



A Comprehensive Food Assessment for Maricopa County

A Desert Food System Facing Unique Challenges

How does the fourth most populous and fastest growing county in the United States feed itself when faced with daunting land, water, and development challenges? How do we preserve our diverse agricultural heritage and grow a food system in Maricopa County that is equitable, healthy, sustainable and thriving? The opportunities to address these questions lie in our ability to inform policy and investment strategies that create health, wealth, community and capacity, while also building relationships based on trust and mutual respect among growers, residents, organizations, and decision-makers.

Maricopa County Food System Coalition, or “MarCo”, is an independent, voluntary coalition comprised of 225 individuals and 110 organizations advocating for the regeneration and advancement of a community-based food system in the region. As the leading expert on community food systems in Central Arizona, MarCo focuses on innovative and collaborative solutions through the work of our committees and work groups. In 2015, MarCo identified the need to conduct a comprehensive regional food assessment as a top priority and the Food Assessment Coordination Team, or “FACT”, was formed.

A comprehensive food assessment is a snapshot in time of how the food system within a specific geographic region is working well, and where it needs to be improved. Because the “food system” is extremely complex, FACT interviewed MarCo Members and Friends to learn what types of information would be most valuable in order to build broader momentum for food systems work and guide strategic action. We decided to focus on the issues facing growers, eaters, and the networks that link the two, with an additional emphasis on the economic contribution of on-farm agriculture, municipal policy, and the productive resources of land and water. This graphic summarizes our core food assessment components and our major accomplishments since 2015. The next page briefly outlines the main Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, and Opportunities identified through our work. Subsequent pages provide a summary of The Food Assessment in greater detail with regards to our approach, methods, and key findings. However, we encourage you to delve even deeper into the results by visiting marcofoodcoalition.org and clicking on Food Assessment. Here, you can access full reports for various Food Assessment component studies.

MarCo is currently utilizing the results of the Food Assessment to inform our 2019 strategic planning process. The Policy Work Group and FACT are developing recommendations to take the assessment results on the road through an educational and advocacy campaign. We are also developing recommendations for building stronger connections among growers and civic leaders, and ways to keep the Community Food Conversations going to emphasize food sharing and building community.





Strengths

- ◆ Maricopa County is a national leader in value of milk, hay, and other forage crops. We are also a national leader in the production of vegetable, potato and melon crops.
- ◆ Farmers that grow for local markets are some of the most skilled in the country based on impressive crop yield.
- ◆ Independent food distributors demonstrate commitment to increasing local food purchasing and distribution.
- ◆ Some municipalities have General Plans supportive of local food systems and many use programmatic approaches such as community gardens and resident education.
- ◆ In general, consumer buying power in the region is very strong, which provides potential for new market opportunities for regional growers.
- ◆ Many residents express that they value high quality foods including “ripe, healthy, seasonal, and organic produce.”
- ◆ Residents are interested in engaging in solutions that leverage food to develop social connections and build community.
- ◆ Food system leaders and organizations are committed and show key shifts towards a focus on policy and systems change.



Weaknesses

- ◆ 95% of all county sales came from just 186 farms which represents less than 10% of all farms.
- ◆ Access to productive resources such as land and water is limited.
- ◆ Too many farmers feel isolated and underrepresented.
- ◆ There are too few growers serving existing local markets limiting potential for the increasing demand for local foods.
- ◆ There is a shortage of food processing infrastructure.
- ◆ Many municipalities take a reactive approach when it comes to policies and regulations impacting the local food system.
- ◆ Barriers to supportive municipal policy include limited staff resources and the presence of many HOAs making policy implementation difficult at the neighborhood-level.
- ◆ Consumers and civic leaders lack awareness of and investment in community food systems.
- ◆ Hunger, diet-related disease and other risk factors are higher than the national average for Maricopa County residents.
- ◆ 1 in 5 Maricopa County children experience limited or uncertain availability of food.
- ◆ Barriers to achieving a healthy diet include affordability, transportation and low access to stores selling quality foods.
- ◆ Food system groups are overrepresented by members from groups with historically better and more reliable access to healthy foods and other forms of privilege which limits their perspective and progress toward stated goals of improving equity.



Threats

- ◆ The county’s potential to grow its own food is small and is shrinking due to the loss of productive agricultural land and water.
- ◆ Agriculture must compete with urban development to hold on to the land and water it needs, both of which are heavily regulated in favor of urban development.
- ◆ The cost to purchase or rent farmland in Maricopa County is too high for most farmers as supply decreases and competition increases.
- ◆ The average farmer is 60 years old, many are considering leaving the profession or moving elsewhere. Growing new farmers is extremely difficult.
- ◆ Many decision-makers, and some local food champions, are unaware of how certain municipal policies and regulations can negatively impact food systems.
- ◆ Maricopa County depends on \$900 million of federal aid each year to provide food relief to low-income residents.



Opportunities

- ◆ Convene farmers and civic leaders to improve awareness around the unique needs of growers while building trust, social capital, and new networks.
- ◆ Advocate for public policy and investment that fosters community health, wealth, connection and capacity.
- ◆ Build economic resilience by scaling and diversifying local market options for farmers.
- ◆ Implement an eat local campaign. If residents spent \$5 on food from a regional farm each week, farmers could generate \$1.1 billion in sales a year!
- ◆ Continue to engage eaters using equity and justice approaches with a focus on food in building community, food access solutions, as well as food quality and value.