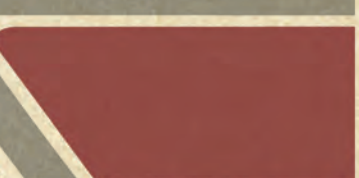




# Food Innovation Districts

An Economic Gardening Tool



# Executive Summary

This guide is a package of how-to information and examples that can help local governments step into and benefit from the growing market and community demand for local and regional food. Specifically, it offers a process for developing food innovation districts, or business districts that support the co-location and collaboration of food businesses of different types (*Figure 1*).

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## **FOOD INNOVATION DISTRICT**

A food innovation district is a geographic concentration of food-oriented businesses, services, and community activities that local governments support through planning and economic development initiatives in order to promote a positive business environment, spur regional food system development, and increase access to local food.

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Food innovation districts connect and catalyze emerging clusters of food and agriculture activity. Benefits include new jobs, healthy food options, and a 'sense of place' that regions increasingly need for success in the 21st century.

The guide zeroes in on the roles that planners, economic developers, elected officials, and community champions have in food innovation district development and steps they can take. It supports "economic gardening" efforts; that is, building local and regional business strength.

In the case of local and regional food, entrepreneurs need warehousing, processing, distribution and related facilities and services that better fit local and regional marketing opportunities. Building a healthy regional food system also involves such things as nutrition education, neighborhood retail, community engagement, and low-cost startup space.

Food innovation districts support the resource- and idea-sharing that occurs when food entrepreneurs and related initiatives work in close proximity. Activities in these districts include:

- Regional food hubs
- Business incubators
- Farm-to-table retail and restaurants
- Farmers markets
- Food festivals and other events
- Nutrition and cooking education
- Healthy food assistance
- Urban agriculture production
- Community kitchens
- Public spaces, neighborhood uses

The food innovation district concept comes out of the Michigan Good Food Charter, a statewide policy platform, which outlines steps leaders can take to achieve 20 percent Michigan food in Michigan markets by 2020 and increase citizens' access to healthy food.

The Charter is, among many similar efforts across the country, focused on realizing the local commerce, public health, and placemaking power of food grown nearby. Food innovation districts are one tool for bringing these benefits home.

## **Audience**

The Food Innovation District Guide offers support to four groups involved. Guide sections likely to be of particular interest are highlighted below.

### **Elected and civic leaders**

- Community considerations, input (pp. 28-30)
- Project initiation and approval (pp. 35-36)

### **Local and regional planners**

- Planning and zoning approaches (pp. 38-45)
- Zoning Guidance (pp. 70-79)

### **Economic developers**

- Business development context (pp. 46-49)
- Applicable programs and partners (pp. 49-59)

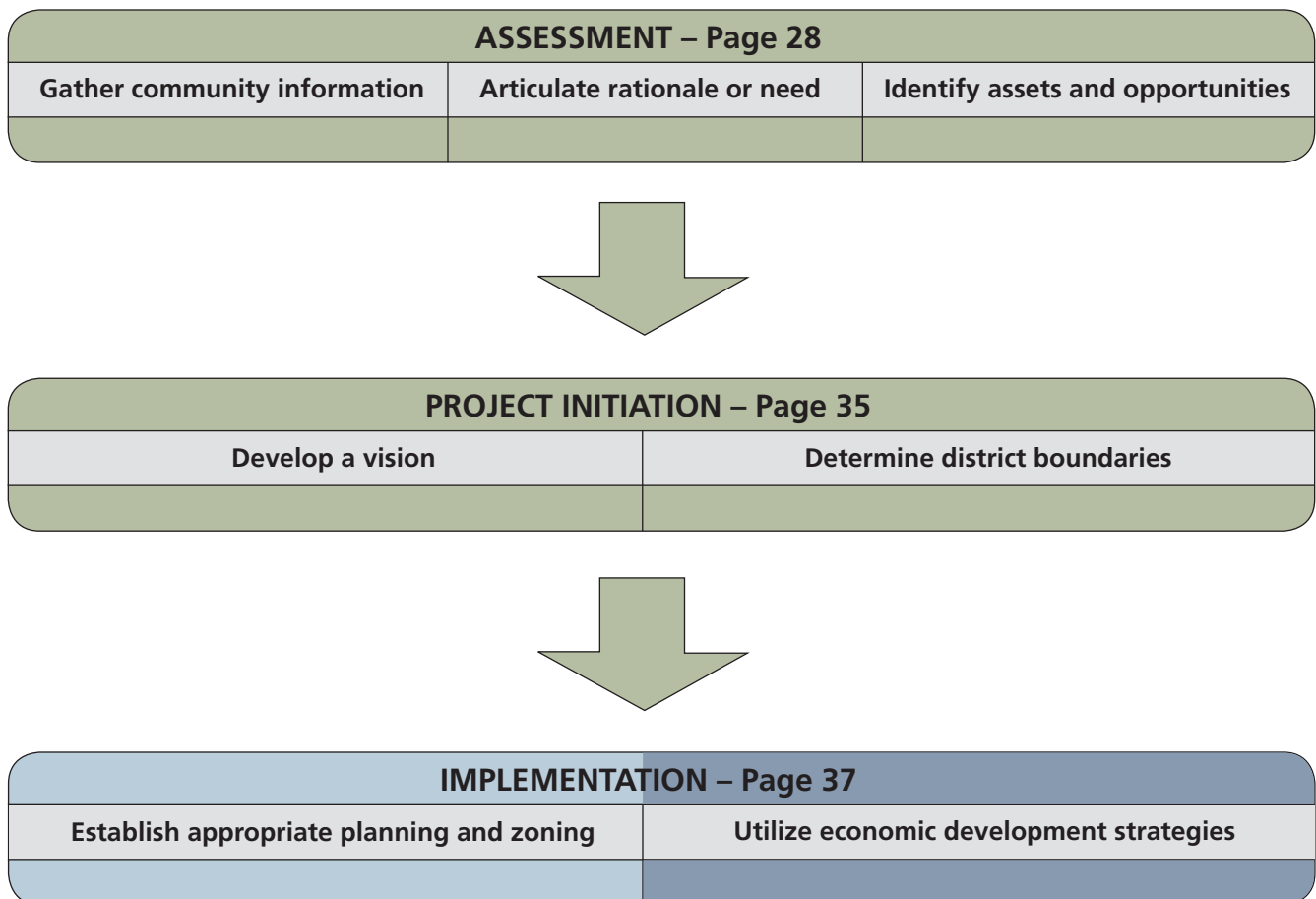
### **Community champions**

- Vision and goals (pp.35-36)
- Services, facilities, and amenities (pp.30-34)

The food innovation district guide walks users through the steps and considerations involved in the development process. It also presents actual examples in Michigan and nearby states that fit the food innovation district concept. (See Examples, p.17.)

Finally, a worksheet in Section 4 summarizes the development process with key questions for each juncture of assessment, initiation, and implementation.

Figure 1: Overview of Food Innovation District Development Process



## INSPIRATION: Growing healthy regional food systems

It wasn't long ago that schools in Benzie County, Michigan, served Red Delicious apples imported from far away even though apple orchards in Benzie and neighboring counties produce many sweet and juicy varieties.

Similarly, the international food service company Sysco until recently supplied only Red and Golden Delicious apples to its west Michigan customers despite the diverse range of apples available from the region's orchards.

No offense to Red and Golden Delicious apples, but what happened? How and why did the schools and Sysco change?

The answer is a story of innovation and opportunity in regional food markets that is generating attention and investment across the nation.

Food innovation districts are emerging from this growing interest in the potential to build new market bridges for food from nearby farms and strengthen local commerce, quality of life, and public health in the process.

The story goes that Benzie County school officials reached out to local orchardists because they believed children, in need of healthier diets, would eat more fruit if they had fresher, tastier options than apples stored and shipped long distances.

The gamble paid off: school cafeterias started going through five times as many apples! Similarly, Sysco gained new customers and increased apple sales after it stepped out of its normal purchasing routine and began offering 12 locally produced varieties.

Communities see in this story, and many like it in their own regions, a new way to grow jobs, build health, and strengthen quality of life by supporting innovation in local and regional food markets. Food innovation districts are one way to do that.



### ***Filling an Infrastructure Gap***

The purpose of food innovation districts is to support development of the business community, markets and infrastructure that healthy regional food systems need.

Most food in the predominant food system moves from farm to plate through long and complex global supply chains.

The standardization and large volumes such supply chains require do not accommodate the emerging local and regional food sector's more diverse range of products and companies.

This leaves the sector's primarily small- and mid-size farms and food businesses without appropriate-scale storage, packaging, processing, and other facilities and services, known as "food system infrastructure."

Food innovation districts help by bringing together complementary community and entrepreneurial activities for synergistic business and infrastructure development.