



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE REGIONAL MEMBER (FARM) POLICY COMMITTEE

Friday, April 10, 2026
10:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.
Virtual Only

(DRAFT) MEETING SUMMARY

DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

- FARM members approved the February 2026 FARM meeting summary by unanimous vote.
- COG staff will circulate links and resources shared in the meeting chat, including materials related to the Local Food Procurement Challenge (LFPC), food retail access, and urban agriculture.
- Members were encouraged to designate jurisdictional points of contact and participate in the Local Food Procurement Community of Practice.
- Jurisdictions considering adoption of a Local Food Procurement Challenge Resolution were invited to contact Chair Friedson or COG staff for support.
- The next FARM meeting will be a joint meeting with the COG Human Services Policy Committee on Friday, September 18, 2026, from 12:00–2:00 PM.

WELCOME AND COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Councilmember Andrew Friedson, FARM Chair
Supervisor Laura TeKrony, FARM Vice Chair

Chair Andrew Friedson called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. and welcomed FARM members and participants. A quorum was confirmed. Members voted unanimously to approve February 2026 FARM meeting summary.

Vice Chair Laura TeKrony shared an announcement from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services regarding the [Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program \(VAFAP\)](#). The program provides grant funding to charitable food organizations to purchase Virginia-grown food for distribution to food-insecure residents. Applications are due May 5, 2026, and approximately \$1.1 million is available statewide for this funding round.

LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT CHALLENGE UPDATE

Councilmember Andrew Friedson, FARM Chair
Sara Pollock Hoverter, Director, Center for Community Health Innovation, O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Georgetown University Law Center
Heather Bruskin, Director, Montgomery County Office of Food System Resilience

Chair Friedson announced that the Montgomery County Council [unanimously passed a Resolution formally joining COG’s Local Food Procurement Challenge](#) (LFPC). The Resolution’s adoption signals

the beginning of implementation. He highlighted the importance of sustained follow-through across county agencies, community partners, and regional collaborators.

Chair Friedson thanked COG staff and partners for their support and noted that Montgomery County's Office of Food Systems Resilience was identified in the [Resolution](#) to lead implementation. He reminded members that COG [maintains a template resolution](#) that jurisdictions may adapt for local use.

Council Member Jolene Ivey (Prince George's County) shared that a similar resolution has been sent to bill drafting in Prince George's County.

Sara Hoverter provided an update on the LFPC Community of Practice (CoP). Its first meeting will be April 17th from 10-11:30 a.m. The CoP will be a peer-learning space designed to support jurisdictions at all stages of local food procurement through shared resources, contract language examples, and connections to technical experts. She emphasized that jurisdictions do not need to pass a resolution to participate.

Heather Bruskin presented examples of how Montgomery County integrates local food procurement into its food assistance programs. She described several locally funded grant programs that support food access while also advancing economic and environmental goals through local sourcing.

The strategies she highlighted included incorporating local food sourcing criteria into grant application rubrics, providing technical assistance to food assistance providers on defining and accessing local food, and using grant reporting to track purchasing outcomes. Heather also described Montgomery County's investments in food aggregation infrastructure to support small producers and connect them to institutional and wholesale markets. Her presentation is available on the meeting webpage.

Members discussed how these approaches could be adapted to fit jurisdictions with varying levels of staffing, infrastructure, and agricultural contexts. Vice Chair TeKrony and Board Member Takis Karantonis (Arlington County) reflected on how rural, suburban, and urban jurisdictions may approach local food procurement differently, citing examples such as CSAs, farmers markets, and partnerships with food assistance providers.

GROCERY RETAIL AND HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS IN THE REGION

Stephanie Johnson, RDN, Group Vice President, Government Relations, National Grocers Association

Mike Houston, General Manager, Takoma Park Silver Spring CO-OP

Radha Muthiah, CEO, Capital Area Food Bank

Tariq Sheriff, Business Development & Strategy Manager, District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning & Economic Development

Chair Friedson introduced Stephanie Johnson from the National Grocer's Association to moderate a panel discussion focused on grocery access, rising food costs, and food system resilience. Panelists included Mike Houston (Takoma Park Silver Spring Food Co-op), Tariq Sheriff (DC Deputy Mayor's Office of Planning and Economic Development), and Radha Muthiah (Capital Area Food Bank).

Panelists discussed the operational realities of grocery stores, including thin profit margins, rising labor and transportation costs, and increased consolidation in the sector. Speakers addressed

recent federal changes to SNAP, declining benefits, and the cascading effects on retailers and emergency food providers.

The discussion also highlighted growing food insecurity among middle-income households, the importance of SNAP participation to retailer viability, and the role that local governments can play through zoning, real estate strategies, tax incentives, and infrastructure investments to support neighborhood grocers.

Members raised questions about attracting grocery stores to underserved areas, lease restrictions that limit grocery replacement, alcohol sales and margins, and opportunities for local government intervention focused on reducing operating costs rather than directly operating stores.

High-level meeting summary of subsequent agenda items continues at the bottom of page 6.

Here's a more detailed list of takeaways, questions, and responses for this item.

Takeaways

- Grocery retail runs on extremely thin margins, limiting price flexibility. After major fixed costs (e.g. labor, rent, utilities), many grocers net 1–2% profit, making it difficult to absorb supplier price increases without passing them on.
- Volume and sales-per-square-foot are key drivers of financial viability and profitability. Mike Houston shared CO-OP data to illustrate how tight margins make store expansion a multi-year, capital-intensive undertaking.
- Supply-chain costs determine grocery prices before food reaches the shelf. Stephanie Johnson emphasized that key inflation drivers (i.e. transportation, labor, energy, fertilizer, etc.) push costs upstream, leaving retailers with limited levers at the store level.
- DC's food-access challenge is both economic and public-health driven. Tariq Sheriff described persistent disparities (e.g., higher rates of chronic illness and large life-expectancy gaps by neighborhood), which overlap with lower food access and lower incomes.
- National chain pullbacks are affecting local availability, while some discount formats expand in DC. There's a broader retrenchment by major chains, alongside growth from discount grocers (e.g., Aldi/Lidl) whose operating models can sustain different margin structures and price points.
- Incentives help but don't fully overcome "proprietary" site-selection calculations. Sheriff described that even with DC's tax-abatement tools, attracting full-service grocers into low-access areas remains difficult because retailers rely on internal, location-specific profitability modeling.
- Food banks rely heavily on grocery-sector donations—and store closures reduce supply. Radha Muthiah explained that a significant share of food Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB) distributes comes from retailers/wholesalers. She cited a major recent example where store closures reduced donated-food volume materially.

- SNAP policy changes ripple through households, retailers, and emergency food demand. Johnson summarized expected SNAP impacts (including work/time-limit effects and stricter retailer stocking rules).
- Houston reported that the CO-OP observed an 11% decline in SNAP sales over the last 15 months and described a visible shift of people from retail purchases to food-distribution lines.
- Inflation raises the cost of both buying food and meeting rising needs requiring new strategies. CAFB purchases a large share of distributed food and faces substantial annual purchasing costs; projections suggest rising meal demand.
- Houston highlighted operational strategies such as avoiding high-fee third-party delivery platforms, using pickup models, and leveraging cooperative/collective purchasing to improve pricing and resilience.
- Industry consolidation can disadvantage independent grocers. Large chains can extract lower supplier prices, leaving smaller operators paying more - this can be seen as anti-competitive pressure that compounds affordability challenges.

Question and Answer

Q: “What should we be looking for when we’re trying to attract the grocer? ... What are some things that grocers are considering when they decide on a location that maybe I can highlight when I’m doing outreach?”

A: Consider doing a traffic/market assessment (often a paid study) to estimate daily customer volume and what store size could be profitable. Check whether nearby businesses (i.e. Dollar Stores) are diverting traffic in a way that undermines a full-service grocer.

Maryland’s [“Compass”](#) resource can provide a lower-cost, pre-market study view of grocery potential for a specific location.

Grocers weigh operating costs vs. basket size, density, and foot traffic - much is proprietary for national chains.

Q: Incentives question: what kinds of incentives are most meaningful to make a grocery project pencil out?

A: Per Houston, rent and upfront build-out costs are key. A grocer may need rent closer to \$30–\$40/sq ft (or less), and free/abated rent early on can help while sales ramp. He also emphasized lowering upfront capital needs (often several million dollars) reduces debt service and therefore reduces pressure to raise margins/prices just to break even.

Q: Robinson–Patman Act: What it is and why it matters for grocery consolidation and pricing?

A: Per Johnson, antitrust thinking shifted in the 1980s toward focusing only on “harm to the consumer,” which effectively made Robinson–Patman enforcement dormant. She added NGA is working to get the FTC to enforce it again, arguing that ignoring “harm to the business” contributed to small business closures.

Q: Has CAFB started to think about supporting our smallest stores ... to continue to accept SNAP by helping them with those stocking requirements?

A: Per Muthiah, yes - CAFB is thinking about supporting small grocers and aligning with partners (she cited DC Central Kitchen’s work with corner stores), while also exploring ways to extend CAFB purchasing power more directly to consumers and looking at non-traditional retail touchpoints where people already shop.

Q: For Mike, how will you balance co-op demand with new SNAP stocking requirements?

A: SNAP stocking requirements are not an issue for the co-op as a full-service store but noted WIC requirements are difficult for natural foods retailers because required items are not reliably available through their distributors; he suggested collaboration/creativity could help smaller stores meet requirements.

Q: What about using government tools on the real-estate side - analogous to affordable housing - to make grocery viable, such as partnering to reduce rent/real estate costs rather than running a municipally operated grocery store?

A: Johnson said municipally run grocery stores generally have not been successful because grocery is complex and perishable-heavy; she recommended incentivizing an experienced (often independent) operator instead.

Sheriff agreed. Reducing operating costs—especially rent—can be decisive (e.g., abating taxes or structuring ownership/leases so an operator can function without high rent) and stressed that stores must match community preferences/assortment or shoppers will bypass them.

Other Key Points

Supervisor Tom Gordy noted that grocery tenants often sign long-term leases and, after closing, can still control the space by refusing to allow competing grocers—effectively “lock[in] these parcels down.” He has been working in Prince William to find ways to end or work around these restrictive lease/contract terms so another grocer can move in.

Karantonis agreed with Gordy and suggested a “legislative fix” (“go together to Richmond”) to address restrictive grocery lease provisions that block new operators.

URBAN AGRICULTURE ROADMAP FOR FAIRFAX COUNTY AND THE CITY OF FAIRFAX

Supervisor Dalia Palchik, Fairfax County

Stacey Evers, Chair and Co-founder, [Hands on Harvests](#), and Staff Member, Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District

Supervisor Dalia Palchik talked about the forthcoming draft Urban Agriculture Roadmap developed for Fairfax County and Fairfax City, aimed at mapping where the jurisdictions are on food production

and laying out practical, next steps. This is especially important given tight budgets/resources. She emphasized that this effort is about more than production. It's about people, community, and rebuilding agricultural knowledge. Supervisor Palchik introduced Stacey Evers, who has led the study.

Evers explained that the roadmap focuses on strengthening local food system's resilience through expanded small- and mid-scale food production. Key issues identified included zoning barriers, limited land access, unmet demand for community gardens, and the need for clearer leadership and coordination on agriculture and food production.

The report includes policy and zoning reform recommendations, workforce and capacity-building strategies, and proposals for more integrated food system planning.

FARM members discussed parallels in their own jurisdictions and the importance of aligning zoning, environmental goals, and food security strategies.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Supervisor Laura TeKrony, FARM Vice Chair

Vice Chair TeKrony announced that FARM will not hold a summer meeting in 2026. Members were encouraged to use the coming months to pass a resolution to join the Local Food Procurement Challenge within their jurisdictions.

The next FARM meeting will be a joint meeting with the COG Human Services Policy Committee on Friday, September 18, 2026, from 12:00–2:00 PM.

ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 11:59.

ATTENDANCE

FARM MEMBERS

Andrew Friedson, FARM Chair, Montgomery County Council*
Laura TeKrony, FARM Vice Chair, Loudoun County*
Caroline Howe, DC Office of Planning/DC Food Policy Council
Caron Gremont, FRESHFARM (alternate)
Dalia Palchik, Fairfax County*
Danielle McKinney, City of Greenbelt
Denise Mitchell, City of College Park
Heather Bruskin, Montgomery County Office of Food System Resilience*
Jacinta Greene, Alexandria City
Jessica Landsman, City of Takoma Park
Joe Liu, Capital Area Food Bank (alternate)
Jolene Ivey, Prince George's County
Julia Gross, MD Hunger Solutions
Julia Raymond, DC Office of Planning/DC Food Policy Council (alternate)
Marybeth Connelly, City of Falls Church

Naomi Herr, City of Laurel
Rachel McQuillen, City of Fairfax
Radha Muthiah, Capital Area Food Bank*
Sara Hoverter, Georgetown University Law, O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law*
Takis Karantonis, Arlington County
Tara Clemons Johnson, Montgomery County Council (alternate)
Tom Gordy, Prince William County
Yesy Amaya, City of Manassas Park
Jon Stehle (emeritus member)

SPEAKERS

Stephanie Johnson
Mike Houston
Tariq Sheriff
Stacey Evers
** Additional meeting speaker*

PARTICIPANTS

202....796	Leshia Chandler
Aisha Salazar VCE	Lisa A. Lachenmayr
Akanksha Sinha	Mandilyn
Alex Cordova - OSEC MD	Mario Minor
Allison Schnitzer MCFC	mark michael
Amy Crone (FFAB)	Mary
Amy Zerante	Mary Charlton
Anne Palmer	Matt Mulder, Arcadia
Annika La Fave -MDEM-	Melissa Jensen
Ashley Sharp	Michele Burton
Beth Sastre	Michelle Caruso
Brian Alexander	Molly Meehan
Caitlin Anne Grady	Momin Kashaf (OP)
Carmen Angel (DOH)	Morgan Standley
Carrie Cannon	Nancy K Nunn
Catherine Nardi	Natalia Salazar Lahera
Craig Rice	Pam Hess
David B. Noto	Piper Phillips Caswell
Elana Goldstein	Robin McClave
Elizabeth Teuwen MCFC	Samuel Wilson
Emily Landsman (FOUA)	Sydney Garner
Erin Michelle Duru	Value Chain Coordinator
Gretchen Greiner-Lott	Vermaak Stuart
Jasmine R. Pazmino	Warren Hansen
Jessie Lupo (DOH)	
John McCarthy	COG
John W. Sheridan	Christine Howard
Katherine E. Braga	Lindsay Smith
LaMonika Jones	Steve Bieber
Laura Jeske	



MEETING CHAT RESOURCES

The VDACS Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program reimburses charitable food assistance agencies' purchase of locally grown food and distribution to people in need:
www.vdacs.virginia.gov/virginia-agriculture-food-assistance-program.shtml

Montgomery County's Local Food Procurement Challenge Resolution:

- COG's coverage of the passage of the resolution: <https://www.mwcog.org/newsroom/2026/04/07/local-food-procurement/>
- Press release for introduction of the resolution: https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?Item_ID=48373
- Resolution text: https://montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=169&event_id=16771&meta_id=214010
- Chair Friedson's staff's contact information for jurisdictions interested in learning more:
 - Andrew Friedson: andrew.friedson@montgomerycountymd.gov
 - Cindy Gibson: cindy.gibson@montgomerycountymd.gov
 - Warren Hansen: Warren.Hansen@montgomerycountymd.gov
- Funding source for the MoCo's food aggregation and distribution facility: <https://www.marbidco.org/>

Frederick County Office of Agriculture feasibility study for the Center for Farm Retail Innovation: <https://homegrownfrederick.com/farm-to-consumer/>

Blog post from the Food Research and Action Center on the stocking requirements for retailers who are authorized to accept SNAP: <https://frac.org/blog/usdas-proposed-snap-retailer-stocking-rule-risks-reducing-food-access-for-low-income-households-p>

Robinson-Patman Act:

- The US Conference of Mayors did put forward a resolution last year, introduced by Mayor Bowser, which includes encouraging enforcement on Robinson-Patman: [Increasing Access to Healthy Food](#)
- Institute for Local Self Reliance is doing amazing work on Robinson-Patman enforcement and trying to raise awareness as well.

Tool to assess suitability of sites for grocery in MD: <https://compass.maryland.gov/map/>

Good analysis that might be relevant to include... including SNAP spend and annual spend and incentives and future development: <https://wdcep.com/resources/washington-dc-grocery-market/>

Conversation about the challenges natural food stores face in accepting WIC:

- Caroline Howe: It is really hard for natural food stores and discount food stores to meet WIC requirements with their business models and product mix. I am curious to see if there is any

appetite in this environment to change WIC requirements at the federal level. We've seen so much change to these programs that never seemed possible... so maybe there's a narrow window for alignment.

- Mike Houston: Food Co-ops in Maine were able to change the WIC products at a state level to add products available to natural foods stores.
- Jessie Lupo: I manage the food retail side of the WIC Program in DC, and you are correct. States have flexibility in what they approve within food categories so long as it meets federal specifications. States who are concerned about their food budget often do not authorize natural/organic products because of cost.

Conversation about incentives to support grocer attraction and retention:

- Michelle Caruso: When I was working for the City of Houston, they adjusted a beer/wine sale restriction (number of feet from houses of worship and schools) in areas with low food availability to help with grocery margins. This was only for stores of a certain size that carried certain products in a set percentage. Relevant for a complicated alcohol sale issue in MD!
- Jolene Ivey: Prince George's County lost several Shopper's Food Warehouses a couple of months ago and one of them was the one that had a beer and wine license. So I'm not sure how helpful those licenses are to keeping grocery stores.
- Michelle Caruso: Certainly not suggesting it solves the problem! Just another factor in the margin equation.
- Mike Houston: Beer & Wine sales are very helpful, especially for a smaller store. It's high dollar, consistent margin and doesn't take up too much shelf space.
- Mario Minor: I'm also happy to be part of this conversation across the ENTIRE spectrum of the challenges from the perspective of a local small full-service grocer concept (experienced, understand the big-box intellect, etc.) who's already spent a significant amount of money. mario@marketfreshgourmet.com

SpringForward Farms - Laurel, recipient of a DOL-ETA grant, is breaking ground later this month after just receiving our building permit. This employment social enterprise will provide employment to those encountering barriers to work and will serve as a site of ag training through the DOL ETA grant beginning late summer 2026. Go to <http://www.springforwardmd.org> or contact me for more details. Piper Phillips Caswell piper.phillips@springforwardmd.org

Stacey mentioned VA's AFID grant as a part of the funding for the Urban Ag Study. Here's a related announcement on one of the AFID programs.

- **April 30th at 5 pm** – Application deadline for [The Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund \(AFID\) Infrastructure Grant Program](#). This is a reimbursable, matching grant program intended to support capital projects at new and existing food hubs, farmers' markets, commercial kitchens, and other value-added facilities and processing facilities or Virginia grown products. Eligible applicants are political subdivisions of the Commonwealth, like towns, cities, and counties. Economic Development Authorities and Planning District Commissions are also eligible.

DC DOEE's [Specialty Crop Block Grant](#) will be opening soon for projects serving District residents to increase production, distribution and consumption of fruits and vegetables. We're a few months behind VA / MD's timeline for SCBG grants, which still come from USDA, but this can serve as a

reminder for VA / MD organizations to prep for next year! My team is doing a workshop on SCBG language next week, if anyone wants to join that, [register here](#).