



2025 LOCAL FOOD Initiative



King County



Local Economy

(Access the full report)



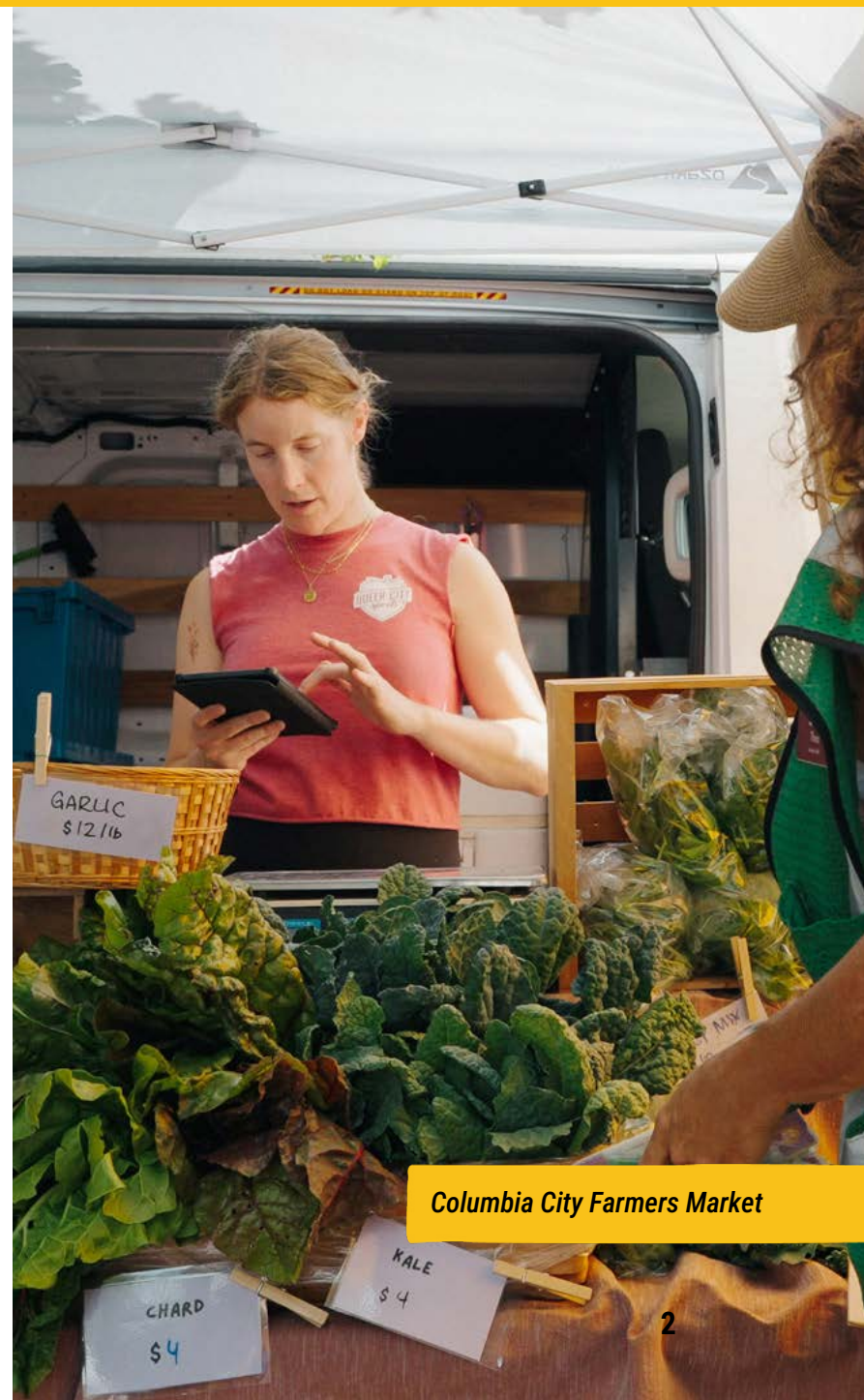
Local Economy goal: Grow a just and thriving local food economy that uplifts locally owned food businesses and promotes dignified livelihoods for food system workers

The food system shapes both the strength of King County's economy and the fairness of opportunities within it. Every day, work is carried out by thousands of people in our community to grow, process, prepare, sell, deliver, and manage the leftovers of the food we eat. Because food touches so many parts of daily life, it creates opportunities for small, local, and minority-owned businesses to thrive and for workers to have steady, dignified work.

A strong and fair local food economy supports family farms, neighborhood restaurants, farmers markets, and other food operations of all sizes. It can also build stronger links in the food supply chain, from farms to grocery stores to kitchen tables, while providing steady jobs and fair wages for workers. Making this vision a reality will require greater investment, more resources, and stronger infrastructure. Building a just food economy will circulate dollars locally, expand equitable access to nutritious food, protect farmland and green spaces, and promote healthier lives for everyone in King County.

The food industry is a significant part of King County's economy and workforce. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, 290 King County farms sold food directly to consumers and those food items were worth a combined \$4.5 million. In 2023, more than 107,000 jobs were in restaurants, cafes,

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Columbia City Farmers Market

Local Economy goals continued

catering, and other food services. In addition there are over 3,000 people working as farmers or farm operators, with more than 1,000 of them being new or beginning farmers. The county has nearly 12,500 permitted food businesses, ranging from restaurants and coffee shops to school kitchens and institutional food providers.

Strengthening the local food economy ranked as the second-highest priority among survey respondents. Farmers, food processors, distributors, retailers, and food service providers shared the challenges they face in keeping their businesses strong and growing. Common barriers included high costs for infrastructure, complicated permitting, limited access to markets, lack of capital, challenges in sourcing and promoting local foods, staying competitive on price, and labor shortages. Thirty-nine percent of retail and 27% of food service businesses surveyed reported difficulty accessing capital to expand. Nearly half (46%) of retail and over a quarter (27%) of food service businesses said they do not have enough reliable workers.

The economy goal focuses on growing a just and thriving local food economy that uplifts local food businesses and ensures fair, dignified livelihoods for workers. The goal's objectives are to increase affordable retail and food system infrastructure, improve small businesses access to capital and business services, increase value chain coordination and market development, and strengthen the food chain workforce through safe working conditions, fair compensation, and essential benefits.



The local food initiative marks a bold shift toward equity-driven food systems, placing community demographics and small-scale economies at the heart of agricultural resilience and regional prosperity.

Sirak M. Weldemicael

International Rescue Committee

New Roots Program Manager



Local Economy actions

 = Top 10 priority actions

Goal: Grow a just and thriving local food economy that uplifts locally owned food businesses and promotes dignified livelihoods for food system workers

Objective 1: Increased amount of affordable retail and restaurant space and infrastructure for storage, processing, distribution, co-packing, and production

- 1.1 Maximize use of existing and underutilized infrastructure by:
 - increasing partnerships to facilitate use of unused and currently unpermitted facilities and transportation;
 - facilitating shared and off-hours use of facilities;
 - increasing use of flexible shared spaces by providing assistance and funding to owners and operators; and
 - upgrading existing infrastructure, such as large community kitchens, to meet commercial kitchen regulations and user needs.
- 1.2 Increase new capacity, focusing on cold storage, post-harvest handling centers, meat processing, and commercial kitchens by developing strategically located infrastructure that food businesses can lease at affordable rates.
- 1.3 Expand directories and maps of commercial kitchens, co-packers, and processing facilities—and increase use of existing directories and maps—through collaboration with resources like Eat Local First, Public Health - Seattle & King County, and Washington State Department of Agriculture.
- 1.4 Increase the use of rent and lease models for small businesses by offering resources on sliding scales, shared and off-hours use, revenue-based adjustments, and negotiating with landlords.
- 1.5 Create model policies to increase the affordability of commercial property, such as vacancy taxes and rent control, to inform local and state-level decision makers.

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Des Moines Waterfront Farmers Market

*Local Economy actions continued***Objective 2: Strengthened small food and farm business access to capital and support services and reduced administrative and regulatory barriers**

- 2.1 Reduce the burden for navigating regulations and licensure by identifying streamlined permitting pathways and creating dedicated county and municipal positions that provide in-language materials and technical support.
- 2.2 Increase inter-agency coordination of county and municipal policies and regulations and innovative permitting models that support food and farm businesses.
- 2.3 Help businesses with planning, accessing capital, financing mechanisms, pricing, marketing, record keeping, and taxes by expanding free and low-cost resources, funding, and technical assistance for small businesses.
- 2.4 Implement King County's 2023 Strategic Food Systems Financing Plan, including establishing self-sustaining revolving loan funds for capital for small food, underserved, minority, or underbanked businesses.
- 2.5 Strengthen business food system networks that promote collaboration and equity, focusing on shared infrastructure and relationships and piloting models like cooperatives and community-owned enterprises.

Objective 3: Strengthened local food economies through increasing value chain coordination, marketing, and new markets

- 3.1  Improve market and distribution channels by funding value chain coordinators, network facilitators, and local procurement specialists who provide technical assistance to smaller buyers, producers, and food businesses.
- 3.2 Connect producers, buyers, and consumers by:
 - convening local food trade events to facilitate system-wide or sector-specific connections, including education, networking, buyer-producer matchmaking, and tastings; and
 - expanding online communication platforms that serve a connection function.
- 3.4  Increase the use of values-based purchasing frameworks by institutional, public, and private buyers to increase demand for locally produced foods while aligning purchasing decisions with social, environmental, and economic goals.
- 3.5 Create marketing campaigns to build demand for local food, including media activities and events that highlight its value.

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*Local Economy actions continued***Objective 4: Strengthened food chain workforce, including safe working environments, equitable compensation, and essential benefits and supports**

- 4.1 Increase workforce development, apprenticeship, job forums/fairs, and career programs across the food chain, including addressing current gaps and keeping programs affordable for both workers and businesses.
- 4.2 Build the local green workforce through training and internships that engage youth in hands-on sustainability projects across the food system.
- 4.3 Expand training and support for food business employers on equitable recruitment, hiring, and retention practices, including fair pay and benefits, employee empowerment and representation, job security, safe and healthy working conditions, diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and fostering a positive organizational culture.
- 4.4 Advocate for local, state, and federal policies that enhance childcare, healthcare, transportation, protections, and benefits for essential food system workers.
- 4.4 Create equitable compensation and taxation policy models that support workers and small businesses.

*Sol to Seed Farm, Carnation*