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Farmer Voices Help Shape New Howard County Food Council Priorities

Columbia, MD - As one of its first initiatives, the Howard County Food Council (HCFC) hosted two focus groups with local farmers to better understand their perceptions, beliefs and experiences around growing, raising, and distributing food in Howard County. Currently, one in five Howard County residents is impacted by food insecurity, according to the [2024 Howard County Health Assessment Survey](#).

The [Farmers Focus Group Findings Report is available here](#). The findings from the farmer focus groups will be shared and discussed with the Food Council's members in the coming months. This information will serve as the foundation for the Council's Action Plan, which will guide its activities over the next several years to support farmers and ensure that all community members have access to healthy, farm-fresh food.

Farmers expressed that they are fortunate to work in a community where agriculture is valued and supported. However, they also identified several key challenges, including the public's limited awareness of the benefits of locally grown food, a lack of knowledge about how to select and prepare fresh produce, and competition from grocery stores. In addition, they face high land, equipment, and labor costs and complex regulatory requirements that make it difficult to sustain operations.

"The Howard County Food Council represents a shared commitment to understanding and strengthening our local food system," said Dr. Maura Rossman, Health Officer for the Howard County Health Department. "By listening to the experiences of our farmers, we can ensure that the programs and policies we create reflect the real needs of those who feed our community."

Major themes emerging from the focus groups included education, public awareness, labor, regulations, marketing, land, equipment, and supply costs, and local food distribution and processing. These themes will guide the HCFC as it develops strategies to improve food access, promote agricultural sustainability, and increase public engagement with local food producers.

"Our farms are critical for a holistic approach to food security in Howard County, which we have promoted through aggressive agricultural preservation and expansion of our Roving Radish farm-to-table produce and meal kit programs," said County Executive Calvin Ball. "I'm thankful for the Howard County Food Council, working with stakeholders to bring further focus on growing healthy, sustainable food in our communities for the health and benefit of our neighbors."



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Yekatit Bezooayehu, Howard County Food Council Administrator, commented, "I am inspired by the dedication of the farmers serving local communities. Their candid insights shared during the focus groups are grounded in real experience. Building on their expertise, we look forward to bringing partners and community members together to develop solutions to address hunger among our neighbors in Howard County."

"The farmer focus groups gave us a chance to listen directly to the people who grow our food. Our local food system depends on the health of our soils, the success of our farms, and the dedication of local farmers who bring fresh, delicious food to our community. I am excited by the opportunities for Howard County to leverage its agricultural strength in order to develop a stronger, more resilient food system," said Nathan Glenn, who assists in overseeing the HCFC with the University of Maryland Extension.

To learn more about the Council, go to the Howard County [Local Health Improvement Coalition Food Council webpage](#). The HCFC is a partnership between the Howard County Health Department and the University of Maryland Extension. The Council's establishment was announced in January 2025 and the press release can be found on the [Howard County Health Department website](#).

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