



Municipal Use of ARP Funds for Local Food System Resilience

Funds from the most recent federal coronavirus relief package, the American Rescue Plan (ARP), will soon be available to municipalities. The program's preliminary guidance cites food insecurity as one of the reasons these resources are being distributed, and states that funds may be spent "To respond to the public health emergency or its negative economic impacts, including assistance to households, small businesses, and nonprofits, or aid to impacted industries such as tourism, travel, and hospitality," **giving cities and towns an opportunity to make investments in the food supply chain** to help ensure food security and better access to healthy food.

The local food system proved to be a critical resource when national and global food supply chains were disrupted, and its long term resilience is equally vital to the Commonwealth's recovery and ongoing food security needs. All aspects of the food supply chain were affected by the crisis, from farms and fisheries, to distributors and restaurants, to consumers and community-based organizations. Food insecurity remains high as many people continue to struggle to afford food. **Investments are needed in infrastructure, planning, and capacity building** to ensure that food system businesses remain sustainable and households have access to nutritious food.

While each city and town has unique needs, some ideas municipalities might consider supporting include:

Local grants. Municipalities could use ARP funds to support farms, fisheries, processors, restaurants, healthy food retailers, other food businesses, and nonprofits by creating grant programs to support infrastructure or program needs. Grants could also support training and education opportunities for farmers and other food chain businesses and workers.

Community gardens. Community gardens and urban farms help build food security, provide education and job skills training, build community, and protect and enhance natural resources. Municipalities can dedicate publicly-owned land or acquire other vacant land to dedicate to these purposes, and fund infrastructure such as fencing, lighting, and water to support these projects.

Farmers markets. Many farmers markets and mobile markets, particularly in low-income communities, are in need of infrastructure

support to remain sustainable. Needs range from signage and parking, to sanitary facilities and payment processing systems. Another consideration would be covering the costs of market fees for vendors who have been hard hit by the pandemic.

Processing and distribution. Small farms and other food producers can benefit from local and regional food hubs that provide processing equipment to make value-added and shelf-stable products, refrigeration, distribution, and other shared services.

Schools. Support for school gardens will provide both immediate and long-term benefit to students, since learning about how healthy food is produced leads to better eating habits long-term for both the students and their families. Purchases of kitchen equipment for school cafeterias can help promote more scratch cooking and healthier foods for children.

Climate change. Farms need support in adapting to the impacts of climate change and in adopting management practices that help mitigate those impacts for all. Investments in renewable energy resources, support for cover crops and no-till practices, or payments for environmental services such as carbon sequestration can help them do so.

Community food assessments. These inventories of local resources and gaps in the food supply chain can help identify areas that are underserved and in need of investment such as healthy food retailers, better public transportation, emergency food services, or other supply chain infrastructure to ensure food security.

Emergency food system. To facilitate food pantries' ability to provide fresh, healthy food to those who need it, refrigeration or delivery vehicles might be considered, or infrastructure for meal preparation for home-bound individuals.

Support for food rescue and gleaning operations would also help create a more consistent stream of food for where it is needed.

Education. Funds could be used for developing or acquiring and distributing existing resources to educate residents of any age about nutrition, culinary skills, gardening, or other issues that help reduce preventable dietary-related diseases.

Food waste. Infrastructure for municipal and school composting programs would help divert food waste from landfills, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and producing compost that provides soil nutrients for farmers and gardeners.

Public transportation. Any funds used to support public transportation should consider how those investments support ensuring access to healthy food sources for residents of areas with limited retail stores.

In considering these or other food system investments as possible projects, there are a number of things to keep in mind:

- Any project should seek to address systemic inequities in the food system that were exacerbated by the pandemic. Communities of color were already poorly served by the food system prior to 2020, and the crisis worsened food access for them.
- Projects should be developed and implemented in partnership with community-based stakeholders, such as local food policy councils, Mass in Motion groups, and other networks that represent residents. Municipalities should consider soliciting public input, as [some cities](#) are doing.
- These funds are not long-term, and so are best spent on capital infrastructure investments or capacity-building projects, rather than adding staff or other capacity that would be lost when the ARP money is exhausted.
- Note how the state is spending its share of ARP funds, since potential state investments in infrastructure such as transportation or rural broadband would allow cities and towns to spend their allotments on more locally-tailored programs.
- Guidance is still being finalized and any proposed expenditures should be carefully checked against permitted uses.

The MA Food System Collaborative can provide additional resources to municipalities considering these or other local food system projects.

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