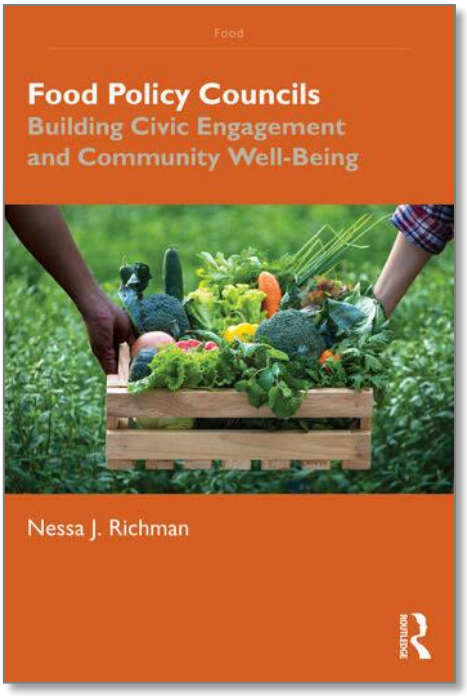
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A food policy council primer: How food policy councils can be a catalyst for change

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Review of *Food Policy Councils: Building Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being*, by Nessa J. Richman. (2026). Published by Routledge. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook 208 pages. Publisher's website: https://www.routledge.com/Food-Policy-Councils-Building-Civic-Engagement-and-Community-Well-Being/JRichman/p/book/9781041125808

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Although food policy councils are not always well understood or appreciated, they can be pivotal tools to improve local and regional food systems. Strengthening local food systems is critical right now, when so many issues can interrupt broader food supply chains and, in the U.S., national support for important systemic issues is in jeopardy. Nessa J. Richman's *Food Policy Councils: Building Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being* is a timely and necessary primer for food systems participants about the creation and running of a food policy council (FPC), and for existing FPCs on how to be more equitable, effective, and even more ambitious in their work transforming local food systems.

The book takes a comprehensive approach, covering everything from the granular issues of starting and running an FPC, to their role in supporting communities and working toward democratic food systems change. Richman shares her valuable expertise and insights gained over years of food systems leadership and as executive director of the robust Rhode Island Food Policy Council

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(RIFPC). She begins with the emergence of FPCs in the early 1980s. The original concept was that bringing together stakeholders would produce a more powerful engine for food systems transformation than working separately. Today, Richman says this collective strength comes from broad and diverse community participation and certain core roles and skills that FPCs share regardless of what form they take. This is helpful framing for readers who are not already familiar with FPCs.

Richman identifies the core roles of convening, educating, and advocating that FPCs use to achieve their chosen policy goals. The core skills underlying these roles include helping people find common ground, fundraising for both the FPC and its participants, and stimulating citizen participation in policy and advocacy. The specifics of how each FPC interprets and addresses these roles and skills vary, but Richman posits that all FPCs should help achieve "food democracy" by working collaboratively with government and inspiring and supporting stronger civic engagement, particularly from voices that are often not heard and who are most affected by food systems inequities. Richman describes this broad participation in democratic processes as an unchanging principle that should guide all FPCs and offers specific guidance for how FPCs can further this.

The book includes chapters with advice on the three substantive areas that many FPCs address: food access and security; food business and economic development; and climate and the environment. However, from a practical standpoint, this book's greatest gift might be the how-to sections on fundraising and evaluation. Richman offers expert guidance, including examples, models, processes, and forms that were successful for the RIFPC and other FPCs, and that can benefit both new and more mature groups. For example, Richman shares the RIFPC's Network Survey, an excellent resource for self-evaluation.

The examples and models provided illustrate how FPCs can better communicate their value to funders and the community at large, a key skill that FPCs need to develop for both fundraising and engagement. That said, even with this skill, acquiring funding for systemic food systems change is no easy task. Many donors and funders focus on the necessary (and becoming even more necessary as the federal government cuts its programs) day-to-day emergency work needed in the food system and are limited by their budgets, biases, and issue area. Even some local governments that fund FPCs under their auspices have explored cutting them from their budgets (Nitta, 2026). The framework and tools Richman provides will go a long way toward helping FPCs navigate today's challenging funding environment and better communicate their added value. This book could also be a resource for first-line food security and climate funders to help them see the value of systems solutions.

While *Food Policy Councils* touches on how internal FPC decisions are often made—collaboratively, with no one right way—another entire book could be written delving more deeply into specific approaches and inclusive practices that can be used to conduct decision-making and support the core skill of bringing people together and navigating differences when deciding on any actions an FPC might take. There can be issues of governance that might need to be addressed in FPCs that are not embedded governmentally about the roles of and relationship between staff and volunteer council participants and stakeholders, with a board if one exists, and among diverse participants. The effectiveness of an FPC rests on achieving a good balance with clear roles for all and keeping participants meaningfully engaged, while also allowing the FPC to move forward with important initiatives.

In the recently released chapter 1 of *Food Policy Councils in Action: Representing the Food System within the Food Policy Councils* (Prota & Reckinger, 2026), a short series of more internationally focused case studies illustrates this and other entwined issues that can bedevil an FPC: how to ensure that the makeup of an FPC equitably reflects the community, how to manage conflict among different points of view, and how to reconcile broad participation with efficiency in the function of the FPC.

The work of both Richman and Prota and Reckinger (2026) highlights the importance of trust and transparency, and wisely advises that the members of the community who are most affected by decisions and who are often least heard should be uplifted and fore-fronted in those decisions. How-

ever, diverse collaborative groups like FPCs need to thoughtfully choose and continually reevaluate their decision-making processes, considering who has power and who does not, how to reconcile differences, and how to balance participation with momentum. Self-evaluation tools, like the network survey Richman shares from the RIFPC, will help with this, but additional work is necessary.

This book should help people feel supported and empowered to begin an FPC or bolster an existing one, harnessing the strength of community to strengthen their local food system. As Richman also contends that strengthening our local food systems strengthens our communities, this can create an impactful feedback loop, with FPCs at the nexus. This book can help more FPCs become that catalyst for positive change, and help others in the food policy, food systems, and funding spaces better understand the value of food policy councils.

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