



Kent County  
**Food Policy Council**  
A Committee of ENTFF



Kent County, Michigan

# Food System Assessment

**Executive Summary**



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# Acknowledgments

This assessment was prepared for the Kent County Food Policy Council by New Venture Advisors, Inc.

The **Kent County Food Policy Council** was formed in 2021 to bring together residents, organizations, agencies, and businesses to advocate for and promote a good food system in Kent County, Michigan.

**New Venture Advisors LLC (NVA)** is a strategy consulting firm specializing in food system planning and food enterprise development. Our team is committed to environmental sustainability, social impact, equity, diversity, and inclusion as we help our clients realize their vision for a more just and sustainable food system.

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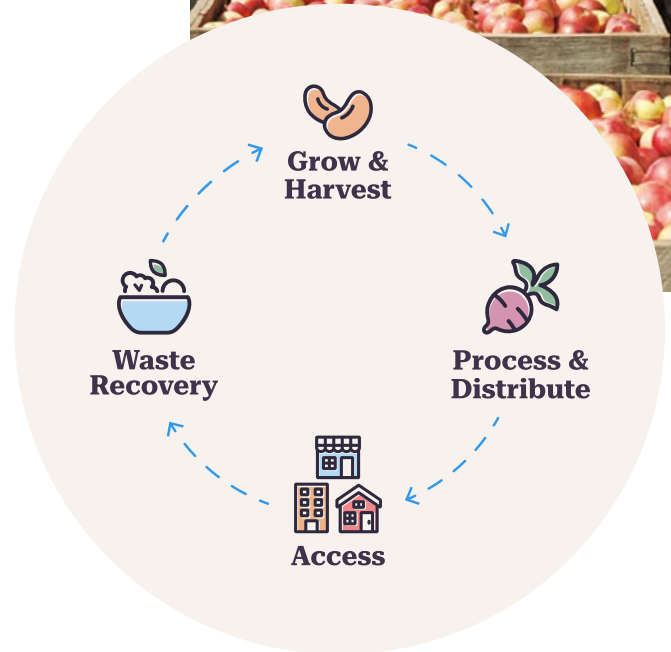
*MSU Extension at the Downtown Market*

# Introduction

This food system assessment provides insights into the current food system in Kent County, Michigan.

## What is a Food System?

- The term “local food system” refers to growing, harvesting, gathering, selling, buying, processing, preparing, and eating food, as well as food waste, in our community. The Michigan Good Food Charter has defined a “good food system” as accessible, healthy, equitable, diverse, fair, and sustainable.<sup>1</sup>
- Within this assessment and the Kent County Food System Plan, the food system will be examined across four main sectors. These provide a framework for understanding how the food in Kent County flows through the system:
  - **Grow & Harvest**
  - **Process & Distribute**
  - **Food Access**
  - **Food Waste & Recovery**



## How will this Food System Assessment fit into the Kent County Food System Plan?

The Kent County Food Policy Council commissioned this assessment to better understand the potential opportunities and current barriers that exist within the regional food system.

### This assessment aims to:

- Build knowledge in the community about the Kent County Food System and how the components of the food system interact.
- Create a baseline of key food system metrics that the Food Policy Council can track over time.
- Lay the foundation for the policy recommendations in the Kent County Food System Plan.

This assessment contains secondary data from national and local datasets that will be combined with primary data collected during the food system planning process. Together, these two data sources will inform the recommendations in the Food System Plan.



# Local Region

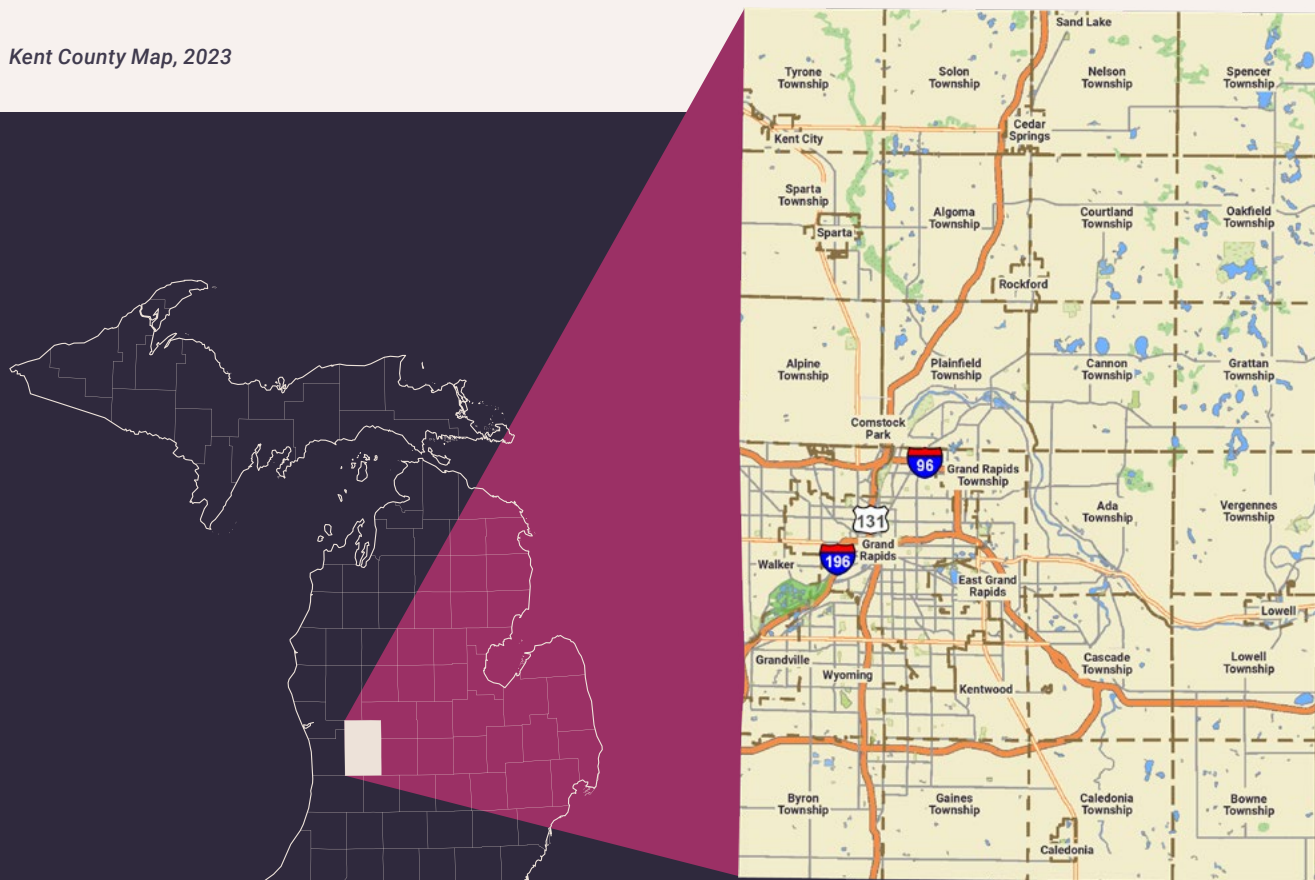
Kent County is located in central western Michigan, the second most diverse agricultural state in the country producing over 300 commodity food products. Michigan farmers are among the nation's leading growers of apples, squash, blueberries, black and cranberry beans, and more.<sup>2</sup>

Kent County is one of the state's 25 urban/suburban counties and is home to Grand Rapids, the second largest city in the state. As an urban county located in a predominantly rural state, Kent County is in a unique position to leverage the consumer base in Grand Rapids to catalyze development of the local food system.

As a growing metropolitan area, Kent County's population has increased by 9.2% since 2010, in comparison with only 1.7% growth across the state.<sup>3</sup> Rapid growth can usher in redevelopment that puts pressure on greenspaces and agricultural land. Kent County has seen this trend as the total number of farms and total acreage of farms have decreased over the past 60 years.

Through this work and the establishment of a Food Policy Council, the people of Kent County are working proactively to identify the regional assets and opportunities to create pathways for growth and preservation.

Kent County Map, 2023





# Grow & Harvest

## Parts of the food system related to land, soil, water, equipment, energy, labor and more.

Farms and farmers are the backbone of our local food system; they are the producers who grow and raise the food we eat. In Kent County, agriculture is a major contributor to the local economy and shapes the urban/rural relationships within the county. Over the past few decades, the face and footprint of farming in Kent County has changed significantly. Efforts are underway at the county and city level to protect farmland and promote urban agriculture.

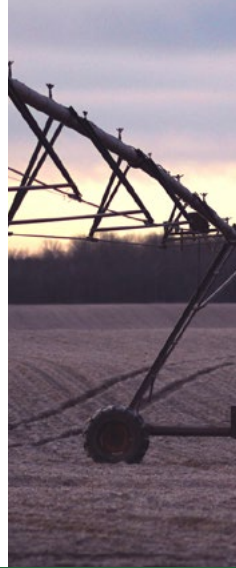
## Key Findings

- **The total number of farms and total acreage of farmland are decreasing while the average farm size increases.** Overall, there are 118,439 less acres in food production than in 1964. The remaining 1,010 farms on average are 37% larger than in 1964.
- **Farm land is being converted for other uses.** Between 2001-2016, 2,100 acres of agricultural land in Kent County was converted to UHD (urban and highly developed) land uses and 11,200 acres was converted to LDR (low-density residential) land uses.<sup>4</sup>
- **Farmers in Kent County are increasingly racially diverse, but are getting older, with an average age of 55.** From 1982 to 2017, the number of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) farmers in Kent County increased from 8 to 51. While this number is increasing, BIPOC farmers still make up less than 3% of the total 1,787 farmers in Kent County. In a county that is almost 30% BIPOC, farmers of color are still significantly underrepresented. With an average age of 55, farmers are aging out of production. Kent County is losing land in agricultural production and active producers.
- **Migrant workers are making up a larger pool of the hired agricultural labor force over time, particularly in Kent County where migrant workers increased by 77% from 2012-2017.<sup>5</sup> Michigan has the 6th highest adverse effect wage rate for workers with H2-A visas in the country, contributing to the increased cost of labor on farms.<sup>6</sup>**
- **Despite the large number of farms and agricultural diversity of farms growing corn, soybeans, sugar beets, apples, cherries, beans, squash, and much more, almost no commercial farms in Kent County are certified organic. Only 1% of commercial farms in Kent County use organic farming practices.<sup>7</sup>**



## Challenges

- Small and mid-size farms are consolidating and/or being bought out by larger producers.
- A growing population and urban sprawl results in a loss of farmland to development.
- BIPOC and new/beginning farmers are in need of support including access to capital, training, and resources.
- Increasing dependence on migrant labor from outside of the region leaves the production vulnerable to shifting federal policies on immigration and worker abuse.



## By The Numbers

### Farms

**1,010**

Total



**-58%**

SINCE 1964

There are **1,010 total farms in Kent County**. This number has declined by 13% since 2012 and 58.3% since 1964. This is in line with the state of Michigan, which has seen the total number of farms decline by 9% since 2012 and 49% since 1964.<sup>8</sup>

### Land

**157,466**

Acres



**-49%**

SINCE 1964

There are currently **157,466 acres of agricultural land in Kent County**. This number has not changed since 2012, but declined 49.2% since 1964. In comparison, agricultural acres in the state of Michigan have declined 28.2% since 1964.<sup>10</sup>

### Farm Size

**156**

Acres



**+37%**

SINCE 1964

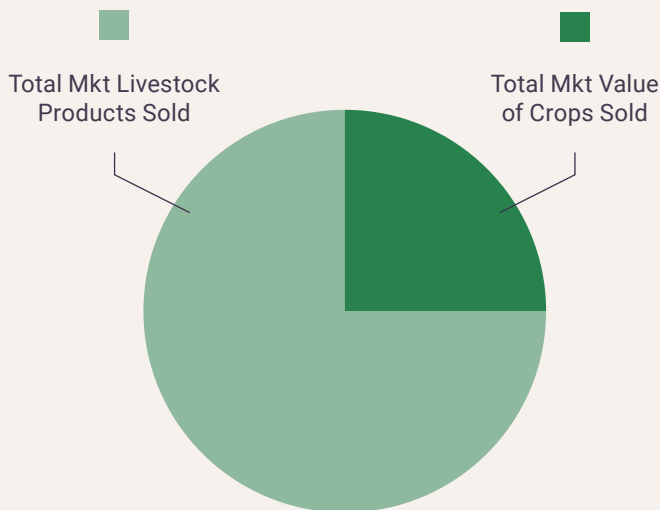
The **average farm size in Kent County is 156 acres**. Due to consolidation and other factors, this number has increased 15% since 2012 and 37% since 1964. It aligns closely with the state trend which shows average farm size increasing 8% since 2012 and 41% since 1964.<sup>9</sup>

In 2017, 17% of Kent County farms were 1-9 acres, 37% were 10-49 acres, 28% were 50-179 acres, 11% were 180-499 acres, 4% were 500-999 acres, and 3% were over 1,000 acres.



## Livestock products make up over 75% of the total market value of agricultural products sold in Kent County.<sup>11</sup>

Crops make the remaining almost 25%.



## Community and School Gardens

- Uncertainty exists about the number of operational community gardens in Kent County. Approximately 25 community gardens exist, but no entity has historically tracked community garden status.
- Kent County has 15 H.O.P.E. School Gardens and the Edible School Yard Project is operating in 8 schools.



### What We Still Want to Know

*and what the Food System Plan will work to uncover*

- How can Kent County track the amount of food consumed locally that is produced locally? How can this number be increased?
- What is the full picture of urban farming and communal gardening in Kent County? Where are the urban gardens and farms and how are they managed?
- Are farmers using regenerative practices? What are the barriers and opportunities to develop more sustainable farming practices in the county? Are farmers using sustainable practices, but not getting organic certification due to administrative barriers?
- What are the structural barriers local food producers experience?
- What are the opportunities to strengthen local food production in Kent County?

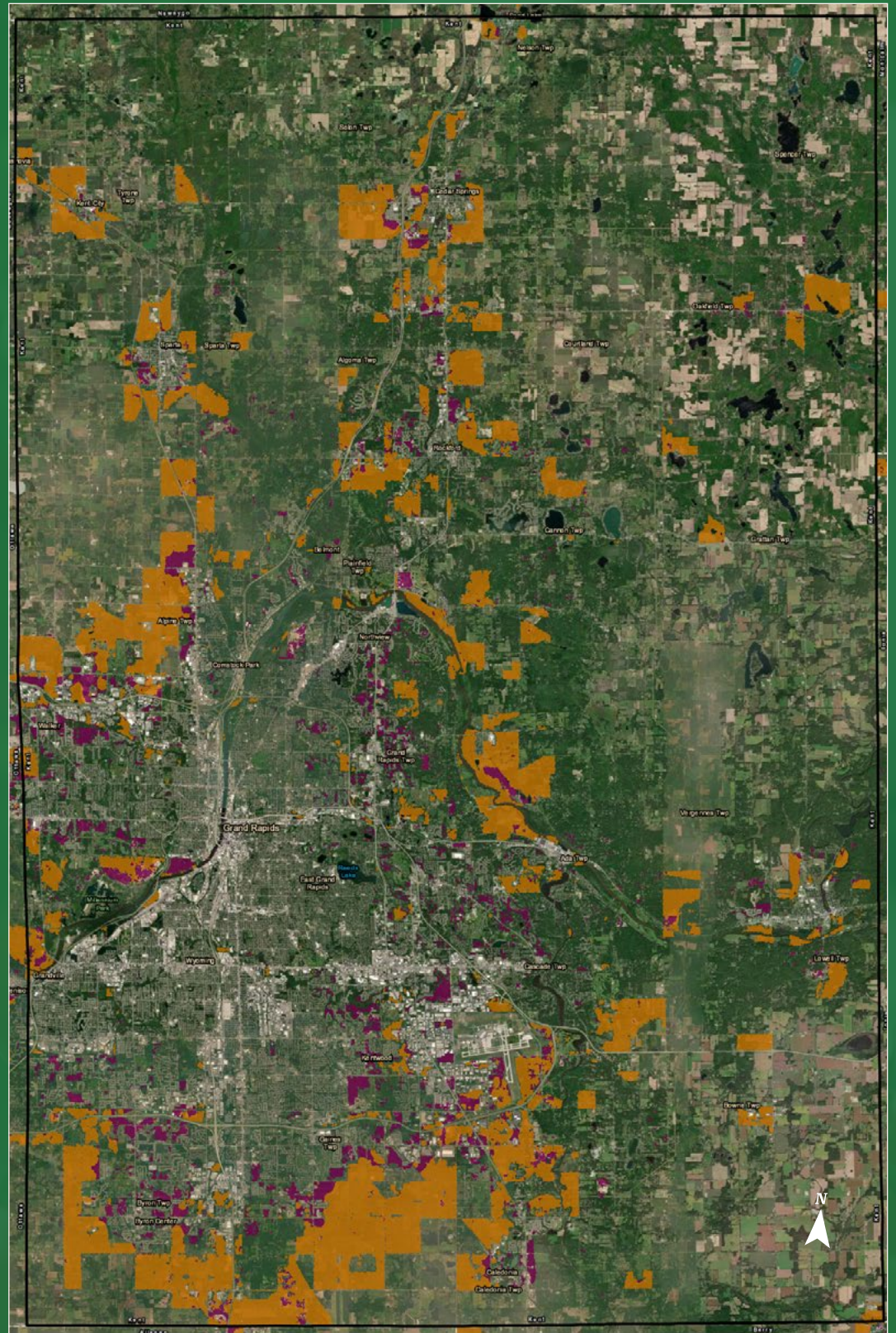
# Projected Conversion of Farmland in Kent County by 2040





Farms Under Threat is American Farmland Trust's multi-year initiative to document the status of and threats to U.S. farmland and rangeland and to identify policy solutions to protect and conserve America's diverse agricultural landscape. AFT uses high-resolution spatial analysis tools to identify where agricultural land has been converted to urban and low-density residential land uses and projects this data into the future to present alternative development scenarios.

If recent trends continue in a "Business as Usual Scenario", 29,200 acres of Kent County farmland will be paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses other than agriculture. Kent County would be one of the three hardest-hit counties in Michigan along with Genesee and Ottawa Counties.

Of the projected conversion, 5,200 acres (18%) would be Urban and Highly Developed for uses such as commercial, industrial, and moderate-to-high density residential areas. Another 24,000 acres (82%) would be Low-Density Residential including scattered subdivisions and large-lot housing, which fragment the agricultural land base and limit production.<sup>12</sup>



## Map Legend

-  Farmland Converted to Urban and Highly Developed
-  Farmland Converted to Low Density Residential

0 1.5 3 6 Miles



# Process & Distribute

## **Parts of the food system related to value-added products, packaging, marketing, transporting, wholesale, labor and more.**

The existing landscape of food infrastructure can signal the maturity of the local food system. Understanding what exists can help identify gaps in the system and show where there are potential market opportunities. This often hidden part of the food system is what moves food from farm to fork.

Local producers and entrepreneurs need support and access to processing infrastructure to establish and grow their food-related businesses. The ability to preserve and extend the freshness of food helps ensure its availability year-round. Activities involved in food processing make raw agricultural products edible through cooking, freezing, combining ingredients, canning, and more.

Distribution is a critical part of the supply chain and a significant factor in the local food economy. Once processed, food distribution connects food from its production location to where it gets prepared or sold. More demand for local food requires the need for smaller-scale distribution networks. These networks create economic opportunities for small and mid-sized producers to connect to wholesale markets and help improve food system resilience.

## **Key Findings**

- Kent County is home to the headquarters of three major grocery chains: Meijer, Gordon Foods, and Spartan Nash.
- **Value added products produced and sold in Kent County in 2017 totaled \$1,273,000.<sup>13</sup>**
- Many regional institutions are supporting the food system career pathway at the city, county, and state level.

## **Challenges**

- There is a lack of mid-scale manufacturing facilities to aid incubator kitchens and small businesses in growth beyond commercial kitchens and cottage industry production.
- Food buyers need products at high volume, consistency, and low cost, which is a challenge for local smaller-scale producers.
- Requiring the same regulations for food packing, transportation, and storage for small and mid-size distributors as larger industrial processors can make it difficult for local businesses to operate and compete.
- Local ethnic grocery stores don't have anywhere locally to go purchase wholesale products. Store owners often travel 4-6 hours to access products.



## By The Numbers

**4** COMMERCIAL  
KITCHENS



**1** FOOD  
HUB



### Kent County is home to four commercial kitchens for processing and production.

A commercial kitchen is a kitchen facility in which food is prepared for sale. A food hub is a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distributions, and/or marketing of locally and regionally produced food products.

West Michigan FarmLink, a food hub, operates as an online marketplace for buyers to shop from multiple local farmers and producers whose goods are aggregated and then sorted for pick up at the FarmLink headquarters in Grand Rapids.

**19% of farms sell products directly to consumers for a total market sector value of \$3.6 million.**<sup>14</sup>

As of 2021, the Food Manufacturing and Processing Sector in Kent County employed **6,215 individuals** (-11% change since 2018) at **94 locations** (+19% change since 2018). The annual average wage per employee in this sector was **\$57,492** (+12% change since 2018).<sup>15</sup>

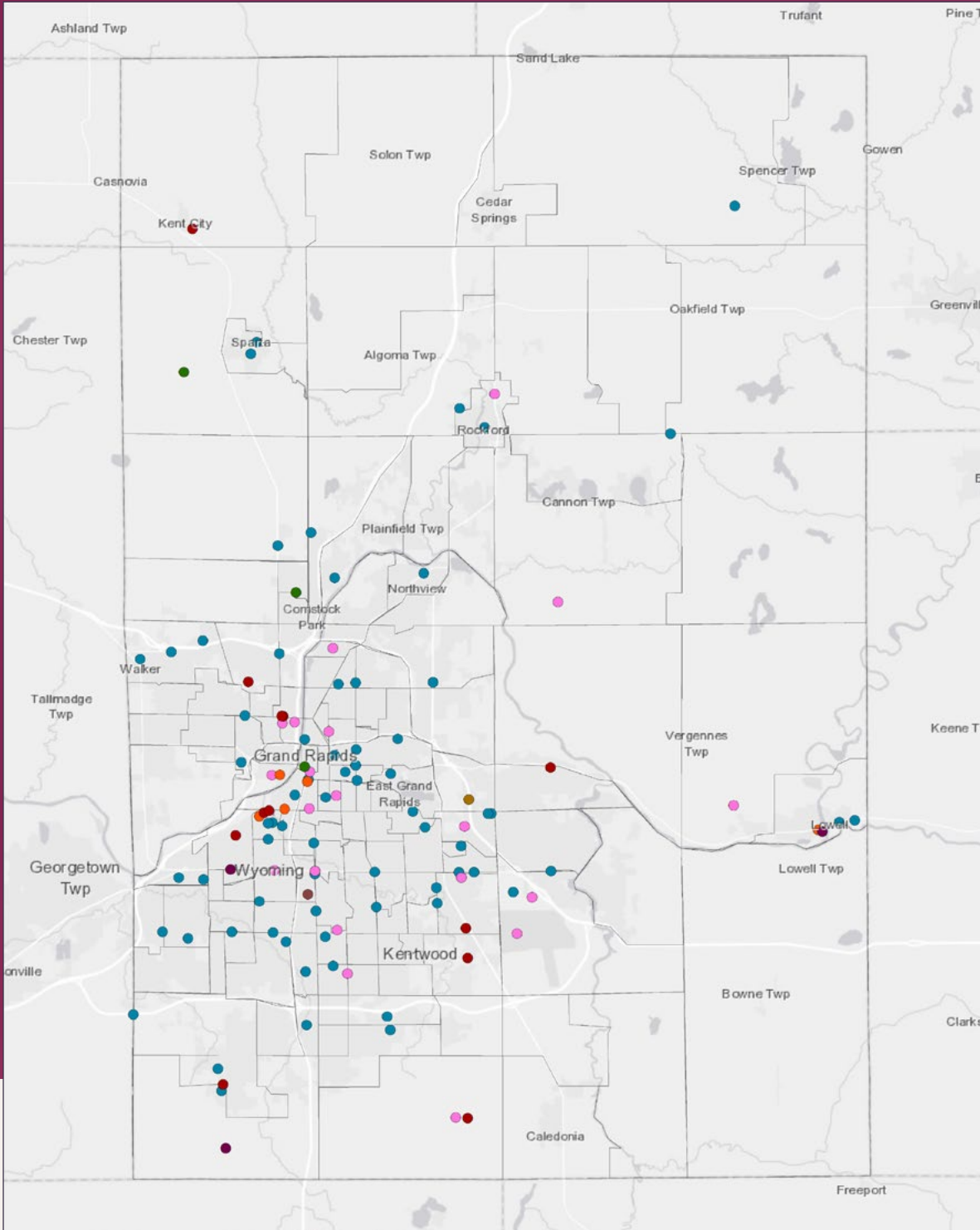


### What We Still Want to Know

*and what the Food System Plan will work to uncover*

- How can we strengthen economic and workforce development in the food processing sector?
- How can we support fair conditions and wages for all workers in food processing and distribution?
- How can government organizations and private food retailers support more procurement of local food?
- How can we track the economic impact of local institutional procurement in our county?
- How much of the food produced in Kent County is sold locally vs. exported out of the county?

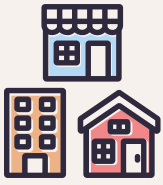
# Food Processing Infrastructure in Kent County, MI



## Map Legend<sup>16,17</sup>



- Dairy Product Manufacturing (NAICS 3115)
- Fruit & Vegetable Preserving & Specialty Food Manufacturing
- Sugar & Confectionery Product Manufacturing (NAICS 3113)
- Grain & Oilseed Milling (NAICS 3112)
- USDA FSIS Meat, Poultry, and Egg Inspected Establishments
- Commercial Kitchens & Food Hubs
- Other Food Manufacturing (NAICS 3119)
- Bakeries & Tortilla Manufacturing (NAICS 3118)
- ▭ Kent County, Michigan Census Tracts



# Food Access

## Parts of the food system related to schools, grocers, hospitals, restaurants, food pantries, homes, labor and more.

Access to culturally-appropriate fresh produce and other whole food options is necessary for a nutritionally-balanced diet, which is, in turn, essential to good health. Food access considers consumers' ability to physically get to places where different foods are available for purchase, the affordability of various food options, and the availability of assistance to ensure consumers have the means to purchase their foods of choice. Residents' ability to access adequate, affordable, and culturally relevant foods varies significantly based on where they live within the county.

Food insecurity, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life." Rates of food insecurity fluctuate with economic conditions such as recessions and inflation and systemic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Kent County saw a peak of food insecurity in 2009 from the Great Recession. Since then, rates of food insecurity have been in general decline except for a three-month spike in March-May 2020. With the end of emergency SNAP benefits in February 2023, there is concern that the downward trend will cease and food insecurity rates will begin to rise, especially in the most impoverished households.

## Key Findings

- **Kent County ranked among the top 15% healthiest counties in Michigan for Health Outcomes & Health Factors.<sup>18</sup>**
- **Food insecurity rates are generally falling in Kent County, but vary widely by census tract from 5.4% to 26.4%.**
- **In Kent County, Black households and households with children are disproportionately likely to participate in SNAP.** Black households are more likely to participate in the SNAP program, making up 29% of SNAP participants, but only 9% total households. Households with children are also more likely to receive benefits as 46% of SNAP participants, but only 33% of total households.
- The ability to physically access food is a key component in food security. 29 of 128 census tracts in Kent County are low vehicle access<sup>19</sup>. With limited public transit options, especially in outlying cities and towns, the **built environment can hinder residents' food access.**

## Challenges

- Food insecurity and the need for food assistance correlates with where Black, Indigenous, and people of color residents live within the county. Black and Hispanic communities are more likely to be impacted by food insecurity than their White neighbors.
- Kent County is home to over 220 public food programs and over 10% of residents are still food insecure.



## By The Numbers

### Consumer and Institutional Spending

- Households spend an average of **11.7%** of their total budget on food.<sup>20</sup>
- Kent County has 22 School Food Authorities overseeing 200 schools with over 90,000 students. In 2019, these schools spent **\$1,944,567**, or **16%** of their total food spending, on local food. 50.6% of all K-12 students in Kent County are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch in the 2022 school year, compared to the statewide estimate of 53.3%.<sup>21</sup>

### Food Access Points in Kent County

#### Conventional Food Access Points

- 128** Grocery Stores
- 74** Specialty Food Stores
- 94** Beer, Wine, and Liquor stores

#### Local Food Access Points

- 7** Farmers Markets
- 11** On-Farm Markets
- 10** Community-Supported Agriculture Programs

#### Emergency Food Assistance

- 69** Food Pantries
- 44** Mobile Pantry Sites
- 16** Summer Feeding Sites
- 9** Meal Sites
- 14** Other Programs (including emergency food distributions programs, home delivered meals, supplemental snack programs, etc.)
- 540** Individual Retail Locations Accepting SNAP
- 27** Locations Doubling SNAP Benefits

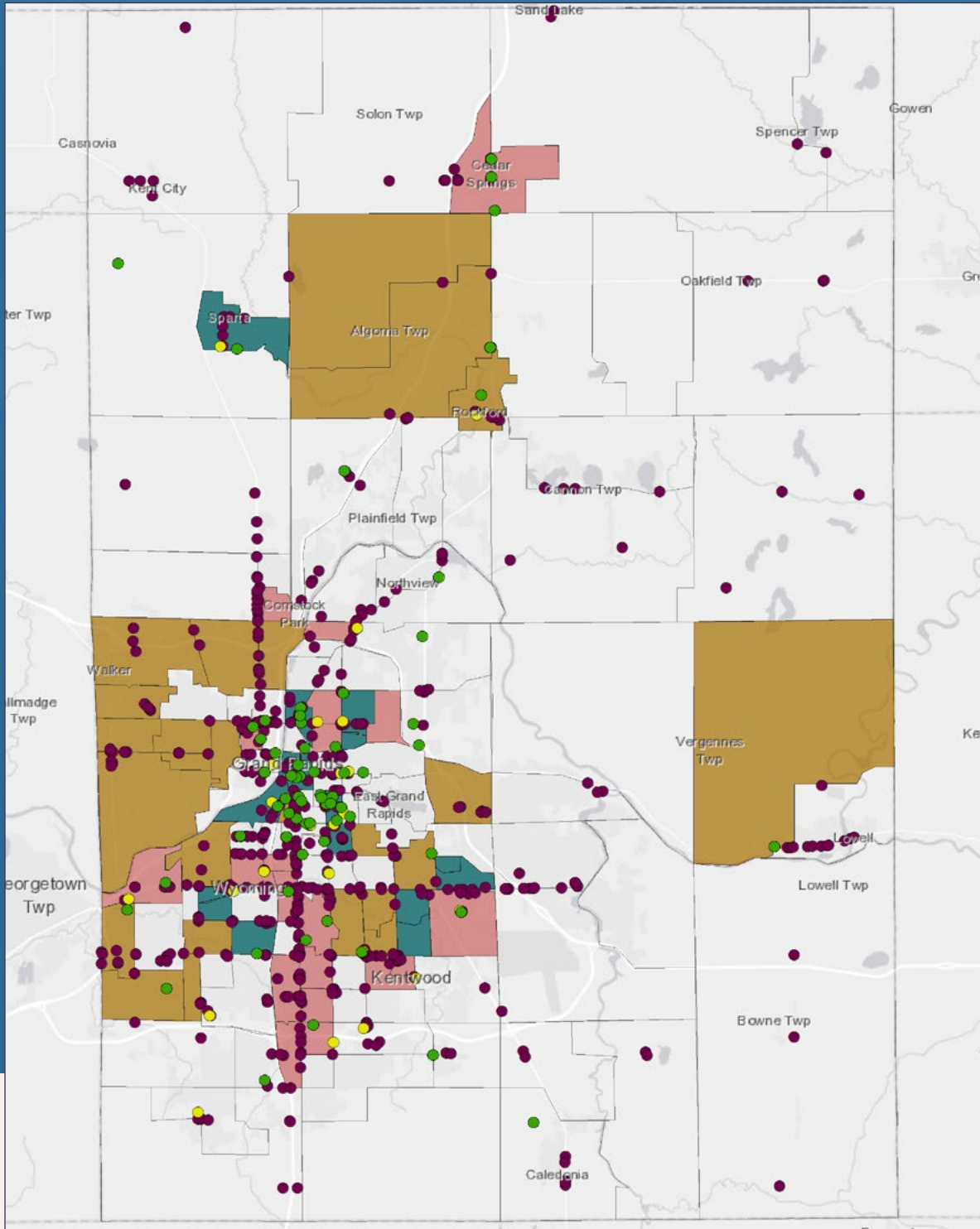


### What We Still Want to Know

*and what the Food System Plan will work to uncover*

- How many residents qualify for benefits, but aren't receiving them? What is the "SNAP Gap" in Kent County?
- How can Kent County address systemic causes of food insecurity outside of the network of emergency food distribution organizations?
- How can Kent County grow Farm to School programming? How can we track the impact of local food school procurement on our economy and the health of our community?
- What percentage of Kent County residents are hunting or fishing for their food? How many are raising chickens or bees at home?

# Food Access Locations in Kent County, MI



## Map Legend<sup>22,23,24</sup>



● Food Pantries    ● Double Up Food Bucks Locations    ● SNAP Store Locations

■ Low Income & Low Access at 1/2 & 10 Miles & Low Vehicle Access

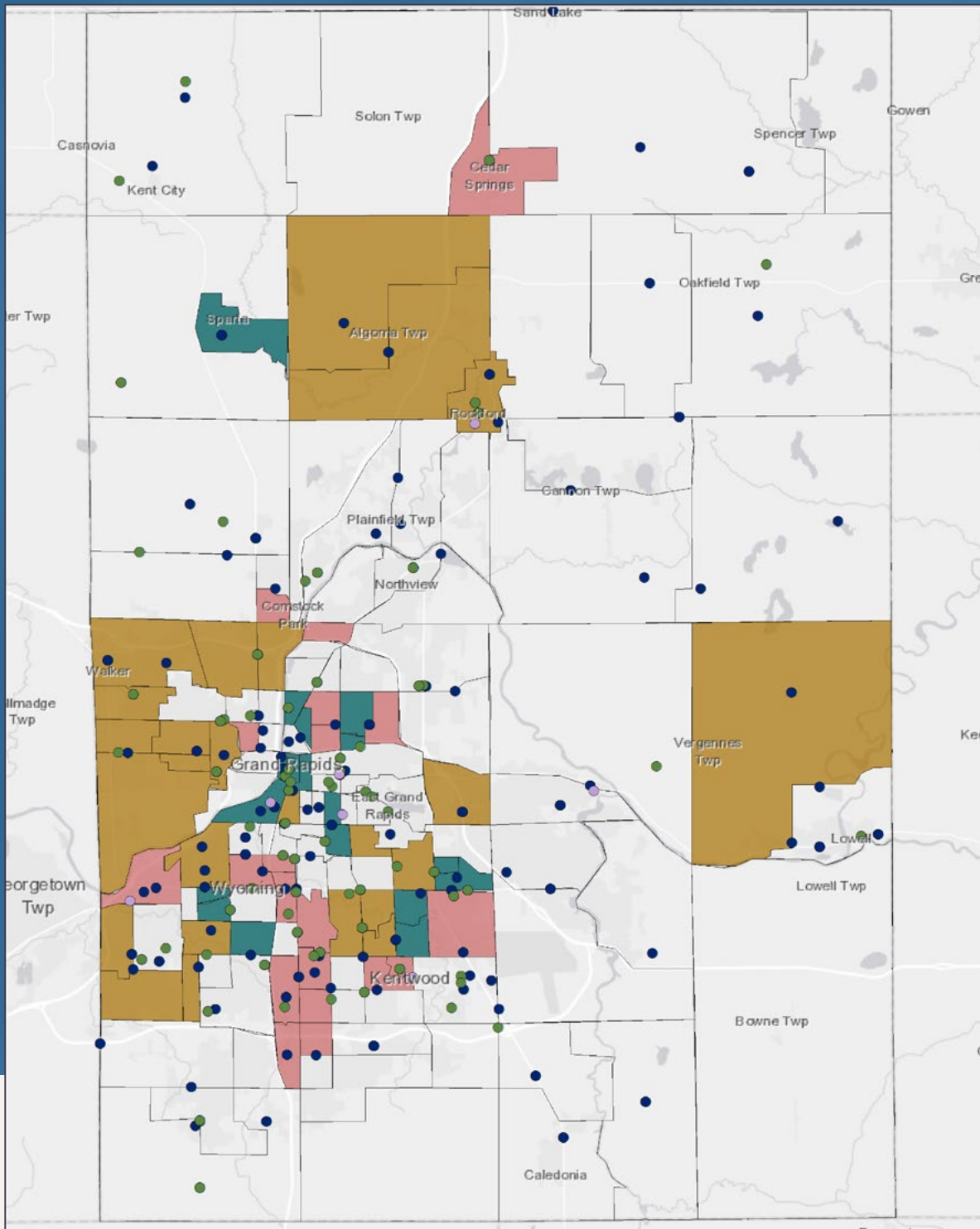
■ Low Vehicle Access Only

■ Low Income & Low Access at 1/2 & 10 Miles Only

□ Kent County, Michigan Census Tracts



# Food Retail Outlets in Kent County, MI



## Map Legend<sup>25</sup>

- Farmers Markets
- Grocery Stores (NAICS 4451)
- Food Specialty Stores (NAICS 4452)
- Low Income & Low Access at 1/2 & 10 Miles & Low Vehicle Access
- Low Vehicle Access Only
- Low Income & Low Access at 1/2 & 10 Miles Only
- Kent County, Michigan Census Tracts





# Food Waste & Waste Recovery

**Parts of the food system related to food rescue, energy, recycling, landfills, compost, labor and more.**

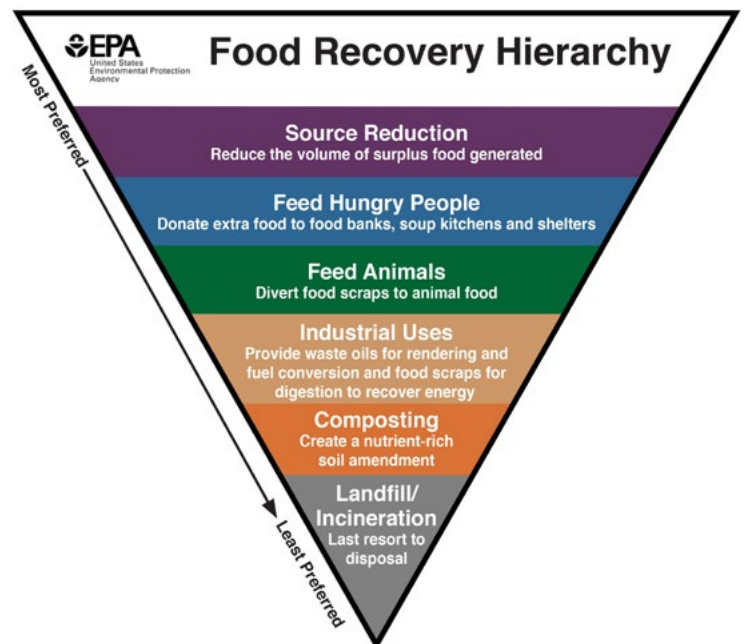
National studies suggest that up to 40% of all food produced is wasted. Loss occurs at each step in the food system. Examples include unharvested crops in fields; unsold food from retail stores; and uneaten prepared food or kitchen trimmings from restaurants, cafeterias, and households. While approximately 40% of food waste occurs from the industrial sector, the largest volumes of food waste occur at the consumer or household level. Environmental, social, and economic costs rise when the food we produce ends up in landfills.

## Key Findings

Local food waste data for Kent County was very limited, showing a need for more data capture at the local and county levels.

We know that between 2017-2022 Feeding American Western Michigan distributed an average of 6,747,941 pounds of food per year. In 2022, 3,982,895 pounds (67%) were donated from farmers, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers, 478,289 pounds (8%) were purchased to fill inventory needs, and 1,486,773 pounds (25%) were government commodities distributed by USDA. Feeding America West Michigan saw the volume of available food decrease by nearly 20% last year. Fewer available pounds resulted in a corresponding decrease in distribution.

The Michigan Sustainable Business Forum is leading the development of the Michigan Food System Waste Reduction Road Map in 2023 which should help guide policy and best practices in this area at the state level.



*The EPA's Food Recovery Hierarchy prioritizes source reduction and utilizing excess food supplies to combat food insecurity before composting.*

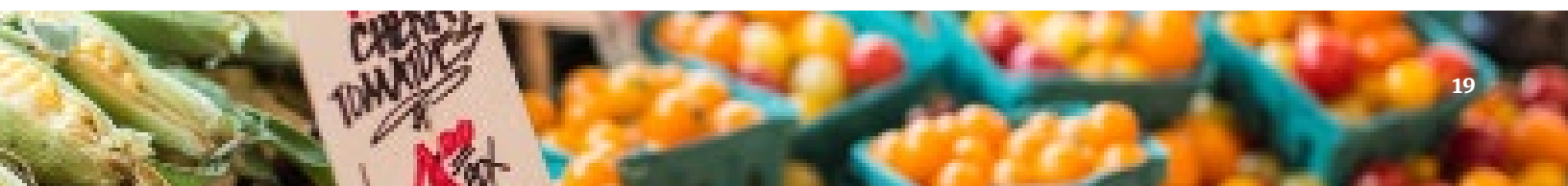
# Which sectors are generating the most food waste?

This chart shows which sectors are generating wasted food (excluding the industrial sector)<sup>26</sup>



## Challenges

- Consumer confusion about date labeling on packaged foods, such as “use by” or “best by” contributes to food waste.
- Retailers want to sell foods in abundance, which can lead consumers to over-purchasing and large portion sizes at restaurants.
- Businesses are concerned about liability and brand protection when donating excess food.
- Composting infrastructure is limited and there are few options for businesses and community members to compost.
- A lack of availability of skilled harvesters leads to waste on farms and orchards.



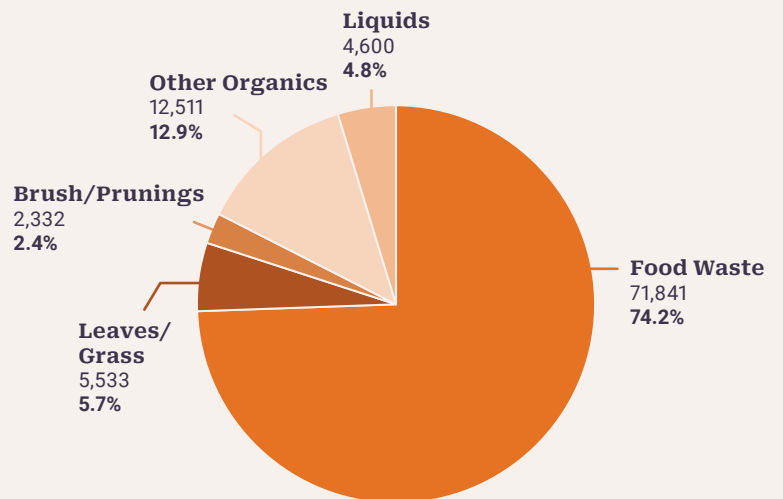


## By The Numbers

**2021 Total Organic Waste Generated in Kent County**  
(in Tons per Year)



**2021 Total Organics Waste Generated in Kent County Breakdown**  
(in Tons per Year)



## Examples of Kent County organizations working to divert food waste from landfills:



In 2022, **Organicycle** rescued and diverted 6 million pounds of organic materials from Kent County.



In 2022, the **Fulton Street Market Gleaning Program** gleaned 27,871 pounds of food.



Between 2018 and 2022, **Wormies** processed 1,720 cubic yards of food and farm waste and brown materials and returned 305 cubic yards of compost as soil amendments.



Other organizations include: **Feeding America West Michigan, Perfect Circle, Good Sweet Earth, Phoenix Resources, Flashfood, and My Green Michigan.**



### What We Still Want to Know

*and what the Food System Plan will work to uncover*

- Where is a majority of the food waste coming from by sector in Kent County and how can we track it in a unified data source?
- How is recovered food waste being used - for human consumption, animal consumption, compost, etc?
- What are some municipal solutions to food waste recovery that can build on the existing organizational partnerships in place?
- How can more businesses connect with the Grand Rapids biodigester for waste diversion?
- How is the charitable food system a part of food waste recovery and how do those partners collaborate? How are they impacted by the growth of business solutions (i.e. Flashfood) to reduce food waste?
- What findings will the Michigan Sustainable Business Forum's Michigan Food System Waste Reduction Road Map of 2023 include and what local implications will this report have?



# Next Steps

**The data from this Food System Assessment will be combined with community input collected during the food system planning process to inform the future Kent County Food System Plan.**

A food system plan is a long-range planning document defined by the American Planning Association as “a set of interconnected, forward-thinking activities that strengthen a community and regional food system through the creation and implementation of plans and policies.” It includes a baseline assessment of how we grow, distribute, consume, and dispose of food and identifies concrete action steps to be taken to improve the policies, programs, and investments that shape how food moves throughout Kent County and the region.

***For more information, visit the Kent County Food Policy Council’s website:***

***<https://kentfoodpolicy.org/>***

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Kent County  
**Food Policy Council**  
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Kent County, Michigan

# Food System Assessment

Executive Summary