Most communities in the United States view issues such as access to healthy food, community connectivity, regional market development, and land use planning as separate and unrelated concerns. The concept of a community’s local food system offers a way to tackle these issues through a sustainability lens. This innovative, integrated approach allows the local governments in Lawrence and Douglas County, Kansas to address and balance their community’s social, economic, environmental and cultural needs by leveraging and harnessing interest for one of the most basic human requirements: food. Over the past seven years, their dedicated leadership within the community and across the state deserves national recognition.

In the early 2000’s, organizations across the U.S. began working with a local food systems perspective. Douglas County, Kansas Commissioner Nancy Thellman saw that local government could utilize the concept, since local governments have a responsibility to support their communities in a balanced, sustainable manner. To further this emergent sphere of work, Commissioner Thellman introduced the idea of the Douglas County Food Policy Council (the Council), which was established by the County in 2010 and convened as a joint City-County Council with the City of Lawrence in 2013. The Council represents a wide range of stakeholders throughout the County’s food system, from agricultural producers and retailers to health and food security advocates. The Council identifies opportunities and challenges that advance community efforts to foster a successful and sustainable local food system in Lawrence and Douglas County. It also serves as a forum to discuss and coordinate initiatives to improve the community’s social, economic, environmental and cultural needs that connect to food production and consumption. In fact, Douglas County was the first community in Kansas to create a Council, and its effectiveness in promoting community sustainability has inspired other Counties to follow suit—with nearly 40 counties across Kansas with Councils established or emerging.

To begin, the Council conducted research to understand the local food system, to inform their subsequent actions. They partnered with Kansas State University researchers to conduct a Food System Assessment of the region in 2011. Key findings included declining fruit and vegetable production, the presence of urban food deserts where residents face limited access to grocery stores, limited affordability of healthy, local food, diet-related health concerns, and inadequate distribution channels for local farmers to work with institutional buyers. The Council also saw an economic opportunity to capture more consumer food dollars locally.

These findings highlighted various opportunities in Douglas County to build the local food system while enhancing community sustainability. Douglas County promotes social and cultural sustainability by providing land for community gardens, matching government food assistance at farmers’ markets, and supporting urban agriculture. The County improves economic sustainability by spurring consumer demand and economic development to grow local food markets, such as initiating the creation of a regional food hub. Embedding protection of high quality soils into long range community planning exemplifies how the County pursues environmental sustainability as part of its local food systems work.

To accomplish its work, the primary costs associated with the Council are staff time, communications, conferences and trainings. Douglas County provides an annual budget of $6,800 to the Council. The County also funds the full-time position of Sustainability Coordinator, shared and partially funded by the City of Lawrence, who devotes about a third of her time to the Council. All other program and staff funding is provided through grants, including a second full-time position for food systems work that began in 2015. As of 2016, local, state, federal, and foundation funding for Council programs and initiatives totaled over $1.1 million. Douglas County, with the support of the Council, uses this funding to address the community’s social, economic, environmental and cultural needs through food systems.

One of the first programs the Council implemented was Common Ground, a community gardening initiative in Lawrence. Established in 2012, the program utilizes vacant, underused government properties to provide free land access to residents for healthy food production—eliminating the need for city employees to maintain vacant lots. Participants must create a Community Benefit Plan, which details how the gardeners plan to give back to the community through actions like donating produce and hosting workshops. In 2016, Common Ground included ten gardens, 203 gardeners, 53 community events, 965 event participants, 1,350 pounds of donated produce and an estimated market value of $64,200 worth of produce. The program thus improves social sustainability by increasing residents’ access to healthy, local food and promoting community connectivity, while also supporting cultural sustainability by creating a space for people to learn about food production—skills many have lost.

Douglas County further demonstrates its commitment to food systems development and community sustainability through Double Up Food Bucks, or DUFB. DUFB allows Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) users to double the value of their federal food stamp benefits at participating farmers’ markets. This supports social and cultural sustainability by making local food more affordable and farmers’ markets more accessible. At the same time, DUFB improves economic sustainability by providing local farmers with new customers and sources of revenue, as well as keeping more dollars in local Kansas communities. DUFB grew from two local farmers’ markets in 2014 to a bi-state collaboration overseeing 15 regional markets and two rural grocery stores in 2017. The program matched $25,152 SNAP benefits in 2016 with an estimated economic impact of $68,926 for the area. Providing this needed resource demonstrates how Douglas County utilizes local food systems to build sustainability to benefit farmers, consumers, and the community as a whole.

Another outcome of Douglas County’s food system work is the establishment of a regional food hub. Food hubs provide infrastructure, like processing, packaging and distribution, to link local food producers with large-scale consumers, such as schools. The 2011 Food System Assessment found that the region was lacking this infrastructure, so the County conducted a feasibility study to assess the market potential for the concept. With the results, Douglas County worked with regional partners to convene interested farmers and helped secure start-up funding for the new business. Fresh Farm HQ launched in 2015 to serve as a food hub for the greater Kansas City region. This intentional work to support regional market development improves economic sustainability by helping local farmers scale up their production and find viability.

In addition to creating programs and resources, the Council develops recommendations concerning local land use policies and planning processes. From 2015 to 2016, the Council aided the Lawrence-Douglas County Planning Department in revising urban agriculture policies. The Council conducted a public survey, held a policy forum, and reviewed policy drafts to offer input and draw upon national examples. Following the policy changes, the Council created user-friendly publications to explain the city code to residents. This work supports cultural sustainability by providing resources to help residents understand policies and promoting self-sufficiency for urban living.

After five years of building credibility and advancing food systems work in local government and the community, the Council took a significant step up when local leaders asked them to create a stand-alone Food System Plan. The draft plan, released January 2017, outlines goals, objectives, and policies to guide local food system development and land use, acknowledging previously weak incorporation of these issues in the community’s comprehensive plan. The pillars of sustainability are infused throughout the plan, including economic development to support farmers and entrepreneurs, preservation of native and agricultural lands, conservation of water and healthy soils, increasing food access and community food production, intentionally directing activities to engage with community diversity and cultural heritage, and a range of future policy and program interventions to reduce waste and divert still edible food to hungry families. Once adopted, the document will serve as a work plan for the Council in the coming decade and ensure that local food systems development remains a priority in the County.

Douglas County has learned a number of important lessons through its years of developing its local food system to advance community sustainability. Most importantly, it has found success by starting small and then building relationships and credibility over time. An on-going focus to find common ground with stakeholders, be open to new opportunities, and engage in regional partnerships helped lead to shared progress and innovative ideas. Particularly with the Council, dedicated staff support and diverse representation across sectors have been essential to its maintaining project momentum and bringing a professional approach to the work. Lawrence and Douglas County also learned to be creative with funding local budgets and external grants. (For example, the County initially used federal funding to hire staff, whose early successes justified use of local government budgets to make permanent two full-time positions. DUFB, however, began with small local funding and is now part of a large federally-funded collaboration.) After seven years, Lawrence and Douglas County have found success in supporting the local food system thanks to the continued use of a sustainability lens and find multifaceted ways to address and balance the community’s social, economic, environmental and cultural needs.