El Paso County Food System Assessment – Phase I Report

El Paso County Public Health

An addendum to the Community Health Assessment

May 2, 2018
Background

Food Environments and Health

El Paso County lies in east central Colorado and, depending on the year, is either the most populous county in Colorado or the second most populous behind Denver County. In 2015, El Paso County had an estimated 677,022 residents with 66.7 percent of the population living in Colorado Springs. According to the 2017 County Health Rankings, El Paso County ranks 29 out of 58 ranked counties in Colorado in health outcomes and 35 in health behaviors, which include adult obesity, smoking, inactivity, excessive drinking, and the food environment.*

Life expectancy is a key indicator of the overall health and quality of life of a community. That’s because our environments have an effect on choices and behaviors that contribute to chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma. How we interact with the surrounding environment impacts our ability to be physically active, access healthy food and other resources, interact socially, and access transportation options – all of which determine our overall quality of life and well-being. In El Paso County, there exists a 16.1-year difference in life expectancy across census tracts. Life expectancy is as low as 69.3 years in some neighborhoods and as high as 85.4 years in other neighborhoods. (Figure 1).

* The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment acknowledges that generations-long social, economic and environmental inequities result in adverse health outcomes. They affect communities differently and have a greater influence on health outcomes than either individual choices or one’s ability to access health care. Reducing health disparities through policies, practices and organizational systems can help improve opportunities for all Coloradans.
The leading causes of death in El Paso County have remained the same for the past decade: cancer, heart disease, and unintentional injury. Contributing determinants include potentially controllable factors such as tobacco use, diet, exercise, access to quality clinical care, access to safe places for physical activity, and access to healthy food options.

A well-designed environment that promotes physical activity and proper nutrition and reduces exposure to toxins and adverse conditions has the potential to alleviate the burden of disease in communities. Fortunately, public health with its partners can shape the design of communities in ways that improves health outcomes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, healthy places are those designed and built to improve the quality of life for all people who live, work, worship, learn, and play within their borders—where every person is free to make choices amid a variety of healthy, available, accessible, and affordable options.

A growing body of research shows that food environments impact our health. The food environment is composed of a variety of food outlets in the community, including grocery stores, convenience stores, full-service restaurants, fast food restaurants, farm stands, community gardens, urban farms, etc. Their abundance, location, storage and stock, proximity to residential areas, connection to transportation, and ability to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits, among other things, all affect the health and accessibility of the environment.

Practitioners are increasingly utilizing Food System Assessments (FSAs) to develop a baseline understanding and a means to track changes in the food environment. The assessment is typically used to measure the assets and needs in communities, municipalities and regions with regard to food security, productive capacity of the land, and economic development. FSAs can be valuable tools for better understanding the social, economic, regulatory and political context of the food system and can point to opportunities for improving the local food environment through policy making and investment.

In 2015, El Paso County and the City of Colorado Springs established the Food Policy Advisory Board (FPAB) for the purpose of advising City Council and County Commissioners on matters, policies, programs, operations, and land use rights affecting local food issues and to serve as a collaborative body and forum for responding to the needs of the community as it relates to the food system. The Board operates on the following tenets: 1. food production, processing, distribution and access significantly affect the public health, land use, economy and quality of life of the residents of El Paso County; and 2. the residents of El Paso County should have access to nutritious, affordable, and responsibly grown food. This assessment is meant guide the FPAB in making data-informed recommendations to City Council and County Commissioners to increase access to affordable nutritious food.

**Methods**

**Reasoning**

El Paso County Public Health cites the following reasons as justification to conduct a food system assessment locally at this time (adapted from LiveWell Colorado’s Food Assessment Readiness Checklist):

- A community food assessment has not been done in our region;
- There is a community-based interest in the food system and knowing more about it;
- There are multiple stakeholders interested in using the results to inform their programs or projects, particularly the Food Policy Advisory Board;
- El Paso County Public Health is willing to coordinate this effort and manage data storage;
- El Paso County Public Health staff have the skills and experiences to moderate cohesive conversations about goals and objectives of the food assessment;
- As a benefit of having member governments participating in the HEAL (Healthy Eating Active Living) Cities & Towns Campaign, El Paso County Public Health has access to an expert at LiveWell Colorado to assist with process guidance, data collection and interpretation;
- El Paso County Public Health and its partners have the means to share the results of a food assessment with the wider community and engage them in the analysis of findings; and
- Several local governments are interested in the results including El Paso County and the cities of Colorado Springs, Manitou and Fountain.
Advisory Committee

An Advisory Committee was formed to guide El Paso County Public Health staff through the process. The Advisory Committee is made up of the following members:

- Beth Anderson (Local Food Application)
- Brianna Rockler (Colorado State University Extension)
- City of Manitou – Karen Berchtold, Wade Burkholder, Nicole Nicoletta
- City of Fountain – Kristy Martinez, Ben Ward
- Penrose-St. Francis Health Services – Sean Svette, Cyndy Wacker
- Lyn Harwell (Food Policy Advisory Board, Founder of Seeds Community Cafe)
- Zac Chapman (Colorado Springs Food Rescue)
- Nanna Meyer (Food Policy Advisory Board, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs)
- Wendy Peters Moschetti (LiveWell Colorado)

Use of Assessment Findings

The goal for the Food System Assessment in El Paso County is to identify prospects for policies and priorities for capacity building, innovation and investment in order to address challenges and capitalize on opportunities in our food system (considering roles for both public and private sectors and non-profit partners). To do so, there must be a better understanding of:

1. The economic, regulatory, political and geographic context of our food system; and
2. Public knowledge, attitude and behaviors as they relate to our food system.

The assessment is designed to answer the following key questions (and sub-questions) developed by the Advisory Committee and based on the tenets of the Food Policy Advisory Board:

1. What barriers and opportunities exist in our food system to positively influence access to and consumption of nutritious, affordable, and responsibly grown food?
   - Where do we have our biggest gaps in healthy food retail (by geography, demographics)?
   - How does our food environment affect food insecure populations?
   - How much money is being spent on food, and where?
   - How often are people eating at home/out?
   - What are the most commonly reported barriers to healthy food access and consumption (by geography, demographics)?
   - What resources are available for food production at all levels (backyard gardening to large-scale agricultural operations)?
   - What infrastructure exists to get food from farm to plate?

2. What role(s) can local governments and community partners play to advance food production, processing, distribution and access to affect the public health, land use, economy and quality of life for residents of El Paso County?
   - What policies and programs currently exist that support or hinder local food production, processing, distribution and access?
   - Where is there current and potential property for food production intended for human consumption (including community gardens)?

The Assessment will consist of three phases:

Phase I: Compiling secondary (existing) data sets to produce preliminary findings and recommendations.
Phase II: Collecting primary data. This involves a survey, listening sessions, and key informant interviews, guided by the results of Phase I.
Phase III: Asset mapping and policy scans informed by any emerging themes of the primary and secondary data collection.
Phase I

In an effort to answer the key questions of the assessment, several maps were produced to visually depict some of the potential barriers and opportunities that exist in our food environment that may influence access to and consumption of nutritious, affordable, responsibly grown food (geographic context). The Advisory Committee was presented with the following maps for observation and to extract some preliminary themes and recommendations:

1. The food retail environment as a ratio of healthy to unhealthy food retail overlaid with poverty rates
2. The food retail environment as a ratio of healthy to unhealthy food retail overlaid with transit routes
3. Food access opportunities in conditions of food insecurity
4. Productive capacity of the land in El Paso County (and existing local production)

The Food Retail Environment – Proximity to Healthy vs. Less Healthy Food

Proximity to different types of food retail can contribute to healthy food consumption, positively or negatively. The United States Department of Agriculture has defined typically “healthy” and “less healthy” food retailers. These categories are imperfect but can help provide a general sense of where residents can access the foods they need to feed themselves and their families nutritious meals.

Healthy Food Facility = full-service grocer with available fresh produce, or a fresh produce market. Includes grocery, club, and specialty stores and supercenters. It also includes full-service restaurants.

Less Healthy Food Facility = convenience stores (e.g., 7-Eleven) or small variety stores that sell limited groceries and stock little to no fresh produce, or a facility (e.g., fast food) that primarily sells foods with high levels of sugar, fat, and sodium.

Retail food establishments throughout the county were categorized as healthy or less healthy and then a ratio of those categories was calculated by census tract (Figure 2). There were very few tracts where healthy establishments outnumbered less healthy. And in some cases less healthy outnumbered healthy by as much as 13:1.

Proximity becomes an even stronger determinant when you have inconsistent access to a vehicle and/or are reliant on transit or other means of transportation (Figure 3).
Figure 2: Food retail environment and poverty levels
Figure 3: Food retail environment and transit access
Food Access Opportunities in Conditions of Food Insecurity

There is also a desire to understand where one could access food if they are food insecure and/or limited by budget constraints. Nearly 15 percent of residents of El Paso County are food insecure. The USDA defines food insecurity as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Again, proximity plays an important role in circumstances of food insecurity where budget limitations often also impact access to reliable transportation. For many, food pantries, Colorado Springs Food Rescue and retail sites that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits are the main sources of food.

*Figure 4: Access to supportive services during food insecurity
*Legend on following page
El Paso County has a notably low rate of grocery stores and supermarkets per capita compared to the rest of the state (which is already low compared to the rest of the country.)

Figure 5. Data Source: US Census Bureau, County Business Patterns. Additional data analysis by CARES. 2015. Source geography: County
Productive Capacity of the Land

Finally, the abundance and location of food produced locally is an additional indicator of food security affecting the community as a whole (regardless of income). Anecdotally, if El Paso County were cut off from receiving food via freight (highways and rail), the community could run out of food in as little as a few days. Outside of the economic development benefits that local food production offers, El Paso County could view more abundant local production as a means to emergency preparedness. Vacant parcels and parks and open spaces offer an opportunity for greater food production in the region (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Existing and potential food production sites in El Paso County

There are currently very few farms harvesting cropland for fruits and vegetables and those that are are very small-scale in terms of acreage (Figure 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harvested Cropland for Fruits and Vegetables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso County, CO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 7. Data Source: US Department of Agriculture, Census of Agriculture. Source geography: County*
In addition, the majority of farms in the County are bringing in less than $2500 in sales annually (Figure 8).

![Farms by Value of Sales](image)

**Figure 8.** Data Source: US Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture*. Source geography: County

**General Observations**

El Paso County Public Health staff and the Assessment Advisory Committee offer the following observations from Phase I:

- Areas of food insecurity and areas of abundant “less healthy” options are fairly dispersed, but there are several explicit “hot spots” that present themselves as areas of opportunity for a greater understanding of assets and challenges: several neighborhoods along the Academy Boulevard corridor, Fountain, and Manitou.
- Areas of higher poverty tend to have a greater ratio of unhealthy to healthy food retail options.
- Transit routes run primarily through areas of higher concentrations of unhealthy food retail, along arterials and between commercial centers.
- There is a definite lack of SNAP and WIC authorized retailers in rural areas.
- Eighty-three percent of SNAP retailers in our area are convenience stores or limited availability grocers (classified as less healthy).
- There are areas of high poverty with no easily accessible food pantry (e.g. south of Citadel Mall).
- The food environment maps don’t account for zoning determinants that encourage/discourage certain land uses.
- Our current food environment is not oriented around neighborhoods, but rather along arterials and commercial centers.
  - Makes the reliance on a vehicle an additional barrier to accessing healthy food
  - Affords an opportunity for more localized food sales, community kitchens
- Anecdotally, there has been a steady decline in the presence of neighborhood markets.
- Big box/grocery stores moved east from Academy to Powers as the population grew in eastern Colorado Springs (leaving a void of healthy food retail outlets in more central areas).
- The productive capacity of our local lands is highly underutilized (demonstrated by limited production compared to vacant parcels).

**Emerging Themes**

Several themes have emerged through examination of the secondary data that frame the recommendations that follow:

- Dispersed, but defined, areas of opportunity
- Zoning as a promising tool to shift the food environment in a more favorable direction
- Neighborhood-based approaches – small grocers, restaurants, community kitchens, community gardens, urban farms, farmers’ markets, farm stands
- Very little food production overall – be it small farms, large agricultural operations or community gardens
• Land potential for scalable, more profitable operations in both rural and urban areas that could offer greater food security and economic benefits for the region

**Recommendations**

**Preliminary Recommendations**

**Areas of opportunity**

Several geographic areas of opportunity have emerged that prompt a deeper dive to better understand their specific assets and challenges. Characteristics of areas of opportunity include a higher ratio of less healthy to healthy food retail, transit access, and high poverty combined with the potential for neighborhood-based interventions and readiness. The areas to look closer at are:

• Neighborhoods surrounding Academy Boulevard and Platte Avenue
• Neighborhoods surrounding Academy Boulevard and Austin Bluffs Parkway
• Neighborhoods surrounding Academy Boulevard from Fountain Boulevard to the Hancock Expressway
• Fountain
• Manitou Springs

The process will be to focus on these neighborhoods/municipalities and combine all the data sets to tell a more complete story in each. We will be able to see food retail sites and their accessibility (by distance), vacant parcels for potential food production, and food pantries and other resources for those experiencing food insecurity all together. Phase II will be focused in these areas, surveying residents and key informants about their greatest perceived barriers and behaviors and attitudes as they relate to our food system.

**Zoning**

Certain land use and transportation patterns can be maximized for better health. For example, zoning procedures can create the conditions in which grocery stores and other retail outlets where people can purchase nutritious food outnumber convenience stores and establishments that serve fast food.

Zoning policies can help achieve improvements to the food environment through regulating land use of a community by:

• Allowing designation of community food production and farmers’ markets; and
• Limiting commercial food retail, such as fast food businesses, or allowing as-of-right or incentives to those businesses that increase access to healthy food.\(^5\)

To increase the ratio of healthy food retail to less healthy, a municipality may consider re-zoning to incentivize grocery stores, neighborhood markets, restaurants and other healthy food retail, especially those that accept SNAP and WIC, particularly in areas of opportunity where the ratio of less healthy to healthy foods is upwards of 13:1.

**Neighborhood-based approaches**

Potential interventions at the neighborhood level include small retail markets, farmers’ markets, community gardens, community kitchens, backyard farms, farm stands, CSA pick-ups at schools, mobile pantries and markets, partnerships between small-scale food producers and corner/convenience stores, expansion of Double Up Food Bucks and Produce Rx. These hyper-localized practices are sustainable, smaller-scale ways to improve the food system when there may be challenges at the municipal level, especially in those neighborhoods that have more barriers to healthy food access and vacant spaces available for said interventions.

Phase II will verify the neighborhoods of greatest need and barriers and opportunities specific to those neighborhoods.

**Productive capacity & scalable food production**

Considering the amount of vacant parcels, parks and open space in El Paso County, there is potential to allocate or incentivize these lands for more local food production. Understanding the limiting factors of agriculture specific to our region – be they regulations, a lack of skilled farmers, water, financing, profit potential or demand – is the first step in changing this trend and capitalizing on the economic and productivity potential of the land. It is recommended that there be intentional inquiry to better understand the
limiting factors to agricultural production in the region – both small and large and on either private and public land. It may also be helpful to develop a matrix for identification and prioritization of high-potential lands.

All of the preliminary recommendations are in alignment with the potential policy approaches identified by Colorado Springs’ City Council and El Paso County Commissioners during the establishment of the Food Policy Advisory Board:

- Strengthening private property rights to encourage urban agricultural activities;
- Working towards reducing barriers for local food producers who wish to sell local food products;
- Building awareness among residents regarding nutrition, food skills and the sources of their food;
- Seek ways to improve access to safe, affordable, nutritious food for residents, regardless of their income level or geographic location;
- Assessing the effects of urban land use policies and regulations on the viability of food production, processing, distribution, and access.

**Primary Data Collection**

Phase II of the Food System Assessment will commence in 2018 with a community-based survey focused heavily on the Areas of Opportunity. The purpose of the survey will be threefold: to ground truth to the secondary data; to identify prevalent perceived barriers to access to and consumption of nutritious, affordable, responsibly grown food; and to inquire about self-reported behaviors like purchasing patterns, meals at home and fruit and vegetable consumption. Staff and the Advisory Committee will work through schools, community centers, and organizational constituents (with intentional effort to reach youth, older adults, monolingual, and very low-income who may not respond to surveys) to collect the data.

In addition, the Advisory Committee recommends a series of key informant interviews to better understand:

- Where there may be existing community kitchen spaces, community garden potential (including at food pantries), and other neighborhood-based spaces and groups that are trusted by the community
- Marketing issues/opportunities
- School sites for Care & Share and other resources
- Any “under the radar” food pantries
- Markets that are not SNAP and WIC authorized – why not?

Phase III will include a policy scan at the municipal level to better understand what policies, ordinances, and regulations currently exist, do not exist, support, or counter the goals of the Food Policy Advisory Board and recommendations from this assessment.