

# HISTORY OF FOOD IN FLINT

## SUMMARY

To understand why Flint's food system functions as it does today, we need to understand its history. One of our first research activities was to co-create a timeline of significant events that impacted the structure and function of the current food system. With food system leaders and community members, we developed a large comprehensive timeline and a shorter digital timeline that highlight both negative and positive environmental, economic, and social events that shaped the food system in Flint. We identified whether events were within or external to Flint, and whether they were food-specific or broader.

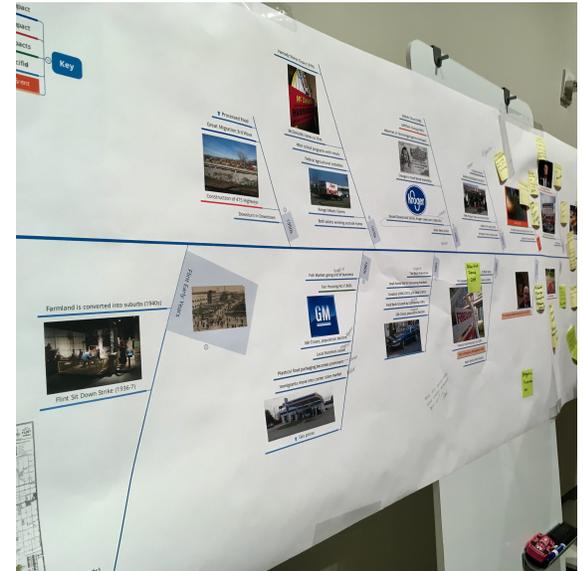
## MAJOR FINDINGS

**The food system is impacted by broader socio-economic context.** Events that were perceived to be most impactful tended to be **external events at the state and national level** that influenced city life rather than food-specific events - i.e., policies related to urban planning, deindustrialization, and actions that removed autonomy in Flint, like Emergency Management. Interestingly, the timing of the water crisis, discussed as another event that reflected this lack of autonomy, reaches far beyond when policy-makers and outsiders tend to describe—the date the water was switched from the Detroit water system, April 25, 2014. For residents, the beginning of the water crisis is directly linked to the installment of the Emergency Manager in 2011. Furthermore, the water crisis is not resolved, and continues today. These findings reflect how **socio-economic events at the city, state, and national scale are entwined and directly contributed to problems with the food system today**, particularly the reliance on emergency food. Such events impact peoples' incomes and thus capacity to ensure food security, further demonstrating that in urban contexts, food security is related to wealth/poverty.

**Changes in food access are the most noted markers of food system change in Flint.** Events perceived to be impactful were the closure of grocery stores, such as Hamady's by 1991, and of local butcher shops. These were viewed as negative events that **decreased the efficiency of the food system**. While food is present in Flint and its surrounding areas (i.e. there is food availability), food access (i.e., affordability, access to transportation, etc.) is critical and in turn influences food utilization (i.e. purchasing and consuming nutritious of food).

**Authors:** Chelsea Wentworth and Jennifer Hodbod, Michigan State University. Contact: [wentwo21@msu.edu](mailto:wentwo21@msu.edu)

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The timeline shows that **major shocks lead to innovation**. Since the 2008 recession, multiple innovative programs have been introduced by Flint residents and community leaders to improve access to food. For example, Double Up Food Bucks (2011 onwards) and the Hurley Food FARMacy (2017 onwards). As a result, Flint is leading the nation in programming and piloting new city or state projects.

While innovation in the supplemental food system is important to prevent people falling further into food insecurity, it is not necessarily changing the structure of the system to a food system that prevents people from needing supplemental food. In recent years, more **structural solutions** have been proposed to improve the food system through gardening and small-scale food distribution, such as the opening of the Flint Fresh Food Hub in 2018, garden kits through Edible Flint, and the Michigan Good Food Fund in 2015. Such a shift indicates a redirection of how organizations within and external to Flint think about solutions to the problem of food access.

Our timeline analysis found that **statewide funding programs that provide funds at structural levels across the system are less visible to residents**. For example, there is low recognition assigned to wider programs such as the MI Good Food Fund and MI Health Endowment Fund but these programs are of high importance because of the scale of their funding (\$50million+ into MI).

# APPROACH

Collecting data points for the timeline was an iterative process:

- We built the first draft collaboratively with the FLPP Community Consultative Panel (CCP)
- We then printed a large version of the timeline and brought it to community events where Flint, Beecher, and Burton residents and community leaders could add to/edit the timeline using sticky notes and in providing verbal feedback to the research team. We also gathered targeted information from a few key food system leaders, and from small groups of research participants.
- Timeline data was entered into Excel so the research team could analyze the information, examining the type and frequency of events.
- Based on community and research team conversations we selected approximately 20 key events that are important to understanding the historical context of the food system in Flint, Beecher, and Burton and created an interactive version of this shortened timeline to share broadly.



## OPPORTUNITIES

The historical context of what has happened to the food system in Flint is essential to understanding the factors that shape the food system today, particularly the role of the broader socio-economic context. Food system change and economic revitalization go hand in hand and should be integrated in planning for the future.

The timeline may still be missing information about grassroots or neighborhood level innovation, particularly as a response to the Great Recession or the Flint Water Crisis. A survey tool on the FLPP website will allow us to continue collecting this data.

The timeline shows the importance of policies (Emergency Manager, state and federal funding mechanisms, etc) in shaping the food system. More research is required to identify and share local-level food specific policies intended to have a positive impact on food access and nutrition.

## USING THIS RESEARCH

Data from the timeline is available for others to use in two formats:

- 1) A brief, interactive version that highlights some key events can be used for educational purposes.
- 2) A full version of the timeline visualization with all community comments incorporated can be used for reference or in providing context for other food system grants, policies and research.

Both are freely accessible at

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/flintfood/what-we-learned/timeline>

Members of the Flint Leverage Points Project, community groups and organizations, and researchers, can draw on this information to provide context for understanding the Flint, Beecher, and Burton food system, particularly the history of food access.

We envision this information being useful for local organizations writing grants – the timeline provides historical context for other food system activities.

## About the Flint Leverage Points Project

The Flint Leverage Points Project is a collaboration between researchers and community partners to find ways to change the food system in Flint so that it is more equitable, healthy, and sustainable. The Community Foundation of Greater Flint (CFGF) is partnering with Michigan State University (MSU) to conduct this research. We are advised by a Community Consultative Panel comprised of representatives from the Flint community who work in the food space. We are looking at the whole food system involved in producing, distributing, preparing, eating and recycling food in Flint to find patterns that are keeping it in an undesirable state. We will also identify strengths and opportunities within the food system that could be built upon. This project will produce an analysis of how community partners can intervene in the Flint food system to create positive change. For more information about the project, contact Damon Ross (CFGF) at [DRoss@cfgf.org](mailto:DRoss@cfgf.org) or Chelsea Wentworth (MSU) at [wentwo21@msu.edu](mailto:wentwo21@msu.edu).