



# Looking Back, Looking Forward

## REFLECTIONS ON ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL AGRICULTURE AND URBAN FARMING IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND

Prince George's County is deeply rooted in agricultural history. From the robust farming practices of the Piscataway people to a tobacco economy built off the backs of enslaved laborers, the region is steeped in agricultural traditions and a dark history of slavery and struggle. From these roots, regional farmers, particularly Black and Brown urban farmers, are sowing new seeds of food and environmental justice through innovative models of food production, access, education, and stewardship that is redefining our Country's food system.

### THE ISSUE

Following the invasion of European colonizers, the County became one of the biggest tobacco producing regions with the highest number of slave holdings.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the economy grew due to increased numbers of enslaved people that produced the cash crop for the wealth and profit of White slaveholders. Even after abolition in 1864, tobacco production continued on land that remained largely in the hands of former slaveholders. While no longer legally enslaved, African Americans had little choice but to continue working the land as tenant farmers and sharecroppers.<sup>2</sup>



By the turn of the 20th century, land ownership began to shift as African American families began purchasing parcels of land and developing farming communities throughout the County. The agricultural landscape changed from a predominantly White-owned, tobacco producing region to a more diverse farming economy. While an increasing number of Black farms developed throughout the early 1900s, by the middle of the century the number of farms, both Black and White, began to decrease in Prince George's County and throughout the US. This was the result of urbanization and development that paved over much of the County's agricultural lands to make way for an influx of new residents and new industry. Simultaneously, Black farmers were increasingly pushed out of the farming economy due to discriminatory financing practices that forced many farmers off their lands.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the County holds 367 farms according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, a decrease of 83 percent since the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> While the County now holds 29 percent of all Black-owned farms in Maryland,<sup>5</sup> the decrease in farms has negatively impacted our County's economy and our health. We know that regional farms and local markets stimulate local economies by creating more jobs and more revenue that can be reinvested and retained in the local economy.<sup>6</sup> Further, by increasing local food production, we can increase access to healthy food options that, for many residents, are only available in areas outside their neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> Lack of healthy food access is one of the many contributing factors to high rates of diet related chronic disease. In 2013, 71 percent of all Prince Georgians were overweight or obese with over 74 percent of rates impacting communities of color.<sup>8</sup>

## POLICY CAMPAIGN: URBAN AGRICULTURE PROPERTY TAX CREDIT

With this in mind, members of the Food Equity Council (FEC) and partners supported the passage of multiple pieces of legislation to promote urban agriculture and enhance local food production. In 2015, the FEC convened stakeholders, including the Prince George's Soil Conservation District (PGSCD), the Prince George's Department of Permitting, Inspections and Enforcement, and local urban farmers, to draft and share promising practices for the Urban Agriculture Property Tax Credit Legislation. Through the leadership of Councilwoman Mary Lehman and recommendations from the FEC, the Council passed [CB-74-2015](#) to implement a property tax credit for urban land used for agricultural purposes.

## POLICY CAMPAIGN: EASING RESTRICTIONS FOR URBAN FARMING

Throughout the next four years, the FEC continued to advocate for additional legislation to promote urban farming and regional food production. These efforts were realized with the passage of [CB-25-2016](#) that allowed urban farming on certain residential and agriculturally zoned lands throughout the County. This was further expanded through additional legislation ([CR-17-2019](#)) that allowed urban farming as a permitted use in Prince George's County's Gateway Arts District. The issue was first raised by local farmer Doug Adams who was unable to acquire a building permit to construct a hoop house at New Brooklyn Farms, an urban farm he operates in the Gateway Arts District. Adams brought the issue to District 3 Councilwoman Dani Taveras who introduced the legislation to the Council. Following public testimony by members of the FEC, PGSCD, and Adams, the resolution passed in September 2019.

Two months later, urban farmers and partners celebrated the passage of [CB-14-2019](#), a bill led by Councilmember Taveras that amended the definition of "Urban Farming" to allow both for-profit and nonprofit entities to operate. After years of hard work researching, drafting, and testifying for legislative change, stakeholders, including the FEC, New Brooklyn Farms, PGSCD, Hustlers2Harvest, Stephanie Freeman of Relish Market, graduates of ECO City Farms' Growing Urban Farmers and Farms Program, and three participants of PGSCD Summer Youth Employment Program, advocated for the Urban Farm Definition Amendment to expand urban farming in the County into industrial, commercial, and additional residential zones.



"After a 2 year-long journey, the passing of CR-17-2019 and CB-14-2019 represent a huge milestone in my journey with New Brooklyn Farms and a resounding encore of the county's commitment to taking a stake in the burgeoning urban agriculture and local food movements, respectively. As an independent small business in a relatively unprecedented space, it's an honor to be the impetus and advocate for legislative change that empowers future green entrepreneurs to realize environmental and economic sustainability. This victory would not be possible without key mentorship and support from my Prince George's County Food Equity Council family, public support from the

city of Mt. Rainier and region at large, and the favorable consideration of Councilmember Taveras, the entire county council, and the county planning board."

-- Doug Adams, New Brooklyn Farms

## CREATING RESOURCES FOR EXISTING AND EMERGING LOCAL FARMERS

The three pieces of new urban agriculture legislation were a tremendous accomplishment for regional farmers and producers. Following the passage of the CB-25-2016, the FEC, PGSCD, the University of Maryland Extension in Prince George's County, and ECO City Farms partnered to launch [Bloomin PGC](#), a website and technical assistance collaborative to support urban farmers with resources on business, marketing, land use, education, training, and legislation and regulations. In addition, through the PGSCD Office, the County funded a full-time position to support existing urban farmers and help new farmers launch sustainable businesses.

## LOOKING FORWARD

In the last few years, the FEC has continued to advocate for new policies and practices to support existing producers and develop opportunities for emerging farmers. Some of these accomplishments include:

- Supported the launch of a County Agricultural Resources Advisory Committee to advise legislators and county decision makers on policy and economic development strategies related to local agriculture;
- Worked with M-NCPPC Parks Department & Office of Central Services to advance local food production through a) identifying parkland and County surplus land to lease to local farmers (both urban and rural) and community gardeners, and b) provide support services to farmers and gardeners leasing the land including water hook ups and fencing; and
- Expanded marketing opportunities for urban farmers by reducing fees for farmers market vendors, extended farmers market operating days and hours, advocated for zoning allowances for aquaponics, and supporting legislation related to promotional signage for agricultural operations.



The FEC is eager to continue collaborating with stakeholders and partners throughout the County to promote innovative solutions to transform the regional food system by supporting local farmers and producers that grow food for and in the community. By examining the County's brutal history of slavery and discrimination, the need for further advocacy, resources, and reparations is clear. Through this lens, the FEC is committed to advocating for Prince George's farmers, particularly Black and Brown farmers, who are transforming the County's food system. By supporting new opportunities for these farming and creating new markets to sell and distribute food to the community, the FEC and County-wide partners are facilitating myriad economic and health benefits that will increase food access and improve the lives of all Prince Georgians.

**If you are interested in participating in an upcoming FEC meeting or becoming a member, please contact Sydney Daigle, FEC Director, at [Sydney@pgcfec.org](mailto:Sydney@pgcfec.org).**



## ABOUT THE FOOD EQUITY COUNCIL:

The Prince George's County Food Equity Council (FEC) is a local food policy council that works to help residents grow, sell, and choose healthy foods. Since 2013, FEC has been a voice for county residents at the policymaking table. The FEC focuses on systematic and sustainable changes to promote health, economic opportunity, food security, and well-being in Prince George's by advocating for policy that creates a more equitable local food system. The FEC is housed within the Institute for Public Health Innovation.

## SOURCES

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