3

Goal	Description	Status	Results
4.3.a	Establish a 2019 baseline measurement of total value and percentage of local food purchases for large institutional buyers, and a mechanism for tracking this information moving forward.	Achieved	This action item was completed in 2019. Throughout that year, the LFC conducted a comprehensive local food needs assessment, contacting more than 200 institutional food buyers and farmers in Monroe County and surrounding counties to complete a survey and in-depth interview. 85 buyers and farmers participated, providing important information about the challenges and opportunities related to procuring and supplying local food to the area. The survey specifically asked buyer respondents to report their total spending on food and beverages overall and in specific categories over the previous fiscal year. Respondents were also asked to report the percentage spent overall and in specific categories on procuring local food, with results averaging from zero to 15 percent. Though the 2019 baseline measure for local food purchasing has been established, the City still needs to set up a mechanism for tracking this data in the future.
4.3.b	Hire a local full-time value chain coordinator for the City of Bloomington to assist with initiatives to create economic opportunities for farmers and gardeners.	Achieved	In April 2019, the City's Economic and Sustainable Development Department hired a temporary Local Food Coordinator funded, in part, by a USDA grant. The LFC has led efforts to create new supply chain opportunities for farmers and institutional food buyers, achieving this action item.
4.3.c	Host a community meeting with institutional buyers and local growers to identify challenges and opportunities for collaboration.	In Progress	This action item has not been accomplished as originally conceived but related activities have occurred. The City hosted a kick-off meeting for the SAP Local Food and Agriculture work in November 2019, and that included formal presentations about value chain coordination work. In addition, in January 2020, a group of nine Monroe County farmers and food system advocates with five staff members of a local Bloomington food co-op, Bloomingfoods, travelled to Ann Arbor, Michigan and completed a three-day intensive training with the Argus Farm Stop team.
4.3.d	Evaluate the development of a SMART goal for increasing the percentage of food purchased by large institutional buyers from local farmers, per the development of a 2019 baseline.	In Progress	Major progress has been made toward achieving this goal, with the initial opening of the new Rose Hill Farm Stop in early August 2021. This project was set up to serve as a bridge initiative, providing local farmers with a new cooperatively owned retail outlet and assisting them in aggregating to sell to local institutions through an online hub platform that will be launched later in 2021.
4.3.e	Conduct research on locations of nearby processing facilities to determine how shared community resources (i.e. grain mills, mobile abattoirs, food storage, root cellars, refrigeration) are structured in other communities to provide support for small local farmers.	Not Met	This action item is not met, as the goal has shifted based on the needs expressed by growers and buyers during the local food need assessment process. Growers were most interested in additional retail outlets and opportunities for aggregation. Buyers were most interested in options to conveniently purchase from a group of local growers through a centralized platform. Interest in processing facilities was limited to a few livestock producers. Following the expressed needs of growers and buyers, the LFC conducted interviews with four comparable Midwestern communities, including Douglas County in Kansas, Johnson County in Iowa, Fayette County in Kentucky, and Washtenaw County in Michigan to learn more about the work these counties were doing to develop local food supply chains in their areas.