The U.S. Department of Agriculture has announced more than $52 million in grants nationwide to support local and regional food systems. As part of the announcement, the Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Planning Commission was awarded $25,000 to study the feasibility of a food hub for the region.

USDA's Local Foods Promotion Program invests millions of dollars annually in marketing and promotional activities for local food enterprises, including food hubs, aggregation businesses, food processors, farm-to-institution activities and other efforts. MPC's study will assess the region's readiness for a centrally located facility for collection, distribution and marketing of locally produced food.

"Program grants provide farmers and ranchers around the country with tools to reach consumers, strengthen ties between urban and rural communities, and help meet the growing demand for locally and regionally produced food," said USDA Agricultural Marketing Services Administrator Anne Alonzo.

MPC will partner with economists from the University of Tennessee's Institute for Agriculture as well as local farmers, distributors, aggregators, processors and consumers to assess the status of supply and demand for local and regional food.

"This is great news, and it ties in well with our ongoing efforts to encourage urban agriculture and address issues of food access across our city and region," Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero said. "You only have to look at the crowds at area farmers' markets to know that there is real demand here for healthy, locally produced food."

Growing the local food economy ranked among the top priorities voiced by residents during the Plan East Tennessee, a three-year regional planning effort for Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union counties.