

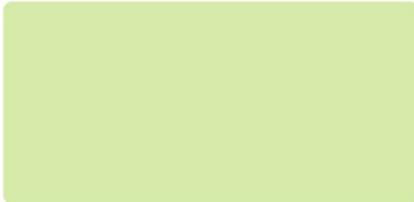
# Local Foods, Local Places



Strengthening the  
Local Foods System  
and Downtown  
Revitalization:

Actions and Strategies  
for the City of Itta Bena,  
Mississippi

August 2015



## Community Story

Itta Bena is a city of 1,800 people in the Mississippi Delta region. It is located in Leflore County, 100 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi and 50 miles east of the Mississippi River in the heart of Mississippi's prime farmland. Among Itta Bena's most valuable assets are its proximity to Mississippi Valley State University and its compact downtown. Mississippi Valley State University lies on the northwest edge of the city along U.S. Route 82. The university has an enrollment of 2,000 students, employs 500 faculty and staff, and brings visitors and income to the city. The city's compact and walkable downtown area with a public green and several historic buildings offers opportunities for community space and revitalization.



*Itta Bena's downtown is a mixture of local businesses and vacant buildings in need of revitalization and reuse (Source: Connie Perkins)*

Seven years ago the city lost its only grocery store, which was located downtown. The loss of the grocery store damaged the business climate downtown and today many of the buildings are vacant and in a state of disrepair, requiring extensive rehabilitation. The closure of the store also turned Itta Bena into a food desert<sup>1</sup>. A local grocery store and local food hub are extremely important to the community's residents because they are approximately 13 miles from the nearest grocery store that has the types of food items needed by families, especially senior citizens. Residents who do not have personal transportation pay a minimum of \$10.00 per trip to the nearest grocery store.



*The only grocery in town closed several years ago. Itta Bena residents must travel over 10 miles to Greenwood for the nearest grocery (Source: Connie Perkins)*

The Itta Bena Food Network formed in response to the social and economic problems created by these circumstances. The Food Network's vision is "to establish a sustainable food network that is fully or majority owned and operated by local individuals, establish a process to continually educate the community on local foods and healthy food preparation, and encourage agricultural sustainability in the local area."

The Food Network's vision is critical to Itta Bena's future, but the group faces several big challenges to creating a new grocery store. First, while agriculture is a key industry in the region's economy, most of the farming is for commodity crops such as cotton and soybeans. Very little food is grown in the surrounding county; only five of Leflore County's 300 farms grow vegetables (Figure 1). While the county generates more than \$240 million in agricultural sales, only about \$12,000 of this amount is through direct-to-consumer channels such as farmers markets, roadside stands, or community supported agriculture programs. This figure seems especially small considering that Itta Bena's residents spend about \$2.5 million per year on food.

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<sup>1</sup> USDA, Treasury and HHS have defined a food desert as a census tract with a substantial share of residents who live in low-income areas that have low levels of access to a grocery store or healthy, affordable food retail outlet (Source: <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/fooddeserts.aspx>)

Figure 1 - Agricultural Statistics for Leflore County, Miss.

U.S. Agriculture Census Figure	2007	2012
<b>Total Farms</b>	296	300
<b>Vegetable Farms</b>	2	5
<b>Fruit, Tree Nut, and Berry Farms</b>	6	2
<b>Livestock, Poultry, and their Products Farms</b>	16	--
<b>Total Agricultural Sales</b>	\$162 million	\$241.8 million
<b>Agricultural Sales Direct to Consumers</b>	Not Available	\$12,000

An economic study conducted by the University of Southern Mississippi in January 2014 indicates that, due to its population, size, and spending power, Itta Bena may not be able to attract a traditional grocery chain. Therefore, the Food Network wants to open a cooperative grocery store owned by the community. This model has proven to work in other communities where local spending power was not sufficient to meet the locational criteria of corporate chain grocery stores. Securing financing for the store and operating it effectively at the local level will be major challenges.

Despite these challenges, the Food Network is taking on the grocery store project to improve the community’s economic and public health. Nearly 15 percent of Leflore County’s adults have diabetes and more than 43 percent have high blood pressure. These rates far exceed the state averages, which are already among the highest in the nation. Furthermore, about 85 percent of the county’s adults eat less than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.<sup>2</sup> Itta Bena residents have expressed that a new grocery store will contribute to fewer diet-related illnesses.

In 2014, the Itta Bena Food Network requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to construct actionable steps the community may take to achieve its vision. The 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), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). These agencies worked with the community to develop the action plan that follows. Implementing the actions described in this plan can bring benefits to the community including:

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

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Health Indicators Warehouse. <http://www.healthindicators.gov/>.

## Engagement

The City of Itta Bena hosted a small team of federal agency staff and consultants for a two-day workshop on January 22-23, 2015. The workshop included a tour of Itta Bena and a series of visioning, brainstorming, and action planning discussions among a diverse group of citizens and local, state, and federal stakeholders. These discussions helped participants identify community values underlying the action plan for their local food system initiatives, including starting a community-owned grocery. These sessions also clarified how local foods can help make Itta Bena a stronger, healthier, and more economically sound community. Participants identified obstacles to, and solutions for, expanding access to local foods and created an action plan that is described within this report.



*The two-day event kicked off with a public meeting that over 170 people attended (Source: Renaissance Planning)*

Among those in attendance were state and local elected officials, local churches, business owners, farmers, and staff from the Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU), Greenwood-Leflore Economic Development Foundation, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Mississippi Department of Health, Delta Health Alliance, Mississippi Delta Business Alliance, North Delta Produce Growers Association, Mid-Delta Home Health, and regional and federal agencies including Delta Regional Authority (DRA), USDA-RD, and EPA. While the two-day workshop is the key event contributing to the action plan, it is preceded by several conference calls, background research, and case study development. Figure 2 presents the three phases leading to development of the action plan.

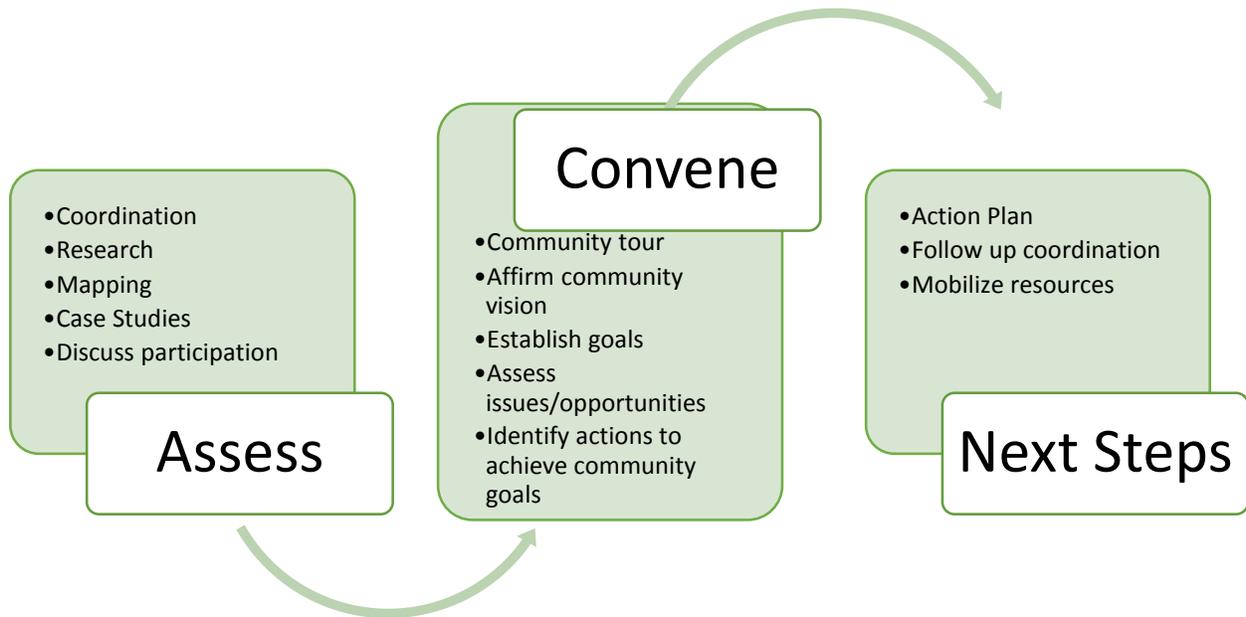


Figure 2 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

## Vision

The Itta Bena Food Network’s vision is “to establish a sustainable food network that is fully or majority owned and operated by local individuals, establish a process to continually educate the community on local foods and healthy food preparation, and encourage agricultural sustainability in the local area.” Some specific initiatives the community is focused on include:

- Creating a community-owned grocery store
- Launching a community gardening program (first project now complete)
- Developing a farmers market
- Establishing a non-profit to provide education and training in nutrition, healthy food preparation, healthy lifestyles, using the opportunity as a community building project.

The workshop facilitators led several exercises and discussions during the two days that helped participants refine these goals and identify specific actions for achieving them.

## Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

The Itta Bena Food Network has a clear, achievable vision, but there are several hurdles to overcome. One workshop activity involved a discussion of the challenges and opportunities Itta Bena faces in creating a community-owned grocery and achieving its other local food system goals. The strengths, challenges, and opportunities identified during this activity are described below.

### Strengths

- There are many potential partnerships and available resources. To quote one of the workshop attendees, Itta Bena is “overwhelmed with goodness.” The pieces are there, they just need to be fit together
- Steering committee comprised of knowledgeable people
- Mayor Thelma Collins – lifelong resident, leader with great vision and ability to get things done
- Community has many talented people.



*One of the strengths of Itta Bena is the commitment of the City to the development of the local food network. Mayor Thelma Collins has overseen public initiatives in this area and is an active volunteer in the community's organization of the cooperative grocery store. Mayor Collins said about the Local Foods, Local Places program that the “workshop and report are indicative of our endeavor to showcase the needs and interest of our residents to have accessibility to fresh foods and vegetables in the absence of a local grocery store.” (Source: Connie Perkins)*

### Challenges

- Many of the members of the steering committee live in other cities. The revised steering committee benefit from additional local leadership members
- Funds are needed to purchase the existing grocery
- Lack of understanding in the community about the co-op grocery model
- The new store needs to be better than existing food options in Greenwood
- Continual monitoring of food network organization to ensure that it remains sustainable.

### Opportunities

- Mississippi Valley State University
  - University's Itta Bena Committee, which is a collaboration between the city and MVSU to enhance the quality of life for Itta Bena youth
  - Education and training at MVSU;
  - Create a fish farm at the MVSU ponds;
  - Business school – internship program with co-op development; community service/volunteer opportunity at store.
- Churches – can act as leaders; one church led the creation of the existing community garden
- Expand success of existing community garden into other community gardens
- Grocery store that closed was not struggling financially
- Locating the grocery in downtown opens up more opportunities for grants related to revitalization
- Include youth in local food initiatives; develop mentorship program with MVSU students
- Full- or part-time jobs created at grocery
- Itta Bena health clinic downtown and hospital can provide health screenings
- USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service program assists with hoop houses and high tunnels
- High school students and retirees can volunteer at store
- Community garden can be “living lab” for educational field trips
- Can utilize community talents



*Partnering with Mississippi Valley State University on local foods initiatives is one of the biggest opportunities for the Itta Bena Food Network (Source: [www.mvsu.edu](http://www.mvsu.edu))*

The workshop discussions helped to further define the goals for Itta Bena’s local food system and the specific actions needed to achieve those goals. The goals are shown in Figure 3.



*Figure 3: Goals for Advancing the Itta Bena Food Network*

Workshop participants also identified action steps for achieving each goal. Additional actions have been added by workshop facilitators, supplementing the actions needed to achieve goals. The goals and corresponding actions are outlined in the Action Plan section.

## Implementation

To begin implementing actions to achieve goals, some organizational considerations of the Itta Bena Food Network need to be vetted and decided upon.

### Organizational Considerations

The Itta Bena Food Network has been working for several years in the community as an informal committee of community activists. Given the pronounced shift that is currently taking place from planning the network and establishing the concept for the cooperative grocery (Cooperative) to setting up legal entities, raising money and entering into agreements, it is strongly recommended that the Itta Bena Food Network be formalized. At the essential level, this means being sanctioned by the City of Itta Bena, operating under a set of bylaws, and structured to represent the diverse interests of the Itta Bena community.

An official Steering Committee (the Committee) should be established to oversee the development of the Food Network component parts. The Food Network should include at a minimum:

- The private cooperative grocery store
- A non-profit entity to manage local programs related to food and health and to eventually manage the farmers market that is envisioned for the community.

The Committee will help set up the private cooperative entity, overseeing:

- The financial accounting and fundraising associated with the project prior to incorporation
- The procurement and development of a site for the store
- The marketing and member organizing and
- The establishment of the legal structure of the organization.

The Committee has the option of remaining in place as a standing committee of the city or to transition to being the initial board of the non-profit that is being proposed. Given the facts that money will need to be collected and managed on a number of fronts, and agreements will need to be made in the development of the Food Network, it is strongly recommended that the Steering Committee formally establish itself as a non-profit as soon as possible. The non-profit can open bank accounts and establish separate fund accounting for non-profit operations as well as the property fund, the startup fund for equipment and operating expenses, and the ownership (or membership) fund for the cooperative. Given that some of the money collected will be considered an equity stake in the cooperative, it is very important that the accounting be effective and transparent.

For the Steering Committee, a nine to eleven person body is recommended with representation from Itta Bena community members, including at least one representative from Mississippi Valley State University. There should be a Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. The Treasurer can preside over meetings if the Chair is not present. The Secretary will be responsible for member nominations, internal communications and record keeping. The initial members should be identified through a nominating committee that includes the Mayor of Itta Bena and at least two other individuals. After the Committee is set, an initial meeting should be held where officers will be elected.

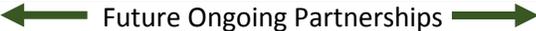
In order to conduct the business of setting up the Food Network, the Committee should establish subcommittees consisting of 2 to 4 members. The subcommittees include:

- Building and real estate
- Cooperative formation (including attracting new members) and
- Non-profit (fundraising, program development and coordination activities)

There should also be an executive committee that reviews finances, legal documents, staff decisions and agreements, providing information and recommending actions to the Committee. Professional support should be sought for real estate, legal and accounting matters. Outside grant writing assistance would also be helpful.

If the Committee chooses to set itself up as a non-profit, a staff person to manage it should be identified as soon as possible. This person would focus on the cooperative first and transition to the broader landscape of programs after the cooperative has established its own board. The other person that should be quickly identified is the grocery manager. That person should be involved in the establishment of the store in order to make it a success. Figure 4 outlines the way in which the organization can be structured.

The Committee will need to work out the purchase or lease of facilities for the Cooperative. The location for the store should be identified in order to effectively raise money from future Cooperative members both within and outside of the community. The Cooperative should ultimately own the property and its purchasing plans should be based on that.

Phase 1 Leadership*	Steering Committee			
Phase 2 Leadership**	Building & Real Estate	Non - Profit		Cooperative
	Various	Farmer’s Market	Health & Wellness	Board of Directors
Management & Employees	Management Company/Agent	Market Manager	Program Manager	Co-op Manager and others
Volunteers	None	Yes, potentially	Yes	Yes, potentially
Program	Facilities and Finance	Run market	Collaborate & Coordinate, Operate	Grocery
 Future Ongoing Partnerships				

\*Phase 1 Leadership is focused on the initial set up of the Food Network

\*\*Phase 2 Leadership occurs once the Food Network is established and operational

Figure 4: Organizational Structure

**Grocery Store/Shared Kitchen/Restaurant Concept**

The Steering Committee is also considering establishing a kitchen that is shared between the grocery and a non-profit restaurant. The kitchen would produce ready-made meals to sell at the grocery and would also make meals to serve to customers at the restaurant. Any food or produce that is nearing the end of its freshness can be used at the kitchen so food does not go to waste. These meals could be served at the restaurant at a low cost to its customers. The donated food can be used as a tax write-off because it is being donated to a non-profit. This could eventually become a community gathering place where people share meals and meet with one another. Figure 5 demonstrates the structure of this concept.



Figure 5: Food Co-op/Shared Kitchen/Restaurant Concept

## Action Plan

Though the workshop focused in on the community-owned grocery concept and determining needed actions to move forward, actions related to the broader food access and community health goals were also discussed and are documented in this action plan. Workshop participants identified several action steps for achieving each goal. The goals and corresponding actions are outlined in this section. The first two goals, which are related specifically to the co-op grocery, include steps that can be accomplished in the next 100 days since these are the most pressing actions to focus on. The purpose of the “next 100 days” actions is to keep the workshop momentum going and to keep this plan at the forefront of stakeholders’ attention. Other actions that are less pressing have “First Steps” to help get the ball rolling for achieving each action. The goals and action items are presented in Appendix A in their complete form (full detail), which includes a time frame, lead role, supporting cast, cost, funding sources, and near-term steps.

### Goal 1: Organize stakeholders to initiate a community-owned grocery store

**Action 1.1** Refresh and reformulate the Steering Committee to oversee the Itta Bena Food Network and its component parts

- **First 100 Days:** Steering Committee is refreshed with additional members representing various skills and talents and Itta Bena residents; assign committee members to sub committees focused on the non-profit, the cooperative, and financing

**Action 1.2** Identify consultant to develop business plan. This should be a person with business plan experience and grocery experience

- **First 100 Days:** Identify consultant or seek help from MVSU to draft a business plan; identify accountant to help with finances

**Action 1.3** Formally incorporate as a cooperative

- **First 100 Days:** Identify legal counsel to help with the incorporation process. Look for someone who is willing to work pro-bono, such as someone working at MVSU or Itta Bena’s legal counsel

**Action 1.4** Establish a viable financial model for capitalizing the cooperative in its initial ramp up

- **First 100 Days:** Determine who will collect funds and how to collect funds

**Action 1.5** Form a non-profit through which the Steering Committee can operate

- **First 100 Days:** Begin application process for creating a non-profit

**Action 1.6** Select a Board of Directors to manage the co-op

- **First 100 Days:** Begin developing the structure and roles and responsibilities of the Board

**Action 1.7** Hold a community meeting (or meetings) to educate and inform public of organizational structure and begin recruiting co-op members

- **First 100 Days:** Pick a date for the community meeting. This provides a date to work towards and keep on-track

**Action 1.8** Identify local community members that can assist with the membership drive for the cooperative

- **First 100 Days:** Start a list of people engaged in the community who may be willing to help; contact MVSU to determine feasibility of using the help of students.

**Action 1.9** Identify staff support for non-profit

- **First 100 Days:** Determine number of staff needed, full-time or part-time, and potential income sources

**Action 1.10** Identify grocery store management specialist to assist with the design and ramp up of the operation

- **First 100 Days:** Ask owner of old grocery if he recommends anyone to fill this role. Reach out to regional cooperatives to gather list of potential managers.

**Action 1.11** Design and formalize arrangement for Mississippi Valley State University students to participate in the food network

- **First 100 Days:** MVSU begins assessing ways students can participate, whether it involves creating an internship program, offering community service hours benefits, or another way for students to receive credit

## Goal 2: Identify steps to secure location for grocery store

**Action 2.1** Evaluate options for grocery store location

- **First 100 Days:** Determine the general location of the grocery store

**Action 2.2** Perform assessment of former grocery store building and site

- **First 100 Days:** Find contractor to assess buildings (preferably one willing to do pro-bono); evaluate cost of needed upgrades to old grocery

**Action 2.3** Establish viable financing structure and ownership model for building purchase

- **First 100 Days:** Determine who will purchase building, and funds needed to purchase building

**Action 2.4** Identify entity that will negotiate purchase of property

- **First 100 Days:** Start list of potential property negotiators/agents

**Action 2.5** Complete purchase for grocery

- **First 100 Days:** Begin generating list of potential funding sources (grants, loans, etc.)

**Action 2.6** Mobilize, equip, and staff grocery

- **First 100 Days:** Determine equipment needs, staffing needs, start defining costs associated with needed equipment and staff

Goal 3: Link grocery store concept to other local food-oriented activities

**Action 3.1** Identify local producers or distributors who will provide food, vegetables, fruits, meats and other goods for the grocery

- **First Steps:** Begin contacting producers and distributors identified on the local food system map to initiate partnerships

**Action 3.2** Evaluate feasibility of grocery store/shared kitchen/restaurant concept

- **First Steps:** Define possible organizational structure

**Action 3.3** Conduct a survey of local and regional farmers to determine if they would participate in a farmer's market and the cooperative grocery

- **First Steps:** Begin drafting survey; start listing farmers to contact

**Action 3.4** Depending on the outcome of the above, seek location for temporary farmer's market that can become permanent

- **First Steps:** List out potential locations to evaluate

**Action 3.5** Assess benefits of collaborating with cooperative grocery start up in Greenwood

- **First Steps:** Contact group behind the Greenwood co-op to assess their goals for potential partnerships

**Action 3.6** Develop vision plan for integrating local and regional food production with Mississippi Valley State University operations

- **First Steps:** Begin identifying goals for integrating local and regional food into university operations

Goal 4: Increase opportunities for local food production

**Action 4.1** Develop a training and seed/start program to help community members learn how to grow their own food

- **First Steps:** Ask Master Gardeners at Community Garden if they would be willing to begin a training program; determine goals for this program; find a space to host this.

**Action 4.2** Expand the success of the existing community garden by identifying locations for more community gardens

- **First Steps:** Identify vacant lots or city-owned lots near downtown that could serve this purpose

**Action 4.3** Conduct a survey of institutions and restaurants to see who is willing to buy locally-grown vegetables and identify what vegetables they are willing to buy

- **First Steps:** Draft the survey and invite restaurant points of contact to take the survey

**Action 4.4** Seek location for local aquaculture production site

- **First Steps:** Ask MVSU if their ponds would be appropriate; identify other potential ponds or bodies of water

**Action 4.5** Create concept plan for a local food production incubator/demonstration site/educational center

- **First Steps:** Define goals for creating this center, who will be involved, what it will achieve, how it will be funded

**Action 4.6** Establish parameters and/or a program for backyard chicken raising

- **First Steps:** Review city ordinances to determine legality; review what other cities in Mississippi have implemented

**Action 4.7** Create a local tree nursery and orchard with edible plants along with planting program for public and private spaces

- **First Steps:** Review what other cities in Mississippi and elsewhere have done

**Action 4.8** Run community gardener program that rewards efforts at local production, sweat equity in public gardens and other production accomplishments

- **First Steps:** Determine goals for program, how to reward volunteers

#### Goal 5: Seek opportunities to improve community health

**Action 5.1** Partner with local churches and MS Delta Health Collaborative to conduct community health screenings to increase awareness and reduce risk factors for cardiovascular health

- **First Steps:** Create list of potential health partners and make contact

**Action 5.2** Develop a local educational program for students or community members to learn the process of farm-to-table

- **First Steps:** Identify the goals and basic structure of a program and identify potential funding sources.

**Action 5.3** Establish community kitchen and non-profit restaurant that provides healthy meal options

- **First Steps:** Identify location for this endeavor (should be near downtown and new grocery); identify chef for kitchen and restaurant manager

**Action 5.4** Program community kitchen or other space with food nutrition and preparation classes

- **First Steps:** Identify goals for nutrition classes, consider potential classes to offer and curriculum to cover, identify teachers and partners

**Action 5.5** Organize walk-a-thon events to fundraise for grocery store

- **First Steps:** Set date for walk-a-thon, market the event, and set fundraising goal

**Action 5.6** Co-locate activities downtown, encouraging walking and bicycling to food-related and other events

- **First Steps:** Hold local events in downtown; hold the farmer’s market in downtown

**Action 5.7** Partner with financial institutions to host financial education workshops (health and wealth go together)

- **First Steps:** Identify financial institutions; determine goals for program; develop curriculum

**Action 5.8** Re-zone downtown to a Mixed-Use classification.

- **First Steps:** Assess current zoning regulations

## Funding

As a follow-up to the technical assistance effort, the Delta Regional Authority is providing an opportunity to apply for a grant of up to \$25,000 to support the implementation of projects or programs identified during the workshop that will help the community advance their local food system and support broader livability goals.

The following represents some specific projects and corresponding livability principles for which additional grants, loans, or other funding could apply.

### Key Actions for Additional Funding and Support

- Funding to develop an organizational and business plan for grocery store
- Funding to evaluate location for grocery and purchase or lease building
- Funding to upgrade and equip building for operating grocery
- Startup farmers market
- Create community gardens
- Develop grocery/shared kitchen/non-profit restaurant concept
- Develop seed/start program to train community to grow their own food

## Livability Principles Advanced by Action Plan

### Provide More Transportation Choices

Several of the action steps relate to improving access to downtown by encouraging more activities and events in downtown, which will promote walking. Eventually it is hoped that downtown will become mixed use so that people can live in downtown and walk to the grocery, shops, and other destinations.

### Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

To promote more activity in downtown, local participants identified the need to allow Mixed-Use zoning to support housing in downtown.

### Enhance Economic Competitiveness

The community-owned grocery initiative fills a needed gap in the community, helps support the diversification of the local economy, and strengthens the economic viability of downtown.

### Support Existing Communities

Much of the conversation centered on the fact that there are many talented people and available resources in Itta Bena, they just need to be tapped into and organized.

### **Coordinate and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment**

The workshop efforts identified several opportunities to build on investments already made and leverage different local, state and federal funding sources to support the grocery and other local revitalization and livability efforts.

### **Value Communities and Neighborhoods**

The grocery/shared kitchen/non-profit restaurant will serve as a community gathering place that will help strengthen the vibrancy of the existing downtown area, improving the attractiveness and livability of the surrounding neighborhood by providing access to healthy, local foods.

## Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Details
- Appendix B – Key Health and Agriculture Data
- Appendix C – Workshop Participants
- Appendix D – Funding Resources
- Appendix E – References
- Appendix F – Presentation Slides
- Appendix G – Photos