

Kent County Food Policy Assessment Report



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Introduction

City and township policies shape the local food environment from farm to table. Zoning permissions, license requirements, and restrictions regulate food production, distribution, processing, and waste – affecting the availability of food in all communities.

This Food Policy Assessment provides a holistic overview of Kent County’s food policy environment. Growers, distributors, and consumers cross city lines, making a countywide assessment important to understanding and improving the local food system. This report will guide the formation of the Kent County Food Policy Council in making sure all residents have adequate access to affordable, nutritious, fair, and sustainable food.

Methodology

Twelve major Kent County municipalities were selected for this assessment, including all nine cities and a sample of three townships (**Table 1**). Each author reviewed seven municipalities: Hollie reviewed Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Charter Township, Cascade Township, Walker, Cedar Springs, and Grandville while Sean reviewed Kentwood, Wyoming, Ada Township, Rockford, Lowell, and East Grand Rapids. Each municipality’s ordinances were available through their respective websites.

Table 1. Municipality Profile

| Municipality | Population Density (population per square mile) | Median Income |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------|
| Grand Rapids | 4,235.6 | \$39,913 |
| Grand Rapids Charter Township | 1,086.0 | \$82,326 |
| Cascade Township | 505.7 | \$107,719 |
| Walker | 943.7 | \$49,587 |
| Cedar Springs | 1,728.6 | \$36,595 |
| Kentwood | 2,330.0 | \$49,201 |
| Wyoming | 2,927.3 | \$46,672 |
| Ada Township | 364.7 | \$119,286 |
| Rockford | 1,764.0 | \$48,641 |
| Lowell | 182.6 | \$52,065 |
| East Grand Rapids | 3,644.9 | \$107,824 |
| Grandville | 2,146.7 | \$53,490 |

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 Census and 2010-14 American Community Survey 5 year estimate; Available at <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts>; Accessed 7/27/16.

Findings

Grand Rapids¹

As the largest municipality and urban core of Kent County, Grand Rapids has the most legislation over food policy, with 45 sections impacting food availability. Notable among these policies are 13 sections with specific license requirements and policies for downtown street vending, as applicable to mobile food vendors, and 9 sections allowing with limitations the keeping of chickens and bees. Unlike other municipalities included in this assessment, Grand Rapids includes specific legislation for commercial and residential composting, providing guidelines for more sustainable food waste management. Grand Rapids is the only Kent County municipality to specifically designate an individual over the production, transportation, storage, and sale of food and foodstuffs, the Director of Public Welfare. The level of detail in Grand Rapids food legislation is likely due to its large population density, diversity, and extent of development.

On July 26, 2016, while this report was being completed, the Grand Rapids City Commission voted on extension of the temporary Backyard Chicken Ordinance and establishment of an Urban Agriculture Committee. A public hearing was held on a new Mobile Food Business Ordinance, and is scheduled for consideration by the Board on August 23, 2016.

Grand Rapids Charter Township^{2,3}

Grand Rapids Charter Township, with 23 sections of food-related policy, covers most of the categories designated by this assessment. The majority of policies identified cover zoning and land use for food growers and vendors. Notable among Grand Rapids Charter Township's policies are very specific requirements for on-farm markets, regulating the location and operating hours as well as types of products permissible for sale. Grand Rapids Charter Township restricts domestic animals to "house pets for the enjoyment of the occupants of the dwelling and not for resale" on small residential properties but allows animal husbandry on residential lots greater than 10 acres in size.

Cascade Township⁴

Cascade Township's 18 food-related policies balance land use for food sales with use for agricultural land preservation. Six sections of Cascade Township's ordinances cover the designation of agricultural and farmland preservation districts, specifying how land and buildings on these properties may be used. An additional two sections allow for animal keeping in residential districts with clear guidelines for the type and number of animals permitted, as well as where they may be kept within property lines.

Walker⁵

With 23 food policies covering 15 of 16 categories, Walker has a comprehensive set of ordinances for food production and distribution. Legal protection of gardens and orchards from destruction is unique to Walker, as is permission for open agricultural burning with city approval. While Walker has a section of its ordinances designated to animal keeping, specifications are made only for racing pigeons; other animal permissions and restrictions are dictated only by noise disturbances, which can be unclear as left up to interpretation.

Cedar Springs⁶

Cedar Springs also has a comprehensive set of policies, with 22 food policies covering 15 of 16 categories. Legislation includes zoning for agriculture, food manufacturing, and food vending in restaurants, grocery stores, and farmers' markets. That being said, Cedar Springs has restrictive policy for agriculture, limiting farms to rural residential zoning districts and prohibiting all animals except those “

Notable among Cedar Springs' policies are various specifications for peddlers, including mobile food vendors but excluding farmers selling their own produce. While Cedar Springs touches on the management of food waste, policies are restrictive of composting, requiring full enclosure for any food waste accumulation.

Kentwood⁷

Kentwood has a relatively low number of policies, covering only 5 of the categories with 10 policies in total. Agriculture and animal keeping are covered by half of these policies, including permission for agricultural animals only with approval of the zoning administrator. Kentwood is one of three municipalities in this assessment to specifically mention and permit home composting, provided piles are less than 100 cubic feet, located in the rear yard, and set at least five feet away from any lot line.

Wyoming⁸

Wyoming has one of the largest and most thorough list of food policies, covering 13 of the 15 categories. Most are described in the zoning legislation, covering where food-related practices may be held and under what circumstances. Overall, Wyoming is more lenient in its permissions than its more urban counterparts. Unique to Wyoming's policies are specifications for the keeping of gardens on private property. Wyoming restricts gardens to rear lots, prohibits stands for the sale of produce and flowers, provides guidelines for temporary greenhouses and hoop houses, and allows on-site storage of compost if limited to 64 square feet on the rear yard at least 10 feet from property lines.

Ada Township⁹

Ada Township's policies reflect that of a more agricultural, but affluent, city. Many of their ordinances relate to where farming can and cannot occur, including zoning for agricultural preservation and rural residential preservation areas. Review of Ada Township's master plan and current projects makes it clear they are also invested in developing a downtown area. This is significant because it shows Ada Township's interest in keeping themselves an agricultural community while creating a downtown to urbanize certain areas. This is an indication of smart planning by attempting to achieve the best of both worlds through carefully thought out zoning.

Rockford^{10,11}

Rockford's policies are geared towards its food service industry and more restrictive of its agricultural sectors. Rockford does provide many special land use areas for greenhouses and nurseries but does not allow agricultural animals of any kind in any district.

Lowell¹²

Lowell has a well-balanced policy agenda, similar to that of Ada Township. Legislation allows for agriculture, but leans towards a restrictive approach in residential areas. The scope of their food policies reflect a focus on limiting drive-through restaurants and regulating bed and breakfasts. Four of Lowell's policies apply to animal agriculture, permitting the keeping of animals but requiring control of animals and regulating associated noise and odors. This balances the interests of agriculture with concerns of city disturbances.

East Grand Rapids¹³

East Grand Rapids has very limited legislation regarding food. The few regulations held by East Grand Rapids are related to breweries and zoning for restaurants and grocery stores. Although unofficial it has been speculated that East Grand Rapids brags about not having a single gas station within the city; this, coupled with the limited legislation, suggest that East Grand Rapids is opposed to any development contrary to its character.

Grandville¹⁴

While many of Grandville's 19 food policies cover zoning for food manufacturing and vending, Grandville also has specific legislation for the keeping of animals. Of the reviewed municipalities, Grandville's inclusion of policy on the treatment of animals is unique, moving beyond noise control and sanitation to animal cruelty and overworking. Grandville's city code formerly had a chapter devoted to soil erosion and sedimentation control, with implications for landscape management and land preservation, but repealed its entirety in 1995.

Discussion

Overview

In this assessment of 12 Kent County municipalities, a total of 265 sections of food-related policy were identified. While this number does not reflect the total number of ordinances related to food production, distribution, preparation, and waste, it serves as a proxy given the variation in city code organization among included municipalities. As the urban core of Kent County, Grand Rapids has the most legislation over its food system, mandated by its population density and diversity of land use. The majority of other municipalities have 18-30 sections of food policy, with the major exception of East Grand Rapids having just 5 sections.

Following the authority for planning and zoning given by the state of Michigan to municipalities, all municipalities have zoning ordinances applicable to the growth, processing, and/or sale of food and food products. All 12 municipalities include zoning for grocery stores and food markets, while all but Ada include zoning for various types of restaurants.

Zoning policies for agricultural production and sales (including land use for farms or gardens, small scale vending in roadside and mobile stands, farmers' markets, greenhouses, and animal keeping) have likewise been adopted by nearly all municipalities, with the exclusion of East Grand Rapids. The particulars of agricultural policies vary widely with the type of development observed in the municipalities. For example, while Grand Rapids lacks zoning for agricultural or rural districts as an urban environment, interest in urban agriculture and local food development has led to ordinances specific to the keeping of backyard chickens and bees. In contrast, less urban communities have the flexibility for less restrictive animal policies, allowing a wider range of animals but providing specific guidelines for the use of accessory buildings on agricultural properties or on-farm sales instead.

While food waste as garbage is covered by all municipalities' city codes, and managed accordingly, just three provided for the keeping of compost on private properties. Five additional municipalities do not mention compost specifically, but have ordinances which discourage the storage of food waste and provide strict limitations for its allowance; in these municipalities, those looking for a more sustainable solution for waste management may have trouble finding one on their own.

Trends by Population Density and Income

The population density of a municipality appears to correspond with the types of food policies adopted. The wide range of population densities displayed in **Figure 2** on the following page reflects the range of food-related policies in Kent County. Municipalities with a lower population density tend towards policies for agricultural preservation and production while those with a

higher population density, likely to be more developed, tend to have more comprehensive policy for food sales and service.

Population density is not the only factor that plays into the food policies adopted by a municipality; another contributing factor is the income of its residents. The level of income a municipality's residents have may impact what they feel is important to address. The tax base from those incomes will also affect how many resources are available to local government for the adoption and execution of policies. As shown in **Figure 3**, there is a large difference in median incomes among the assessed municipalities.

Figure 2. Population Density by Municipality

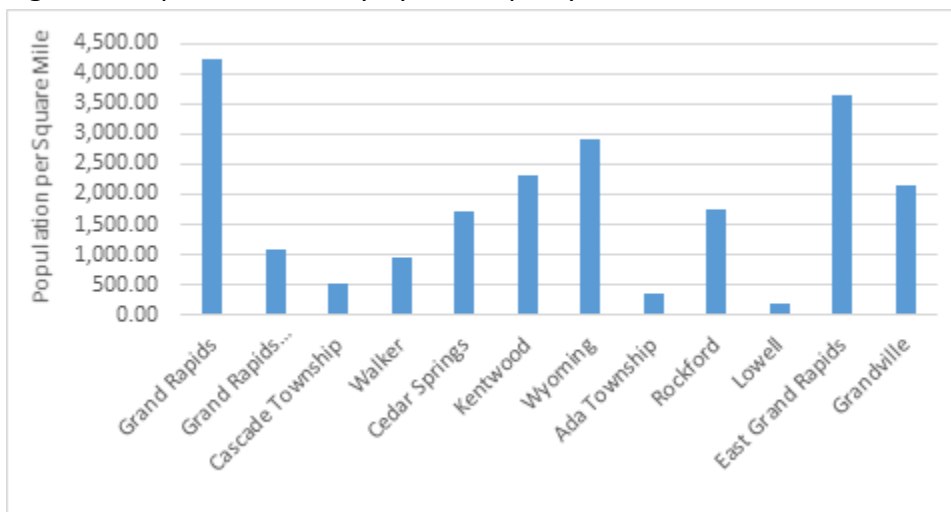
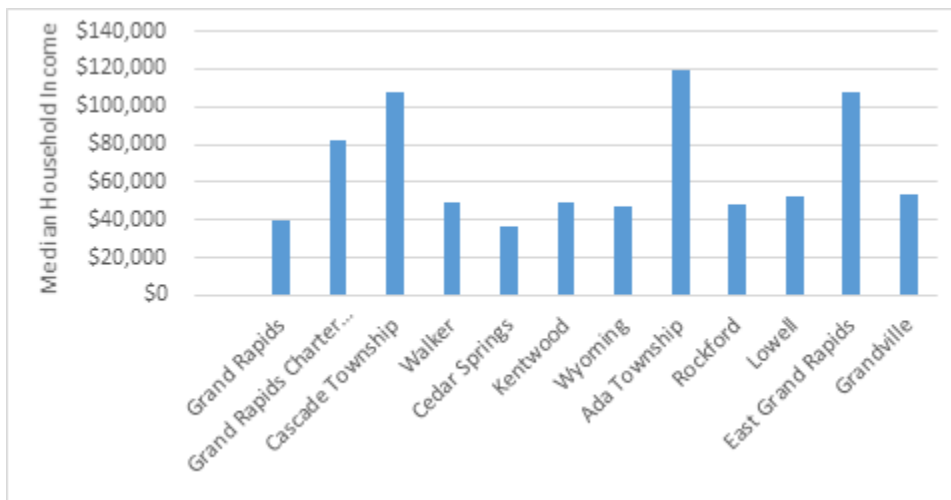


Figure 3. Median Household Income by Municipality



Recommendations

Food policies have the capacity to limit or expand the local food system, designating where food may be grown, processed, distributed, and sold. Each municipality contributes to the food system of Kent County, and inconsistent planning and zoning may limit the quality of the Kent County food system. This assessment reiterates the need to establish common terminology and standards in county planning and zoning, a need similarly identified by the 2015 Agribusiness Community Work Group and 2013 Community Collaboration Work Group reports¹⁵.

Land and soil preservation provide a great opportunity to establish a more comprehensive approach to planning and zoning in Kent County. While the Purchase of Development Rights Program was established by the county in 2002 to control urban sprawl and protect agricultural land¹⁵, the lack of funding has limited its reach such that other approaches may better suit the need for land protection in Kent County. One such approach is the designation of agricultural preservation zoning districts. This has been implemented in Cascade and Ada townships and may be considered as a uniform approach to improving preservation across the county. The provision of tax incentives to property owners maintaining land in such zones may be a cost effective approach to reaching the preservation goals of the PDR program.

The management of food waste offers another opportunity for improvement in the current policy infrastructure. While all municipalities have policies regulating garbage, compost was mentioned by just one-fourth of included municipalities. While allowing compost may prove to be controversial, regulations on the size, location, and enclosure can limit the nuisance while making this sustainable waste management solution more realistic throughout the county.

While food procurement is not covered by municipality ordinances, but instead managed independently by businesses, Kent County has an opportunity to lead the way in local procurement. The Board of Commissioners' resolution for county office procurement encourages purchase of products with recycled content, as well as the recycling of paper and other waste as possible¹⁶. This might be furthered to promote the purchase of local products, including locally grown food and food products, as well as the composting of food waste. This move would not only show the county's commitment to the local community and sustainability, but hopefully pave the way for municipalities and businesses to adopt similar practices.

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