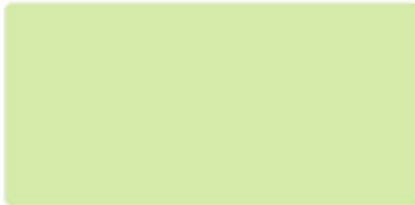
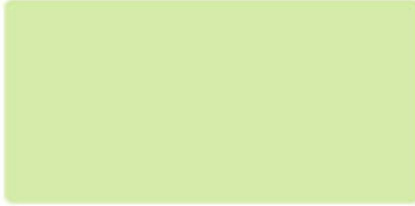




# LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

## Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening the  
Local Foods System  
and Downtown  
Revitalization:  
Actions and Strategies  
for Bessemer, Alabama  
August 12, 2016



## Community Story

Bessemer is a small city located 18 miles southwest of Birmingham in Jefferson County, Alabama. Nicknamed the “Marvel City,” Bessemer has a population of more than 27,000 people. Lawson State Community College is located within Bessemer and the University of Alabama at Birmingham has a hospital located in the city.

From the late 1800s to the twentieth century, Bessemer was a major steel center thanks to the combination of iron ore, coal, and limestone deposits in the surrounding hillsides. The city’s economy depended heavily on the steel industry since its founding in 1887 by an iron magnate. The city was also home to a large railroad manufacturing factory operated by Pullman Standard. At one time, the city was in the top four most populous cities in Alabama. But by the 1980s, the iron ore had been depleted, causing a mass exodus of the steelmaking and railcar manufacturing industries. This industrial shift led to the decline of the city’s downtown, with many businesses closing, leaving behind vacant storefronts and many unemployed residents.



Figure 1 – The Bessemer Farmers Market kicked off its season June 2 with seven vendors. Image Credit: City of Bessemer

Since the decline of these industries, the city has focused efforts to redevelop the downtown, reignite the local economy, and bring business back. The city has worked with businesses to occupy vacant storefronts and has created a business incubator. The city is constructing a new City Hall and plans to construct a new courthouse, both located downtown. The city’s Economic Development Department is now focused on renovating the historic Lincoln Theater. Downtown Bessemer features several notable and historic businesses, including the Bright Star Restaurant, established in 1907, and the Bessemer Hall of History, located in the former train depot. The city is working on a plan to transform an abandoned elevated rail line that stretches across the city into a multiuse trail, similar to that of the High Line in New York City.

Though positive change is occurring downtown, the city and its residents still face many challenges in reviving the city’s economy and improving quality of life for residents. The median household income in Bessemer is \$28,910, compared to \$43,253 for the state of Alabama<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, 25 percent of families are living in poverty<sup>2</sup>. Bessemer residents experience a number of health issues: 41 percent of adults are obese and 22 percent of adults have diabetes<sup>3</sup>. Compounding this issue is the fact that 18 percent of Jefferson County residents and 21 percent of children are food insecure, meaning they have limited or uncertain access to adequate food<sup>4</sup>.

To help in redeveloping its downtown, improving the local economy, and increasing access to healthy food options, the city intends to reinvent its local economy around local food and food entrepreneurs. A few of the initiatives include supporting and expanding the Bessemer Farmers Market, turning vacant lots into

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census

<sup>3</sup> Healthy Food Access Portal

<sup>4</sup> Feeding America, “Map the Meal Gap”

community gardens, reusing a former public housing authority property as an urban farm and gardening project, supporting local food entrepreneurs, teaching youth how to grow food, forging new partnerships with local health organizations, and holding local food-related events.

A grassroots group started the Bessemer Farmers Market in 2013 in the downtown area but had some trouble maintaining regular vendors and customers due to location and time. This year, the Bessemer Farmers Market is located in a park downtown at the end of the city's main street and will take place during Thursday afternoons to attract employees from downtown businesses. Developing a marketing and implementation plan will also help make this effort a success. In the future, the Farmers Market hopes to feature economically disadvantaged farmers to give them additional business and to raise awareness for the small-scale farmers in the county.

There are over 1,300 delinquent or vacant properties within the city that present both a significant challenge and an opportunity to reuse these properties for community benefit. Bessemer is considering the example of cities that are reusing vacant lots for urban farming. These efforts beautify vacant lots, strengthen community ties, empower residents to grow their own food, and teach people, including youth, how to grow food and to earn a living from selling it.

The city has a lot of help in this endeavor. The Magic City Agriculture Project (MCAP) is helping to lead sustainable agriculture efforts on the city's behalf. MCAP develops sustainable agriculture systems as a means of addressing economic and food insecurity issues. The Alabama Cooperative Extension will also aid in the planning and implementation of urban farming systems. Other organizations involved in this effort include Revolutionary Solutions, Jefferson County Soil and Water District, Jefferson County Conservation District, and Bessemer Housing Authority.

In 2015, the City of Bessemer requested assistance through the [Local Foods, Local Places](#) program to

## LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

**Toraine Norris**, City of Bessemer Mayor's Office/Chief of Staff

**E W Phillips**, Master Gardener, Bessemer resident, Bessemer City High School garden project

**Joe Openshaw**, Bessemer Farmers Market Manager

**Sallie Lee**, Alabama Cooperative Extension System/Bessemer Farmers Market

**Virginia Ward**, Magic City Agriculture Project/Bessemer Farmers Market

**Zac Henson**, President, Revolutionary Solutions

**Brian Carrington**, Bessemer Housing Authority, Resident Services Coordinator

**Alice Royal**, Bessemer Housing Authority retiree/Bessemer Farmers Market

**David Vance**, Bessemer City Councilman, District 1

**Doris Lewis**, City of Bessemer Office of Community and Economic Development

**Daniel Rumley**, Red Hair Horticulture

**Pastor Douglas Caddell**, Canaan Baptist Church Bessemer

**Katie Heath**, Jefferson County Conservation District

**Holly Killian**, Jefferson County Conservation District

**Ahinoam Israel**, Bessemer Farmers Market

Figure 2 – LFLP Steering Committee in Bessemer

develop an action plan for promoting local food systems, and healthy, walkable, economically vibrant communities. The goals of the LFLP program are to create:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses.
- Better access to healthy local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- Revitalized downtowns, main streets, and neighborhoods.

The LFLP program is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). Bessemer was one of 27 communities across the United States selected to participate in the program in 2016.

The remainder of this report and its appendices document the engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps for achieving the community's goals. An LFLP Steering Committee (Figure 2) was created to help plan the workshop and guide the community's initial steps to implement the resulting action plan. Over the course of the three planning calls and workshop discussions, the community's goals evolved from those in the initial request for technical assistance to the six shown later in this report and in Appendix A, and reflect the holistic, collaborative approach to community development already underway in Bessemer, Alabama.



*Figure 3 – The Bessemer Hall of History is housed in a former train station, and is located near the site of the Bessemer Farmers Market. Image Credit: Renaissance Planning*

## Engagement

The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP has three phases, illustrated in Figure 4 below. The assessment phase consists of three preparation conference calls with the LFLP Steering Committee to establish the workshop goals, agenda, logistics, and stakeholder invitation lists. The convening phase includes the effort's capstone event—a two-day workshop in the community. The next steps phase includes three follow up conference calls as well as process reporting and documentation.

The community workshop in Bessemer was held on May 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and included a small lunch gathering with the steering committee members and regional, state, and federal partners at the historic Bright Star Restaurant; a tour of the community; an evening community meeting at the Bessemer Civic Center (Day 1); and an action-planning session, also at the Bessemer Civic Center (Day 2). The community meeting and all-day working session were well attended by key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders. The workshop participants are listed in Appendix C.

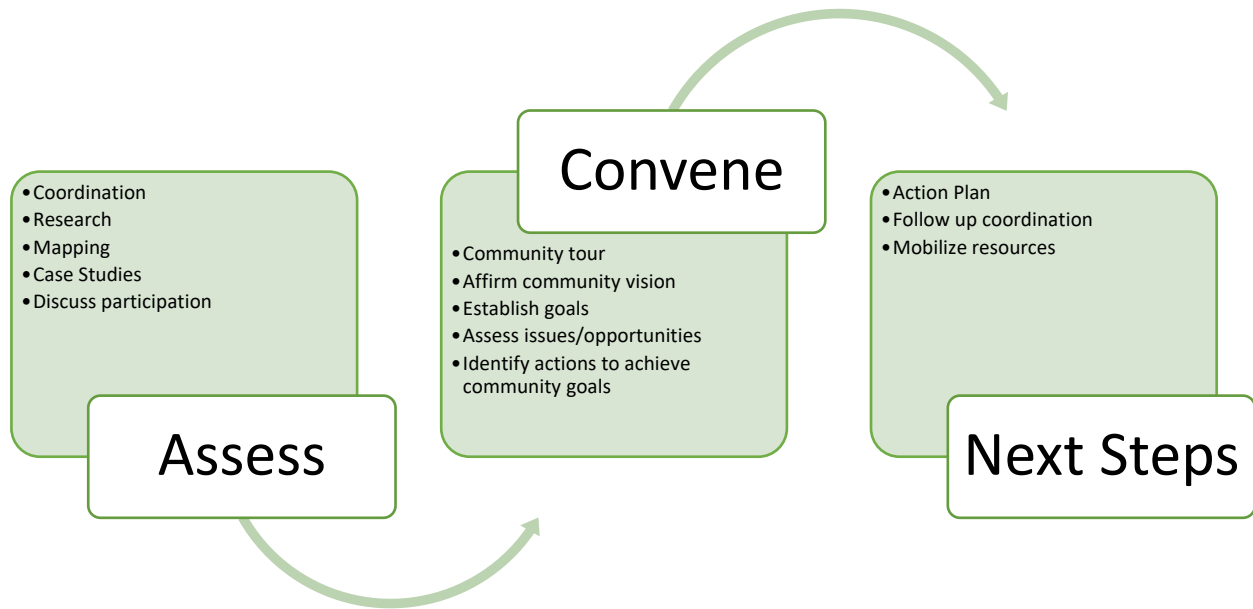


Figure 4 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

## Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on May 10<sup>th</sup> with key stakeholders at The Bright Star Restaurant downtown to introduce the project and the local steering committee, consultants, and federal agency representatives. Following the luncheon, the steering committee led a tour of key places and projects in the Bessemer area including Bessemer City High School student garden, Sowing Seeds Aquaponics, Jonesboro Community Garden, the former housing authority development Sunset Homes, and the site of the Bessemer Farmers Market downtown. The tour provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities, and allowed for informal discussions about the local food system and place-making efforts. A number of the locations visited are shown in pictures in this report and in Appendix D.

## Vision and Values

The vision for Bessemer involves reinventing the local economy around local food initiatives. One major component of this effort is the revitalization of the farmers market to make it more robust and a draw for residents and visitors to downtown.

Bessemer has a number of informal entrepreneurial startups based on local food production and consumption, many of them occurring in people's backyards. The city and its residents have an entrepreneurial spirit that will help to support the vision of reinventing the local economy.

Getting students interested in farming is another priority for Bessemer. EW Phillips started a program at Bessemer City High School in which he and a group of students started a garden on site. There are now around 200 students involved in the garden, which includes around 20 raised beds that students tend to and grow a variety of fruits, vegetables, and ornamentals. The success and popularity of the program is showing up in the classroom too, with teachers reporting students having longer attention spans after having worked in the garden.

The city wishes to turn some of its 1,300 vacant properties into land that the community can use for urban gardens. The city is applying for an EPA Brownfield Community-Wide Assessment Grant to help with this effort and to create a plan for addressing the abundance of vacant properties in the city. Since the workshop, the city learned of a community garden that was started in the north side of city. The community garden is used by surrounding neighborhood residents. Grassroots endeavors like these are inspiring the city to expand this concept across the city and to turn vacant land into viable spaces for gardens.

The Bessemer Housing Authority owns a 20-acre parcel of land that could be used for urban farming. The parcel is the site of the former Sunset Homes housing development that was flooded during Tropical Storm Lee and had to be demolished. The site now sits vacant in a prime location for Bessemer residents to easily access.

During the community meeting on night one of the workshop, the facilitators led meeting participants through an exercise to identify what they believe are the top three challenges and top three opportunities for Bessemer related to its local food goals. The results of this exercise are summarized in Figure 5.

The challenges to achieving the city's vision center on educating and motivating residents to change their lifestyles towards healthier ones that involve eating locally grown foods. Additionally, a challenge is

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### Challenges:

- Need people power and doers, not just visionary leaders
- Access to quality food for all
- Educating people about healthy eating – changing lifestyles
- Motivating people to get involved
- Identifying a common vision for all of the different initiatives
- Affordability of healthy food

### Opportunities:

- Unified leadership
- Creating a new industry and new future for Bessemer
- Support from elected officials to ensure city rules support these efforts
- No farmers markets in west side of Jefferson County
- SNAP and double bucks at market
- Close network of people ready for change

*Figure 5 - Workshop participants' summarized thoughts on the challenges and opportunities for Bessemer's local food system and downtown revitalization efforts.*

ensuring that those who do want a healthy lifestyle change are easily able to achieve one. Affordability of healthy, fresh food is an issue Bessemer wants to overcome. The city has many visionary people, but one of the challenges they face is identifying enough people to step in to make their ideas a reality.

There are significant opportunities to overcome these challenges. The first key opportunity is that the city, in particular the mayor, is behind all of these efforts. At the workshop, the mayor expressed his full support to ease the implementation of actions coming out of the workshop. Another opportunity is that a close network of people is already working on local food efforts in the city, and creating a joint vision and combined effort will tie them together.



*Figure 6 – Bessemer’s downtown has a number of vacant storefronts that it hopes to fill with businesses in the future. Image Credit: Renaissance Planning*

## Action Plan

The workshop’s culminating product is a strategic action plan to guide implementation. The plan is organized around four goals and includes actions the participants brainstormed at the workshop and during follow up calls. The action plan matrix (in Appendix A) helps to further clarify, prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for moving forward on these actions.

### Goal 1: Re-energize the farmers market

The Bessemer Farmers Market is in its fourth year of operations. The first few years were difficult with limited customers attending the market due to location, hours of operation, and limited marketing. After moving locations, they have chosen to locate in a park in downtown Bessemer next to a popular restaurant. This year’s Farmers Market began June 2, 2016 with seven vendors. The market has shifted its hours to Thursday afternoons in order to draw customers from surrounding downtown businesses. Though they have made some changes to move the market towards success, workshop participants identified several action steps to continue to re-energize the Farmers Market.

The Farmers Market committee would like to develop a robust marketing campaign to make everyone in the city aware of the Farmers Market. They also hope to provide shuttle service to the Farmers Market and start a mobile market that stops at key sites across the city to increase their customer base and to make it easier for residents to access fresh, local produce. The Farmers Market is searching for a permanent, year-round location for the Market. One potential option is an empty building across the street from the current Market site, which is owned by the Bessemer Hall of History. A longer-term strategy is to target economically disadvantaged farmers to sell at the Market to provide additional economic opportunity to these farmers. Finally, to help with all of these action steps, they intend to hold a series of meetings to discuss and organize efforts for future market seasons.

- **Action 1.1** Develop a marketing strategy to increase awareness of the Market
- **Action 1.2** Make SNAP benefits and the double bucks program available at the Farmers Market
- **Action 1.3** Find a permanent location for a year-round Farmers Market

- **Action 1.4** Schedule a series of meetings for the next market season to discuss the future of the Farmers Market management and location
- **Action 1.5** Identify and target socially/economically disadvantaged farmers to vend at the market
- **Action 1.6** Develop a strategy for providing more access to the market

### Goal 2: Develop a strategy for reusing vacant land for urban agriculture

Bessemer has an abundance of vacant and tax delinquent properties that the city would like to transform for public benefit. The city plans to identify and inventory all vacant and distressed properties in the city. By documenting these properties in a publicly-accessible online database that has information on the delinquency status and the parcels' underlying land use, the city could enable residents to see what properties are available to use for community gardens or other local food-related projects. The city could develop a marketing campaign to let the public know about this program. The long-term vision is to create a land bank so that the city can manage vacant properties.

- **Action 2.1** Develop an inventory of vacant and distressed properties
- **Action 2.2** Create a publicly available database of the vacant properties identified in the inventory with survey/land use information and the delinquent status
- **Action 2.3** Devise an interim strategy for using vacant land for community gardens and other local food initiatives while exploring models for funding a new land bank
- **Action 2.4** Conduct research on potential plans and get the public engaged so that they know about the vacant land reuse program
- **Action 2.5** Create a land bank to manage vacant properties

### Goal 3: Develop an education and engagement strategy for producing and consuming local food

One of the most difficult challenges to overcome is changing habits and lifestyles of Bessemer residents. This goal seeks to address this challenge through a number of educational programs, organized by an umbrella organization that also oversees the Farmers Market and other local-food related programs in Bessemer. Educational programs include a health education program to teach Bessemer residents about healthy eating and how to prepare healthy foods they can purchase at the Farmers Market. Another educational program could expand upon the program at Bessemer High School to teach students how to grow their own food and ultimately to earn a living from doing so. Sharing the economic incentives for local food production could enhance student interest in the program and could encourage students to consider farming or other food production for future employment opportunities. Marketing these programs, and Bessemer's local food efforts in general, will let residents know about the opportunities they might have. A final strategy related to this goal is to support local agricultural entrepreneurs in their endeavors to contribute to the local food economy.

- **Action 3.1** Form an umbrella local food organization to oversee and tie together the many local food initiatives Bessemer would like to see in the future
- **Action 3.2** Set up a health education program at the recreation center, the Farmers Market, and high school, including cooking demonstration classes to teach people how to cook healthy, locally grown food and the health benefits of eating local, healthy food



- **Action 3.3** Develop a program to teach students how to grow food, the health benefits of eating local food, and how to earn a living from growing and selling local products at the farmers market and other venues
- **Action 3.4** Develop a targeted media and marketing strategy to inform residents and tourists about the Farmers Market, classes, and other local food-related initiatives happening in Bessemer
- **Action 3.5** Initiate strategies to promote local agricultural entrepreneurship

#### Goal 4: Link local food assets to downtown revitalization goals

Tying together local food system strategies with Bessemer's downtown revitalization goals could amplify the success of both efforts. One potential strategy is to partner with local health organizations to create more support and strengthen mutually beneficial efforts. Branding and marketing food grown in Bessemer could expand awareness of the local food offerings in the city and could attract more customers to the market and visitors to downtown. Building a stage at the location of the current farmers market could create a formal place for music and other entertainment during the farmers market and could be used for other events, such as a Sustainable Food Festival. Connecting local restaurants with local producers can help create economic opportunity for farmers and could create additional business for restaurants offering local food.

- **Action 4.1** Explore partnerships between existing or new health clinics and a future co-op grocery store
- **Action 4.2** Build a stage at the park where the Farmers Market will be held for music and other events
- **Action 4.3** Create a brand/marketing strategy for Bessemer
- **Action 4.4** Hold a Sustainable Food Festival (Harvest Festival)
- **Action 4.5** Connect locally grown food with local restaurants

#### Additional Actions

Other ideas were mentioned at the workshop that should be noted for future reference. While these potential action steps are not described more fully in the action plan, they are still ideas to consider as Bessemer seeks to enhance its local food system in the future.

##### Explore creating a business incubation program for local food-related businesses

The Industrial Development Board in Bessemer currently provides a business incubation service for light industrial/manufacturing and information technology industries. These services are provided in two locations, one of which is located downtown. A new program geared toward local food-related businesses could support the numerous local food entrepreneurs and startups that are popping up all over the city.

##### Start a farm-to-table restaurant downtown

A farm-to-table restaurant that features locally grown produce could draw more residents downtown. To make the initial kick off easier and less expensive, a restaurant interested in serving local food could start serving a certain percentage of the food from local sources. As the customer base grows, and the number of connections with local farmers increases, the restaurant could increase that percentage. New

restaurants serving local food would also supplement the limited number of restaurants currently available downtown.

Develop a plan to reuse the Sunset Homes former housing development site for urban agriculture

During the workshop, workshop participants discussed interest in reusing the former Sunset Homes housing development site. Potential options for reusing former Sunset Homes housing authority site for urban agriculture are discussed in Appendix B.



Figure 7 – The site of the former Sunset Homes. Image Credit: Renaissance Planning

## Implementation

Three post-workshop conference calls were held with the steering committee in June and July 2016, following the workshop. The calls were held with the LFLP Steering Committee and federal and state agency partners. These calls helped the steering committee refine the action plan and add clarifying language.

## Post-Workshop Successes

Since the May 2016 workshop, Bessemer has made much progress on implementing action items.

### The Farmers Market

- Started accepting SNAP and EBT benefits and started the Double Bucks program
- Held a wellness fair day at the farmers market where they had a yoga class, offered HIV testing, had health vendors, a dental clinic, chiropractor, and a food preparation demonstration. The fair was well attended, and a van was rented to drive seniors to the market. Some vendors sold out of their produce.

### Land Bank

- The city started setting up the database of vacant properties and is moving forward with this action

### Sunset Homes Site

- The soil at the former Sunset Homes site was tested for heavy metals and other impurities and all tests came back benign

### School Garden

- Have put in an application for a new hoop house on site at the school
- Working on the design of the hoop house
- Incorporating environmental science curriculum

## Appalachian Regional Commission Implementation Assistance

The ARC is providing up to \$20,000 of implementation funding assistance to each of the LFLP communities in its service area. The funding is to be targeted towards specific actions identified in the workshop and post-workshop action planning effort. The steering committee identified Action Items [1.1](#),

1.3, 3.4, and 4.3, as a priority area for this targeted funding assistance. The projects are described briefly below.

### High Priority Actions

Action 1.1: Develop a marketing strategy to increase awareness of the market. The farmers market needs more vendors, more customers, and greater participation from the community. The farmers market will help to promote fresh, local, healthy food and is a way to encourage community involvement.

Action 1.3: Find a permanent location for a year-round farmers market. Having a permanent location would allow the farmers market to run year-round. Repurposing an existing abandoned building, such as the one across from the Bessemer Hall of History Museum, is one option for a permanent location.

Action 3.4: Develop a targeted media and marketing strategy to inform residents and tourists about the Farmers Market, classes, and other local food-related initiatives happening in Bessemer. To get the word out and engage as many people as possible. To improve the health of residents and the local economy.

Action 4.3: Create a brand/marketing strategy for Bessemer. A branding and marketing strategy that builds on the history and culture of the area will help to bring new residents, visitors, and revenue. "We no longer forge steel, we forge food."

### Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Details
- Appendix B – Sunset Homes Site Development Alternatives
- Appendix C – Workshop Participants
- Appendix D – Workshop Photo Album
- Appendix E – Funding Resources
- Appendix F – References
- Appendix G – Presentation Slides
- Appendix H – Community Data Profile