

Open Letter from the Indy Food Council

To the Next Mayor of Indianapolis:

Indiana is a global leader in food production and agricultural innovation. But too often we find ourselves at the bottom of the list when it comes to food issues in our local community.

The Indy Food Council works to build a better food system in central Indiana because food issues are the foundation of a strong community. The food we grow, buy, and eat is deeply connected to our health, our economy, our environment, and our public spaces. Many of the problems we face – diet-related disease, food insecurity, poverty, and environmental degradation – can be addressed through a focus on food.

Fortunately, we have strong local leaders dedicating energy and resources to these problems. Organizations like [Jump IN](#), [Top 10](#), [LISC](#), [Eskenazi Health](#), [Indy Hunger Network](#), [Indy Urban Acres](#), [Green BEAN Delivery](#) and others are using food as a tool to improve the health, wealth, sustainability, and livability of Indianapolis.

As the next mayor, you have an unprecedented opportunity to build on this momentum by providing leadership, support, and coordination. City government influences nearly all facets of our local food system – from land use policies and nutrition standards to food procurement and government benefits. You can leverage this power to address some of our deepest issues.

These challenges are complex and impact all constituents. **The Indy Food Council strongly recommends that you establish an office of Food Policy within the Mayor's Office to provide coordination, leadership, and accountability.** [A growing number of US cities](#) have taken this step, including Minneapolis, Louisville, Portland, Baltimore, New York City, and others.

The Indy Food Council has compiled specific food policy opportunities for you to consider. These opportunities are based on our collective understanding of the central Indiana food system and draw on best practices from competitive cities around the United States. We hope they can serve as a useful starting point for your office's food policy efforts.

Together, we can expand the market for local food and improve access to healthy food for all Indianapolis residents.

Sincerely,

The Indy Food Council

The Indy Food Council is a coalition of institutions, political leaders, and community members. Our mission is to connect food system stakeholders, catalyze ideas, and advance initiatives to grow a sustainable food system that improves the health and quality of life for all. Learn more at www.indyfoodcouncil.org.

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FOOD POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

The next mayor of Indianapolis has an unprecedented opportunity to address our most fundamental challenges through a focus on food systems. The Indy Food Council has called on all mayoral candidates to establish an office of Food Policy within the Mayor's Office to provide coordination, leadership, and accountability on food issues.

We offer this provisional list of 15 policy opportunities, which are based on our collective understanding of the central Indiana food system and best practices from competitive cities in the United States and around the globe. We hope they can serve as a useful starting point for the next mayor to expand the market for local food and improve access to healthy food for all Indianapolis residents.

I. EXPAND THE MARKET FOR LOCAL FOOD

The demand for local food is large and growing. Study after study has shown that in nearly every urban area, the demand for local food outstrips the available supply. A strong local food system provides jobs, supports health, spurs innovation, and helps to attract and retain residents. The next mayor can support the market for local food and grow the local economy by advancing a number of targeted initiatives:

A. Foster a supportive environment for food entrepreneurs and urban agriculture.

1. **Focus food business investments in urban food enterprise zones.** Such an initiative could help to facilitate industrial reuse, revitalize local neighborhoods, and provide good jobs to local residents. This is the central tenet of a 24-acre [West Louisville Food Port](#) currently in development.
2. **Support urban agriculture.** Urban agriculture increases access to local food, connects urban residents to food production, beautifies neighborhoods, and can serve as a tool for [youth development](#) and food education. Local examples such as [South Circle Farm](#), [Big City Farms](#), [Growing Places Indy](#), [Indy Urban Acres](#), [Fall Creek Gardens](#), and Eskenazi Health's [Sky Farm](#), show the potential of urban agriculture in Indianapolis. The next mayor can coordinate urban agriculture support through working with stakeholder groups such as the Indy Food Council and Purdue Extension-Marion County to develop urban agriculture policy (see [Five Borough Farm](#) policy recommendations) and exploring measures such as tax credits (see ordinances in [Baltimore](#) and [San Francisco](#)),
3. **Attract commercial-scale urban agriculture projects to Indianapolis.** As the future of commercial-scale urban agriculture, aquaponics, and vertical farming systems arrive, Indianapolis should also welcome these efforts. We applaud the recent announcement that [Sustainable Local Foods Indiana](#) will operate a commercial urban farm on Indy's east side. The mayor's office can help to ensure that the next wave of projects like [The Plant](#) in Chicago or [Green City Growers Co-Op](#) in Cleveland find their way to Indianapolis.
4. **Support small-scale food businesses.** Food businesses need not be large to have an impact. Thousands of small-business entrepreneurs underpin every local food system. The next mayor can support these players by promoting commercial kitchen spaces (such as [Indy's Kitchen](#)), providing links to growth capital (such as [NYC Food Manufacturers Growth Fund](#)), or helping to pass [cottage food laws](#) that enable small home-based food startups.

B. Promote local food purchasing by Indianapolis institutions.

5. **Encourage local purchasing by city government and public schools.** Cities spend millions of dollars each year to buy food. Very often, a paltry percentage of these dollars flow to local firms and producers. A well-established movement across the US has targeted local food procurement by city governments and public schools to drive investment in local firms, and pave the way for other buyers. An [estimated 37 states have laws](#) that allow state and local agencies to use geographic preference in purchasing foods.

6. ***Support local purchasing efforts among central Indiana anchor institutions.*** Indianapolis is already home to significant momentum from local anchor institutions (including hospitals and universities) interested in local food procurement. The next mayor can provide support and recognition to accelerate these efforts.

C. Raise public interest and awareness around local food.

7. ***Promote local food at high profile venues.*** Indianapolis is the “amateur sports capital of the world” and the “crossroads of America.” These assets provide opportunities to promote local food to a diverse audience in high profile ways at sporting events (e.g., [Nose to Tailgating](#) and [Farm to Stadium](#)) and conventions. The mayor’s office could serve as a coalition-builder to move such initiatives forward.
8. ***Engage in PDA (Public Displays of Agriculture).*** Around the world, citizens are bringing food into public spaces in creative and thought-provoking ways. [Floating farms](#), [urban food forests](#), [edible schoolyards](#), [living buildings](#), and more make the production of food a visible element of the built environment. The mayor’s office can harvest these ideas from other cities and support their deployment in Indianapolis.

II. IMPROVE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Access to healthy food is essential for every citizen. Unfortunately, as the recent closure of Double 8 grocery stores has highlighted, many Marion County residents still lack access. As a result, their health suffers and neighborhoods fail to thrive. In a city where tens of thousands of residents live in food deserts and which consistently ranks among the most overweight and obese cities in America, the next mayor cannot afford to ignore this issue. The Indy Food Council applauds the recent focus of candidates [Brewer](#) and [Hogsett](#), and we recommend some additional opportunities for consideration:

A. Expand healthy food retail options.

9. ***Attract full-service supermarkets to food deserts.*** The vast majority of food that Americans purchase to eat at home comes from supermarkets, so addressing the food desert problem requires engaging supermarket operators. The next mayor can use creative zoning, tax, recruitment, and financing programs to bring supermarket operators back to neglected neighborhoods. The [Healthy Food Financing Initiative](#) offers similar resources.
10. ***Encourage existing food retailers to stock and promote healthy items.*** Attracting new stores is not enough. Working with current neighborhood stores is also critical. The next mayor should create opportunities to train, support, and recognize corner store operators that make healthy, affordable food available. [Philadelphia’s Food Trust](#) offers a large-scale example of such an initiative.
11. ***Ensure that farmers markets and farm stands can accept EBT.*** Farmers markets are a win-win-win. Local farmers retain 100% of the food dollar, consumers can access fresh, affordable, healthy produce, and neighborhoods benefit from positive use of public space. Making farmers markets accessible for residents using SNAP funds, and building on [Fresh Bucks](#) and other local efforts, can help improve food access.

B. Eliminate food insecurity.

12. ***Ensure every eligible resident gets access to benefits.*** Government benefits are by far the largest pool of resources for fighting food insecurity. Yet a recent survey from the Indy Hunger Network found that a significant percentage of food insecure families do not receive these benefits. While the Mayor’s Office does not control SNAP and other food benefits programs, it can facilitate connections and raise awareness about the critical nature of these programs.
13. ***Facilitate connections between healthcare and hunger organizations.*** Hunger is a serious public health issue. Individuals without good food to eat face major challenges to successfully managing their health and often experience negative health outcomes. A growing number of initiatives, in [Indianapolis](#) and [around the US](#), are connecting healthcare and hunger relief

organizations. The mayor's office can facilitate these efforts and provide incentives for healthcare and hunger organizations to identify shared outcomes to eliminate food insecurity.

C. Leverage innovative financial tools that link food and health.

14. ***Support food and health pilots.*** Healthcare organizations are increasingly looking for preventative tools to lower costs among patients with chronic illnesses – many of which are diet-related. [Leading health law and policy groups](#) are exploring the use of innovative programs to use food as medicine in ways that lower healthcare costs and promote healthy eating. Indianapolis, the home to major insurers and leading healthcare institutions, is well positioned to support pilot programs and advance policy research in this burgeoning field.
15. ***Convene stakeholders to unlock prevention dollars.*** One of the best tools for building a healthy local food system is making resources available to coordinate effective programs across a complex array of stakeholders. Some communities, [such as the state of Massachusetts](#), have addressed this issue by forming a Wellness Trust to pool healthcare dollars for prevention efforts. The next mayor of Indianapolis can convene local insurers, public health experts, and health systems to explore effective ways to unlock new resources to support food and health efforts.

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