

Rustbelt radicalism: A decade of food systems planning in Buffalo, New York (USA)

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Abstract

Pressure is increasing from nongovernmental actors to incorporate food more concretely into municipal policies and plans. A qualitative case study of Buffalo, New York (USA), demonstrates that incremental, persistent food systems practice and advocacy by nonstate actors, a group we call the “rustbelt radicals,” followed by their collective engagement with municipal planning, can lead to transformations in municipal policy and planning for strengthening food systems. The paper

concludes with seven factors that enable “rustbelt radicals” to transform local food systems plans and policies.

Keywords

food system planning, food planning, food policy, Massachusetts Avenue Project, rustbelt radicalism, urban planning, Buffalo, urban agriculture, zoning, land use planning, activism

Introduction

Although food is no longer a stranger to the planning field (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000), municipal planning departments remain slow to address the state of food systems in their communities. In 2008, only 30 percent of respondents to a survey of the members of the American Planning Association reported that their agencies were engaged in food systems planning, and respondents whose agencies did engage in food system planning worked largely for nonprofit organizations (Raja,

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Born, Kozlowski Russell, 2008). Only a handful of municipal planning departments include food system planners on staff. Yet food system planning is very much underway in the United States, instigated largely by individuals and organizations working outside of municipal governments.

This paper documents the decade-long experiences and practices of community-based food systems actors we call “rustbelt radicals” in the post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York. Through a case study of the Massachusetts Avenue Project (a nonprofit organization that focuses on food systems and youth empowerment) we explore the practices of rustbelt radicals against a complex backdrop of municipal policies and plans that they alternately navigate and resist, and ultimately transform, in order to improve Buffalo’s food system. The experiences of rustbelt radicals offer insights into the possibilities and limitations of municipal plans and policies to leverage positive changes in the food system, and offer a paradigm for incremental yet collective transformation of the food system in limited-resource communities.

Rustbelt Radicalism: Incremental, Persistent, and Networked

Despite the growing interest in planning for community food systems, only a modest body of planning literature examines the trajectory by which food emerges as a local government planning and policy issue in U.S. communities. Bedore (2012) and Cohen (2012), for example, identify factors that explain the emergence of food and urban agriculture as a public policy issue (Bedore, 2012; Cohen, 2012). Initial evidence suggests that food system planning emerges from and is led by individuals and organizations outside of local government, often in the face of non-engagement by local government planners. We draw on James C. Scott’s accounts of resistance by peasants to state domination (Scott, 1990, 2013) to help interpret how the micropractices of urban food system rebuilders influence food policy in the post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York.

Like Scott’s resisters, Buffalo’s rustbelt radicals, located outside of the local government apparatus, have no formal policy authority. Instead, they draw their power from ordinary, incremental,

and persistent practices: they engage in the ordinary act of growing food, on one abandoned urban vacant lot at a time, and transform them into gardens or farms over multiple growing seasons. Scott (2013) points to the covert resistance practices of subordinate groups (such as peasants) that include feigned ignorance (of laws), foot dragging, noncompliance, etc., that are intended to deny or mitigate claims made by superordinate groups (such as the state), or advance peasant claims vis-à-vis the superordinate group.¹ Rustbelt radicals deploy many of these practices. As highlighted in the case that follows, rustbelt radicals alternately comply with, circumvent, or oppose municipal land use policies that limit practices to rebuild food systems.

Although we draw from Scott’s theoretical frame, we recognize that significant differences exist between our urban rustbelt radicals and the rural peasant resisters (and other subordinate groups) he describes. Unlike Scott’s (2013) resisters, over time rustbelt radicals form advocacy coalitions with the express goal of changing policies and systems. A vast body of research points to the importance of such advocacy coalitions in public policy-making (Sabatier, 1988), including in health-related public policy (Milio, 1987), and indeed in planning (Healey, 1998).² Similar to other policy advocacy coalitions, rustbelt radicals engage in strategic and collaborative alliances and networks with organizations with whom they share core values (Sabatier, 1988) about the broken state of the food system. Through such coalition-building, rustbelt radicals amplify their own resources and voices within the dominant

¹ Note that although lacking the elected and bureaucratic authority of the state, rustbelt radicals bear much symbolic capital: many are educated professionals and members of a vocal not-for-profit community.

² Despite this vast body of research, the role of not-for-profits (such as our rustbelt radicals) in U.S. public policy formation is poorly understood (Sandfort, 2010). It is plausible that this limited understanding is a result of disparate scales: not-for-profits’ practices are focused on a small geographic scale (neighborhood to city), while policy formation occurs at larger geographic scales. The role of food-focused not-for-profits is even more complex since they are working in a domain (food) that is new as a local policy issue.

policy discourse. Because rustbelt radicals come to engage in such collective advocacy action after prolonged engagement in ordinary and incremental practices to repair the food system, Scott's (2013) framework offers a useful way to understand the processes that *precede* the formal articulation and eventual development of food-aware plans and policies in post-industrial cities.

In the case that follows, we claim that two sequential characteristics of rustbelt radicalism — years of incremental, ordinary practices to rebuild food systems, followed by a surge in collective action through network- and alliance-building — have changed the dominant local government policy discourse in favor of food issues. The experiences of rustbelt radicals illustrate the possibilities as well as the limitations of municipal policy and planning in supporting positive change in the food system in post-industrial cities. The remaining paper is organized as follows. We first recount the ways in which food has been treated generally within the profession of urban and regional planning. Following this, we present the case study of how food planning has evolved in Buffalo over the last decade. We conclude by identifying seven elements that have brought food to the planning table in Buffalo.

Evolution in Urban Planning and its Treatment of Food Systems

The relationship between urban planning practice in the U.S. and food systems has evolved considerably over time. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the City Beautiful movement swept cities like Buffalo with ideas of grandeur, aesthetic appeal, “sanitary reform, park planning, and civic art” (Donofrio, 2007, p. 30). Donofrio notes the disdain for urban food system infrastructure in the City Beautiful approach: “if the civic center was the formal embodiment of civic pride, an object lesson in art, culture, and moral values, the [food] market was an informal mass of vendors and products associated with vegetal decay, waste, and odor” (2007, p. 31). Livestock traditionally had been butchered and traded right in public markets in the heart of cities; in downtown Buffalo, the Chippewa/Washington market established in 1865 served as one such locale. The chaotic, obtrusive,

and unsanitary nature of early urban food system infrastructure did not mesh well with the ideals of City Beautiful. Instead, attempts to improve conditions of cities focused on improving sanitation and reducing congestion, dirt, squalor, and the spread of infectious disease, common public health concerns of the time (Sloane, 2006).

Critics of the City Beautiful approach noted the lack of attention paid to functional necessities of urban residents. The City Scientific/Practical approach that followed presumed that planners could define problems in their communities, obtain and analyze data to assess the problems, identify the most efficient solutions to these problems, and implement the solutions with limited engagement by a largely pliant public (Friedmann, 1987). Food was not entirely absent from the minds of these technical, functionalist planners. At the first U.S. planning conference in 1909, a keynote speaker identified food supply markets as one of 12 areas in which planning experts should collect data (Donofrio, 2007). Food-related concerns were viewed through a top-down, scientific-rational lens that dominated the profession at the time. Planners focused, for example, on achieving efficiencies for transporting food within cities by establishing terminal markets (Donofrio, 2007). While the efficiency of distributing food within cities received attention, there is little evidence to suggest that planners viewed food in the context of a larger, complex politico-economic system of food production, processing, and distribution to diverse stakeholders with uneven access to power and resources.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, planners began to argue for planning at a regional scale. These regional planners acknowledged the need to include areas for food production while planning settlements. However, they too did not consider the food system in its full politico-economic complexity. Regional planning never gained a prominent foothold in the United States — nor did the idea that communities' food infrastructure should be a matter of concern for planners.

In the post-World War II era, two parallel trends in development patterns and the food industry further ensured the separation of food concerns from planning, and indeed, from society.

First, suburbanization of the American landscape physically distanced consumers, farmers, food processors, and others involved in the food trade, rendering the notion of a linked and spatial food system irrelevant. Second, significant advances in food technologies used to process and package foods resulted in the production and widespread prevalence of food *products* that bore little resemblance to their source plant or animal, rendering food's origins — and indeed the entire system that moved food from farm to table — nearly invisible. Prescient about these transformations, in 1961 Lewis Mumford wrote:

The town housewife, who half a century ago knew her butcher, her grocer, her dairyman, her various other local tradesmen, as individual persons, with histories and biographies that impinged upon her own, in a daily interchange, now has the benefit of a single weekly expedition to an impersonal supermarket. (Mumford, 1961, p. 623)

Food, or at least its production, did receive attention from two subsets of planners. Rural planners recognized and worked to reduce the loss of farmland in peri-urban and rural areas, and antisprawl planners pointed to the loss of farmland as a reason to thwart sprawl. Still, this vast body of planning scholarship on farmland preservation overlooked larger structural failures within the food system — consolidation within the food industry, shift in market preferences, increasing globalization, etc. — that partially explained the decline of farmland. Moreover, among this subset of planners food was largely viewed as a rural issue, and food systems continued to remain absent from the *urban* planning agenda (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999).

In the middle of the twentieth century, urban planning's failure to deliver technical solutions to communities' problems became even more apparent. The social and political turmoil of the 1960s popularized the notion of advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965). Advocacy planning fueled many in the profession to take normative stances on behalf of the underprivileged (Heskin, 1980).

Food-related concerns were very much on the public's agenda, particularly given concerns raised about the harmful effects of pesticide use in food production on low-income consumers and farmworkers by the environmental justice and organic agriculture movements (Caton Campbell, 2004). However, the mainstream planning practice was largely food-blind.³

Influenced by the writings of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the subsequent communicative turn in planning theory discourse emphasized the role of planners as communicators and facilitators (Forester, 1980). This shift occurred in the 1980s, when power distribution among stakeholders in the U.S. food system became increasingly uneven. Local farmers and consumers became increasingly disempowered while food processors and distributors gained, partly through consolidation, a growing share of the global food industry. Here was an opportunity for communicative planners to mediate tensions and facilitate connections across food system stakeholders (Caton Campbell, 2004), yet the era of communicative planning brought no greater attention to discrepancies and conflicts in the food system. Friedmann's (1987) criticism of Habermasian communicative planning philosophy that it is "suggestive of a radical transformation of society" but ultimately implies "no political planning practice whatever," appears to have held true in communicative planners' non-engagement with the food system (Friedmann, 1987, p. 267).

It was not until the start of the twenty-first century that planning scholars began to address problems in food systems. In a series of articles, Pothukuchi and Kaufman criticized the state of the

³ One notable departure in the field of planning was a 1977 report prepared by planning students at the University of Tennessee's Graduate School of Planning, which documents failures in the local food system (Blakey et al., 1977). Although the report was prepared outside the confines of a government agency, it called for and subsequently catalyzed the creation of the Knoxville Food Policy Council (FPC) in 1981, one of the earliest known food policy councils in the country. The Knoxville FPC continues to function today, and decades after its creation food policy councils are emerging throughout the United States as effective institutions for shepherding communities through the crises of malfunctioning food systems.

U.S. food system, arguing that food must become central to planners' responsibilities (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000). They mapped multiple ways in which municipal planning affects and is affected by the food system (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Since these writings, considerable shifts have occurred in the planning discipline. In 2007, the American Planning Association (APA) issued formal guidance to its members on including food planning as an element of local and regional planning (APA, 2007), and a growing number of local governments across the U.S. have adopted official plans to guide their communities' food systems to healthier futures (Neuner, Kelly, & Raja, 2011). Today, planning scholars in more traditional areas of planning such as growth management are taking note of the importance of food systems (Chapin, 2012), and, likewise, journals focused on food are exploring the possibilities and pitfalls of having planners engaged in food systems. Indeed, in 2011, the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* published a special issue on planning for food systems that covered a wide array of topics ranging from development of new planning definitions, measures, and tools (Freedgood, Pierce-Quiñonez, & Meter, 2011) to planning for new food infrastructure such as food hubs (Horst, Ringstrom, Tyman, Ward, Werner, & Born, 2011). This reemerging interest by planners in rebuilding food systems gives us reason for both enthusiasm and pause. To the degree that planning practitioners reflectively engage with community-led practices of rebuilding food systems (such as those of rustbelt radicals), the profession can facilitate transformation in food systems and communities; conversely, lack of reflective engagement can stultify innovation in rebuilding food systems *even when* food is on the planning table.

Research Design, Methods, and Data Sources

This paper documents and analyzes on-the-ground food systems planning practice through a case study of Buffalo, New York, focusing on the work of two key actors: a nonprofit organization (Massachusetts Avenue Project) and the municipal government. The case study spans events and policies adopted over the last decade, roughly 2002 to 2013.

Our selection of this time period for the case study does not imply that no food systems initiatives existed in Buffalo prior to 2002. Instead, the decade is the period over which the co-authors engaged in a community-university partnership to observe and attempt to transform the city's food system. Mirroring trends in other rustbelt cities, this decade is one of tremendous action and evolution in food systems planning practice in Buffalo.

The empirical component of the case study uses a mixed-methods approach, relying on multiple sources of mostly qualitative data. These analyses include a critical review of draft and adopted local government plans and ordinances, transcripts of two unstructured interviews with a local planning official and a city policy-maker, and 10 years of participant observations by authors (one of the co-authors is a rustbelt radical who works for the organization that is under discussion in this paper; the lead author has observed the work of this organization for 10 years in multiple community meetings as well as on its program site, including observing its work with youth through site visits every summer for the last decade).

Several challenges arise in such qualitative work. First, how does one ensure that the account is a *credible* representation of the rustbelt radicals' experience? Second, how does one ensure that the account represents a *balanced* representation of the overall experience in Buffalo — and is not partial to rustbelt radicals' experiences? To address the first concern — whether the observations in this manuscript were a *credible* representation of the experience of the rustbelt radicals — the lead author requested one of the rustbelt radicals to review and comment on this manuscript (and because this is largely a story of her work she is acknowledged as a co-author). Precedent for a *subject* to have voice in qualitative research exists in the literature (Duneier, 1999). In the event that the lead author and the rustbelt radical (co-author) disagreed, the lead author retained editorial control.

To address the second concern — whether the manuscript offered a *balanced* view — the lead author shared the case study with a city planner and the lead staff member of an appointed official to verify confirmability of the narrative (Trochim, 2001), both of whom were interviewed by the lead

author. Any divergence in the views of the rustbelt radicals, city planners, and representatives of elected officials was noted by the lead author in the manuscript. Data collection through interviews for this case study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the lead author's university. The paper also uses basic quantitative and spatial methods of analysis using geographic information systems (GIS) to describe the demographic and land use conditions; data for these supplementary analyses are from the U.S. Census and Erie County land parcel data, respectively.

Case Study: As Goes the Food System, So Goes Buffalo

The fortunes of Buffalo, New York (NY), are intricately linked with those of the local and global food system. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 enabled the transportation of grain from the Midwest to the Eastern Seaboard via Buffalo, the western terminus of the canal. With the invention of the first steam-powered grain elevator in Buffalo in 1843, grain was stored and transported with unprecedented efficiency. Murray notes that "by the 1920's, [grain] passed through Buffalo at a rate of more than three hundred million bushels a year, [enough] to make bread to feed today's Americans for about two years" (Murray, 2007, p. 201). Science and technology modernized food system infrastructure and propelled Buffalo into a prominent position in the national and global food system and economy. But as the canal became a less significant route for transportation of grain and a broad shift from manufacturing to service-based industries occurred, Buffalo lost its prominence in the nation's food system and economy.

Once home to a half million people, Buffalo's 2010 population was 261,310 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). Vacant land is plentiful: recent estimates indicate that about 15,058 out of 94,856 (15.9 percent) land parcels are vacant.⁴ Poverty and unemployment are high: 30 percent (± 1.2 margin of error) of city residents earn income less than the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). Food insecurity, not surprisingly, follows suit: about a quarter of the city's households and about

46.6 percent (± 1.9 margin of error) of households with children rely on public food assistance to meet their food needs (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.b). The food retail environment is dominated by restaurants, and supermarkets redline low-income neighborhoods (Raja, Ma, & Yadav, 2008), seriously affecting the area's incidence of diet-related diseases (Raja et al., 2010).

Buffalo's rustbelt radicals, and in particular the representatives of the Massachusetts Avenue Project and its allies, are aiming to rebuild a socially, economically, and spatially fractured food system from the ground up. Today, about 60 community gardens and a handful of urban farms dot the city (Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo, n.d.), converting blighted vacant urban land to productive use; an aquaponics project raises fish for sale in an underserved low-income neighborhood; a mobile market transports fresh produce to underserved neighborhoods; food truck vendors are seeing a resurgence; and food supply chains are shortening and localizing, capturing greater returns from economic activity within the region. These and other incremental transformations tighten a disjointed food system and facilitate a public policy dialogue about the state of the local food system.

From Food Projects to Food Planning:

Evolution of Massachusetts Avenue Project

Massachusetts Avenue, a street on Buffalo's West Side, is dotted with vacant lots and abandoned houses. Noting the limited safe spaces for local youth, a group of residents from the area organized in 1992 to construct a playground. After completion of the playground in 1994, the group and its allies planned to open a neighborhood center. In early 1998 the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) neighborhood center opened in a city-owned building that had previously housed a food pantry, and the first paid staff person was hired. Two years later MAP incorporated as a nonprofit corporation.⁵

⁵ An arson event in 2005 forced MAP to relocate to new premises on an adjacent street, in a vacant public building that previously housed a public library. In a pleasant twist of fate, MAP and collaborating nonprofits advocated that the arsonist, a youth from the neighborhood, receive restorative justice

⁴ GIS analysis of 2010 land parcel layer of the city of Buffalo.

MAP's arrival in the former food pantry space foreshadowed a shift in the neighborhood's micro-cosmic food system. Across the street from its neighborhood center, MAP staff started gardening with support from local residents on two city-owned lots. Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo (GGB), another nonprofit organization, provided insurance to protect against liability. MAP signed a five-year lease with the city to use the vacant public land for its gardens for one dollar per year; this agreement was reminiscent of temporary land arrangements in other rustbelt cities as residents sought ways to address the co-existing problems of high vacancy and high poverty. New community garden projects were also being planned by other nonprofit organizations on city-owned properties bordering MAP's community garden. These initiatives stalled after the first year and MAP was offered the opportunity to take over the lease on five additional city-owned vacant lots. Eventually, MAP purchased eight lots from the city, and the community garden grew into the first urban farming project in Buffalo.⁶

In 2003, MAP launched Growing Green, a comprehensive program to address high rates of youth unemployment, land vacancy, and food insecurity in the 10-block area around MAP's neighborhood center in order to achieve its goals of broader social justice and youth empowerment. The same year MAP commissioned a neighborhood food system assessment and plan to inform its work (Almeida et al., 2003).

Through the Growing Green Program, MAP is working to change the city's food system by creating a sustainable and economically viable model of urban agriculture, providing economic opportunities for young people in the local food system and organizing young people and adults to advocate for land use and food policy that meet community members' needs. Since 2003, MAP has employed and trained over 450 low-income youth,

rather than be prosecuted for his crime. Subsequently a partner organization, People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH), trained him in building rehabilitation; the individual has since contributed to rebuilding affordable green housing in the neighborhood.

⁶ MAP also grows produce on four additional lots owned by PUSH.

ages 14 to 20.7 MAP staff partner with young people, employing four main practices:

1. Urban Farming: Teaching and demonstrating sustainable food production techniques to youth through urban farming and aquaponics.
2. Food Distribution and Enterprise Development: Distributing healthful, affordable produce through a farm stand and a mobile market; and developing and running Growing Green Works, a youth-run business specializing in locally made, value-added food products.
3. Community Education and Training: Providing urban agriculture and food systems training, technical assistance, farm tours, and field trips to community members, schools, and other organizations.
4. Advocacy and Policy: Engaging youth and community members to promote municipal policies for healthier neighborhoods and greater food security.

MAP staff members view food not only as nourishment but also as a starting point for education, community building, and economic growth. They note that youth from low-income communities rarely have an opportunity to learn or experience the importance of civic engagement, or to recognize their own value and power to make positive change. MAP organizes youth and other residents to voice their concerns and raise their awareness of healthier neighborhood food environments by introducing new opportunities and spaces for producing, processing, distributing, and marketing healthful foods. Intrinsic to MAP's work with youth is nurturing their understanding of themselves as individuals and community members. Youth are challenged to think about how they see others in relation to themselves and to identify the rights and responsibilities they have in their community. Youth discuss and debate issues

⁷ Incidentally, only about 50 percent of Buffalo's high school students graduate on time, while about 90 percent of high school students participating in Growing Green graduate on time.

of oppression, power, scarcity, and control of resources, and are challenged to think about the power they have both as young men and women, and as producers and eaters in the food system. Youth use their talents, interests, and strengths to make change and advocate for policy change.

In recent years, MAP has begun to combine its direct practices to strengthen the local food system through farming and food distribution with more indirect, somewhat longer-term efforts to change larger policy structures like plans and ordinances that hinder the creation of a healthier food system in Buffalo. In 2005, MAP began conversations with representatives of a local medical campus and other partners to tackle healthy eating policy citywide. Subsequently, in 2009 the stakeholders (including a local medical campus, several public, nonprofit, and private partners, and a local university), with financial support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, launched Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities-Buffalo (HKHC-Buffalo), a partnership intended to transform policies and environments to promote healthy eating and active living in Buffalo. The partnership provided a platform for individual organizations to seek policy change to support their individual organizations' programmatic work. Through HKHC-Buffalo, MAP staff and youth are engaged in policy-focused efforts to improve children's access to healthy foods in multiple ways. Staff and youth serve on the steering committee of the HKHC-Buffalo partnership, enriching its perspective with their on-the-ground experience. In partnership with a local university, MAP youth designed and conducted neighborhood audits of food retail stores; findings from these audits were distributed to policy-makers by the HKHC-Buffalo partnership.

MAP staff works closely with city lawmakers, especially, with city council member David Rivera, within whose West Side district MAP's farm lies, to advocate for policy change. In 2010, with advocacy from rustbelt radicals, Rivera and his staffers developed and successfully oversaw the passage of an ordinance to permit the raising of chickens, following public outcry over an animal control officer threatening to remove a resident's chickens. Rivera, who has emerged as a champion of community food systems and considers MAP a "pioneer,"

notes that he supports food systems work because "community stakeholders have made their case [for food]" (personal communication with D. Rivera, March 13, 2013). As part of this effort to make the case for food policy in Buffalo, in 2010, MAP and its allies in the HKHC-Buffalo partnership co-organized the first Buffalo Food Policy Summit to bring food to the attention of local policy-makers and officials. The summit, which was opened by the city's mayor, was well attended by the city's law-makers and officials.

Signaling a growing support for food policy in the city council, in 2012 two additional council members, Darius Pridgen and Michael Locurto, joined Rivera in sponsoring and successfully advocating for the passage of a resolution to establish a steering committee charged with developing the structure for a food policy council (FPC). The steering committee proposed the creation of a city-county FPC (the Buffalo-Erie Food Policy Council), and sought legal recognition from the county legislature and the city council. In May 2013, the county legislature passed a law recognizing the FPC as an advisory body under the Erie County's Board of Health.

Most salient to planning, MAP and HKHC-Buffalo partners have begun to bring food system-related concerns to the city's land use planning process (described in the next section). A timeline of a selected number of MAP's activities focused on planning and policy development is shown in italics in Table 1. MAP is motivated to engage in the policy development landscape for a variety of reasons. Engaging in policy development reduces risk and unpredictability for its day-to-day program operations. The lack of recognition of urban agriculture in the current zoning code and land use plan, for example, causes urban agriculture to be viewed as a transitional or impermanent land use. MAP also views engagement in policy development and planning as an opportunity for civic education, challenging the status quo that hinders the creation of healthier neighborhoods, and raising public recognition of food as an economic driver and community development tool. MAP's evolution from focusing on incremental practices to rebuild the food system — which they continue — to broader engagement in advocacy and policy

Table 1. Selected Milestones in Radical Food Systems Planning in Buffalo

Massachusetts Avenue Project	Year	Municipal Government	
A coalition of residents organize on Massachusetts Avenue	1992		Food-blind planning
Massachusetts Avenue Project incorporated	2000		
Food for Growth plan published; Growing Green launched	2003		
USDA grant awarded			
MAP starts selling food in the neighborhood at its farm stand	2004		
Growing Green Youth Enterprise launched	2005		
	2006	City of Buffalo adopts Comprehensive Plan	Cautious engagement in the food system
Aquaponics project piloted in the county's first straw-bale greenhouse	2007		
Mobile market pilot launched			
MAP staff appointed to Community Gardens Advisory task force	2008	Common Council appoints Community Gardens Advisory Committee; Committee commissions local university to complete Queen City Gardens Plan	
		Community Garden report Resolution Number 137 adopted in support of community gardens as vacant land reuse strategy	
Healthy Kids Healthy Communities-Buffalo (HKHC-Buffalo) partnership formed, with MAP as a key partner	2009		
MAP builds a hoop house and commercial aquaponics facility	2010	City signs a lease with a new urban farm on public land	
		Common Council passes resolution supporting community gardens	
MAP and allies advocate for the development of a chicken ordinance; raise chickens on its farm		Common Council adopts an ordinance allowing raising of chickens in the city	
MAP and allies convene the first Buffalo Food Policy Summit	2011	Mayor and local university president inaugurate the first Food Policy Summit	
MAP participates as a key stakeholder in the Green Code process		Mayor's office and Office of Strategic Planning launch the "Green Code" process	
MAP builds capacity of youth to participate in the Green Code process			
MAP youth participate in creation of a Youth Food Bill of Rights at Rooted in Community Conference			
HKHC-Buffalo partners publish assessment of local plans and regulations affecting the food system	2012	Common Council adopts a resolution to establish a steering committee to develop guidelines for a Food Policy Council	
MAP youth and staff speaks before U.S. Congressional committee about importance of community food system development		City adopts ordinance supporting mobile food trucks	
MAP advocates for and Executive Director serves as a member of the Buffalo-Erie Food Policy Council steering committee		Green Code draft explicitly supports urban food production and aims to provides regulatory clarity	
	2013	Buffalo-Erie Food Policy Council established	

development has led to their emergence as de facto, if covert (Beard, 2002), food systems planning practitioners in Buffalo.

Municipal Food Systems Policy and Planning in Buffalo: From Food-blind to Cautious Engagement

2000–2006: Food-blind Planning

MAP's efforts to rebuild the city's food system are intertwined with an evolving municipal planning stance toward the food system (see timeline in Table 1). A guidepost to understanding this stance is the city's official comprehensive plan, which describes a vision for Buffalo's future and outlines guidance for future regulatory, development, and public investment choices (City of Buffalo, 2006). Adopted in 2006, the comprehensive plan ambitiously aims to transform Buffalo into "a prosperous, green regional center providing livable communities for all its citizens" (City of Buffalo, 2006, p. 1). The plan's guiding principles call for sustainable development that integrates economic, environmental, and social concerns, and preserves opportunities for future generations to live a good life. Drawing on these principles, the plan outlines seven overarching policies to guide future investments: (1) deliver quality public services; (2) maintain public infrastructure; (3) transform the city's economy; (4) reconstruct schools; (5) rebuild neighborhoods; (6) restore the waterfront; and (7) protect and restore the urban fabric.

These guiding principles or policies make no explicit mention of the city's food system. In the main body of this otherwise visionary and award-winning plan, food plays a minor role. The word "food" itself appears four times in its 134 pages. Three of these four references associate food with economic activity: food processing is identified as one of several new "economic sectors [that] have grown to provide new jobs to replace the old" (City of Buffalo, 2006, p. 10, and food processing is described as having provided some of the greatest gains in local and regional employment in the 1990–1999 decade. These references hint at the "big fix" economic development discourse that has dominated Buffalo's local government policy in recent history. The only non-economic reference

to food appears when the narrative of the plan argues for the importance of protecting the waters of nearby Lake Erie for food production (among other reasons). Yet these minor references define the food system only in instrumental terms to support more traditional planning goals like economic development. Improving the food system for its own sake was neither an explicit nor implicit goal in the 2006 comprehensive plan. As a consequence, the proposed policy, program, and detailed investment recommendations of the plan offer no support for the food infrastructure of the city, which is essential to the ordinary, daily lived experiences of people that make cities desirable (Jacobs, 1961). This food-blind comprehensive plan of Buffalo reflects the prevalent view of mainstream planning practice toward food system concerns at the time.

It is important to note, however, that although the comprehensive plan offered no explicit guidance on how to strengthen the food system, planners were at this time, in fact, engaged in one component of the system: food retail. Specifically, the city government was actively involved in attracting supermarkets to the east side of Buffalo, an underserved neighborhood (personal communication with city planner, March 13, 2013). This effort is similar to attempts by municipalities nationwide to attract food retail to underserved city neighborhoods (Pothukuchi, 2005).

2006–2013: Cautious Engagement with the Food System

In the earlier part of the decade, municipal planning in Buffalo and MAP's practices of rebuilding the city's food system occurred largely without explicit mutual engagement. However, this distance was bridged rapidly and intensely between 2006 and 2012, in part due to the creation of the formal HKHC-Buffalo partnership in 2009. Its coordinator reached out regularly to city officials and policymakers. City planners — at least those interviewed for this paper — appear to respond to rustbelt radicals reflectively (Schön, 1983). When the mayor announced in 2010 that the city would revise its 30-year old land use plan and 60-year old zoning code to bring them in compliance with the 2006 comprehensive plan, an initiative the city labeled the "Green Code" process, city planners invited

HKHC-Buffalo and MAP to join the planning process. A MAP designee served on the Green Code Citizen Advisory Committee established to provide feedback on drafts of the plan and zoning code and assist with public outreach. Since the launch of the Green Code, the planning department has held more than 30 public meetings and engaged nearly 400 city residents in the process (personal communication with city planner, March 13, 2013).

Rustbelt radicals responded to the city's invitation to engage in the Green Code process actively. In partnership with the city, the HKHC-Buffalo coordinator and MAP staff and youth designed and conducted trainings on land use planning and zoning for residents, building residents' capacity to participate and draw attention to food-related concerns in the planning process. Indeed, food concerns emerged as a prominent planning issue through the Green Code community engagement process (personal communication with city planner, March 13, 2013). When queried during an interview about the role of local governments in building food systems, a senior city planner noted the following:

In Buffalo, we do have concerns [about food]...we have heard it in [the] feedback we have had from the Green Code...People understand they are living in a food desert. We want to have zoning that is flexible enough to try to accommodate those needs... recognizing uses like community gardens, market gardens, market stands, open air gardens, aquaponics facilities, composting facilities, some accessory uses...providing legal clarity for those uses...it's something that we are doing through the Green Code. ... For corner stores, we don't tackle food directly but any retail that is within a neighborhood residential area we are allowing things to be approved only on condition at corners. It provides the community an opportunity to weigh in to decide if that use is appropriate. (Personal communication with city planner, March 13, 2013)

City planners' reflective response to residents' and rustbelt radicals' concern is also discernible in

the latest planning guidance from the city, a draft land use plan, *Buffalo 2012–2032—Future Land Use Plan*, released in 2011 (City of Buffalo, 2011), and a preview of the zoning code, released in November 2012. Unlike the 2006 comprehensive plan, the recent draft land use plan and zoning code address components of the food system, a marked departure from the past. Text from the draft land use plan, which opens with the aspirations of the community advisory committee, outlines three principles to guide future action: “economy,” “neighborhoods,” and “environment” — and food-related concerns make an explicit appearance in all three sections (see Table 2).

The draft land use plan acknowledges concerns about the food system, albeit with caution. In nearly each allowance made for the health of the food system, the policies define limiting standards for community practices such as urban growing (see italic text, Table 2). The draft policy also continues its preoccupation with economic development. For example, although vacant land will be made available for urban agriculture and community gardening in areas of the city that are vacant, the possibility of future redevelopment will remain open.

Reflecting the planning approach prevalent across the country, Buffalo's draft land use plan focuses narrowly on food production and does not address other sectors of the food system. There remains limited recognition that, like a well-functioning city (Jacobs, 1961), a well-functioning food system comprises a multitude of practices including processing, aggregation, distribution of food, and reduction and reclamation of food-related waste.

The draft zoning code, which is still under preparation and will implement the broad guidance of the land use plan through precise regulations, includes several land use definitions in support of urban food production, indicating an improvement in the public policy stance toward food since the earlier part of the decade. For example, urban agriculture activities are proposed as a permissible use in most zones, while they are not mentioned in the current code. Structures essential for urban agriculture, such as apiaries, chicken coops, greenhouses, market gardens, and farm stands, are

Table 2. Extract of Draft Land Use Plan (*italic added to illustrate restrictive standards*)

Opening	"Promote land use and transportation patterns that encourage compact development and promote a full array of transportation choices to help us conserve energy, protect the quality of air, water, and soil, preserve and expand our 'green infrastructure,' and support access to wholesome food, promoting healthy living for all citizens." (p. 3)
	"Residents lack ready access to healthy food or the mobility to take part in the broader economy." (p. 8)
Neighborhood	Preamble: "Where areas are predominantly vacant, the plan will allow transitional uses such as community gardening ... or urban agriculture, while <i>keeping open longer-term options for redevelopment.</i> " (p. 34)
	Principle 6.5 "Establish <i>interim</i> uses for vacant land." (p. 34)
	"Permit the development of community gardens on public lands, <i>with landscaping and beautification standards that ensure community benefit</i> " (p. 34)
	"Allow pilot projects for aesthetically pleasing...municipal orchards and urban agriculture within high-vacancy blocks <i>to reduce city maintenance expenditures</i> " (p. 34)
Environment	"Enable healthy food production and distribution" (p.40)
	"Remove barriers to developing grocery stores, healthy corner stores, outdoor markets, and farmer's stands at convenient locations throughout the city while <i>preventing vendors from selling individual items and stolen property</i> " (p.40)
	"Allow small-scale urban agriculture with <i>appropriate guidelines on the design of greenhouses, hoop houses, and the like</i> " (p.40)
	"Allow urban agriculture in high-vacancy neighborhoods as a long-term use, <i>with guidelines for quality design and strict standards governing safety and aesthetics</i> " (p.40)
	"Allow produce sales as a temporary use with <i>appropriate limitations on location, size, and time of operation</i> " (p. 40)

allowed as accessory structures. However, the final treatment of the food system in the land use plan and zoning regulations as adopted remains to be seen.

Challenges to Development of Food-Sensitive Plans and Policy

Despite the gains outlined above, Buffalo continues to confront many challenges in strengthening its food systems through planning and public policy. From the perspective of the municipal government, food concerns compare poorly within the dominant public policy discourse of economic growth and development.

A second, more worrisome, challenge is tied to the eventual success of food-policy development. Once codified, regulations and ordinances are notoriously static (as evident in the zoning code currently in force in Buffalo, which is almost 50 years old) and closed to new ways in which the food systems may innovate in the future. Indeed, once food is no longer a stranger to planning professionals (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000), informal, "under-the-radar," and potentially innovative

practices of rebuilding of the food system may slow down.

Finally, rustbelt radicals, too, face challenges due to limited financial resources. If they expend time by participating in planning and policy development processes, this also imposes a significant burden. To implement food systems plans, local governments must not only partner with rustbelt radicals but also fund food-related work. In looking for models around the country, we see that public financing of such work has come in the form of infusion of public funds through loans, grants (Madison, Wisconsin; Milwaukee, Wisconsin), levies (Seattle, Washington), and gap financing through economic development funds (Birmingham, Alabama), and/or through reduction of expenditures such as permitting and licensing fees (Cleveland, Ohio; Kansas City, Missouri), sales taxes (New York City), and reduction in water impact fee (Austin, Texas) (Neuner et al., 2011).

Seven Elements of Rustbelt Radicalism

As described in the preceding case, rustbelt radicals' engagement with municipal policy develop-

ment is strategic and has varied over the years. As appropriate, they circumvent, challenge, or advocate for alteration of municipal policies that affect their food systems practice. For example, MAP composts food waste on its land lots, although large-scale composting is not an explicitly permitted land use. In some circumstances rustbelt radicals navigate vague policies with flexibility and creativity. For example, because of the lack of regulatory clarity about whether produce grown on publicly owned land can be sold in Buffalo, MAP chose to situate its farm stand on a land parcel they own, rather than on a city-owned parcel, although the farmed parcels are adjacent to each other. Rustbelt radicals also engage in incremental, deliberative practices that push regulatory limits. Such practices are reminiscent of Scott's (2013) reporting of peasant resistance to state domination, which is not accompanied by mass protests or political upheaval but by incremental practices of resistance.

Rustbelt radicalism departs from other radical traditions as well as from traditions of outright passive resistance (Scott, 1990, 2013) by reflecting a certain amount of pragmatism. Unlike other radical traditions, rustbelt radicals are willing to engage the existing policy structures. They focus on building capacity of policy-makers, planners, and others in city government to understand and reform food policy in the interest of ordinary residents (rather than, for example, in the interest of industrialized food corporations). Unlike Scott's passive resisters, rustbelt radicals eventually seek collective action to transform systems and structures. Much like the post-industrial cities it emanates from, rustbelt radicalism is pragmatic in the face of power.

The shift in municipal perspective in Buffalo — from food-blind policy to cautious engagement in food systems — is a result of rustbelt radicals' varied forms of engagement with the city government that varied from oppositional to collaborative. Once part of a coalition, rustbelt radicals participate in working groups, respond to draft plans and ordinances (such as during the Green Code process), and engage in advocacy and outreach work to build residents' capacity to engage in food systems. This success is due in part to the presence of behind-the-scenes technical support provided by

the coordinator and funders of the HKHC-Buffalo partnership, who continually strategized and shared insights with the rustbelt radicals.⁸

The transformation of food systems in rustbelt cities, and of the cities themselves, cannot occur without deep engagement of their citizens and the support of local governments and their planners. Such transformation requires a pragmatic practice that engages both rustbelt radicals as well as reflective planning professionals (Schön, 1983) within municipal government. As James Holston (1999) writes:

Planning needs to engage not only the development of insurgent forms of the social but also the resources of the state to define, and occasionally impose, a more encompassing conception of right than is sometimes possible to find at the local level... Above all, planning needs to encourage a complementary antagonism between these two engagements. It needs to operate simultaneously in two theaters, so to speak, maintain a productive tension between the apparatus of state-directed futures and the investigation of the insurgent forms of the social embedded in the present. (Holston, 1999, p. 172)

Indeed, such complementary antagonism between the state-directed but reflective practice of planning and the practices of rustbelt radicals, such as in the Green Code process, explains the emergence of food systems planning in Buffalo over the last decade. Buffalo's experience with rustbelt radicalism points to seven factors that led to a discernible shift in planning and policy perspective toward food. We outline these below.

1. Ordinary, Incremental, Persistent Practices Precede Policy

The work of rebuilding the food system is not a new, "hot" concept in Buffalo, but rather the result

⁸ The HKHC-Buffalo partnership was one of several partnerships funded across the country. Participation in this national network also increased the rustbelt radicals' capacity to engage in food systems planning and policy by increasing their access to information and lessons from a much broader network.

of years of incremental, persistent, and somewhat resistant practices (Scott, 2013) by multiple non-state food systems actors, including MAP. Rustbelt radicals have decades of experience in rebuilding food systems that existed *prior* to the municipal government even recognizing food systems as a consideration for public policy. As a result, current discussions regarding food policy are enriched by the experiences of community groups who have been rebuilding Buffalo's food systems for years. In other words, food *policy* in Buffalo has followed on-the-ground food *practices*.

2. A Diverse Yet Unified Coalition Supports Food
Experiences of other communities point to coalitions and collaborations as essential to incorporating food into plan-making (Desjardins, Lubczynski, & Xuereb, 2011). Working alone, rustbelt radicals also have a modest policy reach. Buffalo's rustbelt radicals attribute their successes to their participation in a diverse yet unified coalition of organizations (especially the HKHC-Buffalo partnership). Rustbelt radicals' networks cross disciplinary lines (planning, agriculture, environment, and public health), age lines (youth and seniors), food system sectors (farmers, residents, local government, etc.), and geographic lines (urban and rural farmers). Despite its diversity, the network is a fairly unified coalition in terms of its shared vision of an improved citywide food system. Without such unified yet diverse coalitions, food movements may find the long-term engagement that is required for systemic and policy change to be challenging. Such networks also make it easier for municipal governments to engage multiple food advocates through a unified coalition.

3. Incremental Changes Are Balanced with Systemic Changes

Rustbelt radicals balance incremental change with systemic change. They may establish an urban farm on a vacant lot (incremental change) — but they also engage in long-term efforts to change the land use code (systemic change). While the pressure from rustbelt radicals to facilitate public policy change varies in intensity, from opposition to soft diplomacy, its key hallmark is dogged persistence. Such pragmatic radicalism offers an approach for

dealing with the immediate consequences of a broken food system as well as ensuring forward movement in its rebuilding.

4. Communitywide Capacity Is Nurtured

Buffalo's rustbelt radicals engage in capacity-building activities to build a broader network that can participate in, and sustain, the effort to rebuild the city's food system. This capacity-building work has focused on incremental practices and policy change. For example, MAP regularly offers training in urban agriculture to residents. In the policy arena, MAP and HKHC-Buffalo also conduct trainings for city youth and residents on *how* to effectively participate in the Green Code process. HKHC-Buffalo partners also facilitate participation of city staff and policy-makers at food-focused conferences and workshops so they can better understand the role of food in planning. The failure to build and sustain such communitywide capacity is often a challenge for radical reform (Kraushaar, 1988), particularly in resource-strapped cities like Buffalo.

5. Response to (Policy) Windows of Opportunity Is Nimble

Rustbelt radicals make strategic use of windows of opportunity within the policy process, a strategy also used by groups in other U.S. cities (Cohen, 2012). In Buffalo, the Green Code provided such a policy window for food organizations even though land use planning and zoning is not the bailiwick of these organizations. With the launch of the Green Code process in Buffalo, MAP and its allies, through the HKHC-Buffalo partnership, moved rapidly to engage in the Green Code planning process to bring food to the proverbial planning table even though engaging in this process was not a mission of the coalition at its inception.

6. Support Comes from Within the Local Government

For transformation of food systems policy, leadership from reflective practitioners within the local government (Kraushaar, 1988) is crucial. Local governments provide the civic and democratic processes through which residents can participate in shaping the policies that affect food systems (and local governments, unlike other sectors of

society, are accountable and answerable to the public at large). In Buffalo, such leadership from within the government also came from city lawmakers who have sponsored multiple food-related policies (shown in Table 1). Staff of the planning department, too, responded reflectively (Schön, 1983) to rustbelt radicals' concerns by incorporating food concerns within the draft land use plan and zoning code during the Green Code process. Of course, engagement of local governments is not a one-time occurrence; for food policy to be relevant planners and rustbelt radicals must be continually engaged with each other.


7. *Food Is Connected to the Dominant Policy Discourse*

Cognizant that food is but one policy issue confronting the city of Buffalo, rustbelt radicals seek common ground between food and dominant public policy issues — a strategy masterfully deployed, and now advocated by, former Toronto food policy director Dr. Wayne Roberts. At the moment, the “public transcript” (Scott, 1990) of local government policy discourse in Buffalo is focused on economic development. Responding strategically, rustbelt radicals and its allies (HKHC-Buffalo) also chose “food as economic development” as the theme of the first Buffalo Food Policy Summit — participating in the dominant discourse on their own terms. The summit was well attended by lawmakers and laid the groundwork for food policy. Such remapping of food onto other policy issues is an important strategy for food coalitions to participate in public policy discourse.

Conclusion

Buffalo's experience points to a radical yet pragmatic model for food systems planning practice. Through years of engagement in incremental and ordinary practices, rustbelt radicals rebuild urban food systems. Supplementing such practices with collective action to engage in the local government policy landscape at a strategic time, Buffalo's rustbelt radicals have brought food to the policy table. Local governments, too, play a role in this transformation. Reflective planners and policymakers (Schön, 1983) within local government assist and engage with the resources, energy, and knowledge

of rustbelt radicals. Such concomitant engagement of rustbelt radicals and reflective local government planners may provide the groundwork for planning and building resilient food systems in post-industrial cities.

To be sure, as competition over currently undervalued public resources, such as vacant public lands, grows in rustbelt cities such as Buffalo, the current, somewhat pragmatic, approach of rustbelt radicals may no longer be effective in changing public policy as stakes will be higher. Finally, as local government food policy shifts from being “food blind” to becoming “codified” rustbelt radicals may find themselves constrained in new ways. That, however, is a subject for another paper. 

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