



Executive Summary

“Urban agriculture includes the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban areas. Community gardens, rooftop farms, hydroponic, aeroponic and aquaponic facilities, and vertical production are all examples of urban agriculture.”

-- U.S. Department of Agriculture

Three basic, intersecting circumstances in Fairfax County and Fairfax City drove the creation of this roadmap: The rising rate of food insecurity, the decreasing availability of affordable and agriculturally suitable land, and heightened awareness of regional food supply chain vulnerabilities following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, local efforts to strengthen food system resilience have focused on ensuring food access and bolstering smooth distribution. The Urban Agriculture Roadmap project was designed to examine activity at the start of the food system: how increased small- and mid-scale agriculture and innovative production could contribute to greater elasticity and durability.

Communities striving for resilience must demonstrate agility, adaptability, creativity and diversity. When it comes to ensuring sufficient food for their residents, this means embracing all aspects of the food system from production to waste disposal.

Food production in suburban and urban areas doesn't look like traditional or large-scale agriculture, with its sweeping monocultured acreages of commodity crops. Agricultural operations in more densely populated areas are less conventional and more diverse: vertical arrays of crops growing in storefronts and warehouses, community gardens, quarter-acre lots, rooftop farms.

“A farm is defined as any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the year.”

-- USDA Economic Research Service

Urban agriculture thrives in small spaces and provides multiple benefits, including the availability of more fresh and often more affordable (or free) food, cultural relevance, increased food security, workforce development and diversification, and community connection. But city and county regulations define agricultural operations in ways that make commercial farming nearly unattainable. Not nearly enough residents can grow food for themselves, to sell or to donate because of limited land access (including to public land), confusing and restrictive regulations, and a vacuum of support. Obstructions are highest for those in lower-income brackets – many of whom are from countries where subsistence farming and vegetable gardening are the norm and who are most likely to face food insecurity.

What to glean from this roadmap

This roadmap isn't intended to be the definitive word on urban agriculture or food system resilience in the City of Fairfax and Fairfax County. The intention is to ignite much-needed action that will modernize an outdated approach to municipal planning and an outdated perspective of the role of agriculture in urban and suburban areas.

For Fairfax County, the report's recommendations draw a roadmap for executing the Grow Food Systems objective and policies in the Healthy Communities element of the 2025 comprehensive plan policy plan update. The recommendations also provide specificity to the Resilient Fairfax Climate Adaptation and Resilience Plan, which includes Strategy AE.2f: Explore Regenerative Agriculture Opportunities. This is defined loosely as "Engage local farmers, community gardeners and food advocates, and aid in agricultural resilience to climate hazards."

For Fairfax City, the recommendations are a guide for how to achieve its 2035 Comprehensive Plan Implementation Guide goal to "support healthy lifestyles and regionally grown food." In 2024, Fairfax City planning staff and elected officials demonstrated how quickly they can act when they developed and approved a new urban agriculture zoning district in a matter of months.

These recommendations show city leaders how they can go further, not just allowing urban agriculture indoors and on rooftops but in its open spaces and community garden program. As a small, agile locality, the city also has an opportunity to be a regional leader for government-wide, unified planning that includes the food system.

Urban Agriculture Roadmap recommendations

The recommendations fall into five categories: Leadership structure, regulatory and policy revisions, financial support, capacity-building, and communications and outreach.

Key recommendations:

1. Establish a leadership structure for local agriculture.
2. Within this structure, continue stakeholder group collaboration.
3. Craft a strategic framework for increasing food-growing spaces.
4. Prioritize and strategize regulatory changes, including property owner association authorities, to enable small-scale and innovative production.
5. Integrate agriculture into planning and development and identify planning priorities that can be stacked.
6. Explore and prioritize potential agriculture-related financial incentives.
7. Develop programs to facilitate access to capital.
8. Develop an agricultural land conservation policy.
9. Design urban agriculture training programs.
10. Take actions to build a network of farmers and growers.
11. Connect property owners to people who want to grow food.
12. Increase public awareness of local agricultural benefits and promote agricultural events that build community.