

Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)/Food Co-Ops

In a Nutshell

Community supported agriculture (CSAs) programs are an economic system of producing and distributing food supplies more locally to the consumers. Most CSAs operate as a partnership between regional farmers and consumers. The customers pay up-front for a subscription service for the weekly delivery of fresh produce. Often the food is delivered in a single box - recent innovations include customized ordering and more than only produce items. Food cooperatives, or co-ops, are formal partnerships organized for food distribution but owned by their employees and/or customers, rather than by corporations. Most commonly a co-op will own and manage a traditional grocery store, but they can also be a "buying club" more similar to CSAs. The goal of either model is very similar - to better connect local consumers with local farmers and food producers. CSAs and Co-ops are related, but different than [urban agriculture programs](#), [farmer's markets](#), and [local food consumption](#).

The “How To”

For Governments

Typically local government will have a limited role in implementing CSAs and food co-ops. Very few if any governments operate either local foods program. More commonly residents and farmers will start a CSA or food co-op. But it is still important for units of local government to present a local foods and agriculture-friendly environment for such activities to operate. Some municipalities support a local farmers market on city land, in order to encourage local food production and access to fresh fruits and vegetables. In some cases local regulations discourage such activities. There is more information on the Planning & Zoning tab.

At a more policy-focused level, the University of Missouri Extension offers [resources](#) on policies to promote urban agriculture. The American Planning Association has also published a more high-level, [public policy PAS report](#) that is intended for local government audiences.

For Residents

The "how to" can be as simple as making your food purchases through such local foods initiatives. Great resources to locate such vendors in your community are offered by the non-profit website database [Local Harvest](#), or by resources sponsored by the USDA and managed by the University of Illinois, such as the [Agricultural Marketing Resource Center](#). The USDA offers a website resource specifically about [Community Supported Agriculture](#) programs.

The Partnership for Sustainable Communities offers an Urban Farm Business Plan [handbook](#) and [worksheets](#). The [National Cooperative Growers Association](#) provides lots of resources on food co-ops and that approach to local foods. About.com also offers a how-to guide for [starting your own CSA](#). Similarly Local Harvest offers [resources to start one](#). [North Carolina State](#) also offers similar resources.

Planning & Zoning

Regulating & Zoning for Urban Food & Agriculture

A local government will intersect with such local food activities at some juncture, due to its zoning, building, health, or other codes and regulations. In some instances the types of local food activities residents want is deemed illegal, but municipalities can encourage formation of a CSA or organize farmers markets to support local food. Portland, Oregon offers an example of an [urban food code](#) to reflect these new practices. If you are unsure of where your city stands, the City of Milwaukee offers a best practice model in an [urban food policy audit](#) that outlined where their code applied to such activities and what barriers exist. The City of Chicago offers an [FAQ on applying their codes to urban food](#) activities, as well as an [urban agriculture ordinance](#).

Dealing with Sales Tax

One of the most important roles a local government can play is producing easy-to-understand materials (like an FAQ sheet) about sales tax for farmers markets, CSAs, and food co-ops operating in your community. Often times those managing these entities will be planters, growers, farmers, and even just local residents, but not always retail experts. Outlining step-by-step compliance with state departments of agriculture, county or city health departments, and all of the local municipal business licensing and registration processes, permits, and approvals is a tremendous help to local food efforts. One area that may warrant attention is evaluating your community's zoning ordinance - if a resident approached city hall about opening a CSA distribution point (i.e. a food delivery truck in a parking lot or city park) or a food co-op wanted to open a small non-profit grocery store, what parts of town would it be a permitted use? Would a special or conditional use permit be required? These are the types of local-food-friendly assessment each unit of local government needs to evaluate.

Dollars & Cents

How Expensive is it to Start One?



Food co-op depends on the details. The size, design, business model, staffing business-management related details will dictate start-up costs. Further, as any how To, Planning & Zoning, and Measuring Success tabs will share, a new must be based on a realistic market analysis. CSAs and food co-ops operate er base and purchasing power. These types of considerations can be answered or your own local CSA and food co-op and evaluating what options would yield

For local governments, the extent of any cost is staff time and manpower. If any regulations or codes need to be updated, added, or repealed, the likely extent of those actions will be staff time to manage the process and perhaps minimal legal fees.

Measuring Success

How Do I Know I'm Running a CSA or Co-Op Well?

Simply, a successful CSA or food co-op is one that grows and achieves its mission. The most important step in successfully operating a CSA or food co-op is in its initial design and launch. Ultimately, you are essentially running a business and using classic management practices. For residents or local governments, one of the best ways to evaluate success is by interviewing successful case studies from other areas. The [USDA](#) offers resources to start and evaluate the success of a CSA. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service offers [tips for selling through CSAs](#). The University of Tennessee offers a [guidebook for new or beginning farmers](#).

Local Government Success

There is no direct metric to evaluate a local government's success with such programs. In some cases it may not even be relevant or necessary for a government to evaluate the success of a program. If a city or county is interested in local community-based CSAs and Co-ops it can provide support and assistance to such efforts and groups. Simple efforts like a "Sales Tax & CSAs" frequently asked questions flier can garner feedback and input from the community, farmers, and those involved in CSAs and Co-ops. A city or county could perform an initial audit for local-food-friendliness, make changes to their local codes and ordinances, and perform a follow-up evaluation years later to measure progress and improvement. A dynamic approach would be to establish a CSA, co-op, and local/urban foods advisory panel that could provide analysis, feedback, and serve as a sounding-board for government policies - such efforts would identify ways to best achieve everyone's goals. Ultimately, metrics to evaluate a local government's success will largely be based on what role a city or county chooses to take in local food and grocery efforts. A local government can choose to be uninvolved, or can work with local groups to become as integral to their success and demonstrating the benefits to the public as they wish.

Discover More

The USDA hosts a blog titled [The People's Garden](#) that focuses on events, case studies, and news from the world of urban agriculture and local foods. They also offer a [Food Hub Directory](#) that lists businesses or organizations that actively manage the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products to multiple buyers from multiple producers, primarily local and regional producers, to strengthen the ability of these producers to satisfy local and regional wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.

About.com offers a [clearinghouse of information](#) about Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) for the consumer.

The [National Cooperative Growers Association](#) created [Coop: Stronger Together](#) as an online database of information about local foods and agriculture, nutrition, and food in general.

The USDA offers resources on [community supported agriculture](#) as well.