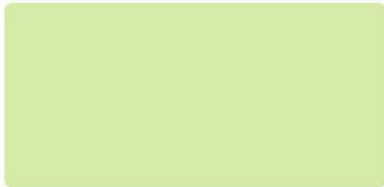
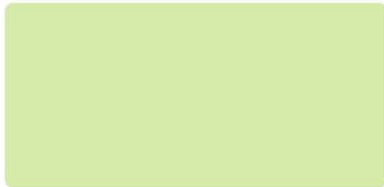
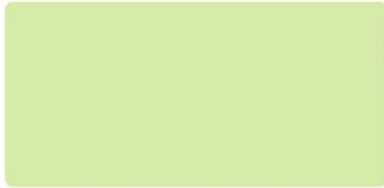




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for Local Foods, Local Place Initiatives

Allentown, PA

November 18, 2015



Community Story

Allentown, Pennsylvania, was first established in 1762 as Northampton Town, an industrial and commercial center for the region. For the first several decades, the town served as a commercial hub for local farmers who produced a variety of crops and livestock. During the early- to mid-1800s, the area continued to thrive from agriculture, but also boomed as a result of the industrial revolution, which brought significant change to the entire Lehigh Valley. With resource extraction industries based on iron and coal in full swing and the advent of the railroad, the area thrived as a booming metropolis for much



*The 7th Street Neighborhood is a walkable district of the city with a mix of housing, shops, parks and other amenities.
(Credit: Renaissance Planning)*

of the 1800s, and Allentown was incorporated as a city in 1867. During the late 1880s, the area experienced an economic downturn, largely due to unfortunate floods, fires, and a banking crisis. The city recovered by the early 1920s, becoming known for its numerous textile industries, most notably the silk mills. Through much of the remaining part of the 20th century, the city and the greater region thrived from manufacturing-based industries. Yet by the 1960s, the area started to see a decline in manufacturing and slow rise in service-based industries.¹

As of 2014, manufacturing made up only 7.4 percent of the local Allentown job base, with the remaining jobs coming from healthcare, logistics, and other service-based sectors.² The larger Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton NJ/PA statistical area has steadily added approximately 75,000 new jobs to the area since 1990, bringing the regional totals to about 429,700 as of August 2015.³ Despite growth in the total number of jobs regionally, the city of Allentown continues to suffer from a high

unemployment rate of approximately 10 percent.⁴ At the same time, the city is experiencing significant population growth and demographic change. “Both population growth and labor force growth have outpaced the state since 2003. This population growth is being largely driven by a rise in the Hispanic population, which increased in the City of Allentown from 2010-2012 by 6%, compared to the “White alone” census group that declined by 6.5% during this time period. From 2012 to 2017, the “Hispanic origin” census group is projected to increase by 16%, reaching over 62,000.”⁵ Allentown is

¹ City of Allentown History. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://www.allentownpa.gov/>

² Envision Lehigh Valley. (2014). City of Allentown Re-Industrialization Strategy. Saratoga Springs, NY: Camoin Associates. Retrieved from <http://www.envisionlehighvalley.com/envision-lehigh-valley>

³ Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton NJ/PA: Local Area Unemployment Statistics. Retrieved October 29, 2015, from http://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.pa_allentown_msa.htm#eag_pa_allentown_msa.f.P

⁴ Envision Lehigh Valley. (2014). City of Allentown Re-Industrialization Strategy

⁵ Envision Lehigh Valley. (2014). City of Allentown Re-Industrialization Strategy

also challenged with high rates of poverty. As of 2013, more than 27 percent of its population was living in poverty, and the median household income was only \$35,560—33 percent below the state median household income of \$52,548.⁶

However despite these challenges, the city and its vast number of local faith-based, non-profit, and for-profit institutions continue to work towards community betterment and economic development goals. Additionally, some neighborhoods within Allentown are seeing revitalization and reinvestment in the form of small business growth, infill residential development, and improved community amenities. The 7th Street neighborhood is one such area seeing positive changes.

7th Street (MacArthur Road) runs from Highway 22 through the historic “Old Allentown” part of the city into the city’s Centre Square area, located at the crossroads of 7th Street and Hamilton Street. Urban neighborhoods in this part of town include street-fronting retail, parks, churches, and a range of housing types, including 3- and 4-story apartment buildings, housing above street-level retail, townhomes, and single-family homes. Many of the historic structures in this neighborhood have undergone renovations and reinvestment, yet several also remain in a state of disrepair, and some are still vacant. This area of the city is home to the 7th Street Main Street organization, which focuses on improving business opportunities and revitalization within the corridor. As a result of these efforts and several other targeted efforts by the city, the area is experiencing revitalization. Over the last few years, new higher-end residential properties have been built on parcels surrounding the historic Centre Square. These new residents, coupled with the large number of employers located in high-rise office buildings in the area have created additional market demand for new higher-end restaurants and retail in the 7th Street neighborhood. In the summer of 2015, the neighborhood saw the opening of Supremo Food Market at the corner of 7th Street and West Allen Street, representing the only larger scale grocery store in the area.

The Rodale Institute is located just outside the city of Allentown. The institute was founded in 1947 by organic pioneer J.I. Rodale to “study the link between healthy soil, healthy food and healthy people.”⁷ Since its founding, the institute has played a major role in advancing organic practices within the United States and beyond. The institute conducts research, supports policy development to advance organic agriculture, and operates a 333-acre farm just outside of Allentown where new farmers are trained and organic practices and farming techniques are tested. Most recently, Rodale Institute established the *Organic Allentown* program with the specific goal of creating an “agriculture supported community,” where more residents of the city could grow, have access to, and thrive from a strong, locally grown, organic food system.⁸ Current Rodale



The Rodale Institute’s Vertical Garden demonstration project at the YMCA. (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

⁶ Allentown: City Specific Quick Facts. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>

⁷ Rodale Institute: Our Mission and History. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://rodaleinstitute.org>

Institute initiatives within the community include two seasonal organic farmers markets and a vertical garden demonstration project. One of the farmers markets is located in the 7th Street neighborhood and operates seasonally in the parking lot of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church. The location of the farmers market is within walking distance of several local residences and the Centre Square area.

In 2014, The Rodale Institute partnered with the city of Allentown, the 7th Street Main Street program, and St. Luke’s Lutheran Church to apply for technical assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program. The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 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). The desired outcomes of the Local Foods, Local Places program, include:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses.
- Better access to healthy, local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- A revitalized downtown that is the economic anchor of the community.

These outcomes align well with existing Allentown goals to increase access to healthy foods in Allentown while simultaneously supporting neighborhood revitalization within the 7th Street neighborhood. This action plan summarizes some of the key outcomes of the Local Foods, Local Places project in Allentown. It captures the highlights of a two-day workshop and includes a targeted set of goals and actions for moving forward.

Technical Assistance and Stakeholder Engagement

The key phases of the Local Foods, Local Places technical assistance program are illustrated in Figure 1. The primary convening event in Allentown was a workshop on July 7 and 8, 2015. The workshop brought local stakeholders together with federal agency representatives to identify next steps for building a stronger local, organic food system and a healthier, economically prosperous 7th Street neighborhood. This action plan, which lays out several critical next steps, is a product of the workshop.

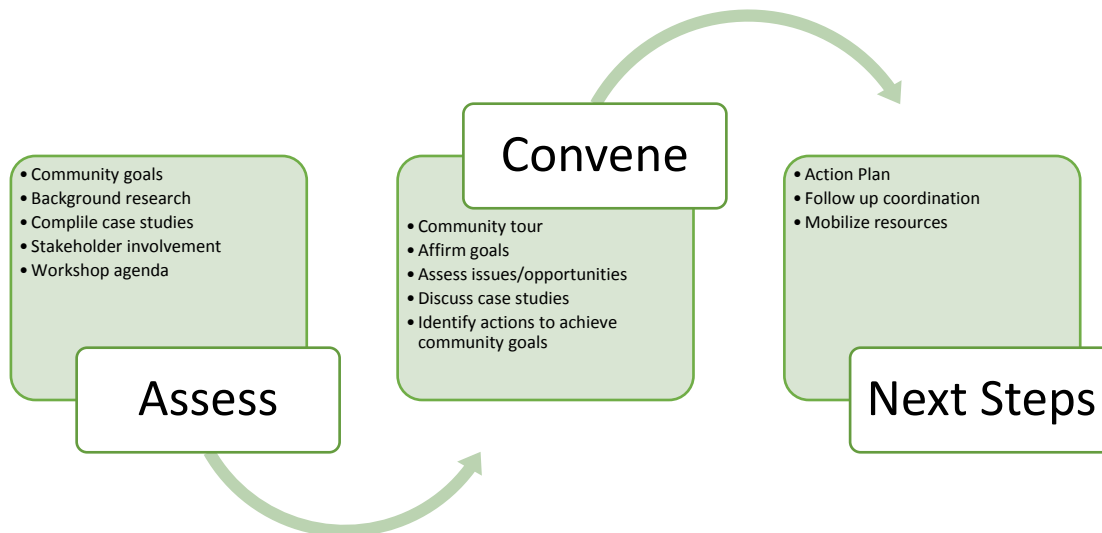


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

⁸ Rodale Institute: Our Mission and History. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://rodaleinstitute.org>

The workshop featured three sessions. The first session included presentations on the economic, health, social, and placemaking benefits of local foods, while also encouraging discussion about local challenges and opportunities for the greater Allentown community. The second and third sessions further explored opportunities for increasing local, organic food production; improving economic opportunities for local residents; and strengthening the local farmers market. The exercises and discussions helped refine the community goals (listed below) and helped identify actions for achieving them.



The workshop attracted a small group of local stakeholders as well as representatives from federal agencies. (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

Goals for the Local Foods, Local Places Initiative in Allentown, PA

1. Increase the purchase and consumption of local and organic foods in Allentown.
2. Increase income-generating opportunities for neighborhood residents tied to strengthening the local food economy and other economic development efforts.
3. Continue Local Food, Local Place action planning and capacity building.
4. Increase local (Allentown) organic production.

Vision

The vision for the 7th Street neighborhood as articulated by workshop participants is to create a healthier, revitalized neighborhood fueled in part by local food production. This includes providing greater access to and promoting the consumption of healthy organic foods; supporting local entrepreneurship and improved access to jobs; increasing opportunities for urban agriculture; and improving coordination among the various community development, public health, and local food-based initiatives to better leverage programs aimed at improving quality of life in the community.

Challenges and Opportunities

In order to achieve this vision, workshop participants identified several key challenges and opportunities as described below:

Challenges

Access and Consumption of Locally Grown and Organic Foods – The 7th Street Farmers Market is the first attempt in the neighborhood to bring in a greater supply of locally grown, organic foods. However, the farmers market is perceived by some neighborhood residents as a place that serves newer, higher-income community residents, and not something that is for the lower-income, ethnically diverse, existing neighborhood residents. The farmers market has limited hours of operation and does not operate year round, making it a less convenient option compared to other grocery outlets. Several local bodegas with lower-prices and more convenient hours lack produce and other fresh food.

Lack of Coordination Among Different Stakeholders – There are many different organizations with missions targeted towards improving the lives of residents and promoting business growth and reinvestment in this part of Allentown. However, strong coordination is lacking among the key non-profit, for-profit, and faith-based institutions working in the neighborhood and beyond, which leads to missed opportunities for leveraging different programs and resources. It also contributes to fragmented communication networks, which can leave some in the community uninformed about the resources and opportunities that are available.

Not Enough Local Food Growers and Producers to Meet Local Demand – Despite the many acres of viable farmland located throughout the Lehigh Valley, there are not enough organic growers and urban farmers—or enough urban lands prepared for urban agricultural production—to meet local demand.

Connecting and Engaging with Diverse Community – Allentown is home to a very diverse population, including a larger transient community of new immigrants coming from many different countries. Many of these residents are non-English speaking, may have a distrust or limited knowledge of local government, or may be in Allentown temporarily. This creates some isolation between different groups of people whose communication networks may be limited to their unique ethnically-distinct cultural groups. This isolation can also serve as a barrier to building community support and action for improving quality of life.

High Rates of Poverty, Unemployment, and Lack of Job Skills – Allentown is still lagging economically in terms of the mismatch between the total number of jobs available, the type of jobs available, and the skills and talents of the local workforce. Unemployment remains high and the total number of new jobs created remains low. There are several small, local businesses run by local residents, but many of these business owners lack the training or experience necessary to maintain and grow a thriving local business. The economic situation is also a contributing factor to the ongoing challenges of poverty in the area. With close to 28 percent of households living in poverty, other issues related to poor public health, educational attainment, and lack of discretionary spending power also present challenges to advancing the community's goals.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges listed above, the community has several key assets and opportunities to advance their goals and overcome some of these challenges as described below.

Strong Place-Based Neighborhood Livability Elements Already in Place – The historic 7th Street neighborhood has many features that make for a walkable, livable, desirable community. These include: a compact urban neighborhood with a gridded street pattern; a mix of housing types and affordability options; a mixture of retail, office, and residential spaces with several opportunities to walk, bike, or take transit to daily destinations; and a distinct and unique neighborhood character defined by historic buildings, parks, and established tree canopy.

Many Stakeholders – The city of Allentown and the 7th Street neighborhood have many non-profit, faith-based, institutional, philanthropic, and private-sector entities with a strong interest in supporting a wide range of community betterment goals. Specific to the Local Foods, Local Places initiative for the 7th Street neighborhood, these stakeholders include Sacred Heart Hospital, St. Luke's Lutheran Church, City Center Investment Corporation, 7th Street Main Street, Envision Lehigh Valley, Simplicity Outreach, and

United Way. These stakeholders represent a depth of capacity and resources. Coordinated effort targeted to this neighborhood could catalyze change that would help achieve the community's goals.

Larger Regional Focus on Local Foods and Local Places – The greater Lehigh Valley region recently completed a regional planning effort called Envision Lehigh Valley. Funded by HUD, this effort identified several strategies and implementation steps to help create a more sustainable and livable Lehigh Valley region. Of particular relevance to this project is the creation of a regional Food Policy Council and ongoing education and outreach to promote local foods, walkability, economic development, and smart growth. The regional partnerships created through this process can serve as a resource for helping to advance goals at the neighborhood level.

Leveraging Local SNAP and WIC Buying Power to Catalyze Local Foods – Several residents living in the 7th Street neighborhood qualify for or currently use SNAP and WIC benefits. Yet participation by these residents at the existing farmers market on 7th Street remains low. Encouraging customers who currently receive these benefits to purchase fresh organic produce at the farmers market would strengthen the market and help bring more residents out to shop in the neighborhood, which in turn could help spark new organic farmers and vendors and contribute to larger placemaking goals. Additionally, these residents might also be interested in working with Rodale Institute or other partners to learn how to 'grow their own groceries' by planting their own urban gardens or participating in community gardens. Finally, there may be additional resources available to residents seeking to create small businesses around local organic production, value-added food production, or other entrepreneurial efforts related to strengthening the local food system.

Demand for New Service-Based Businesses Growing – As the 7th Street neighborhood continues to see new investments and an influx of new residents, there is an increasing demand for locally serving retail, restaurants, and other services. This increased market demand can catalyze new business opportunities and help strengthen existing businesses. Additional job training, small business training, and similar programs for neighborhood residents or business owners would help ensure they benefit from these changes.

Action Steps

This section introduces the four major goals that emerged from the workshop process. The goals address some of the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities described in the previous section. Each goal is supported by specific actions, which are steps different stakeholders can take in the near term and longer term to move closer to each goal. The goals and action items are presented in Appendix A in their complete form, which includes a time frame, lead role, supporting cast, cost, funding sources, and near-term steps.

GOAL 1: Increase the purchase and consumption of local and organic foods in Allentown.

- **Action 1.1:** Expand partnerships between Rodale Institute and additional community or neighborhood organizations to improve access to local foods in Allentown.
- **Action 1.2:** Establish lines of communication between 7th street neighborhood residents and farmers market manager to better align market offerings and events with local community's needs and preferences, e.g., through means such as: 'veggies for survey' type of events or focus groups held at churches.

- **Action 1.3:** Refine market offerings, programs, advertising and signage based on feedback from activities in Action 1.2. Could include: simple signage improvements, changes to market hours, rebranding the market with a culturally relevant name like La Placitas or Plaza de Mercado, developing 7th Street neighborhood based ethnically tailored (and multi-lingual) menus, cooking demonstrations, musical performances, kids activities and other efforts to help make the market ‘the neighborhood’s own’.
- **Action 1.4:** Identify new partners to begin offering other social services at farmers market locations.

GOAL 2: Increase income-generating opportunities for neighborhood residents tied to strengthening the local food economy and other economic development efforts.

- **Action 2.1:** Identify existing small business resources that neighborhood business owners and entrepreneurs can access.
- **Action 2.2:** Establish lines of communication between local community members and city, non-profit, for profit, and institutional economic development partners to help identify opportunities and barriers to raising income levels within the neighborhood. Should include identification of specific opportunities for income-generating agriculture jobs (e.g. Rodale Institute Pilot programs) and information on how to ‘grow your own groceries.’
- **Action 2.3:** Identify and engage anchor institutions and/or employers with a vested interest in the 7th street neighborhood’s success in helping to improve quality of life for local residents and strengthen the local food system. Identify existing small business resources that neighborhood business owners and entrepreneurs can access. This could include the Rodale Institute (or another local institution) exploring the option of becoming a local vendor of USDA’s SNAP Employment and Training program to train people interested in pursuing organic farming as an occupation.
- **Action 2.4:** Engage City of Allentown representatives in identifying specific strategies the city can help implement to support 7th Street Corridor neighborhood and Rodale Institute’s goals for buying local, hiring local, and strengthening the local organic food system.
- **Action 2.5:** Identify recent immigrant community leaders/liaisons to help strengthen lines of communication with immigrant populations and raise awareness of local food offerings and economic development initiatives as developed in Actions 1.4, 2.1, and 2.4.

GOAL 3: Continue Local Food, Local Place action planning and capacity building

- **Action 3.1:** Establish a new steering committee (including representatives from Rodale Institute, St. Luke’s, the 7th Street Main Street program, the City, etc.) and formalize communication channels
- **Action 3.2:** Prioritize action plan initiatives for Steering Committee.
- **Action 3.3:** Develop and implement a communications strategy for a Local Foods, Local Place program in support of Organic Allentown that targets local community residents and businesses.

GOAL 4: Increase local (Allentown) organic production

- **Action 4.1:** Identify city-owned sites for larger-scale community gardens, smaller-scale vertical gardens, and other programmatic activities.
- **Action 4.2:** Identify additional privately owned sites within the 7th Street Corridor (vacant lots, parking areas, etc.) for smaller-scale vertical gardens.

- **Action 4.3:** Based on site selection, develop a pilot project and program details for implementation at single site. Replicate to additional sites based on successes/lessons learned. Longer-term program to include youth camps, youth employment, community gardens, and urban farm. Combine with Action 2.2 efforts.
- **Action 4.4:** Examine zoning and other city policies that encourage or discourage urban agriculture. Work with city partners to identify temporary policies or longer-term code amendments as needed. Look at Pittsburgh’s Food Policy Council for model codes and policies.

Implementation

Most of the goals and actions described herein require dedicated staff time from different organizations and entities to further coordinate, organize, and facilitate work moving forward. Goal 3, Action 3.1 calls for the formalization of a new Local Foods, Local Places steering committee to help prioritize actions and identify specific implementation resources. From this ongoing work, local stakeholders can begin to identify specific projects and initiatives that may be well suited for outside funding or additional technical assistance. Information on relevant resources and funding opportunities can be found in the Appendix.

Livability Principles Advanced by the Action Plan

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The Partnership includes EPA, DOT, and HUD. These agencies have been working since 2009 to incorporate livability considerations into their policies and funding programs. This section describes how this action plan supports each of the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

The 7th Street Neighborhood is a walkable area served by transit. Existing patterns of development help provide local residents with a range of transportation choices to access their daily needs. Continued revitalization of this area will result in more people and more businesses located within an area where walking, biking and taking transit are viable alternatives to driving. The farmers market at St. Luke’s allows residents to access to healthy foods by walking. Additional streetscape improvements along 7th Street could help improve the attractiveness and safety for pedestrians.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

While not directly related to the specific goals and actions contained herein, the 7th Street neighborhood already contains a mix of affordable housing options for a range of income levels. As revitalization efforts continue, the city of Allentown has the opportunity to begin discussing strategies for preserving existing affordable housing over time. As the neighborhood continues to see the positive benefits of revitalization in terms of increased property values, tax revenues, amenities, businesses, etc., it will be important to ensure existing residents can remain in the neighborhood as property values rise.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

The City Center mixed-use area traversed by 7th Street is well positioned as a prime location for new business growth. Many employers recognize it can be easier to attract a strong workforce when the jobs they offer are located in walkable, livable, diverse, and vibrant neighborhoods with a range of amenities. Therefore, business that locate downtown could benefit from the competitive advantage of this location over others in the region. This competitive advantage will only improve as the revitalization continues.

The stronger the downtown office market, the more demand there will be for nearby housing, restaurants, and retail.

Support Existing Communities and Value Communities and Neighborhoods

The Local Foods, Local Places initiative for Allentown is entirely focused on improving the quality of life for existing residents, promoting the adaptive reuse of existing properties, repurposing underutilized spaces for urban agriculture and other community betterment uses, strengthening the vitality of the existing neighborhood, and strengthening connections between existing stakeholders dedicated to improving the neighborhood.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The goals and actions described herein can further leverage previous and ongoing federal investments by HUD through the CDBG grant program and the regional planning grant that led to Envision Lehigh Valley. These efforts also position the community for continued support from EPA on brownfield assessments, clean up, and adaptive reuses.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Details
- Appendix B – Funding Resources
- Appendix C – Additional References
- Appendix D – Workshop Participants
- Appendix E – Presentation Slides
- Appendix F – Urban Agriculture Business Plan