

# Cities in Transition - Interview

*Vacant Property Research Initiative*



**Samina Raja**  
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## Profile

Samina Raja is an associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University at Buffalo, State University at New York. Her research focuses on planning and design for healthy communities and the fiscal dimensions of planning. Dr. Raja collaborates with colleagues from UB's School of Medicine and the School of Public Health and Health Professions to examine the influence of the food and built environments on obesity and physical activity. An ongoing multi-year study, conducted in collaboration with the School of Medicine, examines the effect of the built environment on obesity among youth, and has received over a million dollars in funding from the National Institute of Health.

## The Importance of the Local Food System for Cities in Transition

By David Morley, AICP

Many journalists and food policy researchers have noted the prevalence of food deserts, or areas without convenient access to supermarkets selling fresh food, in some chronically distressed Cities in Transition. Samina Raja sees these food deserts as a symptom of a malfunctioning food system in the United States. The culprits: artificially low foreign food prices and the centralization of food distribution.

Raja believes that the prevalence of vacant land represents the biggest opportunity for transforming food deserts into food oases in chronically distressed cities: "In the City of Buffalo [for example], we have about 15,000 vacant parcels," says Raja. "Traditionally, these parcels are viewed as areas of blight, but if we reimagine these parcels, they could be an avenue for food production within the city."

## Changing the Mindset

Many municipalities do not recognize community gardening or urban farming as a legitimate use of land in their zoning ordinances, although Raja notes that this is beginning to change. "When cities recognize urban agriculture, community gardening, and related uses as permitted uses in particular areas, it creates a trigger that influences how that land is valued and taxed," she says. Echoing other experts on Cities in Transition, Raja suggests that urban form and land use in older, post-industrial cities may need to change, and sees this change as a logical starting point for addressing deficiencies in the local food system.

According to Raja, food issues often fall through the cracks in local policy debates. "One of the things that cities should do, before we can prescribe policies, is to examine their institutional structures and see if it's possible for them to establish a food policy council that then takes on the charge of evaluating what policies are appropriate for those places," she advises.

## Local Self-Reliance

Even when communities seek to directly address food issues, Raja worries that too much emphasis is put on attracting new supermarkets to food deserts. "While I think this is laudable and important, we might be making the same mistakes we made in urban renewal or in early economic development strategies by chasing after something outside of municipality," she says. Cities often already have an existing network of smaller food retail outlets. Although many of these corner and medium-sized grocery stores do not stock healthy, affordable options, Raja foresees an opportunity to address

both neighborhood business development and nutrition: “We could think about public policy that’s smart enough to both do workforce development [to] support small stores and also give access to healthy food without chasing after large, big-footprint supermarkets.”

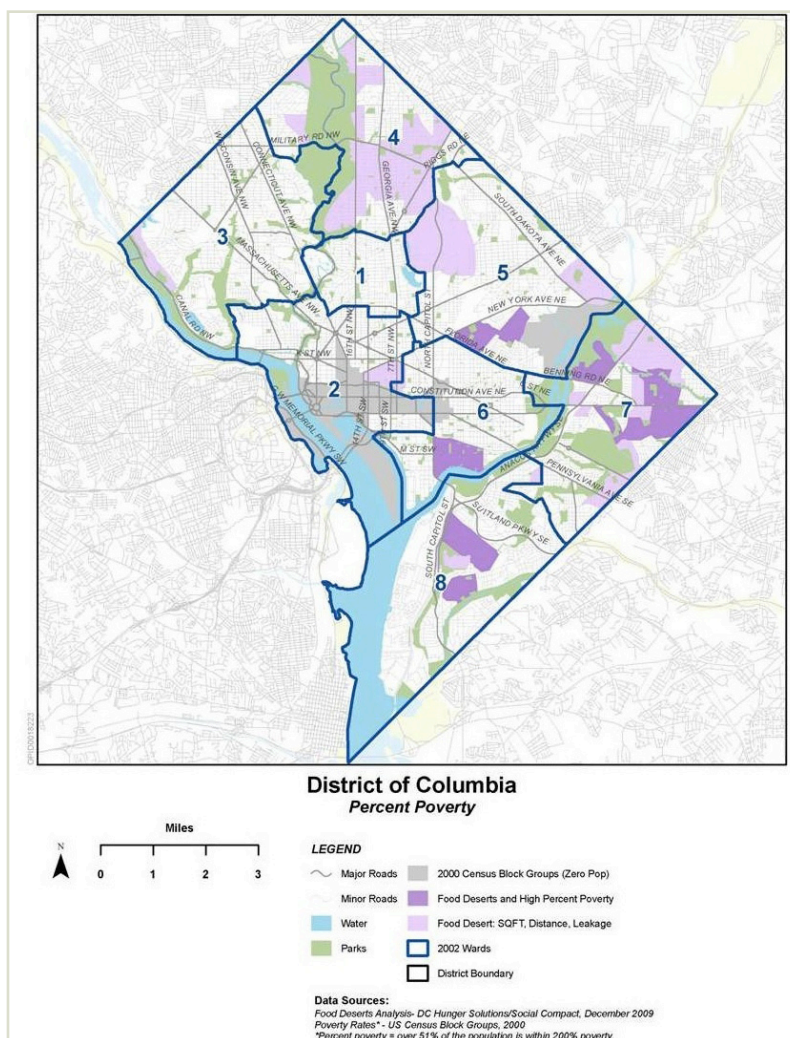
Raja believes that Cities in Transition can also become more self-reliant and sustainable by supporting broad-scale policy and investments to improve local agriculture. Many older, post-industrial cities have access to water and infrastructure in addition to available land, making them ideal locations—from a climate change mitigation perspective—for food production and distribution. According to Raja, food system investments address the two key issues that low-income residents in cities like Buffalo are facing: high health care costs and lack of food availability.

“Sometimes it’s challenging for people to imagine that, but I like to remind people that urban agriculture is not a new phenomenon. It’s been around for decades,” says Raja.

### The Timing is Right

Raja’s research suggests that planners are ready and willing to get more involved in food systems planning. Furthermore, planners have an opportunity to play a bigger role because most places lack an entity charged with improving the food system. The challenge is a lack of training, information, and resources on the topic.

She suggests that planners start by connecting with existing food producers or food access advocates to learn more about specific needs. “There is a huge groundswell of food work that is being pushed by the grassroots,” says Raja. “Planners would do well to tap into that groundswell and learn about the projects that are happening in their communities, and then find out what they could do through policy and planning to support those projects.”



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