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# Reducing local regulatory barriers to local foods: Municipal Zoning for Local Foods in Iowa Guidebook

Gary Taylor

*Iowa State University*, [gtaylor@iastate.edu](mailto:gtaylor@iastate.edu)

Andrea Vaage

*Iowa State University*, [vaagea@iastate.edu](mailto:vaagea@iastate.edu)

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## **Abstract**

A guidebook was created to help municipal officials navigate the legal, political and economic challenges of encouraging urban agriculture in their communities.

## **Keywords**

Community and Regional Planning, Community-based food systems, Policy



## Reducing local regulatory barriers to local foods: The “Municipal Zoning for Local Foods in Iowa” guidebook

**Abstract:** A guidebook was created to help municipal officials navigate the legal, political and economic challenges of encouraging urban agriculture in their communities.

### Principal Investigator:

#### Gary Taylor

Community and Regional Planning  
ISU College of Design  
Community and Economic Development  
ISU Extension and Outreach

#### Co-investigator:

#### Andrea Vaage

Community and Regional Planning and Sustainable Agriculture  
Iowa State University

#### Budget:

\$23,915 for year one

**Q**How can cities employ zoning to balance competing interests in the use of urban land while reducing barriers to urban agricultural production, distribution and sales?

**A**Through discussion of agricultural best practices and sample zoning code language from over 80 municipalities across the country, Guidebook readers are given the tools to make well-informed policies choices about local land use regulations.

### Background

Municipal officials are increasingly acknowledging the multiple benefits of urban agriculture. As the urban agriculture movement advances, many city leaders have recognized the role that local government policies and regulations play in either stifling or facilitating the production, processing and distribution of local foods. Land use regulations can intentionally or unintentionally hamper the activities necessary for a local foods system to develop and thrive.

The reasons for these regulations vary. Many restrictive zoning provisions simply have been in place, unchanged, since zoning was first created to separate and isolate incompatible land uses. Bans on raising farm animals within city limits, for example, date back to the health and sanitation concerns associated with “piggeries” in urban areas. In other jurisdictions, urban agricultural practices became unintentional victims of neighborhood uniformity and aesthetic demands. Occasionally, zoning rules may have been a conscious policy choice to exclude agricultural activities from municipalities.

If zoning trends across the country are an accurate reflection of the politics of urban agriculture, the politics favor more urban agriculture, not less. Municipalities around the country are rapidly adopting zoning regulations that promote urban agriculture practices. Because zoning regulations are designed to balance competing interests in urban land use, they can be written in ways that facilitate urban agriculture while minimizing health, safety, and nuisance concerns.

The PI and an ISU graduate student developed a guidebook – *Municipal Zoning for Local Foods in Iowa* – for Iowa municipal officials. The book focuses on the intersection of local foods and municipal zoning and other related land use regulations.

Objectives of the project were to:

1. Create greater awareness and knowledge of Iowa municipal officials of the common code barriers to urban agriculture and the legal/policy solutions to those barriers and



P O L I C Y



*Food truck: Des Moines, IA. (Photo courtesy of Ben Norris.)*

2. Encourage changes in the policies and practices of Iowa municipalities; specifically, the adoption of zoning code provisions that eliminate barriers to, and encourage common practices associated with urban agriculture.

## Approach and methods

The authors researched, evaluated, and categorized urban agriculture-related zoning code language from 84 municipalities across the United States. Code language was collected by reviewing journal articles relating to zoning and urban agriculture, conducting

Internet keyword searches of code databases, and conducting Internet keyword searches for relevant newspaper and popular press articles.

The authors also researched practice-oriented scientific publications from a variety of sources, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Cooperative Extension publications from several university Extension services. This was done to ensure that the sample code language included in the guidebook would address real, potential impacts of the agricultural activity in question, and were not arbitrary or based on unsubstantiated concerns not supported by science. In order to gain context for how urban agriculture was being practiced in Iowa, the authors collaborated with the city of Fairfield to determine what issues they faced, what practices they already allowed, and what sample code language would prove most beneficial.

## Results and discussion

The authors ultimately produced a guidebook with chapters that address the following common urban agriculture uses: aquaculture, bees, chickens, goats, front-yard gardens, community and market gardens, gardening on vacant lots, urban farms, season extenders, composting, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) drop-sites, farm stands, farmers markets, food trucks and pushcarts, and urban agriculture districts.

Each chapter provides a general description of the activity, and the science-based information on standards and best practices associated with the activity; the public health, safety and welfare concerns commonly associated with the activity; a summary of the commonalities found among municipalities' codes; and sample code language taken from municipalities that vary both in size and location.

The chapters feature four sections:

- The Introduction provides a general description of the activity, and the science-based information on standards and best practices associated with the activity.
- The Land-Use Concerns section discusses the public health, safety and welfare issues commonly associated with the activity. For example, noise and odor issues are common concerns attached to raising crops and rearing livestock in the city. Issues such as traffic, parking, signage, and lighting are also discussed in relation to other types of activities such as sales and distribution.
- The Existing Regulations section summarizes the commonalities found among municipalities' codes. Depending on the activity, these may include the zoning



*Farmers market, Des Moines, IA. (Photo courtesy of Downtown Community Alliance.)*

districts where uses are commonly allowed, the types of operating standards and restrictions that are generally put into place and the accessory or incidental activities generally allowed with the use.

- Finally, each chapter contains Sample Code language. These samples come from municipalities that vary both in size and location, and were selected to reflect the variety of regulatory approaches found across the nation. Code language is split into topical subcategories when appropriate.

## Impact of results

The primary output of this project was the guidebook *Reducing Regulatory Barriers to Local Foods: Municipal Zoning for Local Foods in Iowa*. It is available on the PI's website for free download: <http://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/planningBLUZ>.

## Education and outreach

Information about the project was presented at two conferences: the Upper Midwest (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) American Planning Association Conference in October, 2014, and the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals Conference (Little Rock, Arkansas) in May, 2015. A third presentation was made for the American Planning Association-Iowa Chapter Annual Conference in October 2015. A webinar with more than 90 participants was held September 30, 2015 to publicize the guidebook. The webinar was promoted through numerous Iowa professional networks, the eXtension local foods Community of Practice, and the North Central Region Center for Rural Development. The PI has blogged about the project, and it is available for free download on the PI's website: <http://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/planningBLUZ>.

## Leveraged funds

Leopold Center funds leveraged \$22,266 from the following sources:

- PI salary and benefits for one month was matched in-kind 1:1 by ISU Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development.
- Andrea Vaage received funding from the ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture which provided funding for one-fourth research assistantship (salary, fringe, and tuition stipend) for two semesters.

***For more information, contact:***

*Gary Taylor, 286  
College of Design,  
Iowa State University,  
Ames, Iowa 50011-  
3091; (515) 290-0214,  
e-mail [gtaylor@iastate.edu](mailto:gtaylor@iastate.edu)*