

Rio Grande Valley Food Policy Council

Strategic Planning Report

BACKGROUND

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) classifies over fifty percent of census tracts in the Rio Grande Valley as food deserts. Defined by USDA as urban areas where residents must travel more than one mile to reach a grocery store or rural areas where residents must travel upwards to ten miles or more, food deserts have a myriad of implications across our region. Lack of access to nutritious, affordable food is a contributing factor to high rates of food insecurity, obesity and diabetes in the Rio Grande Valley.

A strong local food system is essential to ensuring all residents of the Rio Grande Valley have access to healthy food. Over the last two years, conversations between stakeholders in agriculture, government, education, public health, the environment, and non-profits focused on food security and healthy food access have evolved into an organized effort to create a food policy council in our region. Established in 2017, the overarching goal of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) Food Policy Council is to apply a systems-based approach that looks at the various components of the food system—production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management—to develop and implement creative solutions through policy that strengthen local food access. Through a collaborative process, council members developed a Mission, Vision, and Goals in October 2017.

While members have been actively engaged in activities supporting collective goals, the council identified a need to strengthen council structure to facilitate actionable participation from all members, develop a long-term plan for sustainability, and prioritize short/medium/long term activities.

The RGV Food Policy Council convened a Strategic Planning Session on May 21, 2018 with support from The Food Trust.

PROGRESS

Throughout the past year, members have participated in several events and initiatives to support the goals of the food policy council:

GOAL	ACTIVITIES
1. Develop policies that support healthy eating in schools year round.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council members have attended SHAC meetings in McAllen and Edinburg • Conversations with McAllen ISD to reinforce policies
2. Promote procurements and consumption of food by strengthening coordination between local food business and RGV farmers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed procurement workshops with McAllen ISD and STAY
3. Engage policy makers through continuous education on food security issues and policy-based solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Food Resolution introduced in Hidalgo County • Collaboration with Proyecto Azteca on RBA Workshops and white paper with policy recommendations
4. Engage residents of the Rio Grande Valley to increase awareness and understanding of the local food system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm tours: Circle 3 Farms, J&D Produce • Created Infographic of Food Insecurity in the Rio Grande Valley • Agriculture presentation

5. Promote sustainable management of land use and other environmental resources in food production.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Menu of Change developed for Land Use Agreement
6. Strengthen collaborative efforts among non-profits, service organizations and higher education institutions to address food security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UTRGV Food Insecurity Forum • Partnership with Unidos Contra La Diabetes Policy Taskforce • Proyecto Azteca Results Based Accountability Workshops

COUNCIL STRUCTURE

Building & Leveraging Internal Capacity

Prior to Strategic Planning Session, council members were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Why you joined the food policy council?
2. How have you contributed to the work of the council?
3. What individual or organizational resources you bring to the council?
4. How could further contribute to the work of the council?

Based on the responses, the following resources & areas of expertise were identified:

Resources

- Professional Networks
- Research Capacity
- Media Connections
- Time

Expertise

- Data
- Education & Awareness
- Policy
- Agriculture & Farmers Markets

Council members identified the need to align the council's goals more closely with their organizational work and roles. This will help maximize council members' participation and contributions accordingly to skillsets, and prevent replication of interest. Currently, the Texas A&M Health Science Center is providing backbone support to the food policy council through the Working on Wellness project. The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council is receptive to housing the council but structural issues need be addressed first.

ACTION Create subcommittees in alignment with members' organizational goals and interests.

ACTION Assign a chair & co-chair

ACTION Rotate facilitation for meetings amongst council members

ACTION Determine participation with Photovoice and School Fall Poster Campaigns

Member Representation

The council needs to diversify its membership both organizationally and geographically to be more representative of the Rio Grande Valley. Further, to increase awareness and connection to community members and individuals, the council should identify community-based leaders to join the council.

Organizational

- Healthy Communities of Brownsville
- Large Healthcare Corporations (DHR, STHS)
- WIC/AAA/Seniors/Headstart

- School Health Advisory Council (SHAC), School Representation
- Region One
- Starr County stakeholders
- Faith Based Organizations
- Big Retailers (HEB)
- Valley Metro, Brownsville/McAllen Metro
- Environmental Groups (Sierra Club)

Community Representation:

- La Union del Pueblo Entero
- Proyecto Azteca
- City/County Housing Authorities
- Farmers: Yahweh Farms-Harlingen
- Proyecto Desarrollo Humano (Peñitas)
- Promotoras (Community Health Workers)
- Student Representation: UTRGV/STC Food Pantry

ACTION Reach out to and meet with potential new members (explain FPC mission and progress to date)

Meeting Logistics

The council currently meets on the last Thursday of the month for 1.5 hours. To increase participation the council agreed to rotate location of meetings, change meeting time to 3:00-4:30pm and provide alternative ways of joining meetings remotely (i.e., virtual conference and phone calls). In addition to the monthly meeting, the council will host bi-annual strategic planning meetings for extensive planning, self-assessment, and re-visiting goals. Regular meetings will continue at the LRGVDC and bi-annual meetings will rotate at various locations throughout the RGV.

ACTION Update meeting time at LRGVDC to 3:00-4:30pm

ACTION Schedule and determine locations for bi-annual meetings

Coordination with other Policy Initiatives

There are several other ongoing policy efforts throughout the RGV. We need to strengthen these policy connections.

Unidos Contra La Diabetes (UCD) Policy Taskforce

Several council members participate in UCD's Policy Taskforce. The Texas A&M School of Public Health will serve as a liaison with the Policy Taskforce. Salomon Torres, UCD coordinator, presented on UCD's policy work. UCD is aiming to replicate a sugar campaign from San Antonio to educate residents of the RGV on the sugar content of popular drinks in the region. This effort could potentially lead to policy action. UCD will be hosting Focus Group sessions to receive feedback on the campaign materials.

ACTION Provide regular updates on UCD Policy Taskforce & other policy-oriented initiatives during FPC meetings

Proyecto Azteca

ACTION Confirm participation in RBA workshops

GOALS, TASKS & ROLES/RESPONSIBILITIES

Goals need to be revisited and edited to “SMART” (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timebound) format. Roles and responsibilities will be defined using the “RACI” model (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed).

The council agreed to remove Goal 5 (Promote sustainable management of land use and other environmental resources in food production) and revisit in the future.

<i>Goal 1: Develop policies that support healthy eating in schools year round.</i>				
Milestone 1.1: Identify and disseminate best practices				
Tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create google drive/dropbox for FPC ▪ Meet with school district nutrition departments to identify how to serve and help them ▪ Identify the gap and see how FPC can help then share best practices 			
Roles	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed

<i>Goal 2: Strengthen procurement and consumption of locally grown fruits & vegetables in the Rio Grande Valley</i>				
Milestone 2.1: Campaign promoting buying from local small growers from the RGV Milestone 2.2: Policy scan of local procurement policies				
Tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contact small farmers to increase awareness of local farmer’s markets 			
Roles	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed

<i>Goal 3: Engage policy makers through continuous education on food security issues and policy-based solutions.</i>				
Milestone 3.1: Develop a white paper for Food Security Summit				
Tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attend RBA Workshops ▪ Create factsheet with indicators on food security and access 			
Roles	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed

<i>Goal 4: Engage residents of the RGV to increase awareness and understanding of the local food system.</i>				
Milestone 4.1: At least two community members from at least two separate RGV counties represented on council by October 2018 Milestone 4.2: Council members agree to set community engagement goals in own organizations by December 2018				

Tasks:				
Roles	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed

<i>Goal 5: Strengthen collaborative efforts among non-profits, service organizations and higher education institutions to address food security.</i>				
Milestone: Expand member participation				
Tasks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reach out to organizations and community representatives that were identified earlier and invite them to FPC meetings. 			
Roles	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed

ACTION Complete SMART revisions and RACI designations at next food policy council meeting

SUSTAINABILITY

The Texas A&M School of Public Health will continue to provide support to the food policy council through its Healthy South Texas initiative. The council discussed two upcoming CDC funding opportunities that can help support and expand activities: 1) Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) and 2) High Obesity Program (HOP) grants. The applications for both these grants are due July 16th. Texas A&M is looking to put together both a REACH and HOP application. UCD is also working on a REACH application.

ACTION Meet with UCD to discuss potential collaboration, re: REACH grant