

Nourishing Food in Northwest Aurora

Analysis and
Opportunities for
Food Retail and
Food Production



FOOD IN
COMMUNITIES

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Overview

Food Justice NW Aurora (FJNWA) is a community-based nonprofit organization that seeks to create a just, sustainable, and complete food environment by mobilizing people, organizations, and businesses; building community wealth; facilitating and nurturing strategic partnerships; and advocating for policy and systems changes. The three community-driven pillars of FJNWA's work are to increase local food production, improve access to nutritious food where people live, and build the movement for food justice in northwest Aurora, Colorado.

Northwest Aurora is home to a racially and culturally diverse population, including immigrants, refugees, and asylees who bring diverse culinary traditions and agricultural knowledge to the community. Along the East Colfax corridor, many small food markets offer food from around the world; residents grow food in productive community gardens and home gardens; and urban farms harvest food for food pantries, farmers markets, and other clients. However, a larger percentage of people in the northwest Aurora community struggle with food insecurity than in Colorado, which means they do not have reliable access to adequate quantity and quality of food to meet their basic needs. A 2023 FJNWA survey illuminated that 66% of Aurora respondents indicated they were experiencing or at risk of food insecurity,¹ which is alarmingly higher than the state food insecurity rate of 11.2%.² Food insecurity is a systemic issue that disproportionately impacts BIPOC³ and low-income communities in Colorado and across the U.S.

This report synthesizes community input from listening sessions and surveys dating from 2022 to 2024; detailed analysis of Aurora's comprehensive plan and regulatory policies; and spatial analysis (maps) of local food production, food retail, and food assistance locations across the city. Through this analysis, FJNWA sought to understand how existing municipal policies support or impede the advancement of community priorities related to food access; describe the extent to which these policies are being implemented; and identify gaps and opportunities to introduce new or strengthen existing policies, programs, and/or strategies.

Key Findings

FJNWA identified opportunities to leverage existing small food retailers to improve access to nutritious food, activate underutilized land to increase local food production, and build community knowledge and increase engagement in the local food system through educational programming. Within this report, we elaborate on three priorities for policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes, which are strategic, systemic approaches to improve individual and community health and wellbeing. These are:

- Strategies that support small markets to offer more fresh and staple foods at affordable prices;
- Activation of vacant and underutilized land for urban agriculture in order for the community to fully benefit from zoning and city codes that allow small-scale food production in all parts of the city; and
- Expanding multilingual and multicultural educational programming for building community knowledge and civic engagement in the local food system

FJNWA also identified opportunities for residents, community-based organizations, and local businesses to engage in the City of Aurora's current and upcoming planning and policy processes and advocate for strategies that improve access to nourishing food through food retail and local food production in northwest Aurora. These are:

- Integrating food retail and urban agriculture strategies into economic development plans for the City and for Ward 1 in particular;
- Incorporating regenerative agricultural practices and responsible land and water stewardship strategies into a city-wide sustainability plan; and
- Prioritizing transportation infrastructure for people without cars to reach food access outlets in the multi-modal transportation plan.

FJNWA also identified two overarching strategies to build capacity and financial resources to pursue Aurora's comprehensive plan goals that align with community priorities related to food retail and food production:

- Secure sustained funding for implementation of food and agriculture strategies.
- Advocate for the creation of a food systems staff position in the City of Aurora to coordinate internally and foster external partnerships.

Next Steps

Based on these findings, FJNWA will allocate financial resources and staff time to the pursuit of the three PSE change priorities and associated planning and policy processes over the next two to three years. As a follow-up to this report, FJNWA will conduct additional research related to the priority areas, continue to engage residents and organizational partners, build new and strengthen existing partnerships to collectively advance the priority strategies, develop a collaborative action plan for the strategy areas, and identify and seek funding to implement the action plan.



Introduction

The Food System and Food Access in Northwest Aurora

The Challenge of Food Insecurity

Access to nourishing food is a key social determinant of health which directly impacts a person's health and wellbeing. Conversely, people experience food insecurity when they do not have reliable access to sufficient nutritious and culturally relevant food due to a variety of social, physical, and economic factors based on one's income, employment, race/ethnicity, immigration status, language, gender, age, physical ability, neighborhood, and distance to full-service grocery retail. Food insecurity increases levels of stress and uncertainty about where and when the next meal is coming, and experiencing food insecurity can force people to make difficult decisions about purchasing food or spending money on other basic needs like medication, housing, transportation, and utilities. These tradeoffs potentially lead to other compromises in health, as well as educational and employment opportunities.

In the U.S., there are higher rates of food insecurity among BIPOC households, low-income households, families with children, older adults, and people living with disabilities.⁴ In 2022, nearly 23% of Black people in the United States experienced food insecurity, which is nearly two-and-a-half times the rate of white people.⁵ Decades of research demonstrate the connections between inequities in access to nutritious food and disparities in diet-related health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and excess weight and obesity. Racial and ethnic minorities, as well as, low-income individuals, disproportionately face barriers to accessing healthy and culturally appropriate food, which is a main contributor to increased risk for diet-related chronic diseases in these populations.⁶

The food system is a complex web of actors and activities that encompasses producing (farming, ranching, and gardening), processing, aggregating, distributing, selling, consuming, and disposing of or transforming food waste. The dynamics of the local food system - such as the locations and accessibility of large and small food retailers, the ability to use land for food production, and the cost of food and availability of food assistance - have bearing on residents' ease of access to nutritious food and are influenced by local policies and regulations such as comprehensive plans detailing the city's priorities and zoning and city codes. Recognizing the systemic barriers people face to growing, purchasing, and accessing food, this report explores opportunities to engage with community members and partner agencies to enact policy, systems, and environmental changes to improve food security and promote food justice and food sovereignty. Food justice views adequate, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food as a basic human right for people of all identities and circumstances. Food sovereignty is the ability of local people to be involved in decision-making about the food that is produced, sold, and consumed in the community; define and protect its own food agricultural practices and production; and create and sustain fair economic activities related to food and agriculture.

“ A larger percentage of people in the northwest Aurora community struggle with food insecurity than in Colorado overall.

Food System Advocacy in Aurora

Food Justice NW Aurora (FJNWA) is building a multicultural, intergenerational, and intersectional movement for food justice and food sovereignty to transform our local food system in northwest Aurora, Colorado. We strive to create a just, sustainable, and complete food environment by mobilizing people, organizations, and businesses; building community wealth; facilitating and nurturing strategic partnerships; and advocating for policy and systems changes.

FJNWA was founded in 2022 by a dedicated steering committee and with the guidance of the diverse participants of the inaugural annual strategic retreat, which included resident leaders, local organizations, and small businesses. FJNWA derives all organizational guidance from our community and steering committee. Equity is central to our process and outcomes, and we believe that those most adversely affected by the current political, social, and economic systems should play a key role in transforming and building new systems. These voices are prioritized as we work towards optimal health, social, environmental, and economic outcomes for all people.

At the second annual strategic retreat in April 2023, which marked FJNWA's first anniversary, FJNWA membership agreed on the three pillars of FJNWA's work: increase local food production, improve access to nutritious food where people live, and build the movement for food justice in northwest Aurora. FJNWA membership also identified four cross-cutting strategies to advance these pillars: communication and outreach, education, activation of vacant and underutilized land, and policy and systems change.

Three Pillars of FJNWA's Work:

1 *Increase local food production.*

2 *Improve access to nutritious food where people live.*

3 *Build the movement for food justice in northwest Aurora.*

Community Experience and Needs

Across two years of community conversations, strategic retreats, and surveys with residents, community leaders, and organizational partners, FJNWA has heard several common themes:

A larger percentage of people in the northwest Aurora community struggle with food insecurity than in Colorado overall. In our survey of residents⁷ at the 2023 Food Justice Festival in northwest Aurora, two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicated that they were experiencing or at risk of food insecurity (see Figure 1) based on Hunger Vital Sign⁸, a “validated 2-question food insecurity screening tool based on the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module to identify households at risk of food insecurity.”⁹ Data collected by the Colorado Health Institute show that 11.2% of Coloradans “ate less than they thought they should in the past year because they couldn’t afford food” in 2023.¹⁰ It is concerning that statewide food insecurity rates have risen three percentage points from 2021 to 2023,¹¹ and even more alarming that FJNWA’s survey data suggest much higher rates of food insecurity in northwest Aurora.

Food Insecurity Screening at 2023 Food Justice Festival in NW Aurora

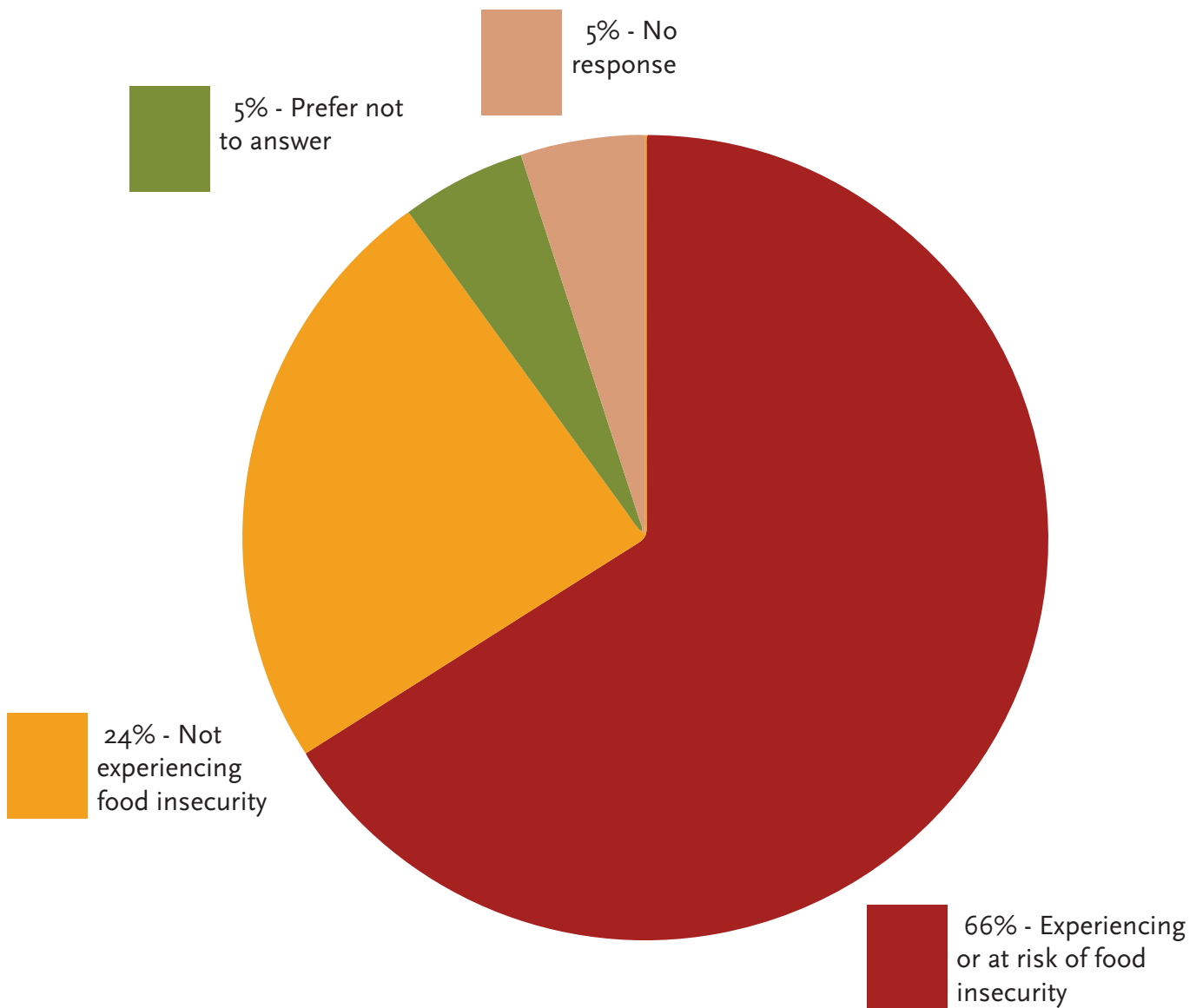


Figure 1. Food insecurity screening (Source: 2023 Food Justice Festival Survey)

For people in northwest Aurora, cost of food is the most common barrier to accessing nutritious food for themselves and their families. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents to the survey at the 2023 Food Justice Festival stated that cost of food created problems or challenges in procuring nutritious and culturally important food (see Figure 2). Affordability of food has been a topic of interest and discussion in every community meeting that FJNWA has hosted since 2022. Other common barriers were poor quality of food in stores (22% of respondents); distance to stores or transportation or mobility issues (19% of respondents), and limited time to purchase or prepare foods (17% of respondents). Data from the 2023 Food Justice Festival survey were consistent with the 2022 survey, with the same top four challenges: cost/price (69%), poor quality of food in local stores (29%), limited time to purchase or prepare foods (27%), and distance to stores or transportation or mobility issues (26%).

Problems Accessing Nutritious Food (n=267)

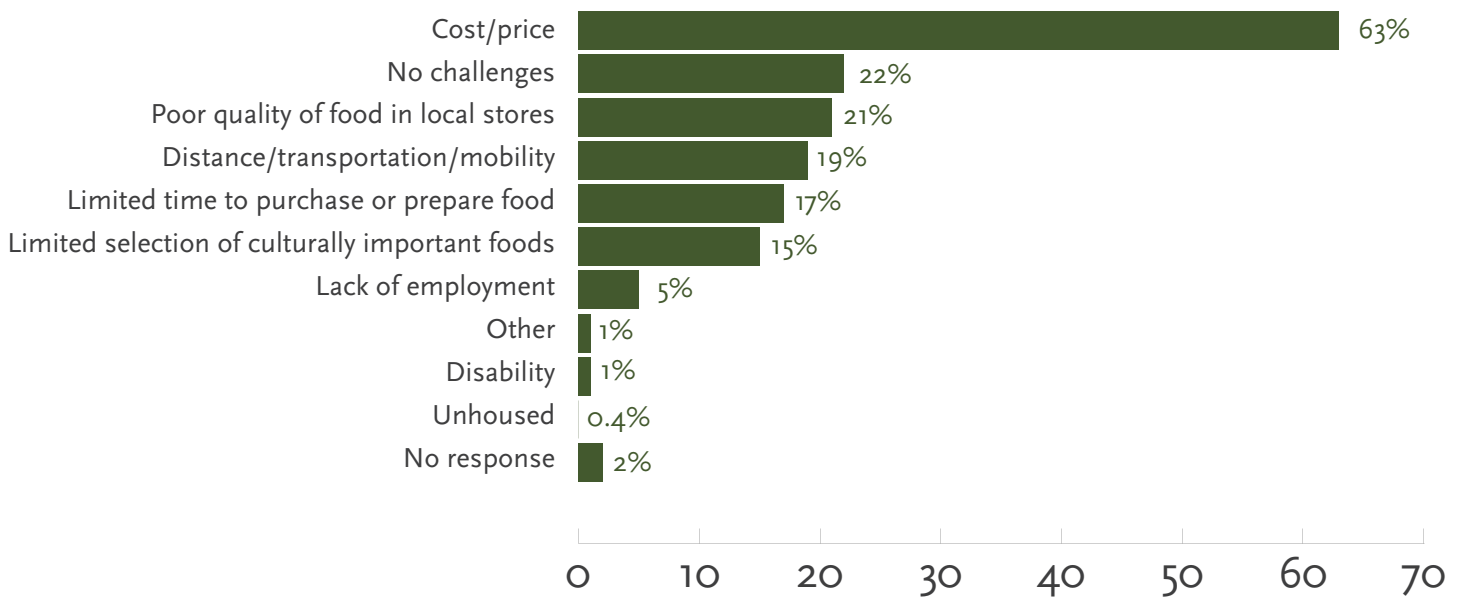


Figure 2. Barriers to accessing nutritious and culturally important food (Source: 2023 Food Justice Festival Survey)

Residents and community leaders have many ideas about how to improve access to nutritious and culturally important foods in northwest Aurora - especially through local food production, food retail, and education. Additional ideas for strategies to improve access to nutritious food focus on leadership development, diversity and dignity, and dissemination of information via languages and means of communication that work for the many cultural groups of northwest Aurora. In both the 2023 and 2022 Food Justice Festival surveys, local food production was the most common theme among the ideas that respondents shared (representing 31% in 2023 and 27% of responses in 2022). In FJNWA community meetings over the course of two years, participants have expressed great interest in local food production - whether in the form of home gardens, community gardens, or urban farms. As seen in Figure 3, the main sub-themes for local food production are growing one's own food, community gardens (including building new community gardens, expanding existing ones, and improving accessibility of community gardens), expanding and supporting urban farms, and land access for food production. Other prominent themes include community support such as sharing food, volunteering, donating, and community events; food retail such as improving affordability, improving quality and selection, supporting small food stores, and expanding farmers markets; information and communication including increasing awareness of existing resources and improving language access; and education including how to grow food and youth programming (see Figure 3).

“For people in northwest Aurora, cost of food is the most common barrier to accessing nutritious food for themselves and their families. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents to the survey at the 2023 Food Justice Festival stated that cost of food created problems or challenges in procuring nutritious and culturally important food.”

Community Ideas for Improving Access to Nutritious Food (n=156)

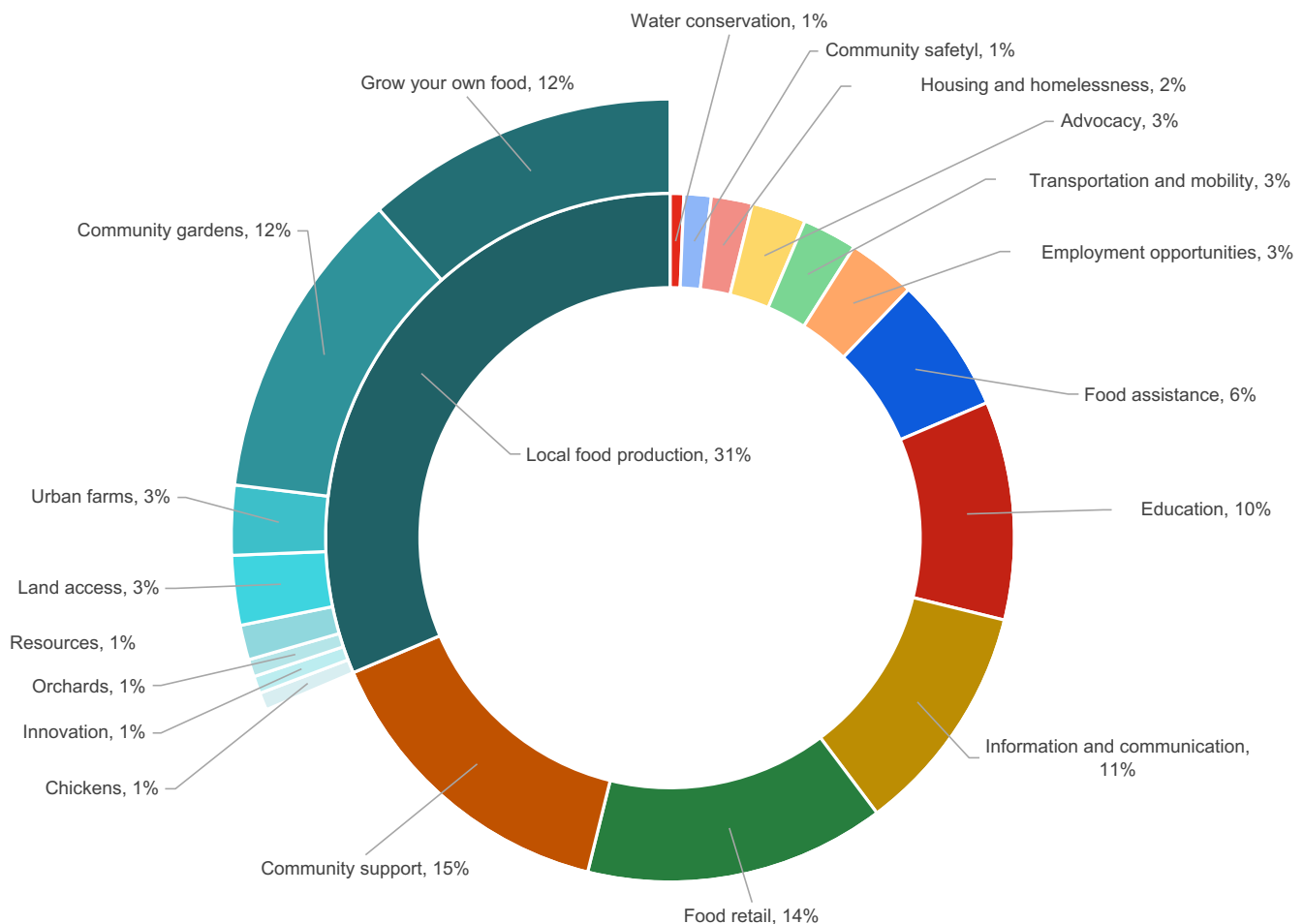


Figure 3. Community ideas for improving access to nutritious food (Source: 2023 Food Justice Festival Survey)

The consistency in high-priority strategies in both years of the survey are also seen in FJNWA's three strategic pillars, which were established through community decision-making processes at the second strategic retreat in April 2023¹². The pillars are:

1. **Increase local food production.** This pillar focuses on increasing the amount of food produced in northwest Aurora. Approaches include: providing community education, leading the development of community greenhouses, increasing access to land, and connecting with those who are producers and growers to build networks.
2. **Improve access to nutritious food where people live.** This pillar focuses on improving access to nutritious food where people live by addressing three main barriers: 1. **Availability** of high quality fresh and culturally relevant foods, 2. **Affordability** of food prices and the ability to use benefit programs like SNAP, and 3. **Accessibility** of physical locations close to where people live and work via various transportation and mobility options.
3. **Build the movement for food justice in northwest Aurora.** This pillar focuses on building a diverse base of people who are developing knowledge about the local food system, cultivating community leadership, and strengthening communications.

Land Use Policy Assessment and Spatial Analysis of the Aurora Food System

Land Use Policy Assessment

FJNWA is a core partner in the Food in Communities (FIC) regional collaborative, along with Denver Department of Public Health and Environment and Jefferson County Public Health. Food in Communities is a regional collaborative working to increase equitable access to healthy, affordable, and culturally important foods through food policies, systems, and environmental changes. Policy, system, and environmental (PSE) changes are ongoing, sustained strategies to address root causes, shift behavior or culture at a population level, and improve individual and community health and well-being.¹³

The intent of FIC is to collectively cultivate and sustain neighborhood and regional-level changes that support community-driven priorities and build capacity among community leaders and organizational partners to strengthen the local and regional food system.

One of the main objectives for FIC in 2024 was to conduct a Land Use Policy Assessment (LUPA) and to map and analyze food production, retail, and access points in each of the FIC jurisdictions. The purpose of the LUPA is to: 1. analyze how existing municipal policies support or impede the advancement of community priorities related to local food production, food retail, and no-cost food assistance (e.g., food pantries and food banks); 2. describe the extent to which these policies are being implemented; and 3. identify gaps and opportunities to introduce new or strengthen existing policies, programs, and/or strategies.

FJNWA designed the LUPA as a thorough analysis of Aurora's land use policies with regards to food production, food retail, and food assistance. To complete the assessment, FJNWA analyzed existing municipal policies; determined if and how policies and programs related to these food topics are being implemented; and identified opportunities for PSE change strategy development, amendment, or implementation. To understand the landscape of policies for local food production, retail, and access in Aurora, FJNWA conducted a detailed review of planning policy documents, regulatory policy documents, and financial policy documents. These 17 documents are referenced throughout this report, cited at the end of this report, and include:

Policy, system, and environmental (PSE) changes are ongoing, sustained strategies to address root causes, shift behavior or culture at a population level, and improve individual and community health and well-being.

Plans and Reports

- Aurora Places: Planning Tomorrow's City (comprehensive plan, 2018)¹⁴
- Adams County Health Department Community Health Improvement Plan (updates on progress, 2024)
- Arapahoe County Public Health Community Health Improvement Plan (updates on progress, 2024)
- City of Aurora Housing Strategy (2020)¹⁵
- Adams County Transportation Master Plan (2022)¹⁶
- Arapahoe County 2040 Transportation Master Plan (2021)¹⁷
- Immigrant Integration Plan 2020-2030 (2020)¹⁸
- Our Parks, Our Places: A Plan for Aurora's Parks, Recreation and Open Space (2023)¹⁹
- Environment Aurora Report 2018-2022 (2023)²⁰
- 2015 Municipal Water Efficiency Plan (2015)²¹

- Sustainable Infill and Redevelopment Design Handbook (2012)²²
- Aurora’s Sustainability Plan (2009)²³

Regulatory Policies

- Aurora City Code (2024)²⁴
- Aurora Zoning Map(2024)²⁵
- Aurora Unified Development Ordinance (2023)²⁶
- Permitted Use Table (2023)²⁷

Financial Policies

- Aurora 2024 Operating and Capital Improvement Budget²⁸

Additionally, FJNWA staff interviewed City of Aurora agency representatives with insights into planning processes, policies, and program implementation. These interviews served to confirm and/or clarify our understanding of the existing plans, policies, and programs, as well as to learn about upcoming planning processes.

Mapping the Aurora Food System

The physical distribution of food production, food retail, and food assistance locations affect Aurorans’ ability to grow, purchase, or otherwise procure nutritious foods in adequate quantities to nourish their families and themselves. As a complement to the LUPA, FJNWA collaborated with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and epidemiology professionals to conduct spatial analysis in order to identify existing food production, food retail, and food assistance locations and understand their spatial relationships to socio-demographic characteristics.

Our team mapped existing food production, food retail, and food assistance locations, drawing on a combination of existing datasets and institutional knowledge of local food-related organizations and businesses. We developed the following data layers (the data source is noted in parentheses):

- Food retail including large supermarkets, small supermarkets, specialty food stores, and convenience stores (Adams County Health Department and Arapahoe County Public Health environmental health data)
- Food retailers that accept SNAP and/or WIC federal food assistance program benefits (United States Department of Agriculture)
- Farmers markets (Colorado Farmers Market Association and institutional knowledge)
- Farm stands (institutional knowledge)
- No-cost food assistance including traditional (brick and mortar) and non-traditional (temporary or mobile) food pantries and food banks (Food Bank of the Rockies, 2-1-1 Colorado)
- Farms (Mile High Farmers and institutional knowledge)
- Community gardens and food forests (Denver Urban Gardens, Aurora Community Garden Network)

We additionally mapped demographic factors including race and ethnicity, and created a socioeconomic index. Demographic data are from the United States Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2018-2022 (the most current dataset at the time of this analysis). The data are summarized and mapped by census block group, a geographic unit that contains between 600 and 3,000 people and represents a statistical division of census tracts.²⁹ The socioeconomic index is a composite score derived from statistical analysis of five variables: Education index, Median household income, Median house value, Percent blue collar worker, Percent of households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs. The index scores were then categorized into five statistically distinct categories from very low to very high socioeconomic status.³⁰

Demographics of Northwest Aurora

Northwest Aurora is the most racially and ethnically diverse community in Colorado. According to Aurora Public Schools, families in the district speak more than 160 languages and come from more than 130 countries.³¹ As seen in Map 1, census block groups with higher percentages of People of Color (POC, which includes all racial and ethnic groups except non-Hispanic white) are principally located in the northwest area of Aurora, notably north of East 6th Avenue and adjacent to East Colfax Avenue and Interstate 225. The northern part of the city has greater racial diversity than the southern portion of the city. According to U.S. Census data, 74.1% of Aurorans living in Adams County (the northern part of the city) are POC and 47.2% are Hispanic, while 50.4% of Aurorans living in Arapahoe County (the southern part of the city) are POC and 23.5% are Hispanic.

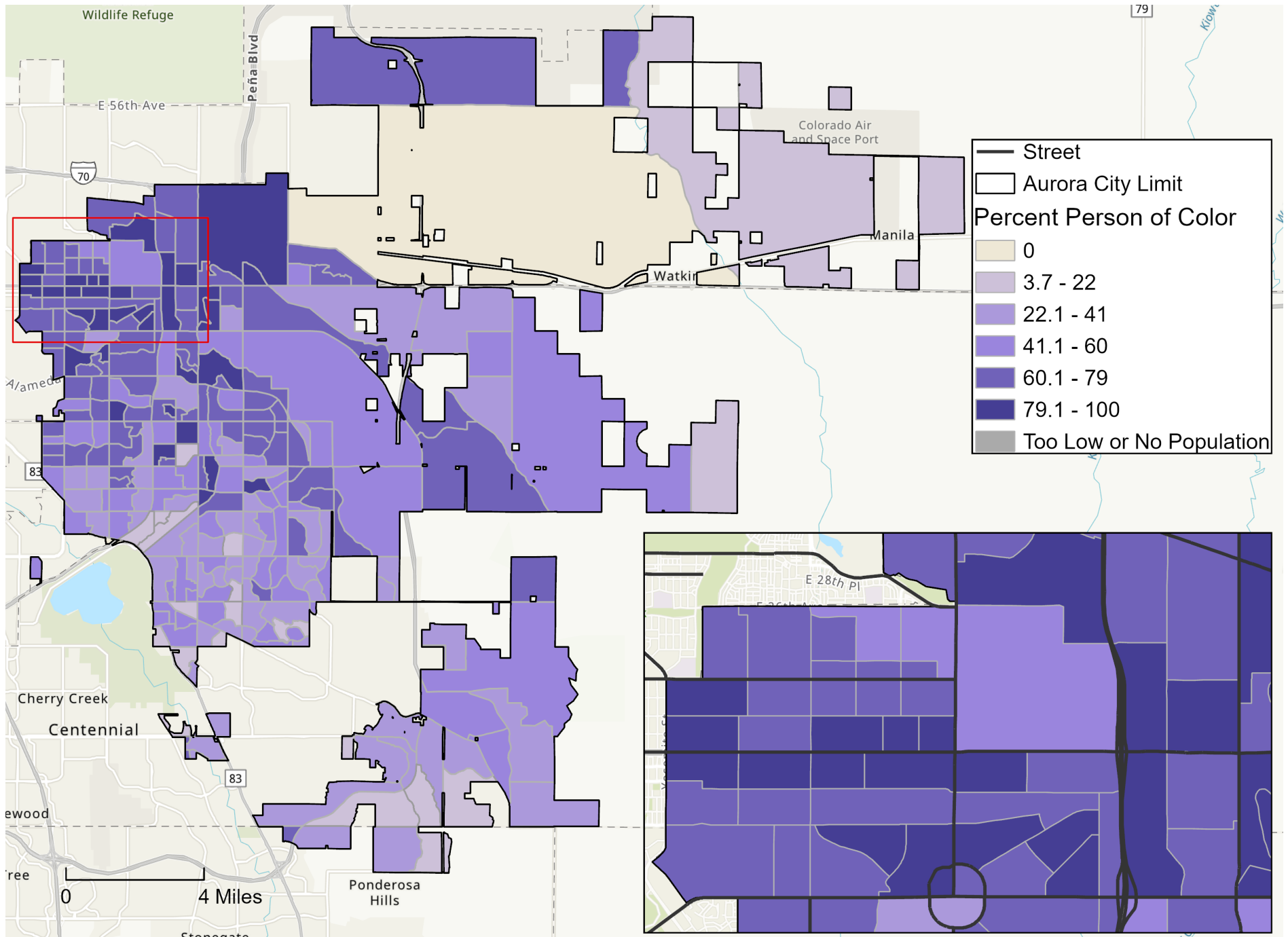
The immigrant, refugee, and asylee residents of Aurora bring diverse culinary traditions that we see in the myriad restaurants, food trucks, caterers, and small markets in Aurora. They also bring agricultural knowledge and crops from across the world to community gardens and home gardens throughout the city. The ability to use these skills at home and in the workplace contribute to economic opportunities, social connection, and community resilience.

The northern part of Aurora is also socioeconomically distinct from the southern part of Aurora. Map 2 illustrates the general pattern of a gradient from higher socioeconomic scores in the block groups in southeast Aurora, transitioning to lower socioeconomic scores in block groups in northwest Aurora. According to US Census data, the median household income in the Adams County portion of Aurora is \$20,000 less than the Arapahoe County portion of Aurora (\$53,022 in comparison to \$73,689, respectively), and a greater portion of renters have an excessive housing cost burden (29.5% in comparison to 20.1%, respectively). Map 3 illustrates that almost all census block groups with very low socioeconomic scores are north of East Alameda Avenue, and mainly in block groups immediately adjacent or proximal to East Colfax Avenue. Block groups with low socioeconomic index scores are located throughout the northern half of Aurora, particularly north of East Mississippi Avenue.

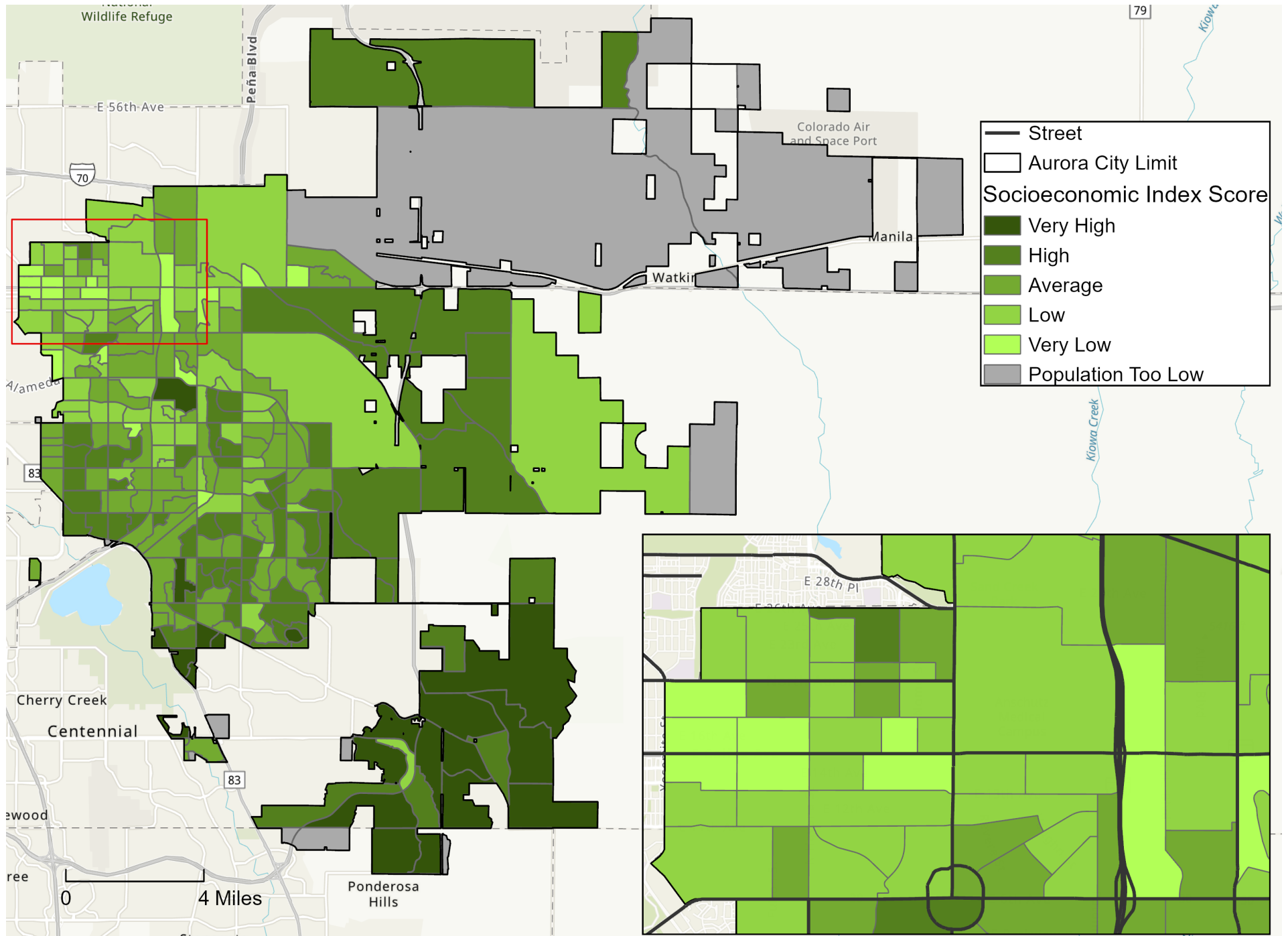
Analysis of demographics in relation to food production, food retail, and food assistance locations is critical because households with income below the federal poverty line, single-parent households, and people of color (especially non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic individuals) experience higher rates of food insecurity and could be more adversely affected by limited food retail and food access options near where they live.³² Data from Colorado Health Institute indicate that people who speak a language other than English also experience higher rates of food insecurity.³³



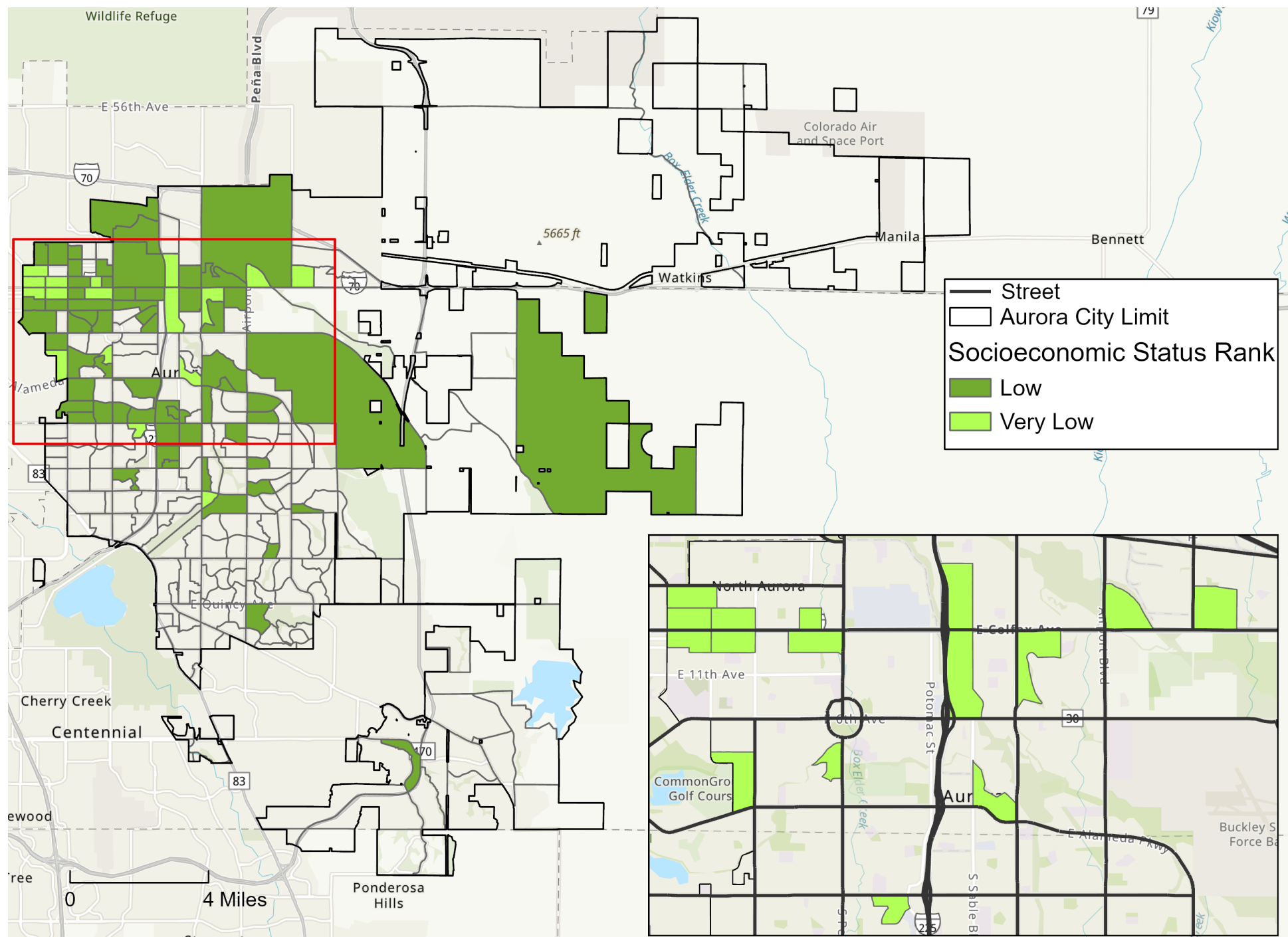
Map 1: Percent People of Color by Census Block Group in Aurora



Map 2: Socioeconomic Index by Census Block Group in Aurora



Map 3: Low and Very Low Socioeconomic Index Scores by Census Block Group in Aurora



Summary of Existing Policies

Stated goals and recommended practices for food retail, food production, and food access in Aurora's Comprehensive Plan

Aurora's comprehensive plan - [Aurora Places: Planning Tomorrow's City](#)³⁴ - outlines the city's vision and strategy for urban development, community well-being, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Aurora City Council adopted the comprehensive plan in October 2018 as the guiding document for the next 10 years. The comprehensive plan serves as the basis of subsequent plans and policies on specific subtopics (such as housing, economic development, transportation, parks and open space, arts and culture, sustainability, and others), regulatory policies (such as zoning and city codes), and the city budget.

The comprehensive plan is the policy document in which the City of Aurora most directly addresses topics related to food availability and outlines goals and recommended practices related to food retail and food production. In community outreach events during the plan's development, residents identified the need for better access to food including fresh and healthy food options available in every neighborhood (p. 21). Community members also demonstrated strong support for community gardens and urban agriculture (p. 21). The comprehensive plan defines a "Healthy Community Principle," which recognizes that "Eating healthy food, walking and exercising, living in a clean and safe environment and having access to medical care improves the lives of all Aurorans" (p. 92). Furthermore, within the "Healthy Community Principle," the City articulates one goal and four recommended practices related to healthy food access and urban agriculture:

Goal:

"Neighborhoods should have safe and convenient access to retail outlets that offer healthy and/or fresh food choices."

Recommended Practices:

- "Support the establishment of retail outlets that provide healthy and/or fresh foods that are conveniently accessible to neighborhoods across the city."
- "Encourage grocery stores...to locate at easily accessible locations and provide goods and services to meet local needs and preferences."
- "Support programs that improve access to healthy food systems and food security..."
- "Increase opportunities for neighborhood gardening and urban agriculture."

Source: *Aurora Places*, p. 92



Within these sections of the comprehensive plan, the City defines a clear goal and recommended practices for food production and food retail that are aligned with community priorities. Food access, which for the purposes of this report refers to no-cost assistance programs like food pantries or food banks, only appears as an oblique reference in the third recommended practice (“Support programs that improve access to healthy food systems and food security”). As with any comprehensive plan, the document is not a prescriptive action plan for advancing this goal or implementing these practices. Furthermore, in the comprehensive plan’s “Implementation Action Matrix” (p. 103-105), which “suggests actions and projects that may be taken in the near term to implement Aurora Places recommendations” (p. 103), there are no suggested actions or projects that explicitly advance these food and agriculture-related goals and practices. Therefore, it is all the more critical that subsequent action plans, strategies, and policies explicitly incorporate food production, food retail, and food access priorities.

The comprehensive plan is the policy document in which the City of Aurora most directly addresses topics related to food availability and outlines goals and recommended practices related to food retail and food production.

Cross-referencing food retail, food production, and food access in other Aurora plans

In addition to a detailed review of the comprehensive plan, FJNWA closely read through additional planning documents related to topics that intersect with the food system: public health, housing, transportation, economic development, sustainability, and open space. Table 1 on the following pages summarizes the extent to which food retail, food production, and food access issues appear in each document, and identifies gaps and opportunities for future integration of food-related goals and practices in these intersectional areas.

Table 1. Cross-referencing food retail, food production, and food access in other Aurora plans

Topic and Documents	To what degree and how do food retail, food production, and food access issues appear in the plan?	Opportunities and Gaps
Public Health Adams County Health Dept. - Community Health Improvement Plan (in development)	Through the course of partner and community engagement, Adams County Health Department has identified and adopted three focus areas for the community health improvement plan: • Economic security • Housing • Access to care	There are opportunities to integrate food security priorities and strategies - which could include food production, food retail, and/or food access - into the Economic Security focus area, for which the visions is: “In a thriving Adams County, there are equitable, reliable, and resilient economic opportunities, including assistance when needed, for all people to build a financial future that can adapt to changes in the economy and needs across the lifespan and benefits future generations.”
 Arapahoe County Public Health – Community Health Improvement Plan (in development)	In the initial phase of developing a community health improvement plan, Arapahoe County Public Health (ACPH) identified six potential focus areas for the community health improvement plan (CHIP): Healthy and Affordable Food, Economic Security and Mobility, Healthy and Affordable Housing, Safety, Access to Physical and Behavioral Care, and Healthy Environment. In June 2024, with additional input and prioritization from representatives of agencies across the county, the ACPH Board of Health adopted Economic Security and Mobility and Safety as the two priorities for the CHIP. Within each of these priorities, there are nested topics: “Through the priority of Economic Security, we will leverage community assets, expertise, and resources to improve conditions associated with access to affordable physical and behavioral care, nutritious and healthy food, and safe and affordable housing. Through the priority of Safety, we will seek to increase conditions that foster and support socially connected and safe communities.”	With the adoption of these two priority areas and the inclusion of access to nutritious and affordable food within the Economic Security and Mobility focus, there is an opportunity for the northwest Aurora community and FJNWA to collaborate with the public health department on strategies, initiatives, and projects aimed at improving access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally important foods. In late summer 2024, ACPH will convene community, organizational, and government stakeholders to help develop CHIP goals, objectives, strategies, and performance metrics for each focus area.
 Housing City of Aurora Housing Strategy (2020)	There is just one reference to food in the 2020 housing study, which cites data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017 Consumer Expenditure Survey to illustrate that households that are moderately or severely burdened by housing costs spend less on food than similarly sized households that are not burdened by housing costs (84% and 65% of the average monthly food budget for an unburdened household, respectively). These data quantify the trade-off between housing cost burden and household food budgets.	A Housing Strategic Plan with recommendations and strategies to address short- and long-term housing needs is an action item in Aurora’s comprehensive plan. However, FJNWA is not presently aware of the timeline for the development of this plan. When this plan is developed, there may be opportunities to link food access and affordable housing strategies, such as incentives for developing community gardens and food forests (perennial food-producing crops) at or near multi-family dwellings and/or affordable housing units.

Topic and Documents

To what degree and how do food retail, food production, and food access issues appear in the plan?

Opportunities and Gaps

Transportation

[Adams County Transportation Master Plan](#) (2022)

The Adams County transportation master plan recognizes grocery stores as “key community locations.” Access to key community locations is a criteria for project prioritization with respect to the pedestrian network (sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.), bicycle network, and roadways. Other food access locations such as food pantries, community gardens, urban farms, farmers markets, and small markets are not mentioned in the plan.

[Arapahoe County 2040 Transportation Master Plan](#) (2021)

There are no direct references to access to essential locations like grocery stores, food pantries, farmers markets, or cultural markets in the Arapahoe County Master transportation plan.

In 2024, the City of Aurora is developing a multi-modal transportation master plan - the first of its kind for Aurora. Through the plan development process, the City will look at safety and mobility issues for walking, biking, rolling, taking transit, and driving a vehicle. There are opportunities for advocacy to ensure that food retail, food production sites, and food access points are priority locations for transit stops and that Aurora designs complete neighborhoods where essentials such as food are available in safe, convenient, and affordable ways that do not require car ownership.

Economic Development

[Aurora Places: Planning Tomorrow's City](#) (2018)

As of July 2024, there is no city-wide economic development plan. Until such a plan exists, the comprehensive plan is the city's guiding document on economic development. The comprehensive plan does not draw specific links between economic development and food retail or local food production.

[Immigrant Integration Plan 2020-2030](#) (2020)

The Immigrant Integration Plan's offers goals related to entrepreneurship among immigrants and refugees, such as low barriers to starting a business, and recognizes that immigrants and refugees are “over-represented among owners of so-called ‘main-street’ businesses” that include “retail, accommodation and food services, and neighborhood services that anchor neighborhood-level economic growth and revitalization” (p. 21). Moreover, this plan recognizes that “These types of businesses are especially important in a city like Aurora, which receives over half its revenue from sales tax (p. 21).”

There are efforts underway by City Council and City staff to develop economic development strategies for the specific wards of the city. There are two planning and policy processes on the horizon for northwest Aurora: 1. a research study about community economic development and special districts, which is preparatory work for an economic development strategic plan for Original Aurora (Northwest Aurora), and 2. retail strategies specific to Ward I and Ward III that will identify City staff, programs, and resources to support businesses and thus increase sales tax revenue. Both of these strategies present opportunities to integrate community priorities, such as supporting small food retailers in northwest Aurora.

Parks and Open Space

[Our Parks, Our Places: A Plan for Aurora's Parks, Recreation, and Open Space](#) (2023)

There are several mentions of community gardens in the parks and open space plan. However, this is mainly to demonstrate that community gardens mostly exist in neighborhood parks as opposed to pocket parks or special use parks (p. 28). This plan reports that Aurora has fewer community gardens per capita than both the national median and the “aspirational peer city” median (p. 38). However, it does not go as far as to make a goal of increasing the number of community gardens per capita.

The City of Aurora has community garden agreements with Denver Urban Gardens on nine city-owned properties in the parks and open space system.

The parks plan identifies neighborhoods in the northwest and central west of Aurora as areas of highest need for parks and open spaces, based on criteria of having the highest concentrations of vulnerable residents who lack park and open space access (p. 45). An expansion of parks and open space in these areas could lead to opportunities to develop additional community gardens.

Northwest Aurora is assessed as middle in terms of tree equity gaps (p. 51). There could be opportunities for food forests in these areas.

Topic and Documents	To what degree and how do food retail, food production, and food access issues appear in the plan?	Opportunities and Gaps
Sustainability	Local food production is incorporated into the 2009 Aurora Sustainability Plan's vision: "Community gardens are incorporated into neighborhoods, designated parks and open space areas to ensure all citizens have access to healthy and sustainable eating opportunities" (p. 1). Community gardens are further discussed as green infrastructure (p. 19) and recognized for their environmental, economic, social, and health benefits (p. 17-19). However, since this plan was part of the 2009 comprehensive plan, it is no longer a guiding document for Aurora's policies, regulations, and budget. The 2012 Sustainable Infill and Redevelopment Design Handbook (which was a derivative of the 2009 comprehensive plan) recognizes that "Local food production is a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies. Sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal economic, environmental, and social health of Aurora citizens" (p. 29). The handbook includes a section on "Local Food Production" that offers recommendations and strategies for the voluntary inclusion of community gardens, greenhouses, rooftop gardens, composting, farmers markets, and other food retailers in development projects. The most recent 2023 report on environmental projects in Aurora states that 17 public and private community gardens in Aurora have been established since 2017.	As the City of Aurora planning department prepares to draft an update to the city's sustainability plan, there are opportunities for community-based organizations and community leaders to participate in an advisory group and advocate for the inclusion of food production, food retail, food waste, composting, and resource recycling strategies and priorities in the sustainability plan. These food- and agriculture-related strategies contribute to sustainable and responsible stewardship of land, water, and air resources, and are important in the advancement of environmental justice and climate action in Aurora.

Implementation of Recommended Practices and Advancement of Goals through Regulatory Policies and Financial Resources



Regulatory Policies: Zoning and City Codes

Overall, Aurora's zoning and city codes have been updated to reflect the comprehensive plan's goals and recommended practices related to food production and food retail. The zoning and city codes are fairly permissive of food production and food retail activities and do not present regulatory barriers.

Zoning and city codes for food production

When the zoning code and unified development ordinance (city codes) were updated in accordance with the 2018 comprehensive plan, Aurora created a new land use definition for **urban agriculture**: "The use of a parcel of land five acres or smaller in size for the cultivation of food and/or horticultural crops, composting, aquaponics, aquaculture and/or hydroponics. This use may include the production of food products from food grown on the premises and accessory keeping of animals or bees subject to City regulations, but does not include cultivation of marijuana."³⁵ As related to urban agriculture, there are regulations for season extension structures and other accessory structures (such as greenhouses, hoop houses, cold frames, and storage sheds), the operation hours for loud equipment, and the keeping of chickens, ducks, and bees.³⁶ Importantly, urban agriculture is a permitted use in ALL zone districts, which is to say EVERYWHERE in the city.³⁷

The City of Aurora created a new land use definition for urban agriculture, which is permitted in all zone districts throughout the city.

Even so, as seen in Map 4, community gardens and community farms are mostly concentrated in northwest Aurora and central Aurora (north of Alameda Pkwy and west of Airport Blvd). This distribution of community gardens may speak to the distribution of multi-family dwellings, where a larger number of residents do not have access to outdoor growing spaces where they live and therefore seek to access growing space in shared gardens. The locations of community gardens echo the locations of low and very low socioeconomic index scores, with the exception of the gardens in the far east and south parts of Aurora. No community gardens exist in census block groups with very high socioeconomic index scores.

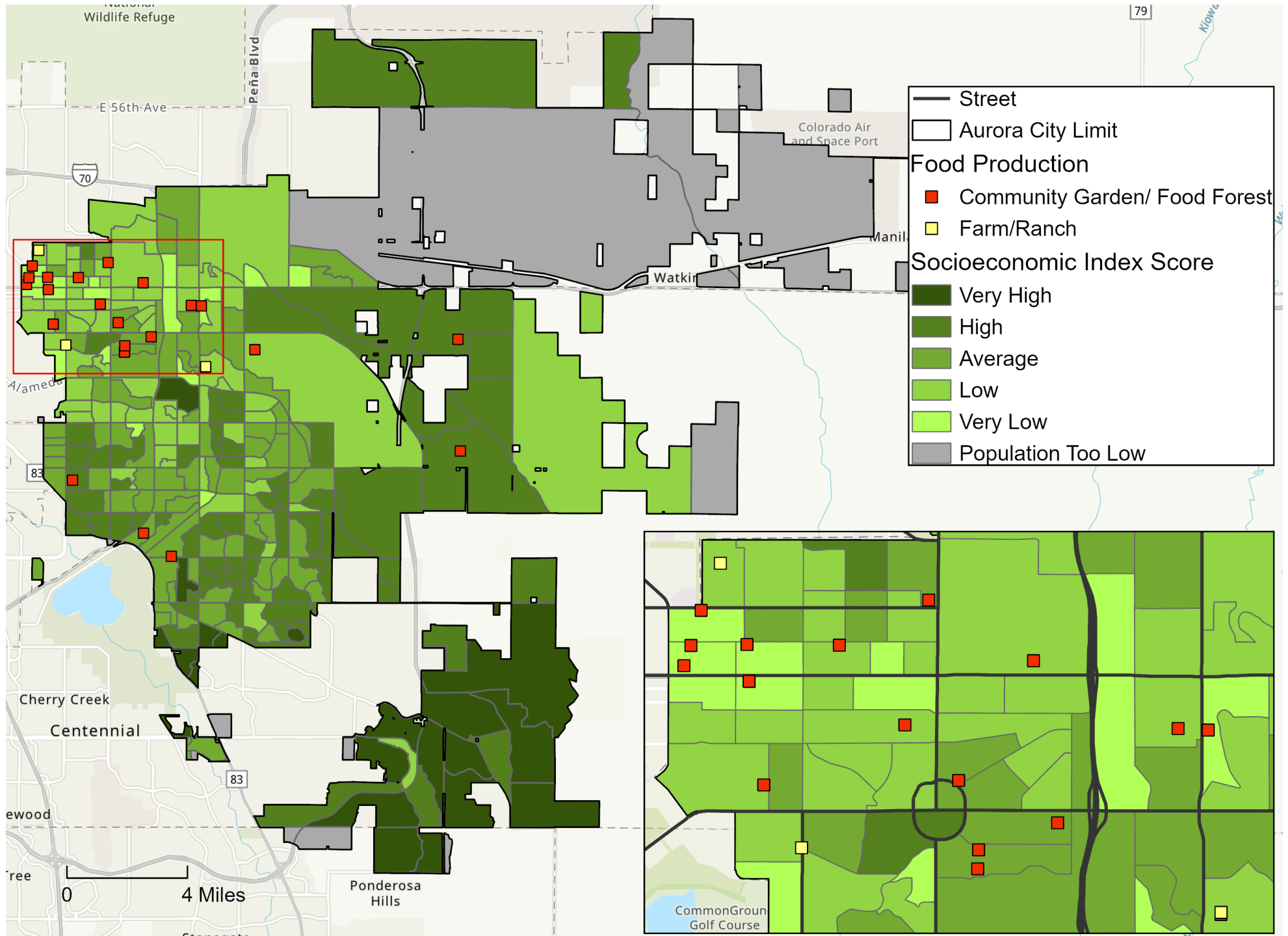
The vast majority of community gardens in Aurora (21 of 23) are affiliated with Denver Urban Gardens (DUG), a nonprofit organization that builds and administers community gardens throughout six counties in the metropolitan area. DUG has land agreements with the City of Aurora, school districts, nonprofit organizations, and churches. All three known urban farms depicted on the map are associated with local nonprofit organizations and located in northwest Aurora. Delaney Farm, which is a partnership between Project Worthmore and Denver Urban Gardens, is located on the historic 158-acre property that is also part of Aurora Parks and Open Space public land. The other two urban farms are located on private land.

City codes allow for the keeping of beehives in residential areas with specific restrictions on maintenance, placement and density of hives, and design of hive boxes.³⁸ City codes also allow for the keeping of chickens and ducks in residential areas with a permit and specific restrictions on number, type (no roosters), placement and size of coops and enclosures, and husbandry or care.³⁹ Larger-scale agriculture (greater than five acres in size)⁴⁰ is more limited in zone districts and is mainly allowed in the newer and more rural areas of the city (eastern and southeastern), as well as in limited industrial and open space zones in the older parts of the city (northwest, west, and central).⁴¹

Zoning and city codes for food retail

With respect to food retail, Aurora's zoning and city codes allow for both brick-and-mortar food retail and temporary food sales events (like farmers markets) in reasonable locations throughout the city. Food retail is not separately regulated from other types of small and large retailers of all sorts of goods and services.⁴² Generally, small and large retailers are permitted in mixed-use zones that follow the major road corridors of the city.⁴³ Small retail is allowed in additional locations in Original Aurora (northwest Aurora), if they meet certain conditions such as being located at an intersection in a mixed use area.⁴⁴

Map 4: Food Production in Aurora





Aurora's zoning and city codes allow for both brick-and-mortar food retail and temporary food sales events (like farmers markets) in reasonable locations throughout the city. Generally, small and large retailers are permitted in mixed-use zones that follow the major road corridors of the city.

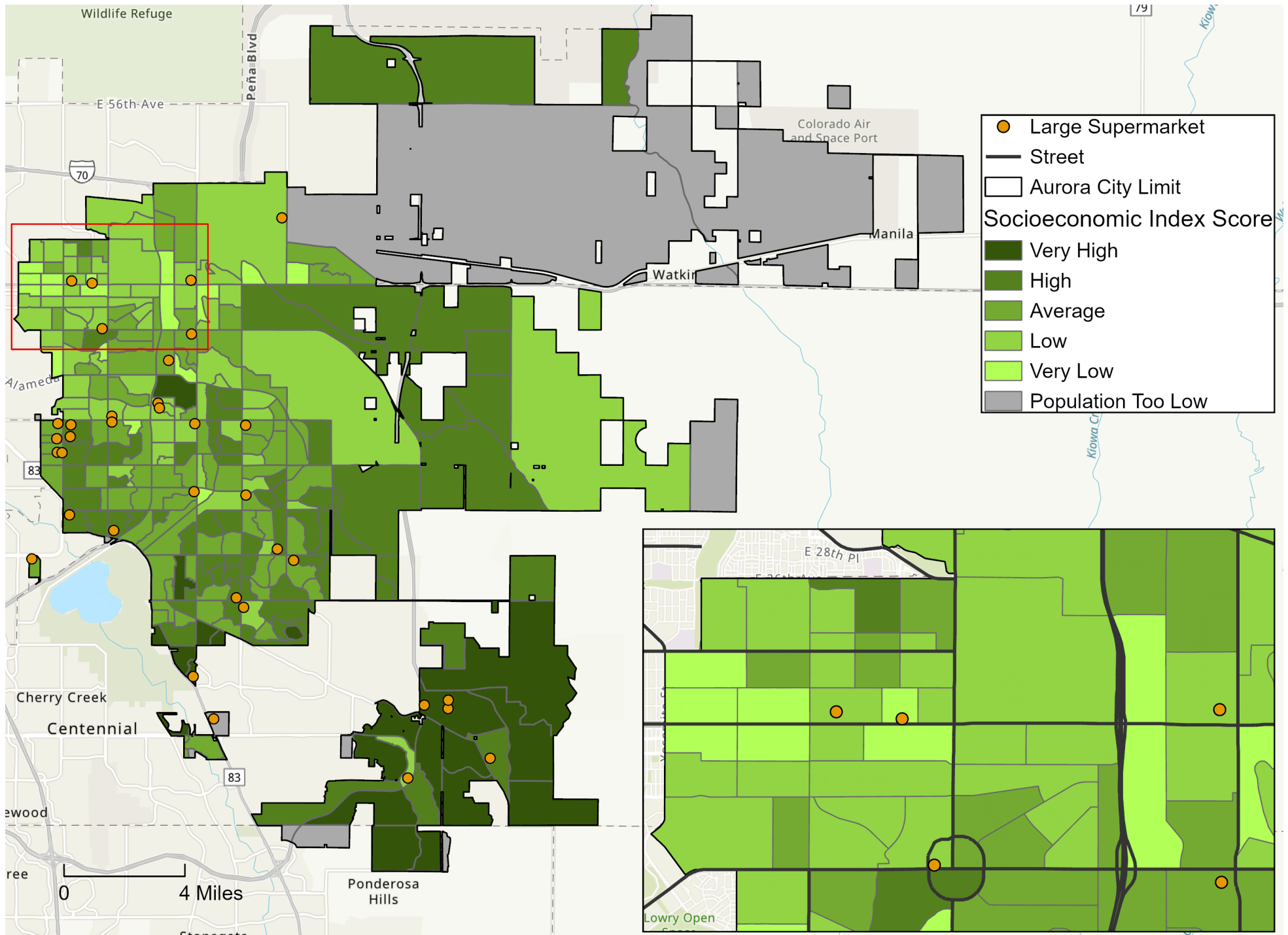
Large supermarkets, grocery stores, and membership stores (like Costco and Sam's) almost universally accept benefits from federal food programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Store eligibility requirements for WIC are stricter than requirements for SNAP and require a broader and more specific inventory of food items, thus making WIC eligibility out of reach for most small food retailers. These assistance programs expand food budgets for households with limited income, and having SNAP and WIC eligible stores located near where program participants live alleviates some barriers to food procurement such as transportation or mobility challenges, limited time to purchase or prepare foods, and affordability issues.

As seen in Map 5, there is an uneven distribution of large supermarkets and other large grocery stores (greater than 15,000 square feet) throughout the city. Several areas in the city offer multiple large grocery store options in a concentrated area, including on Havana Street between Mississippi Avenue and Iliff Avenue, along Mississippi Avenue between Havana Street and Buckley Road, and in southeast Aurora along Smoky Hill Road. In contrast, residents living in northwest Aurora have sparse options for large grocery retailers, and residents in far east and northeast Aurora must travel longer distances to access food retail options. With the closure of the Walmart Neighborhood Market at Colfax and Havana in early June 2024 and the potential for additional grocery store closures in the coming years, options for full-service grocery stores in northwest Aurora may become severely limited. Limitations in transportation or physical mobility in combination with longer distances to large grocery stores especially affects households that use public transit, do not own a vehicle or have a driver's license, and include elders or people with physical disabilities. According to U.S. Census data, in the 80010 zip code in northwest Aurora, 14.21% of households (equivalent to 1 in 7 households) do not have a vehicle, which is a stark comparison to only 5.8% of Aurora households overall (equivalent to 1 in 17) do not have a vehicle.

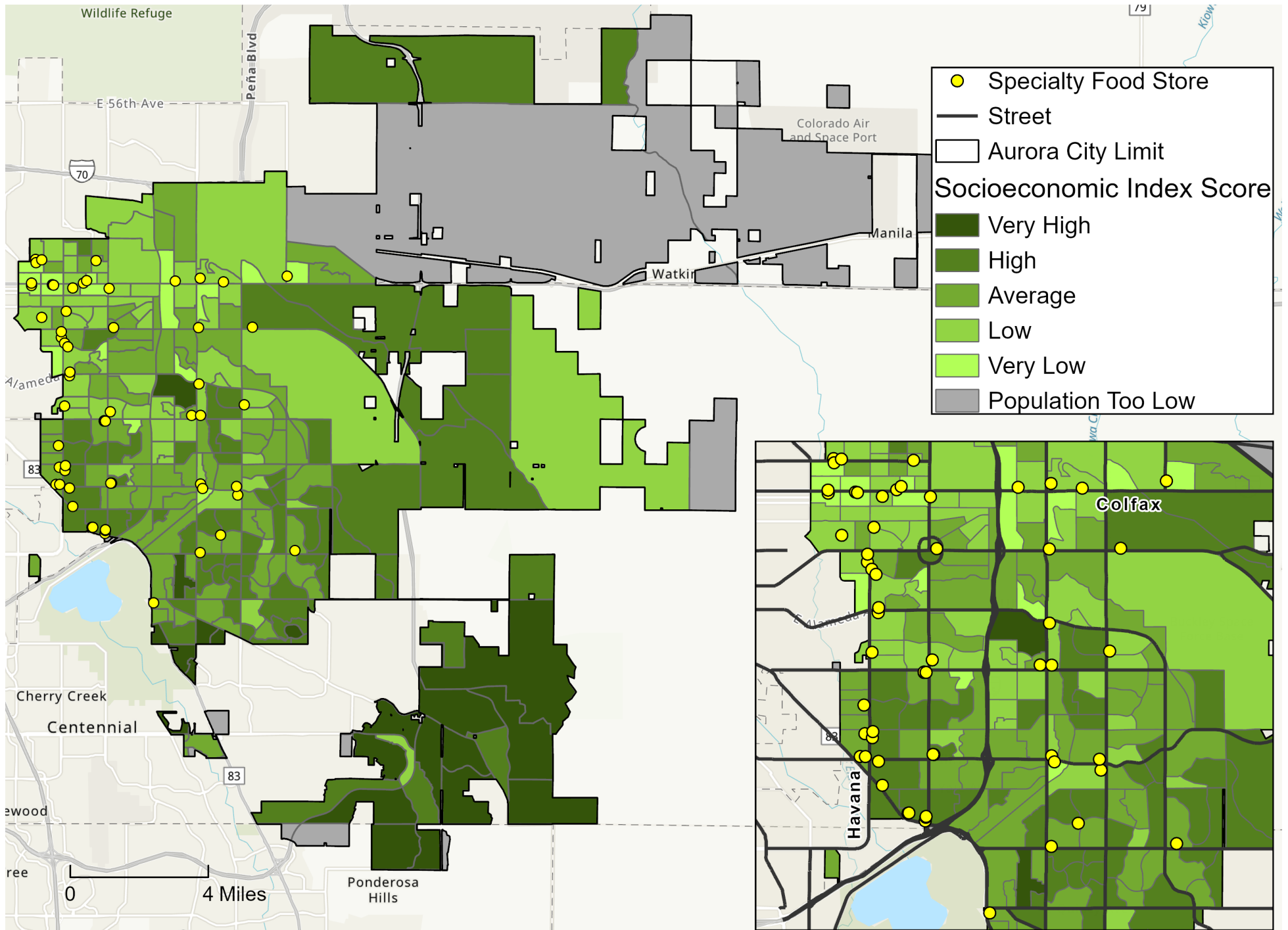
One of Aurora's unique assets in food retail are the many small, independently-owned specialty food stores (which includes small markets, cultural markets, and ethnic markets but excludes convenience stores), including many immigrant- and refugee-owned markets. These food retailers offer food items from around the world such as staple goods like grains, legumes, spices, and cooking oils, as well as meat, dairy, and produce. Many of these stores can accept SNAP benefits, but some may require technical assistance for application and compliance with SNAP requirements, as well as point of sale system upgrades and/or infrastructure improvements like expanded refrigeration.

As seen in Map 6 and Map 7, there is a greater number and density of specialty food stores along two major corridors - in northwest Aurora on East Colfax Avenue between Yosemite Street and Peoria Street, and in western Aurora along Havana Street between Montview Avenue and Parker Road. Observing Map 6, specialty food stores tend to be located in or near census block groups with average to very low socioeconomic index scores. When specialty food stores are overlaid with percent people of color as in Map 7, we observe that the specialty food stores not located along the East Colfax and Havana corridors are located in the areas of the city where there are block groups with higher percentages of people of color, likely indicating the proximity of these stores to their customer bases.

Map 5: Large Supermarkets and Grocery Stores in Aurora



Map 6: Specialty Food Stores and Socioeconomic Index in Aurora



Specialty Food Store

Street

Aurora City Limit

Percent Person of Color

- 0
- 3.7 - 22
- 22.1 - 41
- 41.1 - 60
- 60.1 - 79
- 79.1 - 100
- Too Low or No Population

Wildlife Refuge

E 56th Ave

Peña Blvd

Colorado Air and Space Port

Manila

Watkins

Cherry Creek

Centennial

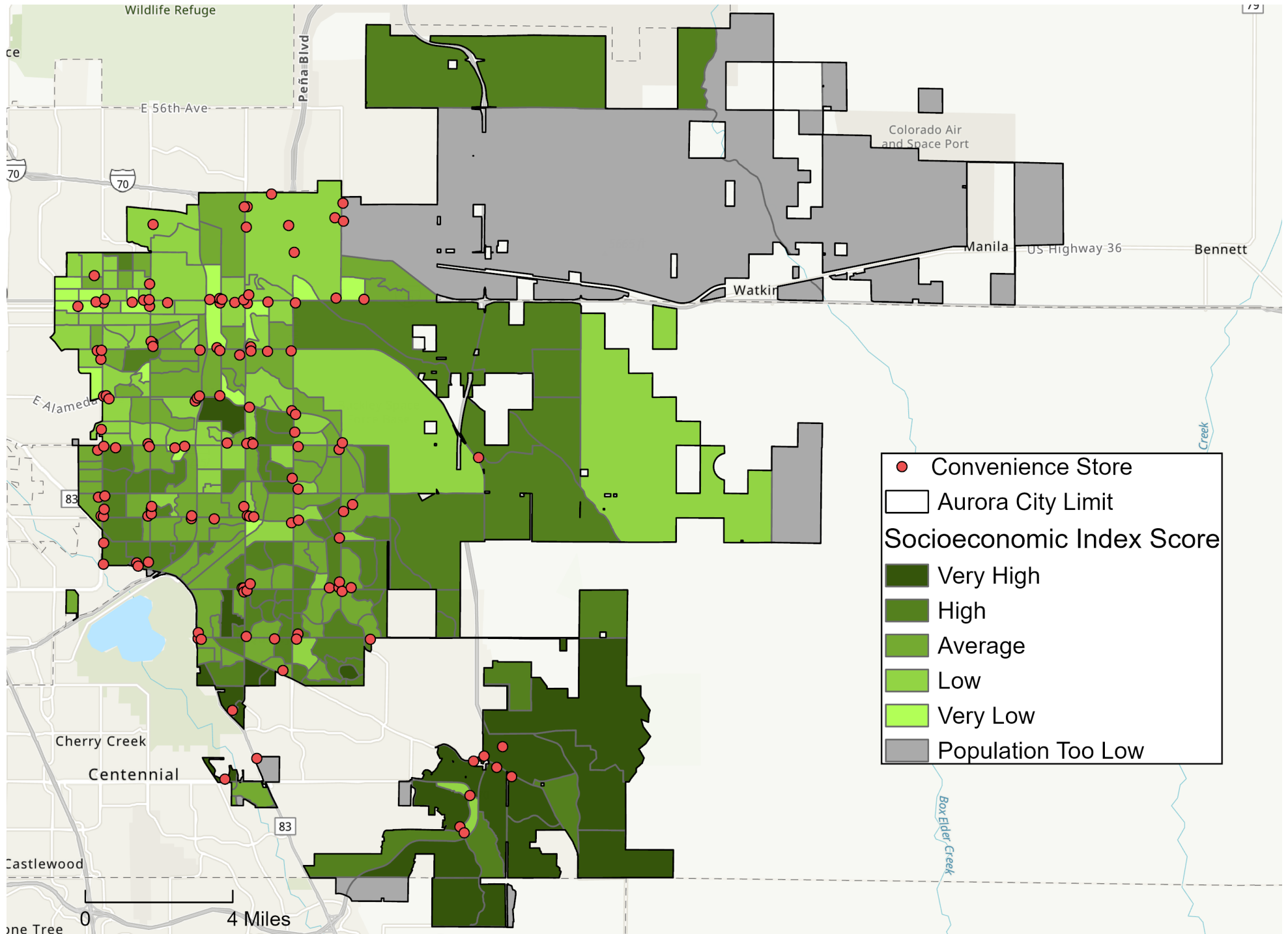
Ponderosa Hills

0 4 Miles

Golfax

Havana

Map 8: Convenience Stores in Aurora



As seen in Map 8, convenience stores are located with relatively uniform distribution and density throughout the city and are principally located at the intersections of major roadways, with the exception of far eastern Aurora and far southeastern Aurora where there are fewer convenience stores. In areas where large grocery stores or specialty food stores are not located, residents with transportation or mobility challenges may rely more on convenience stores as a primary source of food. Although many convenience stores are able to accept SNAP benefits, convenience stores have limitations as primary food access points due to narrow selection, elevated price for staple goods, and emphasis on highly processed foods.

Temporary outdoor food sales such as farmers markets are permitted in most mixed use zones and all special districts, and require a temporary use permit, business license, and compliance with location restrictions, hours of operation, and litter removal.^{45,46} Roadside stands, like farm stands, must comply with urban agriculture standards and are only allowed as temporary uses in all zones except rural residential where it is an accessory use.⁴⁷ Opportunities to purchase produce grown in Aurora are currently few. Aurora will have just two farmers markets in 2024: Rebel Marketplace in Del Mar Park in northwest Aurora and the Southlands Farmers' Market in southeast Aurora. During the peak harvest time from August to October, Nome Park Community Garden hosts a pay-what-you-can farm stand.

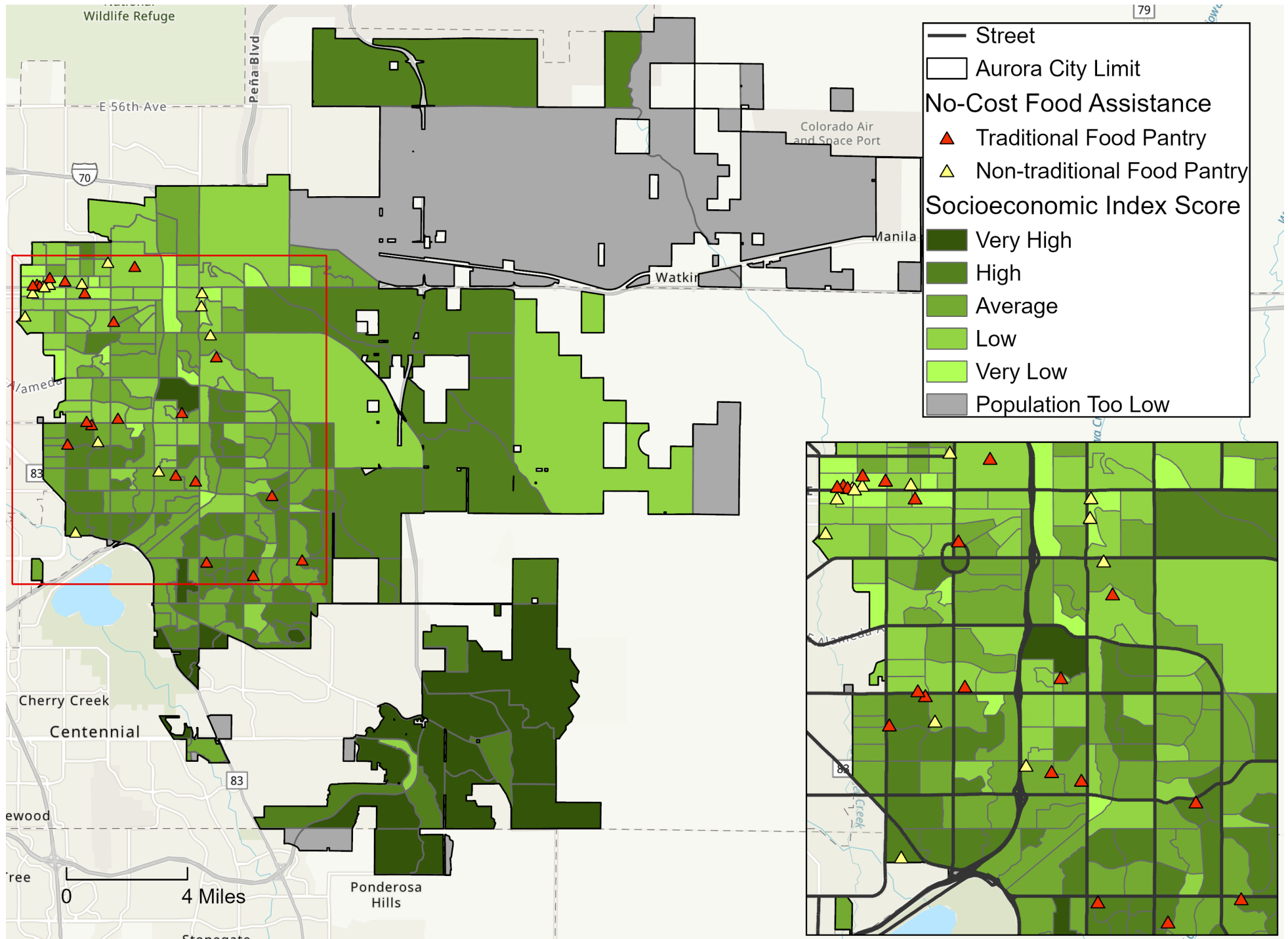
Zoning and city codes for food assistance

Lastly, no-cost food assistance (including food pantries, food banks, and mobile food distribution) is not a land use defined by Aurora's city codes and therefore is not regulated through zoning. We are not aware of restrictions on location or barriers to operation in any areas of the city with the exception of the cost of leasing or owning space to conduct operations. As seen in Map 9, no-cost food assistance programs, including traditional brick-and-mortar food pantries or food banks as well as non-traditional food pantries or food banks (temporary or mobile operations), are located in higher number and density in the northwest part of the city, especially along East Colfax Avenue, where food pantries and food banks are hosted by both nonprofit organizations and faith-based organizations. Throughout central and south Aurora, food pantries are more often hosted by faith-based organizations than by nonprofits and through mobile food distribution sites coordinated by Food Bank of the Rockies.



Several areas in the city offer multiple large grocery store options in a concentrated area, whereas residents in other parts of the city have sparse options for large grocery stores and must travel longer distances to grocery stores.

Map 9: No-Cost Food Assistance in Aurora

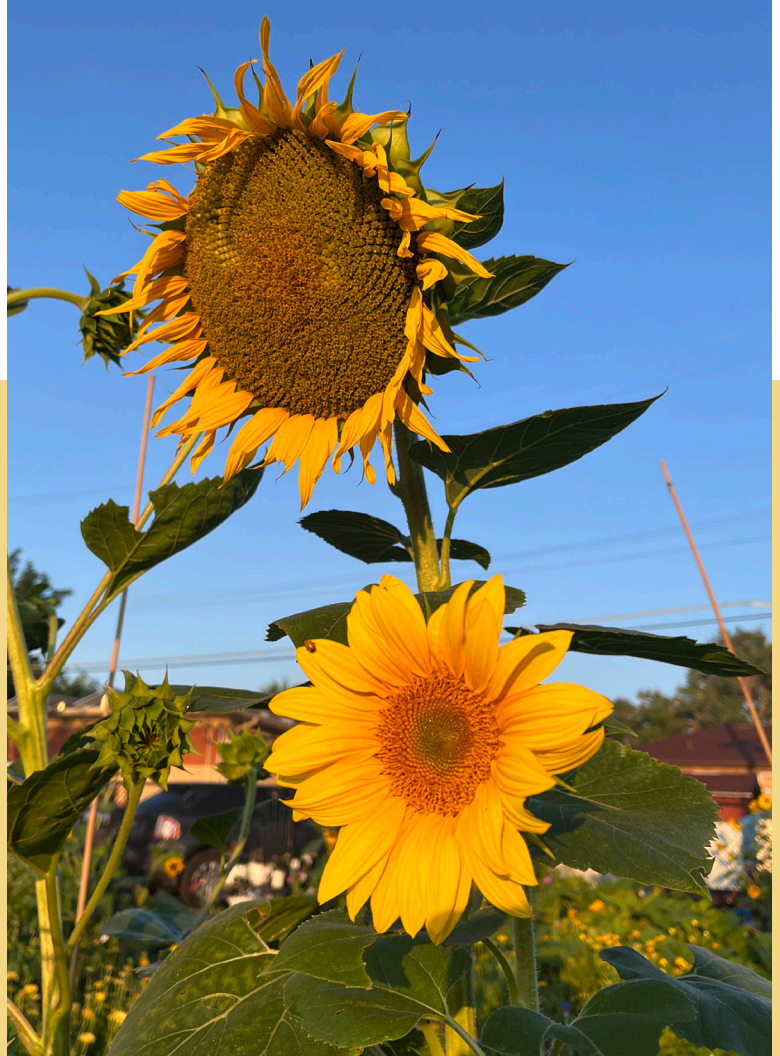


Financial Resources

Although food production and food retail are clearly prioritized in the comprehensive plan and through zoning and city codes, the shortfall in implementation is mainly due to limited budget allocations and lack of dedicated staff positions to advance food and agriculture strategies in the city.

Aurora is largely dependent on grants to carry forward goals and recommended practices above and beyond the core functions and operations of the city. This even includes the need for grants to support critical infrastructure such as transportation improvements. Thus, it is common that efforts to advance goals and practices related to food and agriculture initiatives depend on grant funding, special projects at the City, and/or the efforts of community-based organizations.

With respect to supporting food production in Aurora, the Aurora Water Conservation program, nonprofit partners, and residents themselves are the main parties advancing these goals and practices. Community gardens rely on volunteer garden leaders to organize fellow gardeners and convene workdays. Aurora's three urban farms are all associated with local nonprofit organizations, two of which cultivate on private land and one of which cultivates on public land owned by the City. The Aurora Water Conservation program is the city program most directly involved in food production goals and practices through their work with community gardens and home gardeners. The Water Conservation program convenes the Aurora Community Garden Network (ACGN) and has a \$2,000 annual budget for supporting community garden leaders and community gardeners. Working with community garden leaders through ACGN is an educational strategy to promote water efficiency and is outlined in Aurora Water's 2015 Municipal Water Efficiency Plan.⁴⁸ The Water Conservation program's other offerings are geared more towards home gardeners, who can receive free landscape design services for waterwise landscaping (that can include vegetable gardens), rebates through Grass Replacement Incentive Program (GRIP) for removing grass in favor of waterwise landscaping, irrigation rebates for efficient systems, and education on waterwise gardening. Through Aurora Water Conservation, there could be future opportunities for a grass-to-vegetable-garden conversion rebate program. In 2024, Food Justice NW Aurora launched the Cultivate Aurora Community Garden Mini-Grant Program and awarded funds to support 12 community gardens through infrastructure projects, materials, and community building. FJNWA plans for this to be an annual grant program. FJNWA is also collaborating



with Aurora Water on illustrated signage to promote water conservation and composting practices in community gardens across the city.

While there are resources dedicated to licensing and regulating food retailers, there are fewer resources and staff positions dedicated to supporting their establishment and viability. City staff reflected that the City does not have incentives for food retail to locate in new developments or strategic neighborhoods, but rather that the establishment of new food retail in new developments is dependent on developers' goals. The Aurora-South Metro Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is the main resource available through the city to support small food markets. The SBDC offers ongoing classes, business consultants (specialists in marketing and finances), and legal help for pre-start-ups, start-ups, and existing businesses. However, they do not specialize in food retail. They have had more interaction with food trucks and caterers as part of the SBDC's coordination with the University of Colorado Anschutz campus to purchase from local vendors. Beyond the City's programs, the nonprofit small business lender CEDS Finance has a history of working with immigrant- and refugee-owned businesses including cultural and ethnic food markets.

In order to make more significant advancement of food retail and food production goals and practices within the "Healthy Community Principle," additional financial resources will need to be secured, likely through grants and partnerships with community-based organizations.

Although food production and food retail are clearly prioritized in the comprehensive plan and through zoning and city codes, the shortfall in implementation is mainly due to limited budget allocations and lack of dedicated staff positions to advance food and agriculture strategies in the city. Efforts to advance goals and practices related to food and agriculture initiatives will likely depend on grant funding, special projects at the City, and/or the efforts of community-based organizations. Efforts to advance goals and practices related to food and agriculture initiatives depend on grant funding, special projects at the City, and/or the efforts of community-based organizations.



Opportunities

Systems Change and Environmental Change Strategies

This analysis points to three systems change and environmental change strategies that have also surfaced repeatedly in FJNWA's community discussions over the past two years: supporting existing small markets, using vacant and underutilized land for urban agriculture, and supporting and expanding multilingual and multicultural educational programming. These strategies are described below and framed with needed investigations, possible collaborations and partnerships, and potential policy interventions. The summary of each opportunity also includes feedback from an April 2024 public community meeting hosted by FJNWA during which 40 residents and organizational leaders discussed and ranked these strategies based on their potential for the greatest positive impact on food access for individuals in northwest Aurora. Overall, the participants at the April 2024 meeting found all three opportunities to be important and were concerned about addressing immediate needs and opportunities related to food access and urban agriculture while also maintaining a long-term vision for transforming the local food system for producers and growers, food retailers and entrepreneurs, and consumers.

Support existing small markets

Strategies that support small markets to have more fresh and nutritious food at affordable prices have dual benefits of economic development and healthy food access in areas with limited access to large grocery retailers. Based on mapping food retailers across Aurora, FJNWA noted that northwest and west-central Aurora have the highest concentration of specialty markets along two major corridors: the East Colfax Avenue corridor from the Aurora-Denver border at Yosemite Street to Peoria Street and the Havana Street corridor from 6th Avenue to Iliff Avenue. Moreover, with the closure of the Walmart Neighborhood Market at Colfax and Havana in early June 2024 and the potential for additional grocery store closures in the coming years, small markets are even more critical for food and grocery access in northwest Aurora. This presents both the opportunity and the challenge to fill gaps for grocery access by supporting existing small markets.

In our April 2024 community meeting, participants prioritized supporting small markets as the top strategy. Participants noted that this strategy has the highest potential for short-term positive impact on food access in northwest Aurora because this strategy leverages existing food retail infrastructure in a way that improves food access while also supporting the financial viability of local businesses and the livelihoods of their proprietors. Participants favored supporting small markets because small markets provide year-round food access and could increase demand for local produce during the growing season. Existing small food markets, especially cultural and ethnic markets, are also seen as community and cultural gathering spaces for their customers. Participants also spoke of the desire to build community wealth by keeping money circulating in the local economy through supporting existing small markets. Some challenges that would need to be addressed when undertaking this strategy include the need for logistical support for food procurement and delivery (especially of fresh and local foods), as well as the need to address affordability, perhaps through cooperative agreements between stores to purchase fresh food and staple food items in bulk together.



Participants identified supporting small markets as the strategy with the highest potential for positive short-term impact in northwest Aurora with dual benefits of economic development and fresh food access.

Potential investigations and actions to pursue this strategy include:

- Build relationships and conduct outreach to owner-operators of small food retail businesses to understand the challenges they face and goals they have. This will also help identify needed technical assistance and potential policy impediments to their business viability. This will also serve as the basis for tailored strategies to support each business according to their needs.
- Identify existing resources at the local and state level that provide technical assistance to small businesses and have experience with small food or grocery retailers (e.g., Small Business Development Center, CEDS Finance, Colorado Department of Agriculture, and community based organizations).
- Identify and secure funding to provide additional technical assistance and implement infrastructure improvements (such as modern point of sale systems, refrigerators, freezers, shelving, etc.).
- Connect small businesses with technical assistance to become eligible or reapply for eligibility to accept federal benefits like SNAP and WIC.
- Learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the current supply chain and investigate feasibility of cooperative agreements between stores that allow for stores to purchase items in bulk together, such as fresh produce.
- Host community conversations to understand what residents and current/potential customers want and what, if any, barriers they have to shopping at small markets (e.g., price, selection, awareness of store options, language barriers, etc.)
- Learn from healthy corner store and bodega initiatives in other cities and communities, such as the Los Angeles Food Policy Council's Healthy Neighborhood Market Network.⁴⁹
- Develop a healthy corner store initiative that supports small business viability and improves accessibility and affordability of fresh and culturally important foods.
- Collaborate with the Aurora Office of International and Immigrant Affairs and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to develop trust with immigrant and refugee business owners so they are more likely to access the SBDC's services and resources. Ensure that the SBDC is able to provide services in the client's preferred language. The Immigrant Integration Plan outlines a suite of strategies that could support these businesses (p. 22).⁵⁰

- Consider creating clear legal pathways for start-up food businesses, including for immigrant, refugee and asylee entrepreneurs. Supporting food businesses owned by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), including immigrants, refugees and asylees can increase economic opportunities for those entrepreneurs and expand culturally important food offerings to others in the community who share similar heritages.
- Consider options to incentivize food retail business in priority areas, including areas with large concentrations of immigrants, refugees and asylees. One option is to use overlay districts or other target zone designations to incentivize, retain and attract food businesses in areas of a city where doing so would be helpful for achieving various city goals. For example, by narrowing in on areas with large concentrations of immigrants, refugees and asylees, incentives can increase economic development, increase food access and, support food immigrant-, refugee-, and asylee-owned businesses that sell offerings that may be appealing or culturally important to other people in the surrounding community.
- Launch a marketing campaign to promote small businesses and create opportunities for ongoing communication about new offerings at the food retailers in order to increase customer awareness and demand for small businesses. This could be an expansion of the existing Aurora Eats Guide.⁵¹

Use vacant and underutilized land for urban agriculture

Given that the comprehensive plan and zoning codes in Aurora are supportive of urban agriculture across the city, increasing local food production will depend on securing access to and activating publicly- and privately-owned land for food production infrastructure. Since 2022, the FJNWA community has identified the opportunity to acquire and/or convert vacant or underutilized land for food production in community gardens, urban farms, and greenhouses. For example, FJNWA has developed a comprehensive business plan, operations plan, and financial model for “Cultivate Aurora: A Community Greenhouse Project” to renovate and reactivate 4,000 square feet of greenhouse space owned by the City of Aurora in order to launch food production, create jobs, and offer educational programming to Aurorans.



In our April 2024 community meeting, participants expressed enthusiasm for urban agriculture strategies while also recognizing that urban agriculture should be one of multiple strategies that the FJNWA community pursues. Participants also saw this strategy as fundamental to food sovereignty - the ability for local people to make decisions about and exercise influence in their local food system. Residents of northwest Aurora pointed to opportunities to use available community spaces like schools and churches as food production sites, and were curious about vacant lots in the neighborhoods. While urban agriculture has some temporal limitations due to the short growing season in Colorado, participants are excited about the development of the Cultivate Aurora greenhouses to extend the growing season and add critical food systems infrastructure to Aurora's urban agriculture landscape.

Potential investigations and actions to pursue this strategy include:

- Identify where community garden demand exceeds community garden plot availability.
- Identify public and private land appropriate for urban farms and community gardens. Identify who owns/ administers the land.
- Establish collaborative partnerships and land use agreements for urban agriculture with nonprofit organizations and public or private institutions such as community colleges, universities, school districts, hospitals, and faith communities.
- Develop a streamlined process to apply for the use of public land for urban agriculture (farms and community gardens) on City-owned land.
- Collaborate with the Aurora Parks, Recreation, and Open Space department for the development of community gardens and food forests in high needs areas, in alignment with the 2023 parks and open space plan.⁵²
- Advocate for the integration of urban agriculture strategies and priorities into the City of Aurora's updated sustainability plan.
- Identify opportunities to encourage or incentivize the incorporation of urban agriculture into new development, especially for multi-unit housing. There may be an opportunity to address this within Aurora's Strategic Housing Plan.
- Identify and secure funding to develop and sustain urban agriculture (farms and community gardens) on public or private lands.



Participants identified using vacant and underutilized land for urban agriculture as a strategy that is fundamental to food sovereignty - the ability for local people to make decisions about and exercise influence in their local food system.

Support and expand multilingual and multicultural educational programming

Since the inception of the organization, the FJNWA community identified the desire for more educational opportunities related to food systems and urban agriculture. Developing or expanding multilingual and multicultural educational programming for children, adolescents, and adults to learn how to grow, prepare, and preserve food, as well as to learn about the food system more broadly, would respond to this community desire. This strategy is key to guiding the development of educational programming for FJNWA's "Cultivate Aurora: A Community Greenhouse Project." There are a variety of community-based and nonprofit educational programs in Aurora related to urban gardening, nutrition, and preparing food. Volume of participation and attendance is varied, even though community members repeatedly express interest in education programming during FJNWA meetings.

In our April 2024 community meeting, participants identified educational strategies as overarching and necessary for building community knowledge and leadership in the food system. They saw this strategy as a longer-term strategy focused on future impact, but also that pursuing this strategy in the short-term would be fundamental to pursuing short-term and mid-term strategies such as supporting small food markets and urban agriculture. Participants stated that food systems education is needed at all levels - individual, community, and institutional - in order to be successful in transforming the local food system.

Participants were particularly excited about the opportunity to learn from community members and support their development as leaders, and saw this as a way to increase relevance of educational offerings and to strengthen community connections. Participants indicated that community members are interested in a broad range of topics - food production in a variety of settings, advocacy, research, leadership training, health and wellness, cooking and nutrition, and food safety and storage, among others.

Participants identified educational strategies as overarching and necessary for building community knowledge and leadership in the food system.

Potential investigations and actions to pursue this strategy include:

- Investigate what prevents people from participating in existing programs, such as lack of awareness of programs and classes, language access and/or cultural relevance of the classes and workshops, convenience of locations and time, limited time to participate due to work/life responsibilities, cost of participation or materials, etc.
- Develop strategies for inclusivity and accessibility of educational opportunities, such as offering interpretation and translation services, co-hosting workshops on site at community gardens, and ensuring that locations are accessible for people with physical disabilities.
- Develop a network of multicultural and multilingual educators.
- Develop a holistic food justice and food production curriculum that integrates the contributions of multiple partners and community leaders.
- Adapt curriculum and match appropriate educators for diverse ages.
- Coordinate and collaborate across the community-based and nonprofit educational programs in northwest Aurora to support and promote programming that is offered in multiple languages, settings, and modes of learning.
- Create and implement a multilingual and multi-modal (e.g., social media, text, email, printed material, etc.) communications plan to promote accessible educational programming.
- Identify and secure funding to offer multilingual and multicultural programming, and to compensate community educators for sharing their knowledge.

Current and Upcoming Planning and Policy Processes

Through the LUPA, FJNWA identified that there are three major planning and policy processes on the horizon or currently underway in Aurora that could potentially impact food retail, food production, and food access in northwest Aurora: economic development, sustainability, and multi-modal transportation. Each of these processes presents the opportunity to advocate for community priorities. Additionally, FJNWA has the opportunity to do initial education and capacity building workshops related to each of these planning topics and their intersections with the food system. At the April 2024 community meeting, participants discussed and voted on upcoming planning topics as potential topics for future community learning sessions. While participants recognized all topics as important, participants ranked the topics in the following order: economic development, environmental justice, and multi-modal transportation.

Economic Development and the Food System

Food and agriculture businesses are an important part of our local economy. Through these types of businesses, we can create job opportunities and build community wealth. This topic is in anticipation of the City of Aurora creating an economic development strategy for northwest Aurora and a retail strategy for Ward I in northwest Aurora. We would seek to integrate food and urban agriculture strategies into economic development policies or plans with objectives that include improved accessibility and affordability of fresh and nutritious food in neighborhoods without large grocery stores, improved business viability and sustainability, and increased sales tax revenue for the city.

Environmental Justice and the Food System

There are many interconnections between how we grow, process, transport, and prepare food with the quality of air, water, and soil in our community. People living in different communities within our city are disparately impacted by poor environmental conditions, just as with varied access to nutritious foods across different neighborhoods in Aurora. This topic is in anticipation of the City of Aurora updating the Sustainability Plan, which is related to the stewardship of environmental and natural resources like water quality, air quality, land conservation, and climate change. We would seek to integrate food production and regenerative agriculture strategies into sustainability plan updates and make explicit connections between sustainability, environmental justice, and food production.

Multi-modal Transportation and the Food System

Multi-modal transportation refers to the many ways we can move around the city, such as walking, biking, wheeling, bus, train, car, etc. Transportation is key to how we get to and from stores, food pantries, community gardens, and farmers markets in safe, convenient, and affordable ways. This topic is related to the City of Aurora's planning process to create a multi-modal transportation plan, which was well underway in the first half of 2024. We would seek to integrate food access priorities into the multi-modal transportation plan by prioritizing public and alternative transportation infrastructure to access food outlets (stores, food pantries, farmers markets, community gardens, etc.) for people without cars and addressing safety and convenience of walking, biking, bussing, rolling, scooting, or driving to food retailers, food access points, and community gardens in neighborhoods.

“ Integrating food retail, urban agriculture, and food access strategies and priorities into any plan or policy will also require identifying, securing, and employing sustained funding to implement these strategies, likely through grants and partnerships with community-based organizations.

Overarching Strategies to Build Capacity and Resources

In addition to the specific systems change and environmental change strategies, as well as opportunities to get involved in advocacy during plan development, FJNWA identified two overarching strategies to build capacity and financial resources to pursue Aurora's comprehensive plan goals that align with community priorities related to food retail and food production.

Secure sustained funding for implementation of food and agriculture strategies

The inclusion of food- and agriculture-related goals and practices in Aurora's comprehensive plan alone is insufficient in securing resources to advance goals and recommended practices. Integrating food retail, urban agriculture, and food access strategies and priorities into any plan or policy will also require identifying, securing, and employing sustained funding to implement these strategies, likely through grants and partnerships with community-based organizations.

Advocate for the creation of a food systems staff position in the City of Aurora

This position would steward the food systems goals and recommended practices in Aurora's plans by coordinating internally between municipal departments as well as with public agencies such as human services and public health in Aurora's three counties) and fostering partnerships with community-based organizations and residents.



Moving Forward

The findings presented in this report are part of ongoing, community-based work to transform the local food system in northwest Aurora to better meet the needs and realize the goals of the residents, small businesses, and community-based organizations of the area. FJNWA will use the priorities identified in this report as guidance for allocating resources (including financial resources and staff time) in pursuit of these strategies over the next two to three years. As a follow-up to this report, FJNWA will conduct additional research related to the priority areas, continue to engage residents and organizational partners, build new and strengthen existing partnerships to collectively advance the priority strategies, develop a collaborative action plan for the strategy areas, and identify and seek funding to implement the action plan.

In the coming months, FJNWA will publish an interactive digital version of the maps presented in this report. We hope that the maps and this report will support not only FJNWA's work in the northwest Aurora food system, but will also foment and support the work of other leaders, organizations, and businesses to build a more just, sustainable, and complete food environment for northwest Aurora.



Endnotes

- 1 This analysis includes all responses for which the respondent gave an Aurora zip code, zip code adjacent to Aurora, and respondents that indicated that they have no permanent address or residence. The most common zip code given was 80010 in northwest Aurora, with 104 responses.
- 2 Colorado Health Institute. (2024). 2023 CHAS: Food Security. Available at: <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-food-security>
- 3 BIPOC stands for “Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.”
- 4 USDA Economic Research Service. (November 29, 2023). Food Security and Nutrition Assistance. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/#:~:text=Food%20insecurity%20rates%20are%20highest,and%20very%20low%20of%20food%20security.>
- 5 Feeding America. (2024). Hunger hits black communities harder. Available at: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/black-communities#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20in%202022%2C%20nearly,the%20rate%20of%20white%20people.>
- 6 Cooksey Stowers, K., Jiang, Q., Atoloye, A. T., Lucan, S., & Gans, K. (2020). Racial differences in perceived food swamp and food desert exposure and disparities in self-reported dietary habits. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(19), 7143. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33003573/>
- 7 “The Hunger Vital Sign identifies households as being at risk for food insecurity if they answer that either or both of the following two statements is ‘often true’ or ‘sometimes true’ (vs. ‘never true’):
‘Within the past 12 months we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.’
‘Within the past 12 months the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.’” Quoted from: <https://childrenshealthwatch.org/public-policy/hunger-vital-sign/>
- 8 Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, T., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. A., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers A. F., Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. *Pediatrics*, 126(1), 26-32. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146.
- 9 This analysis includes all responses for which the respondent gave an Aurora zip code, zip code adjacent to Aurora, and respondents that indicated that they have no permanent address or residence. The most common zip code given was 80010 in northwest Aurora, with 104 responses.
- 10 Colorado Health Institute. (2024). 2023 CHAS: Food Security. Available at: <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-food-security>
- 11 Colorado Health Institute. (2024). 2023 CHAS: Food Security. Available at: <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-food-security>
- 12 Evaluation of the 2023 strategic retreat indicated significant and diverse community representation:
 - 46 total participants with simultaneous interpretation in 3 languages (English, Spanish, Nepali)
 - 70% of participants were BIPOC, including people who identify as Latinx, Black, Asian American, Indigenous, Nepali
 - 70% of participants were Aurora residents, the remainder were representatives of organizations located in or significantly serving Aurora
 - 7 youth (high school or college aged, ~15-25 years)
 - 5 elders (60+ years)
 - Participants reflected various roles in the local food system: residents, youth activists, small businesses, nonprofit organizations, farmers, local gardeners and garden leaders, agency or institution staff, parents, farmers markets, transportation advocates, food assistance programs, medical students, and food distributors.

- 13 The Institute for People, Place, and Possibility. (n.d.). An Introduction to Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) Change. Available at: <https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/An-Introduction-to-Policy-Systems-and-Environmental-PSE-Change>
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- 21 City of Aurora. 2023. Environment Aurora Report 2018-2022. Available at: https://cdns5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1881137/File/Residents/Environmental%20Review/2018-22EnvironmentAuroraReport_8.5x11_Vertical.pdf
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- 23 City of Aurora. 2009. Comprehensive Plan, Chapter II. Aurora's Sustainability Plan. Available at: https://cdns5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1881137/File/Business%20Services/Development%20Center/Sustainability/002546.pdf
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- 36 <https://aurora.municipal.codes/UDO/146-3.3.4>
- 37 <https://aurora.municipal.codes/UDO/146-3.2>
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- 39 <https://aurora.municipal.codes/Code/14-134>
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