

# *Towards a Collaborative Food Systems Container*

**An Executive Summary and Analysis of the 2021  
Survey, Interviews, and Listening Circles**



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# Introduction

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This executive summary brings together the findings of the research initiative undertaken by Soil Born Farms in response to the direction of food systems leaders, advocates, and champions to expand upon their collaborative efforts which had been built over a decade of impactful work under the Building Healthy Communities initiative funded by the California Endowment between 2010-2020.

This document summarizes the key findings of each research element, illustrates the wider *agreement that a container for the food system is needed* and provides guidance for what a future container might look like. Primary sections of this executive summary report are highlighted below:

➤ **Historical Overview (pg. 2)**

This section provides an overview of a few collaborative food systems efforts, including the Food Systems Collaborative, the Healthy Food For All Collaborative, and the Sacramento Food Systems Partnership.

➤ **Governance Models + Funding Mechanisms: National Findings (pgs. 3-6)**

The findings from research conducted on governance models and funding mechanisms that effectively bring food partners together across geographic boundaries to connect, communicate, collaborate, and collectively take action are overviewed in this section ([Link to full report](#)).

➤ **Local Reflections on National Findings (pgs. 7-11)**

The national findings mentioned above were subsequently presented to a diversity of local food systems partners with the intention of discerning which aspects would be most appealing and meaningful for local replication.

- **Methodological Overview:** The research team prioritized receiving input from a wide range of food systems partners and through a variety of listening formats, including a survey, interviews, and community listening circles ([Link to reports](#)).
- **Thematic Analysis of Findings:** For ease of review, the findings of each element listed above (i.e. survey, interviews, and listening circles) have been thematically grouped to surface key themes and outcomes. These conversations reveal a firm foundation and required next steps to advance a collaborative food system effort that is attuned to local preferences.

➤ **Avenues for Action (pgs. 12-16)**

Finally, this executive summary culminates in a series of ‘Avenues for Action’ which provide direction on the content, logistics, and social foundation for constructing a future food systems container.

# Historical Overview

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This historical overview highlights three specific groups who have been targeted for their direct relevance and connection to the current food system work underway. These include the Sacramento Food Systems Collaborative, the Healthy Food for All Collaborative, and the Sacramento Food Systems Partnership.

## Sacramento Food Systems Collaborative (FSC)

The first of its kind in the Sacramento region, the Sacramento Food Systems Collaborative, was convened by Valley Vision between 2012-15 with the intention of bringing food systems partners out of their siloed sectors to begin a more robust conversation that systematically advanced food systems transformation. Through this process, a number of participants emerged as food systems leaders, developing fully-fledged organizations out of the respective committees they once chaired. Prime examples of this include the Sacramento Food Policy Council and the Food Literacy Center. Though the role of convenor transitioned to the Healthy Food For All Collaborative in 2015, Valley Vision's commitment to realizing holistic, equitable food systems change at the regional level continued through their development of the Food Systems Action Plan funded by the Sacramento Region Community Foundation in 2015, which was most recently updated in 2021.

## Healthy Food For All Collaborative (HFAC)

The Healthy Food For All Collaborative emerged from the need to connect the wide-range of related food-systems efforts spearheaded by the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative funded by the California Endowment between 2010-2020. The Collaborative served as a container that supported partners in communicating about their work, collaborating across projects, and connecting as a way to strengthen relationships that could lend themselves to future partnerships. While the original impetus for coming together was informed by each partners' BHC related work in South Sacramento, the HFAC soon began seeing participants outside of the BHC attend the monthly meetings, illustrating the need for a wider space wherein partners could continue connecting not only beyond geographic boundaries, but also beyond the grant lifecycle. At the culmination of the initiative, HFAC produced a collection of Best Practices vis-à-vis a podcast surfacing a decade's worth of key learnings on local food systems transformation. Equipped with these insights, HFAC partners set out to discover how to best share and leverage their learnings and collaborative relationships at the wider level their meetings were now drawing, giving rise to the national landscape survey on governance and funding models reviewed in the subsequent sections.

## Sacramento Food Systems Partnership (SFSP)

In October 2020, Green Tech, in coordination with the Sacramento Food Policy Council and a number of cross-sector food systems partners, was awarded a two-year, \$250,000 USDA grant to conduct a Sacramento County food systems assessment, with an ultimate goal of creating a county-wide food system action plan. The assessment will engage partners and neighborhoods in a collaborative goal-setting and research process, deepening the understanding of opportunities and barriers for racial equity, climate resilience and other themes identified by stakeholders in each sector of the food system. The intent of the action plan is to offer a blueprint of the Sacramento community's food needs and, in turn, inform the essential action needed to meet these needs.

# Governance and Funding Models

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## Context

With the sunset of the BHC initiative in 2020, and in response to the expressed desire of partners internal and external to HFAC, the HFAC Facilitation Team set out to discern which governance structures and funding models would best meet the growing needs and aims of food system partners. From the outset, this research was undertaken with the intention of soliciting local feedback from the widest range of food system partners possible to ensure that the development of a future container would integrate best practices gleaned from high-level findings in such a way that they would be rendered locally meaningful.

## Methodology

This landscape survey aimed to surface models that already exist across North America for effectively, collaboratively, and inclusively bringing food partners across geographic boundaries together in a space to connect, communicate, collaborate, and collectively take action. Particular emphasis was placed on seeking out governance models which were most innovatively approaching those needs, such that their framework for connecting expanded the realm of possibility for what collaborative food system ventures could achieve. With regard to funding, the intention was to identify the full spectrum of mechanisms available which could sustainably fund food systems work at scale, year-over-year.

## Findings: Governance Models

The research on governance models gave rise to two types of findings: **individual models** which in their entirety reflected the desired criteria listed above and **key elements** which emerged from cross model analysis. With regard to the individual models, though many were reviewed, those which were highlighted include the Capital Region Food and Agricultural Initiatives Roundtable and its corresponding network entitled The Good Food Network based in Vancouver, Canada; the Los Angeles Food Policy Council; and the San Diego Food Systems Alliance. Another model worthy of review is the Western U.P. Food Systems Collaborative (MI). Despite still currently being under development, the depth of attention to equity within this model is exemplary. With regard to the key elements, these findings reflect the most powerful and impactful approaches of all models reviewed and, where relevant, reflect commonalities across models.

The **key elements** emerging from the cross model analysis are summarized below. For further detail on any of these elements or to reference the model(s) from which they were gleaned, please see the [Governance and Funding Models Report](#).

- **A Dedicated Backbone Organization:** The most successful networks are organized around a supporting, dedicated backbone organization and capitalize on the additional services offered, in turn passing that support on to their constituents in the form of additional and more robust services.
- **Constellation or Working Groups Model:** The Constellation model allows for the organic organizing of collective action (i.e. working groups, coalitions, collaborative projects, etc.); promotes internal self-determination; and enables more graceful dissolution as missions are completed. The working group is self-explanatory and is organized in number and topic to reflect local priorities. Alternatively, a mixed methods approach may be pursued with a few fixed working groups with supplemental constellations arising and dissolving to allow for target action groups to arise as needed.

# Governance and Funding Models

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- **Semi-Annual or Quarterly Whole Food Space Convenings:** There is value in these meetings which keep the whole food space informed of the work happening across each sector and offer dedicated time and space for idea germination across the breadth of the container.
- **Play to Local & State Strengths:** The most successful models embody and leverage local priorities and strengths. One example of this is King County in Seattle which draws from the state's culture of conservation work to channel tax dollars collected in the name of conservation towards food systems work. Sacramento could parallel this by more deeply engaging with the meaning of being the Farm to Fork Capital of the United States and the capital of California.
- **Advance Equity and Inclusion:** The most progressive models move beyond the racial equity lens to create a health promoting food system and explicitly center the following: emergent strategy, food sovereignty, and partnership with indigenous groups beyond a land acknowledgement. They also include people and women of color at the highest levels of leadership.
- **Prioritize Digital Storytelling:** Though the power and value of storytelling is widely accepted across the food space, stories collected are not always communicated in ways that leverage the power of a digital medium. To this end, prioritizing user interface and experience (UI and UX) is paramount for storytelling.

## Findings: Funding Mechanisms

Research on funding mechanisms gave rise to three core findings: 1) the importance of viewing the food system as an asset ripe for investment; 2) specific financial tools that can be used to drive investment funding into the food system; 3) case studies on food funds currently in operation.

### ➤ **Systemic Reframe: Food System as an Asset Class**

The current lack of investment in our food system mirrors the experience of the clean energy sector a decade ago when it was considered too risky and fragmented for sustained investment funding. Given the transformation that the clean energy sector has undergone, this is promising news for food systems partners who are eager for more robust and diversified forms of funding to support the system as a whole.

In its early stages, investment in clean energy was limited, because: 1.) the sector as we now know it was only considered in terms of its individual technologies and institutions, and 2.) risk vs. reward calculations were difficult to compute due to a lack of data, impact metrics, and portfolio performance. To overcome these two problems, the constituent technologies united to build general consensus and strong performance measurements, which demonstrated how investment in clean energy could be as profitable as other sectors where traditional development finance tools had been deployed (i.e. municipal bonds for infrastructure, loans for small businesses, tax credits for community development). The result of this collaborative approach has allowed the clean energy sector to emerge as one of the most sought-out investment classes in the development finance spectrum.

The food system is ripe for undergoing a parallel transformation. Like the clean energy sector, it not only is critical to creating a healthy community, but also provides a comparable economic output. In order to achieve that outcome, a similar two-step process must be undertaken. First, food system partners must present a unified front in order to overcome the investor perception that the system is a siloed set of sectors and efforts. Developing a governance container with a unified voice will aid in achieving this step. This clear definition of the food system will aid in the second step where food partners can connect with development finance agencies to bridge the financing gap and determine which tools would be most suitable for reducing investor risk while establishing a reliable financing streams.

# Governance and Funding Models

Through this reframe, we can see how the lack of funding in the food system is not for lack of available funding options (once we step outside of the traditional range of grants, subsidies, small biz loans, etc.), but for the lack of a coherent channels where the full spectrum of development financing tools can be applied.

## ➤ Financial Tools + Examples

The table below outlines the available tools and lists corresponding examples where those tools have been successfully deployed. For further information on any of these, please refer back to the Governance and Funding Report.

Private Activity Bonds	Targeted Tools	Investment Tools	Access to Capital
<p><b>Aggie Bonds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Iowa Beginning Farmer Loan Program, Iowa</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Industrial Development Bonds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Muffin Mam, Inc. – Laurens, SC</i></li> </ul> <p><b>501(c)(3) Bonds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Project Angel Food – Los Angeles, CA</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Exempt Facility Bonds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Columbia Pulp – Columbia County, WA</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Other</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Pike’s Place – Seattle, WA</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Tax Increment Financing (TIF)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Farmers’ Market TIF District – Dallas, TX</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Special Assessment Districts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>River North Art District – Denver, CO</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Property Assessed Clean Energy Financing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>5 Spoke Creamery – Goshen, NY</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Tax Credits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Food Lifeline’s Hunger Solution Center – Seattle, WA</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Opportunity Zones</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Harvest Returns Opportunity Zone Fund</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Revolving Loan Funds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>San Diego Small Business Micro and Regional Revolving Loan Fund</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Loan Guarantees</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Texas Agricultural Finance Authority Loan Guarantee Program</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Investment Funds</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Natural Capital Investment Fund</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Fair Food Network’s Fair Food Fund</i></li> </ul>

## ➤ Funds

With respect to food funds, the Philadelphia Food Justice Initiative, the Michigan Good Food Fund, and the King County Regional Food System Program are examples of food funds which present distinct approaches to advancing local food systems transformation. It is important to note that while each of these models deploys their funding differently, each program exists as a partnership, either with local government, a development bank, and/or foundation.

# Local Reflections

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## Context

In order to determine which aspects of the national-level research would be most locally resonant, local feedback was solicited in a variety of forms. This multi-methodology, multi-sector approach included:

1. A **survey** sent to the HFAC distribution list of all past HFAC meeting attendees and other local food-related partners, administered and analyzed by LPC Consulting Associates Inc. ([Link to report](#));
2. Four **interviews** with five seasoned HFAC partner organization staff, conducted and analyzed by LPC Consulting Associates Inc. ([Link to report](#)); and
3. **Community Listening Circles** with new food partners, conducted by the HFAC Facilitation Team ([Link to report](#))

This element of the overall research strategy was undertaken with the further intentions of gauging the will of the food community to collaboratively shape and/or engage in either a future container or funding efforts, deepening the relationships and foundations that had been built over the previous decade, and identifying what would be most helpful during the continued COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts.

## Methodologies

The survey covered the following topics: core functions and issue areas for a collaborative container, geographic preferences, challenges faced during the COVID pandemic and organizational capacity to work with others to establish a food-related fund.

The interviews sought feedback on: the collaborative food space models; core functions, issue areas, and geographic focus of a potential collaborative; resources and assistance that would be helpful during, and moving forward from, the COVID-19 pandemic; and, finally, organizational capacity to develop a regional food fund.

The listening circles were undertaken with the following objectives in mind: reviewing collaborative food space models; sharing the mandate for carrying forward the desire for a future container; gauging the will of the food community to engage in a future collective space; and building + strengthening relationships among and across new and seasoned food partners.

## Thematic Analysis of Findings

This section connects corresponding findings across the three data sources explored above in order to more accessibly surface key themes.

**Food partners system-wide are in overwhelming agreement of the following statements and look forward to receiving and offering the support required for the container's realization:**

1. There is general agreement that an overall container for the food system is needed and would be beneficial.
2. The focused and well-resourced support of a backbone organization is crucial to sustaining a container and providing essential facilitation support for collaborative participants.
3. In addition to the container, there is a need to better leverage existing food-related efforts.

# Local Reflections

The sections below reflect the **findings of the three data sources** and is organized topically for ease of understanding. These sections surface key points as well as important questions raised by participants which would require further facilitated exploration. The topics include:

- Reflections on Governance Models
- Core Functions & Issue Areas for a Future Container
- Leadership Qualities
- Geography
- Funding

## Reflections on Governance Models

### General Response

When reviewing the governance models, partners were encouraged to identify the unique elements that appealed to them from each model rather than select a single model in its entirety. Of the models that were presented, partners identified elements from the Los Angeles and San Diego models to uplift which are captured below:

#### Los Angeles

- Simplified and manageable governance structure;
- Cultivated, diverse network of changemakers that provide strategic guidance.

#### San Diego

- Issue areas determined by a food systems assessment;
- Emphasis on building cross-sector, collaborative efforts.

### Working Groups

Across both of the models above, partners identified working groups organized around a specific issue area as an important feature for adoption as they offer the following advantages:

- Targeted opportunities for engagement and action while the container maintains the wider structure;
- Convening and collaboration is aligned with organizations' missions and workloads without having to dedicate time or resources beyond their scope;
- Relationship building is deepened through sustained participation.

In the construction of these working groups, partners emphasized the importance of ensuring that future groups account for and are able to integrate existing collaborative efforts.

### Equity

Regarding how equity is incorporated into these collaboratives, partners appreciated different elements of the community engagement framing of both models. Further, in terms of how that framing was put into practice, some appreciated how San Diego's model was primarily staffed by women of color, including at the most senior levels and board, and others appreciated the deep attention to residents and advocates in the Los Angeles model. The latter gave rise to a deeper conversation around approaches to resident engagement, including questions such as: How are residents represented through organizations? And, how can interest and empowerment be sparked for their participation in a larger container?

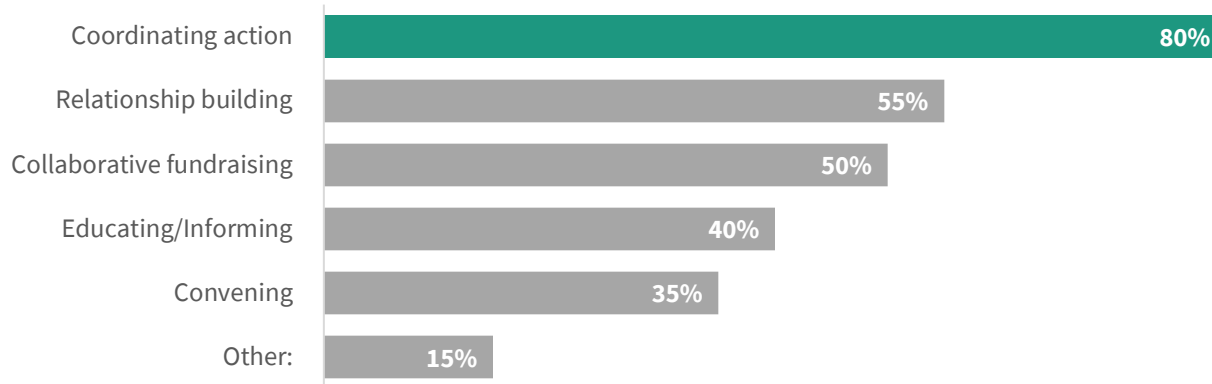


# Local Reflections

## Core Functions & Issue Areas for a Future Container

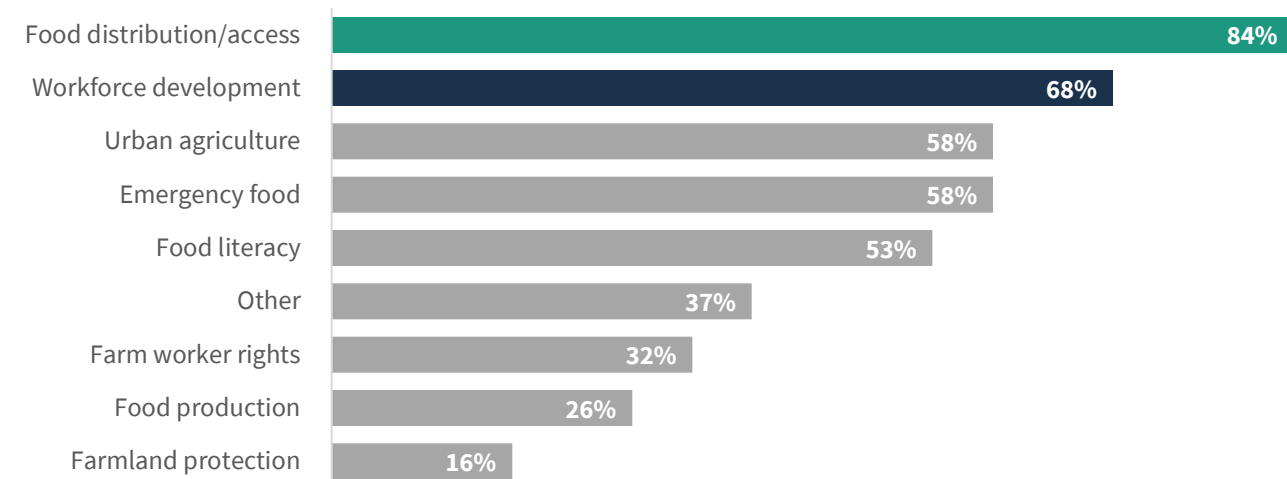
Clear direction emerged on the core functions and issue areas a collaborative food container should undertake. The two graphs below reflect the outcomes from the survey and their findings are echoed across the other data sources.

### Core Functions of a Collaborative Food Container



With regard to the finding on “coordinating action,” partners offered additional detail, expressing a desire for action to be coordinated not only across the vast spectrum of food system activities but also at different scales. It is also worth noting that this finding on core functions bear similarities to the results of a separate question asking partners what specific supports and resources would have been most helpful during and after COVID. Partners responded to that question with the following categories: funding, communications, relationship building and collaboration, and community feedback. Further details within each of those categories may be found on pp. 5-6 of the Survey Findings Report.

### Critical Issues to Address



Responses for “other” included: food security, food justice (distinguished from food access), local food processing, policy, nutritional insecurity, and food chain worker rights to include all workers in the food system.

# Local Reflections

## Leadership Qualities

Partners noted key characteristics which they believe are important for a future leader of the container to embody. It is important to note that partners did not identify a specific person or group, but instead reflected more generally on the qualities that would be most important moving forward. The following list surfaces those qualities from the data sources:

- **Capacity:** a future leader would be able to ensure forward progress by being able to focus their time and resources solely on building and managing the container;
- **Diversity:** a future leader would ideally be someone who reflects the wider community, representing any number of historically marginalized groups;
- **Awareness of Regional Perspectives:** a future leader would need to be able to not only account for the diversity of needs that the region presents, but also be able to intentionally incorporate, integrate, and align the existing spectrum of work already underway.

## Geography

Across the three data sources, there is no clear consensus on the geographic scale that a future container should span, with partners offering insight into the value and challenges of both a county-specific or multi-county focus.

As a general outcome, it appears that taking action at a local scale would be appropriate, while essential coordination, monitoring and evaluation, and learning and adaptation would be much more effective at the regional scale. The reasons for each option have been surfaced from the three data sources and are compiled below:

### Sacramento County Focus

- Broader geography adds complexity;
- Easier to focus on issues and convene on a smaller scale;
- Priorities differ across counties, particularly in the rural/suburban counties;
- Existing collaborative efforts should be strengthened first;
- Decision-making happens at the local level for feasible advocacy-related work.

### Multi-County Focus

- Strength in working at a broader level;
- More comprehensive understanding of fellow partners' issues, in turn making it easier to uplift one another;
- Stronger network to depend on in moments of crisis (e.g. COVID and wildfires);
- Maximizing collaborative potential at the programmatic level and need room for growth;
- The foodshed is not bound by political jurisdictions;
- Planning and facilitation can reflect all of the primary components of the food system, some of which might be missed if county-focused;
- The question of how to integrate Yolo County and West Sacramento;
- Can function as stronger, more well-rounded force for policy initiatives and advocacy efforts.

# Local Reflections

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## Geography & Funding

With regard to funding and geography, there is general agreement on the need for collaborative funding, though there remains a difference of opinion on the scale. Some feel funding is easier to obtain when focused on one county, while others feel that convening on a larger scale allows for the opportunity to pose stronger, more well-rounded funding asks.

## **Funding**

With respect to funding, partners stand in general agreement that a future container would best serve them if it could offer support with the following items:

1. Identifying and sharing funding opportunities for both individual orgs and joint ventures;
2. Offering technical assistance on applications; and
3. Generating funding (e.g.: collective fundraising).

## Funding Sources

The majority of partners believe that the group should be open to pursuing a range of funding sources, such as corporate partnerships, foundations, local governments, community benefits, fee for services, and value-added services.

## Food Fund Establishment

Just under half of the partners who responded to the survey would have the capacity to work on food fund establishment, and most partners who were interviewed expressed they would be willing to participate. Partners agreed that it would be helpful to establish clear expectations for what their participation would entail.

With regard to where the fund should be housed, partners appear to prefer the flexibility and emphasis on equitable distribution that a foundation can provide over a local government entity. When reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of local government funding, partners believed that engaging with city and county funds is important and should be approached strategically; however, many voiced concern about how funding can be cut during lean times, susceptible to political agendas, and slowed up by bureaucratic processes. A partner representing local government offered support for working with a foundation, explaining how government funds stop at borders and a container could ensure food is directed to wherever it is most needed.

## Points for Future Conversations

In the process of discussing funding sources and food fund establishment, additional funding-related themes and questions emerged which will require deeper, sustained conversation in the future. These include fiscal responsibility, ideas on how to apply for joint funding in the meantime, and the possibility of funding partner orgs to sustain participation in a future container.

# Avenues for Action

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Drawing from the “Findings” section above, the following recommendations offer guidance on development of a future food systems container. The recommendations reflect key learnings from a combination of evaluation data conducted over a decade by LPC Consulting Associates Inc., national research findings vetted at the local level, community listening circles with a diversity of food systems partners, and best practices derived from ten years of facilitating the Healthy Food for Collaborative in South Sacramento.

These foundational actions for constructing the container are grouped into three main categories: the *content of the container*, the *logistical process of building the container*, and the *social process for building of the container*.

- Recommendations at the **content-level** provide direction on the scope of work for the container to undertake.
- Recommendations on the **logistical process** of building a container provide direction on next steps required to build a stand-alone container, given that there is not a single organization which, in its current form, meets the requirements specified at the content-level.
- Recommendations on the **social process** for building the container refer to facilitative techniques and strategies that will aid in harmonizing group momentum.

Readers will notice that equity is explored in both the content and social foundation sections given that it must be considered in both the content (i.e. the “what”) and the process (i.e. the “how”).

These recommendations are meant to serve as springboards for action which propel the work forward *and* are to be supplemented with the findings sections of the three data sources, which must be viewed as the anchor documents from which this summary in general, and the following recommendations in particular, are sourced.

## The Content of the Container

### 1. Focus the core functions of the container on “backbone” services.

Backbone services would include the following elements:

- **A Network Approach to Food Systems Management:** Build a more integrated and connected network of food system partners in order to shape policies and attract resources for food work. The network approach follows a wider trend across the social impact sector which leverages collective resources, power, and voice towards systemic change.
- **Food System Action Planning Alignment:** Actively align on-going research and planning at the regional, county, city and neighborhood level to link priorities with actions. Actions to guide the present scope of work at the regional level have already been defined in Valley Vision’s Food System Action Plan (2015, updated in 2021). Future work must ensure alignment across additional action planning efforts and hold space for new priorities that emerge at the local level, including the efforts by the mayor’s office and the Sacramento Food System Partnership.

# Avenues for Action

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- **Workgroups – A Facilitated Approach to Action:** Dedicate facilitative support for content experts throughout the food space in order to take collaborative actions that achieve systemic change.
- **Storytelling to Advance Advocacy + Outreach:** Create better awareness among stakeholders and the public about what is happening in the food system, including through digital mediums.
- **Food Fund Development and Management:** Oversee the development of regional and local food funding mechanisms and inform how funds should be directed to food system priorities. Please see point #3 below for additional detail.

## 2. Center core attributes of the container on the following:

- **Equity-centered:** Consciously center equity, trust, and relationships at each step of the way. At the content level, equity must be embedded into the fabric of the container’s approach to food work. For support with this element, The Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley launched by John A. Powell can provide meaningful framing and theoretical direction on the role of equity in our food system.
- **Food-focused:** Focus the container on food work and ensure equitable representation across sector and org size. Facilitating capacity-building for smaller orgs, while supporting larger orgs in their work with an eye towards ensuring funding equity, can help alleviate the possibility of competing for local philanthropy
- **Dedicated Staffing:** Ensure well-resourced staff are dedicated to the provision of consistent backbone services (listed above) year-over-year.
- **Regional Focus, Localized Action:** Balance a regional focus with localized action to ensure the container is nimble enough to take and facilitate action by issue area, while still being able to have a regional voice that collaboratively dreams, convenes, and accounts for the full spectrum of efforts which contribute to a whole, health-promoting food system but do not overlay neatly with geographic boundaries.

Taking action at the regional level has proven cumbersome in the past and taking action at the local level only has proven insufficient to making system wide impact. Lessons learned from HFAC provide proof of concept for this balanced approach: Success was incumbent upon the Collaborative’s ability to at once reflect the *unique* assets and requirements of *each neighborhood* within South Sacramento, while still presenting a *unified* voice when advocating for and advancing the work in external arenas (i.e. city, county, etc.). South Sacramento vs. The Avenues is a perfect example of this point and serves as a microcosm of the regional vs. local tension. A successful future container must reproduce that interplay at a magnified scale—i.e. between the local and regional level—which HFAC was able to achieve between the neighbourhood and wider South Sacramento level.

- **Leadership Council:** Create and coordinate a diverse Leadership Council of content and community experts who represent the full spectrum of food systems efforts and can provide informed guidance on the container’s undertakings.

# Avenues for Action

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## 3. Diversify funding sources and engage innovative approaches to pursue funding.

- **Healthy Food Fund Development:** Develop and sustain healthy food funds guided by action planning efforts. Ensure content and community experts are consulted in the distribution of funds and guided by action plans. Span the full spectrum of partner activities by ensuring future funding efforts and mechanisms cross geographic boundaries and sectors.

To account for the full spectrum of partner activities, future funding efforts and mechanisms must cross geographic boundaries and work in partnership with city and county funds which have geographic limitations. Having a regional fund for wider dollars and efforts and connecting it to local dollars will allow funding to span the spectrum of efforts and geographies. Local government officials support this approach, as a broader container can ensure both food and funding is directed to where it needs to go.

- **Holistic Approach to Food Systems Funding:** Reframe thinking to approach the whole food system as an asset class worthy of investment. Given that an asset class is simply defined as a group of similar investment opportunities, our food system provides multiple points of opportunity for investment.
- **Diverse Funding Sources:** Pursue diverse funding sources and consider a wider spectrum of financial tools. Depending upon the activities that partners choose to pursue, different financial tools will be better suited than others. For example: infrastructure development is best served by bonds, sustained programmatic funding is best served by tax-increment financing (TIF), and profit generating activities could be served with any of the access to capital tools depending on their scale. This approach will allow future funding efforts to be balanced between pro-active and re-active funding needs.

## The Logistical Process of Building the Container

### 4. Implement a Two Year Path for Interim Leadership that balances offering *interim convening and backbone services* with developing a *future container*.

As there is no organization in the regional food space which currently meets all of the above recommended criteria to immediately steward a food systems container in the long-term, a two-pronged approach which balances interim and long-term needs must be adopted.

Two high-capacity organizations do currently exist that could provide *interim* convening support and backbone services for current food initiatives underway, in addition to driving the development of a new food-systems container. These include Valley Vision and Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF). In addition to providing this interim backbone support, it is strongly recommended that Valley Vision and/or CAFF work in collaboration with food systems partners across the spectrum to develop the new future container.

With regard to developing a new *future container*, four possible options already exist that should be considered before any new entity is launched. The following options reflect existing possibilities which have demonstrated history of impact, breadth and depth of work, and deep existing relationships. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these options would require a significant amount of further

# Avenues for Action

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development and capacity building before they could be formalized enough to serve as a future container.

These options include:

- *Option 1 - California Food and Farming Network (CFFN)*: While state-wide in scope, CFFN has experience in this space and holds potential as a future container worth exploring. One of the strengths of CFFN is that it is a formalized organization.
- *Option 2 - Sacramento Food System Partnership (SFFP)*: Grant-funded work under the name of the Sacramento Food System Partnership is currently underway. Though not officially an organization, this is a collaborative effort led by Sacramento Food Policy Council and Green Tech. While SFFP is relatively new, is not an official organization, and is currently Sacramento County focused, there is the possibility that this effort could be expanded and formalized into a future container for the food space.
- *Options 3 & 4 - Food System Collaborative (FSC) and Healthy Food For All Collaborative (HFAC)*: While neither were official organizations, the original FSC or HFAC have a combined track record of over ten years convening partners towards collaborative food systems transformation. Either convenor could be resurrected, expanded, and formalized into the stand alone container.

Under any scenario, the interim backbone organization would require the support of experts in the regional food space to co-create a new stand-alone container who would serve as the Leadership Council. The interim role would optimally be held for a two-year period as they hold the primary role of convenor and attend to an initial set of backbone services (such as calendaring, note-taking, and communicating updates across the network).

Allowing wider criteria for holding a seat on the council (i.e. looking to the program director or project manager level), rather than automatically deferring to the executive director, could potentially address equity issues at predominately white-led orgs. Additionally, when considering a seat on the Leadership Council, it is important that an individual undergo honest self-reflection to consider whether they possess the capacity and resilience to weather the process fatigue that could emerge from sustained engagement in the length and depth of the conversations required to build the container.

5. **Balance Content and Process Expertise.** Build and nurture an intentional partnership between content experts who can strategically *inform* the group and process experts who can strategically *guide* the group. This can take the form of co-facilitation (one content and one process expert) OR bringing in a process facilitator to work with a steering committee of content experts (partners within the container) who are representative of the communities being served. The intentional pairing of someone with content expertise with someone with process expertise to support and facilitate the group towards and through action ensures that the group is taken care of from all possible aspects.

For further clarification: the content expert tends to the substantive aspect of the group's goals ensuring alignment with trends/needs in the field and can weigh in/guide areas related to group's goals from a subject matter perspective. The process expert tends to the relational aspect of the group's work as well as ensures that the group's strategic trajectory is aligned with its broader action plan and stated objectives.

## The Social Process of Building the Container

# Avenues for Action

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*Building the social foundation of a container for the food system means incorporating key practices that center equity while fostering safety, inclusion, and collaboration. Bringing partners from across the food system together means bringing together a diverse array of experiences, expertise, and perspectives – in order to leverage these elements into a unified space that is cohesive, inclusive, and collaborative, special care must be taken with how the social foundation of the container is set-up.*

- 6. Center Equity.** Acknowledge and integrate the wisdom and perspectives of BIPOC partners and community members. There is a recognition that within the Sacramento food space there is a predominance of white-led institutions. Creating an equitable, inclusive, health promoting food system will require more than the existing experts' voices at the table, as this only represents a specific portion of the community. A future container will be best served by holding space for wider perspectives as it relies on the insights and expertise of folks who have been deeply involved in the food space and will also serve as a critical lever in informing the way forward.

The container must also be undergirded with education and the history of race and racism in the food space as a way to build shared language and understanding of how different communities have been impacted, as well as how white dominance continues to harm communities of color and permeate our everyday ways of thinking, doing, and engaging. This creates space for partners to come into conversations with increased awareness and a more informed lens, particularly when navigating conversations about racial disparities and the disproportionate impacts BIPOC partners and communities experience within the food space and beyond.

- 7. Begin with Relationship Building.** Prioritize trust and relationship building, as these provide the foundation for groups to connect and effectively, respectfully, and authentically navigate difficult conversations. This is often the arena that is neglected when any new group is forming as the focus tends to be on putting into place structures and processes. It's important to keep in mind the "and" here, one can put those into place *and* tend to the relational aspect by building trust and relationships within and across the group.

- 8. Emphasize Actionable Steps.** Partners agree they want a space where they are able to come together and want to move into action. In order to combat the overwhelm and fatigue that can often arise in a collaborative process, it is crucial to emphasize actionable steps, particularly for seasoned partners who have been participating in this work over the long term. Past experience has demonstrated that finding one goal which partners from *across* the food spectrum can come together around was challenging and led to *multiple* conversations about the purpose of a collective space. And even when a goal was identified, capacity is often limited to take action outside of the goals set forth in each partner's respective work plans, leading previous attempts at 'calls to action' to fall short, creating more frustration and tension. Needless to say, these learnings further underscore the need for a future backbone organization which can take this burden off of the shoulders of overtaxed orgs who are more often than not working on the front-lines of our food system.

- 9. Create Group Guiding Principles/Guidelines.** Set expectations for how partners will engage with each other and be reflective of the collective voice and perspectives. Ideally, these principles center collective wisdom, ensure equity of voice, and create brave space for difficult conversations.



# Avenues for Action

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**10. Create a Shared Values Statement.** Collectively identify which values will serve as a north star for group process, discussion, and decisions. They will also fundamentally inform how partners agree to approach their work together, which ultimately has the potential to lead to valued-aligned partnerships, strengthened relationships, and sustainable collaborations.

## Concluding Remarks

A decades worth of experience and research findings have illuminated the overwhelming consensus that food work in our Sacramento community needs to be held in some type of collaborative container. While there certainly is an acknowledgement that we are all doing great work individually, there is also agreement that we will not make systemic improvements to the food system under our current siloed approach. Furthermore, despite a rare combination of food, environmental and political assets, our region is falling far short of its potential and continues to experience many of the same food and diet related challenges that communities with far less resources deal with. A container brings the shared value statements, guiding food action plans, facilitated actions, cross sector coordination, storytelling and fund development that we need to truly move the needle towards an equitable and health promoting food system. Our collective hard work over the last two decades has paved the way for this moment, but we must take the next step. Thank you so much to all of the many talented and dedicated partners who contributed their time, honesty, expertise and insights to this report. Our persistence in this effort will bear fruit!