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Permits and paperwork: Administrative burden in Kansas City's community food system

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Abstract

Local food producers and organization leaders often encounter unclear regulations, complex permitting processes, and frustration as they ensure that their food is grown legally. The administrative burden framework offers a valuable lens to identify these costs and potential interventions to support the long-term success of community food system efforts. This research uses a qualitative case study of the Kansas City metropolitan region to identify the learning, compliance, and psychological costs these actors face when encountering local government. I analyze survey and interview data to explore how administrative burdens manifest in local policy through zoning, use definitions, and permitting processes. Findings reveal that vague

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policy language and permitting requirements impose steep administrative costs. These barriers are not only technical but psychological, particularly for producers who perceive local food as marginalized, who face structural disadvantages such as insecure land tenure, or have limited familiarity with bureaucratic systems. Encounters with administrators often shape whether burdens are alleviated or intensified. Importantly, both informal peer networks and formal organizations—such as nonprofits—function as navigators, reducing costs and filling institutional gaps. Practical recommendations include clarifying local policies, conducting policy audits, and providing administrator training. This study underscores the need to address administrative costs that hamper investments in community food system initiatives.

Keywords
qualitative research, community food systems, administrative burden, local food, small-scale producers, municipal policy, land use, zoning, grant-seeking, psychological costs

Introduction

In the United States, "local food" represents alternative agriculture movements, community-oriented food economies, and sustainable, biodiverse agricultural production. The concept of local food is defined in numerous ways, reflecting its multifaceted nature (Allen, 2010; Low et al., 2015; Maretzki & Tuckermanty, 2007). The government typically defines local food based on factors such as the distance it travels to point of sale, the marketing outlets used, its perceived attributes, and its potential to address food deserts, as outlined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Johnson et al., 2020). Although not all local food is inherently sustainable or equitable (Enthoven & van Den Broeck, 2021; Stein & Santini, 2022), research highlights key benefits of local foods. Multifunctional agriculture offers biodiversity, and in urban settings it provides microclimate control, heat island reduction, recreation, and public spaces (Lovell, 2010); reduced stress, increased physical exercise (Brown & Jameton, 2000); and increased community awareness and efficacy around food and the environment (Reynolds, 2015).

Local governments regulate food and agriculture through land use zoning and ordinances. For example, cities may designate areas for urban agriculture or permit community gardens. They also regulate the steps producers must follow to obtain legal approval for their objectives if not allowed by right with set parameters. For instance, backyard chicken-keeping may require a special-use permit that entails a public hearing, an application fee, and, in many cases, an annual renewal fee that varies widely, ranging from under US$100 to beyond US$1,000. Previous research has mapped many municipal policies (Halvey et al., 2021; Meenar et al., 2017). Yet few studies link these to administrative burden, which has been more often studied in food assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Barnes et al., 2023; Negoita et al., 2024), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (Cochran, 2023). We know far less about how local food producers experience administrative burden in navigating local government policy.

Using the case of the Kansas City regional food system, this study examines how producers and food system stakeholders encounter government policy through the lens of administrative burden—a concept describing how an individual perceives and experiences the learning, compliance, and psychological costs of policy implementation given that individual's resources, capabilities, and personal context (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Heinrich, 2016; Masood & Azfar Nisar, 2021; Moynihan et al., 2015). Community food system producers and advocates encounter government at the local, state, and federal levels through regulatory compliance and efforts to seek financial support in the form of grants. This study centers on one such level: local government. Drawing on surveys with small-scale agricultural producers and interviews with stakeholders such as nonprofit leaders and food program administrators, this qualitative study explores their experiences. Rather than cataloging complaints, this research applies the administrative burden framework to better under-

stand how community food advocates experience local government influence. My core research question is: *How do community food system advocates experience administrative burden at the local level?*

The goal is to empower stakeholders by identifying how administrative complexity affects their work and advocacy, identifying points of potential intervention. This descriptive and exploratory analysis contributes in three ways. First, it evaluates the learning, psychological, and compliance costs at the local level. Second, it highlights a lesser-studied area of administrative burden with practical implications for local policy reform. Third, it provides an empirical foundation for evaluating administrative burden in local food systems, pointing to the role of social networks and power dynamics in shaping how administrative costs are experienced. Ultimately, I offer insights for practitioners and researchers seeking to improve the investments of local food system stakeholders like producers and nonprofit leaders.

Applying Administrative Burden to Local Food Systems

Administrative burden—the learning, compliance, and psychological costs individuals experience during government encounters—shapes participation in public programs (Moynihan et al., 2015). Learning costs refer to the time and effort invested in understanding eligibility requirements, completing applications, and remaining informed about shifting policy (Moynihan et al., 2015). For example, lacking the technical knowledge required to navigate complex federal grant program applications such as the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service [USDA AMS], 2023). Historical disparities intensify these barriers; Black farmers, for instance, have long faced exclusion from USDA programs due to limited access and discretionary implementation (Cowan & Feder, 2008; *Pigford v. Glickman*, 1999; Russell et al., 2021). Compliance costs refer to the documentation requirements, financial obligations, and other mandates that may disproportionately affect individuals with limited administrative capacity. City and county land use regulations impose use restrictions or permit requirements that create compliance costs such as fees, time spent in meetings, or required paperwork for urban and peri-urban food production (Halvey et al., 2021; Meenar et al., 2017).

Finally, psychological costs capture the stress, frustration, and stigmas perceived during government encounters. Baekgaard and Tankink (2022) expertly describe the power of psychological costs in shaping an individual's perception of encountering policy implementation: "a feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness that individuals might experience when dealing with burdensome rules or procedures where they do not understand the origin or need" (p. 18). Psychological barriers are pronounced when program participants sense a misalignment in a policy or program's purported mission and its actual impact through bureaucratic hurdles. They also manifest where a program is tied to stigmas like deservingness or political ideologies (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022). This raises concerns about policy design that ostensibly promotes agriculture while creating administrative obstacles. Such obstacles can shape attitudes toward government; for example, one study found that farmers participating in direct-payment programs and associated inspections exhibited administrative burden, which influenced their view of the direct payment system negatively (Ritzel et al., 2020). The consequences of administrative burdens are substantial. Policy choices and government encounters ultimately influence social capital, civic engagement, government trust, political efficacy, and participation (Herd et. al, 2013; Moynihan, 2022). Thus, administrative activities do much more than provide services or set policy; they influence the relationship between citizens and their government in a democracy. The result is an explicit link to policy feedback, wherein an experience with the state affects attitudes, beliefs, and negative emotions toward the state (Hattke et al., 2020; Mack et al., 2021; Soss, 1999).

Third-party actors—nonprofits, peer networks, and extension services—help reduce perceived burden by guiding individuals through complex systems. These navigators offer technical support and reassurance (Sternesky, 2023). For example, agricultural extension services and community food

nonprofits support farmers navigating federal and community grant-seeking or understanding local regulatory frameworks. Trusted community organizations and peer networks, forms of social capital, provide reassurance and advocacy, counteracting feelings of alienation and distrust toward government institutions (Masood & Azfar Nisar, 2021). Studies on administrative burden in housing assistance indicate that navigators improve application success rates and reduce dropout rates due to psychological deterrence (Sternesky, 2023).

Local Government Policy and Local Food

Local governments shape the regulatory landscape in which agriculturalists operate. Food and agriculture intersect directly with local police powers overseeing health, safety, and welfare—codified in a municipal code of ordinances (Witt, 2013). This code governs zoning, building standards, and business operations through rules that define where land uses can occur (zoning), what may occur in those zones (use restrictions), and how to seek exceptions (permitting, variances, rezoning). Some cities offer clear pathways; others impose barriers through restrictive or ambiguous rules. This variation across municipalities leads to uneven costs for producers in a given region.

Zoning, which separates land based on permitted uses, is a key source of administrative burden. It aims to protect health and guide development (Reece, 2018) but has also historically reinforced racial and rural-urban divides (Pendall, 2000; Rothstein, 2017). Zoning codes define agricultural use—such as crop farming or animal husbandry—based on location, lot size, number of users, traffic, and commercial activity (McClintock et al., 2012). Some codes prohibit agriculture outright; others are silent, causing urban agriculture to "fall through the cracks" (Pawlowski, 2018, p. 6) when uses are not explicitly addressed.

Producers engage in a range of activities, such as growing, processing or adding value, sales, beekeeping, aquaculture, and more. Where limited agricultural definitions or use restrictions related to processing, adding value, or sales exist, diverse agricultural objectives are impeded (Horst & Gaolach, 2015). Residents may become confused about local government's goals when policies enacted under the banner of promoting local agriculture are challenging to understand or comply with. Such was the case when the City of Oakland, California, implemented mixed zoning with conditional uses in its city code. Although the intent was to facilitate urban agriculture, it resulted in conditional use applications with fees and required justification that an operation's location, size, design, and operating characteristics would not affect the "residential character" of a neighborhood. Residents, unsure of whether their activities were considered "gardening" (an accessory use allowed by-right on one's property) or "agriculture" (a potentially commercial use if it attracts traffic or sales) in code, walked a thin line determining whether transforming a vacant lot into a garden was allowed at all, and how to meet conditional use permit requirements (Witt, 2013). Agricultural definitions, use restrictions, and permitting process requirements are the root of this example's administrative costs (Halvey et al., 2021; Meenar et al., 2017). Conditional or special use permits often entail extensive, expensive, or confusing administrative processes, including paperwork, fees, and weeks of time. Producers may struggle to determine how their objectives, like building fencing or engaging in sales onsite, fit in with existing municipal policy when it is vague or silent regarding agricultural and/or food uses. Administrative burden provides a useful lens to understanding this complexity that can lead to a "daunting and fruitless endeavor . . . either discouraging individuals from engaging in the process or causing them to unintentionally violate local ordinances and face penalties" (Pawlowski, 2018, p. 7). Pawlowski (2018) further notes that the complications in fitting with policy also relate to the intersection of planning, building, and fire codes, as municipal codes of ordinances set requirements for building height, building code, setbacks, lot size, accessory structures, fencing, and other components of urban agricultural activity.

Some municipalities reduce burden through more supportive frameworks. For instance, Waterloo, Canada, adopted open zoning to allow cooperative wholesale produce sales, improving community food system outcomes (Desjardins et

al., 2011). This contrast demonstrates how use definitions and permit processes—like conditional versus open use—shape land access, direct-to-consumer sales, and farm viability. Halvey et al. (2021) found differences in the actors implementing policy, the tools used (e.g., regulation, programs, recommendations), and the issues addressed. These policies may originate from governments, quasigovernmental entities, or public–private partnerships. Regulations typically govern zoning, land tenure, and animal husbandry; notably, the Midwest had the second highest number of urban agriculture ordinances in one study, demonstrating regional variation in policy, potential burden, and a useful case to investigate (Meenar et al., 2017).

Applied Research Methods

I leverage a qualitative case study to examine administrative burden in the Kansas City regional food system, selected for its diverse agricultural policies, varied production types, and research accessibility. I draw on two data sources: a regional survey of agricultural producers and semi-structured interviews with producers and stakeholders (e.g., program managers, nonprofit leaders). The University of Kansas Institutional Review Board approved the methodology, ensuring compliance with ethical standards.

First, an online survey gathered responses from agricultural producers in the region between June and October 2023 using Qualtrics software. It included questions about producers' experiences with regulations, government's role in the food system, and farm characteristics. The survey design was informed by prior research on administrative burden and balanced to respect producers' time. I identified participants through farm listings (e.g., farmers markets listings, Kansas City Healthy Kids, Local Harvest, Missouri Grown) and included urban, peri-urban, and rural growers in a roughly 60-mile (97-km) radius of Kansas City. In-person outreach to invited participants and recruitment of any producers not found online occurred at Kansas City and Olathe farmers markets, with some completing the survey on-site. I also offered an hour of my volunteer labor to respondents opting in. Three reminders to participate were sent via email.

The final survey sample consisted of 39 respondents (for a 40% response rate). Producers were reluctant to disclose certain information, with many declining to share income or education data, instead focusing on questions directly related to their experiences. Thus, the survey data provide qualitative insights and descriptive statistics but are not suited for quantitative analysis. I analyzed the responses using summary statistics to describe interactions with local policy and perceived administrative costs (learning, compliance, and psychological) as they relate to governance.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups: agricultural producers and key stakeholders, who had experience in food policy councils, nonprofits, extension services, and grant-funded program administration. The stakeholder group was identified via online searches and social media, prioritizing those with cross-sector experience (e.g., farming and policy). Of 12 invited, six food system stakeholders completed interviews via Zoom (in spring and summer 2023), each about one hour long. These discussions explored policy implementation, structural barriers, and administrative burden in food system governance. The producer group was largely recruited through the survey's final question ("Do you or someone you know have a particularly noteworthy experience (positive or negative) with the government you would be willing to share in a short interview?"), while others began through conversations at farmers markets. Producers who opted into my volunteering an hour of time at their operation typically discussed their experiences during my site visit. Ten in-person interviews with producers took place between June and October 2023. These interviews averaged 1.5 hours. Although they were audio-recorded, some were difficult to transcribe due to outdoor conditions, so detailed field notes were used. Conversations focused on local permitting, grant access, compliance burden at various levels of government, and key actors shaping producers' perceptions.

Data coding was systematic and iterative, facilitated by NVivo software (2022). I leveraged inductive reasoning to allow themes to emerge from content, and deductive reasoning to structure cod-

ing using the existing administrative burden framework (Moynihan et al., 2015). These approaches were combined by first coding content with the existing conceptual framework while tagging content for emergent themes. An iteration of coding was then applied to track those emergent themes. Concepts from administrative burden and the costs framework are found in Table 1, outlining this alignment. Survey and interview findings were triangulated to assess how burdens appear, accumulate, and where opportunities for intervention may lie, as discussed below.

Results and Discussion

This section presents two sets of findings. First, I examine the learning, compliance, and psychological costs experienced when engaging with local policy, along with opportunities to reduce burden. Second, I highlight how the actions of individuals, especially administrators, social networks, and professional connections, can exacerbate or alleviate perceived burden.

Finding 1: Local Government: Administrative Costs and Opportunities

Municipal codes of ordinances and county policy produce memorable administrative costs for producers, revealed in both survey and interview data. These are discussed under three themes: learning, compliance, and psychological costs.

Learning Costs

Understanding how a producer's operation aligns with local land use codes is a persistent challenge. Participants described difficulty deciphering vague wording and inconsistent regulations, often worsened by unclear or contradictory guidance from administrators. For example, some cities clearly define and allow urban agriculture, while others leave its legal status ambiguous. In the region, only Kansas City, Missouri, explicitly defines "urban agriculture" in its code. Producers also cited uncertainty around constructing temporary structures or if they could sell products on-site as a home-based business. One producer, Taylor,[1] described the burden of learning how to go about building a demonstration farm on county-owned land in city limits:

> I have to say, working with the zoning and code people was kind of a nightmare. [Because] the county is the owner it became a commercial structure. If I had been trying to build the same structures in my backyard, it would have been easier. However, because they became commercial structures, we had to go through a complete permitting process, which I thought could seem relatively straightforward, but they wanted engineered drawings for the structures.

Table 1. Administrative Burden: Learning, Psychological, and Compliance Cost Measurements

Administrative cost	Description of code
Learning costs	L1: Extent of difficulty finding information about a policy, generally
	L2 Extent of difficulty learning terminology or what the other side "wants" based on their verbiage
	L3: Extent of difficulty learning required processes, paperwork, etc.
Psychological costs	P1: Impact on one's personal stress level
	P2: Impact on one's perception of their own efficacy or autonomy
	P3: Impact on one's sense of stigmatization
Compliance costs	C1: Complying with paperwork requirements
	C2: Complying with requirements such as visits with administrators or public meetings
	C3: Complying with financial requirements like application or annual renewal fees

Sources: Jilke et al., 2024; Moynihan et al., 2015

[1] All producers' names are pseudonyms to provide anonymity.

Season extension structures like hoop houses, essential for profitability, are a central point of confusion. These unheated greenhouse-like structures may be considered permanent or semi-permanent depending on locality, but are rarely named in code. Whether they require permits or are allowed by-right is often unclear, imposing learning costs. Seeking clarification from administrators does not always help. One producer, Rod, shared their first foray with county government to learn regulations on constructing a hoop house that was meant to happen quickly.

> I tried to be a good citizen [and ask], "Well, do I need a construction permit?" [The county said] "No, you really can't get started because you're in a floodplain, you can't do it. You can't get insurance. Well, [unless] is it a permanent structure? Or is a semi-permanent structure? If it is movable, you can. …"
>
> We come back and forth, and we got frustrated. I don't need insurance. I try to make it permanent, so the wind doesn't blow it away, but I call it movable. Finally, I got the state representative involved. Two months later, staff came down to the farm and we got this corrected. They [the county] had questions I thought were legitimate, but meanwhile if I build again, I'm not going to ask anything or raise my hand. … I try not to take it personally, but I felt that they [the county] were fairly aggressive. I don't know everything about the fine print in government and what we can or can't do, … but it flies in the face of what we need to accomplish.

This illustrates a mismatch between floodplain building limitations and unique agricultural structures, since hoop houses technically can be moved and do not require insurance, whereas these are not considerations for a structure that people inhabit. In this scenario, seeking information from a local administrator did not result in reduced learning costs, more accessible information, or help navigating complex administrative processes. Rather, getting assistance from a state representative solved the problem. The outcome was ultimately remembered for the administrator's attitude, which also shaped the perspective of a future "ask for forgiveness" approach. When administrative requirements are incongruent and demand considerable time to learn and comply with, the resulting frustration compounds, intensifying psychological stress and creating a greater cumulative burden. This frustration deepens when producers perceive that administrators are more responsive to the influence of other actors in determining how an agricultural use is recognized, or whether exceptions are granted.

On the other hand, reaching a helpful administrator might not matter if the information provided is outdated, inaccurate, or if the administrator is unsure of how to apply policy to an agricultural objective. Inaccurate information inadvertently results in learning costs and increases the perception of burden as time and energy are spent to engage with administrators. One interviewee describes special use permits required when agriculture is not allowed by-right, including the unique cost faced by refugees with English as a second language: "that special use permit process. … it's almost like they're seeing different directions on the website than they're hearing from … city staff that they're working with and it's just a very confusing and complicated process [to learn]." This showcases administrators' role and potential importance for individual producers as they cope with learning costs.

Compliance Ccosts

Assuming that one is able to learn how policy applies to an agricultural objective, producers face financial and technical demands complying with requirements. In this region, of cities that allow agriculture in residential areas, 60% (n = 9) require special or conditional use permits for common practices like hoop houses, deer fencing, on-site sales, or signage. These intersect directly with producers' core objectives. Special use permits come with time costs and can be financially constraining as described by a survey respondent:

> Not all municipalities allow goat grazing (no willingness to issue permits), so there are many places I cannot operate. I've also offered services in some areas that will allow grazing with a permit; however, the cost of that permit makes it prohibitive for the customer … often adding 25% or so to the total cost of their project.

The scale of agricultural objectives can also increase the cost to comply. Taylor returns to describe complying with the special use permit requirement of submitting architect renderings, which they found challenging due to their project's scale. Although time- and cost-intensive, these renderings were not approved because they crossed state lines:

> Getting those drawings done was basically a small enough job that I couldn't get any engineering firms to call me back. I couldn't make any progress. Really, I was kind of stuck, and I didn't know how to proceed. … Then, thankfully, one of our master gardeners who lived nearby … trains architects and just volunteered to help us out of their good, good hearts. And as soon as they got involved … I don't know, the issues just went away. Watching the email correspondence, they were saying the exact same things [to code/enforcement representatives] that I said. But somehow, they convinced them that the ones I submitted would work.

This quote illustrates two points. First, social connections can mitigate compliance burdens, in this case, access to a knowledgeable and trusted community member. Second, an architect's formal credentials appeased the administrator's concerns rather than a producer who relayed the same information, reminiscent of Rod's experience upon involving a state representative. Survey respondents mentioned special use permits and on-site sales restrictions the most. Of the 18 producers who responded to questions about local policy interaction, 56% encountered a special use permit (n = 10), 44% encountered on-site sales restrictions (n = 8), and 33% encountered on-site signage restrictions (n = 6). Survey results indicate broad adoption of accessory and season-extension structures and fencing. Accordingly, vague or inflexible rules governing these uses produce equally broad consequences (see Table 2). These costs accumulate through learning how municipal code applies to an objective, complying with engineering drawings, public meetings, fees, and coping with the process. Each requirement represents a point where compliance can become a deterrent to agricultural objectives, build a greater cumulative burden, and affect this group's view of local government.

Interview participants detailed the requirements for getting these permits and permissions—lengthy meetings, engineering renderings, fees—which seemed disproportionate to the size of their operation and more geared toward large development projects. This incongruence fosters frustration and perceived unfairness, producing psychological costs alongside the compliance costs of time, money, and energy. One stakeholder contrasted the experience of small producers with city support for developers in a dubious tone:

> There are a number of graduates from the [New Roots for Refugees] program who have wanted to keep chickens, and basically, any number of them need a special use permit to do that. The process to get a special use permit is the same for around 20 chickens as it is for a massive building. So, a huge amount of paperwork, going to public meetings, and community meetings. Apparently one of the farmers had to stay at a meeting until midnight to get his special use permanent for his handful of chickens.

Table 2. Agricultural Uses Reported by Survey Respondents

Which of the following are used in your operation?		
Agricultural use	**Count**	**Proportion**
Accessory structure	25	76%
Fencing	22	67%
Season extension structure	16	48%

Psychological Costs

The psychological cost of advocating for agricultural objectives when administrators seem unreceptive has been described. Producers also express psychological costs tied to land tenure uncertainty and the emotional toll of navigating a system with little consideration of their objectives. Precarity in land access is an important contextual feature of how burden is perceived in the local policy environment. One nonprofit organization's community farm, led by Sam, encapsulates this challenge. Their organization farmed on a 25-year leased property through a development firm, which owned the land. This community farm was an integral part of the initial developer acquisition. However, the developer was seeking an amendment to terminate the lease early and build apartments, which required city approval. This threat to stability made investment by the nonprofit feel risky and emotionally exhausting. For many urban producers working on leased land, public lots, or temporary contracts, land access seems to shape how burden is felt. Sam describes the arduous process of finding out they will likely lose the land they have invested in to try and benefit their community:

> We have to work with developers because they are our landlords … and we need them to honor their agreement to at least help pay for relocation costs. We were part of the vision that was sold to the community for the developers to be able to purchase the site [originally] and now this situation … We don't totally know how much we're going to put into fighting to stay on that land or not. So, I think about other urban farmers that … will find themselves in similar situations as the city continues to develop.

Producers also described the frustration and mental fatigue of operating in the larger corporate-dominated food system given their stewardship values and volunteering time in local food policy councils. Several individuals' reflections reveal a sense of weariness and inequity, sentiments that shape how administrative burdens are experienced:

> I'm tired of near starving and juggling pennies all while being a responsible steward of the land.

> An interesting observation is the number of farmers who have quit the local food policy council in frustration of being on a committee with salaried, government/nonprofit members.

> What we are trying to do is feed people and mitigate losses from the environment, and it flies in the face of what we need to accomplish when you have government bumping heads.

> All of this local and regional food is part of a larger system and how we have structured our dominant … food system. In a lot of ways, it dictates how things go with local and regional food. Like profitability, which is partly a challenge because of how we subsidize and externalize costs in our dominant food system—there are certain costs associated with the dominant system that are externalized to society that are not externalized in local regional food systems. So, to some degree, it's not fair, you know. There's not fairness across the board between the two systems.

These statements reflect more than policy frustration; they reveal how structural inequities, perceived marginalization, and value-incongruence in the larger food system impose psychological weight. For small-scale, locally oriented producers, the cost of trying to "do good" often includes emotional exhaustion and sense of exclusion, sharp psychological costs not always captured in administrative terms.

In sum, learning, compliance, and psychological costs seem to interact and compound into a substantial cumulative burden for producers. For example, learning how an operation's objective fits into vague municipal policy takes more time than when policy is clear, adding stress in certain cases. Similarly, undergoing special use permit fees, public meetings, and other process requirements contributes to a sense of stress. When logistic stress meets the weight of land precarity or incongruence with

one's values, administrative costs are deeply felt. These candid offerings speak to the intensity and impact of administrative costs for this social group seeking to advance community food system efforts.

How Can Local Governments Apply These Insights?
Local governments can reduce administrative burden for producers, especially in urban areas, by revising policies for clarity and inclusivity. Revising local policy with an eye toward enabling agriculture in a thoughtful and clear manner versus permitting on a case-by-case basis is a meaningful lever to influence local food production. A planning and policy audit using the administrative burden framework can track both policy substance and potential costs, helping local governments avoid policies that superficially support agriculture but create hidden barriers (Witt, 2013). It also identifies opportunities to reduce unnecessary complexity where permitting requirements are utilized. A comprehensive policy audit and revision workshop would:

- Include formal collaboration with local food nonprofits, producers, and policy councils to bridge gaps in knowledge and social networks. Such collaboration brings practical insight and attends to important local context. Where producers' ideas are integrated and valued, collaboration can rebuild trust in local government intentions.

- Interrogate existing definitions of agriculture and urban agriculture for inclusivity of peri-urban and urban use. Does the code reflect modern practices (e.g., chickens, bees, value-added processing), or only traditional row-crop farming? Many cities lack a definition of urban agriculture entirely.

- Review allowable uses, restrictions, and process requirements from a producer perspective. This includes season extension structures, taller-than-average fencing, on-site sales, and signage. If these uses are allowed, to what extent, and in what form: hobby, backyard garden, or home business? A lack of clarity adds burden for both producers and administrators. For example, Kansas City, Missouri, divides urban agriculture into home gardens, community gardens, and community supported agriculture operations with clear limits on what can be grown and sold in each.

- Streamline permitting processes where possible. Assess whether requirements are tailored to small-scale agriculture or modeled on large-scale development. Simplify language, reduce fees, and make materials accessible. Consider whether certain agricultural activities could be allowed by-right or granted exemptions if they operate below a determined scale. This step, in collaboration with food system stakeholders, can prevent unintended consequences of allowing all agricultural activities by-right while considering common agricultural objectives, their scale, and fit with local government goals. For example, policy could specify the number of backyard chickens allowed by-right or allow permitting through a simplified process that relies on a single form with lower fees and no meeting requirements. These reform efforts should remain attentive to the scale at which allowances create public health concerns or become incompatible with neighborhood factors like space, density, and character.

- Coordinate across jurisdictions. Regional working sessions between counties and municipalities can resolve conflicting rules where jurisdictions overlap, reduce learning costs between governments. This also lowers transaction costs for both producers and governments.

Finding 2: Individual Influence in Administrative Burdens

Producers' encounters with policy demands are shaped by others: administrators, peers, nonprofits, and professional networks. These actors can either heighten or reduce learning, compliance, and psychological costs. By influencing how producers interpret policy, meet requirements, and manage stress, these individuals represent an important lever for positive change. For instance, some non-

profit leaders leaned on colleagues' successful grant applications as templates. One producer described a peer-driven mindset around grant-seeking: rather than viewing grants as competitive and scarce, they emphasize the need to "evangelize" about available competitive grants and teach others "how to speak USDA and speak bureaucracy." This perspective highlights how individual and collective efforts in networks can shape access to funding opportunities and reduce costs to apply for funds enabling community food system programs.

In cases where producers could not persuade administrators, professional contacts often provided the support needed to gain approval or exemption. Recalling an earlier example, Taylor resolved an issue with architectural renderings for a demonstration farm with help from a connected neighbor. This support reduced administrative burden and underscored how professional connections can function as a critical resource when administrators place more weight on professional authority than a farmers' own knowledge or advocacy. This dynamic was also at play in Rod's case, whose hoop house was ultimately approved once a state government representative advocated on his behalf—what they described as "utilizing leverage and other government agencies to get things moving." Survey results reinforce this theme. Over 40% of respondents identified professional connections as instrumental in their success (Table 3). One's personal social circle also proved useful, with 42% of respondents citing them as helpful in addressing administrative burdens.

While producers identified personal networks, professional associations, and cooperative extension services as the most helpful, formal governmental institutions like city planners and managers were perceived as less helpful. Overall, experiences with administrators were described as inconsistent. One survey respondent summarized it as a "mixed bag":

> Our farm has interacted with various government departments and agencies, national and local. Some have been great, and some have been frustrating. Local planning and zoning [is] down the middle and doing their bureaucratic job okay; it really depends on the municipality and person you talk to. City health department [is] totally hit or miss, depending on the individual you talk to. NRCS local offices? Okay, if underfunded and short-staffed. It's really a mixed bag. We are lucky enough to have some familiarity with bureaucratic processes. Sometimes having mentors to "translate" bureaucracy helps.

This "mixed bag" is further illustrated by the goat-grazing example from a survey respondent, who describes how their learning and compliance costs directly relate to who is in charge:

Table 3. Groups Helpful and Not Helpful in Navigating Administrative Costs

Group	Helpful	Not Helpful
Your personal social circle	46%	3%
Professional connections	38%	8%
Extension offices	33%	0%
Social media groups	18%	8%
Another city or county representative	18%	10%
University connections	15%	0%
City planner(s)	13%	5%
Nonprofit(s) (please list)	10%	5%
City manager's office	8%	0%
Food policy council	8%	0%

> Some cities are easy to work with—they understand that targeted grazing is not "farming in the city" and are happy to let me operate with basic communication. Others require multiple steps, fail to respond or communicate at all, contradict themselves, and are a major time sink. Depends on the city in question. Lenexa, Platte City, Independence: communicative, helpful. Blue Springs: moderately communicative, willing to be flexible. Liberty, Smithville, Plattsburg, Parkville: communicative, not always flexible. KCMO: noncommunicative, inflexible. At these different spots I've spoken to city managers or administrators, zoning, business, codes enforcement, animal control, and others—all depends on who they decided was in charge.

Stakeholders encounter administrators regularly, making their role consequential. This is supported by interview data, where Taylor encountering an administrator was described as "very confusing and complicated" or "kind of a nightmare … working with the zoning and codes people." Another producer, Lee, adds to this evidence. They described receiving a citation for rank weeds over a certain height due to a neighbor's complaint. They attributed the complaint and subsequent citation for code violation to "a lack of understanding and familiarity with what native, edible, landscaping looks like, or what is a farm." They further describe challenges attempting to comply as they "called the Codes inspector on the letter 10 times and never heard back. Then it kind of went away, so I don't know [what happened]." Lee's attempts to comply or share knowledge about native landscaping were stymied by unresponsiveness—an example of psychological and time costs amplified by ineffective communication.

The inconsistency of administrator helpfulness reflected in survey responses and interviews demonstrates a feasible opportunity to improve administrative encounters with short-term results. These patterns also illustrate that administrative burden is not only structural but also relational. Administrators, along with other individual actors, whether supportive or obstructive, can profoundly shape producers' engagement with local government. They represent a practical lever to reduce burden.

Applying Insights Around Individual Influence

Individuals—administrators, peers, and professional network connections—influence how producers perceive and navigate administrative requirements. Government representatives such as city and county planners, zoning officials, health departments, and more all produce one side of an administrative encounter that can greatly shape how administrative costs are perceived. They directly impact the ease of achieving an objective through learning and complying with requirements. Their tone, clarity, and responsiveness shape whether producers feel supported or discouraged. Positive interactions can encourage engagement with complex systems. Negative interactions may lead to future avoidance and a higher perceived burden through stress or the sense that local government lacks understanding. Because administrators were more often associated with negative experiences, such as unclear guidance, unreturned communication, or seemingly adversarial encounters, they represent a key source of unintentional, informal administrative burden. Overall, the evidence suggests that increased responsiveness and constructive use of discretion could shift administrative encounters toward being supportive rather obstructive, easing unintended burdens.

Producers with access to peer support, nonprofits, or extension services reported lower learning and compliance costs. This emphasizes the importance of social capital in mitigating administrative costs, underscoring the "community" in community food systems for essential support. However, not all producers have equal access to these connections, highlighting potential gaps in knowledge-sharing and support.

The following interventions are possible methods to address these gaps and lower the costs of administrative burden:

- Clear, written standards should precede and anchor training. Training should address administrative behavior by promoting plain

communication and supportive responses to producers across planners, zoning officials, and other staff. This is especially relevant where decisions are now governed by discretionary judgment due to absent or vague policy. However, because personnel changes routinely produce variation in interpretation, education is a second-best, partial remedy; codifying rules in policy is necessary to minimize inconsistency and address structural gaps affecting agricultural goals.

- Strengthen informal peer networks to build encouragement and policy knowledge through the exchange of real-world experiences of policy interpretation, regulatory compliance, and efforts to seek financial support. Identify existing networks, resources, and "champions" in the food system to reinforce these efforts. Target outreach to producers with limited social capital, including immigrants, refugees, and beginning farmers. Involve governmental and nongovernmental organizations to host outreach events, establish producer-to-producer mentorship programs, and provide funding to sustain them.

- Invest in formal organizations (governmental or nongovernmental) who serve as navigators offering regular, essential technical assistance in grant-seeking and local policy interpretation. Investments in structured mentorship, policy trainings, and skill development programs can formalize the support currently accessible to producers with greater social capital. Organizations like New Roots for Refugees demonstrate how nonprofits can act as navigators for producers unfamiliar with regulatory systems. Extension services likewise provide valuable assistance.

- Prioritize collaboration among producer networks, food policy councils, nonprofit organizations, and local government bodies to strengthen relationships and establish regular channels of communication. This approach fosters ongoing shared understanding and strengthens relationships between government and food system stakeholders. Such relationships provide the foundation for informed use of discretion, for example, in decisions about the permanence of hoop houses, challenges related to project size, and other cases that require clearer communication to determine fit with existing policy.

Conclusion

This study leverages the administrative burden costs framework to examine the learning, compliance, and psychological costs faced by agricultural producers and community food stakeholders in the Kansas City region (Moynihan et al., 2015). Findings demonstrate that vague local policies and complex permitting systems create substantial burdens, while social and professional relationships can ease the experience of administrative burden. Producers face psychological costs rooted in land insecurity and in operating in a dominant food system that undervalues the environmental and community-oriented principles guiding their approach to agriculture.

Third-party intermediaries—nonprofits, peer networks, and professional connections—are key navigators of local rules and processes. They translate zoning and permitting requirements, broker communication with administrators, support grant preparation, and buffer the psychological strain of compliance. By filling gaps, especially when government communication is limited or adversarial, they reduce administrative burden. Yet access to these resources partly hinges on social capital, raising equity concerns about who receives help. Expanding formal navigators' technical assistance while strengthening peer networks can address this concern. Future research should clarify how these supports complement or substitute for improved government responsiveness and clarity.

Practically, these findings point to a need for clearer, more inclusive policy language, especially around permitting, use definitions, and use restrictions (e.g., season extension structures, sales). Local governments must examine how discretion is exercised, particularly by administrators who unintentionally produce burden through misinformation, poor communication, or procedural opac-

ity. Administrative training, partnerships with food policy councils, and intentional collaboration with producers could improve encounters and reduce friction. One avenue to reducing learning costs is ensuring that information on ordinances, how to interpret code, and contact information with administrators is clearly accessible online. Digital tools are another avenue to reduce burden: web forms containing plain language might start the permitting process for particular objectives (i.e., deer fencing) or uses below a certain scale.

Limitations of this study are three-fold. First, it presents one regional case, Kansas City, limiting its generalizability. While Kansas City offers a valuable lens to examine administrative burden in community food systems, future research should test if patterns identified here hold across other Midwestern contexts and the greater United States. Comparative research would clarify to what extent the findings are context-specific. The degree of coordination between government entities and the strength of nonprofit and extension networks are unique to this region and may shape how burdens are mitigated or amplified. Future research should explore how various metropolitan governance arrangements (e.g., consolidated city-county governments, regional councils, or government-integrated food policy councils) alter the extent to which producers experience learning, compliance, or psychological costs. For example, consolidated city-county governments may feature less variation in policy, reducing learning costs, even if permitting processes are still required.

Second, although this study's sample size is sufficient to capture recurring themes, it does not capture the full range of experiences among producers and food system stakeholders. Larger samples, whether gathered through expanded survey data or additional qualitative interviews, would allow for greater statistical power and a more nuanced understanding of variation in burden across subgroups. Third, this study relies on self-reported perceptions of administrative burden. Accounts do not fully capture the institutional perspective or document-based measures of burden. Future research could complement these perspectives with administrator interviews or policy document analysis for a more comprehensive view.

Beyond logistics, this study highlights two takeaways for administrative burden research. First, administrative costs are not experienced in isolation but accumulate to create a heightened sense of cumulative burden. Repetitive learning demands—such as deciphering policy language, determining required compliance steps, or identifying the appropriate administrator for guidance—compound over time and intensify psychological stress. These stressors stem not only from the complexity of the requirements, but through repeated encounters with administrators regarding the same issue. Streamlined processes and clear policy language could alleviate this cumulative burden, in part. Similarly, compliance obligations often appear disproportionate to the scale or nature of agriculture and food production, contributing directly to perceptions of administrative burden.

Second, small-scale producers bear a distinct psychological burden when engaging with government systems. They perceive a misalignment between their agricultural objectives and the policies they encounter, often interpreting this as evidence that local governments lack knowledge or consideration of agricultural objectives. This psychological impact is heightened by their commitment to environmental stewardship and community food connections—values they invest in financially, materially, and socially—which remain largely incongruent with the priorities of the dominant food system. Psychological costs therefore extend beyond stress with government policy misalignment. They reflect both the structural position of community food advocates and their perception of whether government recognizes and supports these guiding values.

Cumulative administrative burden and psychological costs are further shaped by land insecurity, language fluency, and cultural familiarity with government processes. Producers who speak English as a second language, are recent immigrants or refugees, or do not identify with dominant cultural or professional norms may experience elevated psychological burden due to feelings of exclusion, intimidation, or mistrust. This underscores how administrative costs may be distributed unequally

or amplify pre-existing differences in a community's food system, an interesting area for future research. Establishing these differences would provide evidence of a differential impact of burden (Heinrich, 2016) and its disparate consequences in this empirical setting (Jilke et al., 2024).

The long-term impact of securing land, seeking financial solvency, and encountering government in the process is not simple. Stakeholders frequently frame their orientation toward agriculture and food as rooted in stewardship, environmental protection, and community engagement, yet they perceive themselves as working against a powerful current. These perceptions may compound and shape views of government, suggesting a pathway for future research. It is uncertain how far such disillusionment extends, whether encounters with local policies or administrators shape broader attitudes toward government, and how state and federal interactions contribute. Here, qualitative research indicates a strong descriptive relationship between psychological costs and sentiment toward local government, making causal analysis an important next step for research.

In sum, local governments should take seriously the cumulative burden community food advocates face. While social ties, professional networks, and formal organizations provide essential navigation, they can be unevenly distributed in filling institutional gaps. Scholars and practitioners alike should explore how to scale such supports and reform policy to ensure clarity and inclusion of agricultural objectives. Addressing these challenges directly supports community food initiatives and the investments that advocates make in their communities.

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