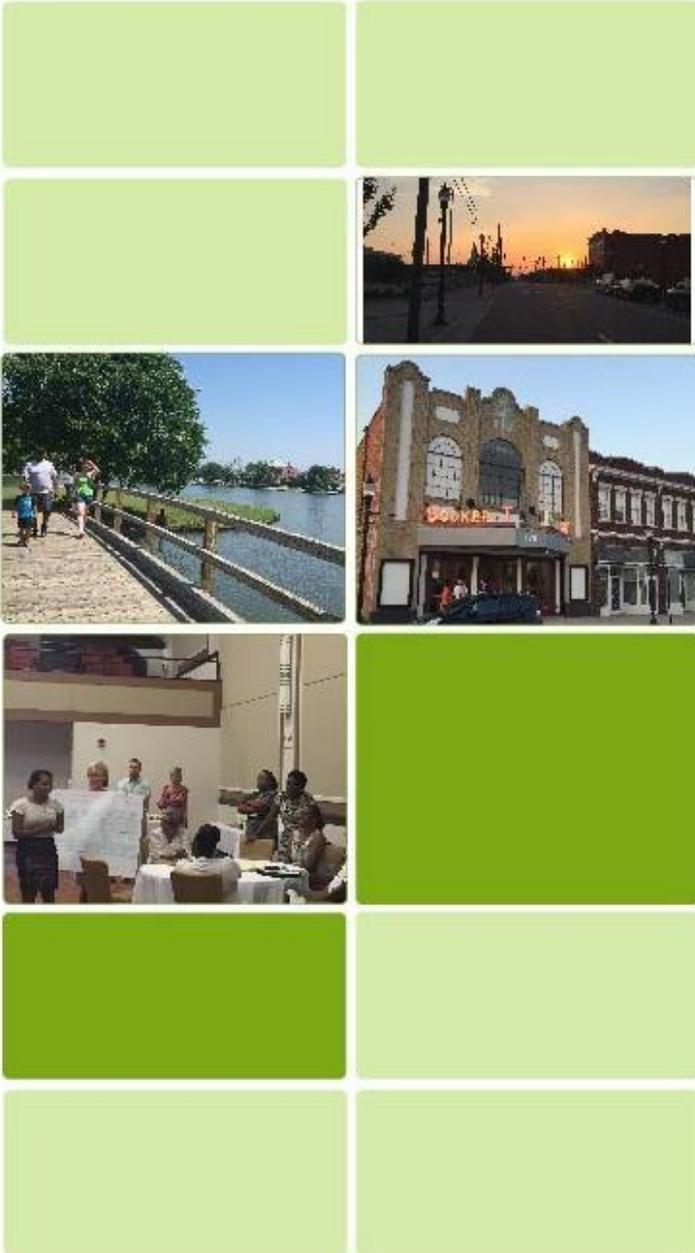




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for Strengthening Rocky Mount through Local Foods and Local Places

Rocky Mount, NC

October 16, 2015



Community Story

Rocky Mount is one of several eastern North Carolina cities along the fall line, where the state's rivers drop from the hilly Piedmont region to the flat coastal plain. The city's advantageous location on key transportation routes to the north and south, and along the Tar River with the water power it provides, made Rocky Mount a key industrial city for the state.

Textiles, tobacco, and the railroad fueled Rocky Mount's rapid growth in the early part of the 20th century. These industries also supported the growth of the banking industry, specifically Peoples Bank and Planters Bank. Their merger in the 1990s created Centura, which grew into one of North Carolina's largest banks. The city's growth brought educational institutions including North Carolina Wesleyan College, Nash Community College, and Edgecombe Community College.

The city's fortunes changed rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s as the textile and tobacco industries shed large numbers of jobs. The banking industry also took a downturn after an out-of-state bank purchased Centura and moved the headquarters out of Rocky Mount. Hurricane Floyd in 1999 also dealt Rocky Mount a severe blow as major floods destroyed homes and neighborhoods along the Tar River. In 2015 the city's poverty and unemployment rates climbed to levels much higher than those of the state as a whole. In addition to the job losses, Rocky Mount suffers from public health problems in many neighborhoods, including high rates of infant mortality, heart disease, and diabetes. Many neighborhoods are food deserts where residents lack access to fresh, healthy foods.

These challenges have not come to define Rocky Mount. The city is resilient, and in 2015 finds itself in transition once again. In recent years the city and its partners have undertaken the reconstruction of Main Street; revitalization of the historic African American business district — the Douglas Block — and its Booker T Theatre; the transformation of the old Imperial Tobacco Company's factory into an arts center and children's museum; development of Crossing at 64 in a food desert community that will include a fresh and healthy market place component; and a proposed project to convert the site of the old Rocky Mount (textile) Mills into a craft beer incubator and new homes.

The city's challenges and the steps it is taking to address them captured the attention of the White House, which in 2014 designated Rocky Mount for participation in its Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) program. The program is connecting the city to federal resources that can help it continue to rejuvenate its economy and confront its public health problems.

One of the city's next steps, which the SC2 program is supporting, is to improve food access for disadvantaged populations and to grow the local food economy. The region has a long history of agriculture and an abundance of land that is well suited to growing food. Expanding the food economy is viewed in Rocky Mount and regionally as an opportunity to address both the economic and health problems that have plagued the area. The city owns more than 200 acres of property that were flooded during Hurricane Floyd. These lots were purchased through a Federal Emergency Management Agency buyout program and transferred to Rocky Mount. As such, they cannot host permanent structures, but could play a key role in supporting the local foods economy.

The region has several successful programs upon which it can build. Rocky Mount has several thriving community gardens that are helping to revitalize neighborhoods and build community. Meanwhile, the Conetoe Family Life Center in the nearby town of Conetoe, is an exemplary program for using farming to help at-risk youth learn critical life and job skills. The program, led by Reverend Richard Joyner, uses a

25-acre community garden to teach lessons in gardening, healthy cooking, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Another standout program is Down East Fresh, based in nearby Greenville, which consolidates fresh local produce from area farmers and offers it for sale through a community supported agriculture (CSA) program that accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and sells at a convenient location in the Greenville area.

City officials see tremendous potential in expanding and coordinating these and other programs in the region. Rocky Mount in 2014 requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to develop an action plan for promoting local food systems and healthy, walkable, economically vibrant neighborhoods. Rocky Mount was one of 26 communities across the United States selected to participate in the program and this action plan is the outcome of its work. The actions outlined in this plan support the goals of the Local Foods, Local Places program, which are:

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

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). These agencies worked with Rocky Mount to develop this action plan.

Engagement

The main event of the Local Foods, Local Places program in Rocky Mount was a workshop on June 23 and 24, 2015. The workshop brought together local residents and local, state, and federal agency representatives to identify next steps for building a stronger local food economy and revitalized neighborhoods. This action plan, which lays out several critical next steps, is the primary outcome of the workshop.

Among the attendees were local and regional officials from Rocky Mount, Nash County, Edgecombe County, and the Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, the city of Greenville, the Nash Health Care Foundation, the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC), the Nash County Health Department, the Edgecombe County Human Relations Commission, the Down East Partnership for Children of Nash and Edgecombe Counties, Nash Community College, and the Conetoe Family Life Center.

Several state and federal officials also participated including representatives from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Golden Leaf Foundation, USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, Association of Mexicans in North Carolina, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, the North Carolina Public Health Foundation, the North Carolina Division of Public Health, U.S. EPA, USDA-Rural Development, Rural Forward NC, Land Loss Prevention, the North Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Contractors from Renaissance Planning facilitated the workshop. Workshop attendance and contact information is provided in the appendix.

The workshop included three sessions. The first session featured presentations on the economic, health, social, and place-making benefits of local foods, while also encouraging discussion about local opportunities. The second and third sessions further explored opportunities and challenges facing the

local food economy and used the information gleaned through exercises and discussions to arrive a set of goals and actions to achieve them. The goals this action plan supports are:

1. Increase coordination and ownership among organizations involved in growing the local food system in the Rocky Mount region.
2. Build community understanding of how institutional racism and other inequities affect the local food economy, and identify opportunities for systemic change to promote equity.
3. Identify a process for evaluating and selecting uses for city-owned sites and using vacant lands to support community-led efforts in neighborhood stabilization and individual empowerment.
4. Create opportunities for better health and economic opportunity through physical activity, healthy local foods, and new skills acquisition.

Figure 1 is a summary of the workshop process.

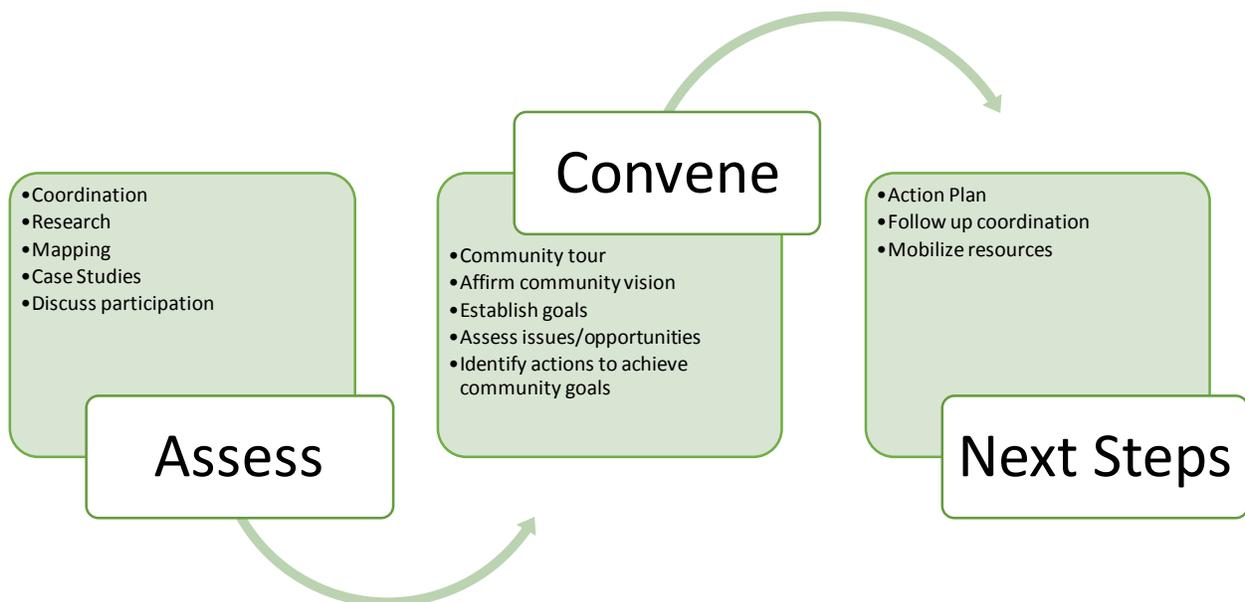


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

The first workshop session provided opportunities for people to share their hopes for Rocky Mount and the role that local foods can play in realizing these hopes. Expanding opportunities for the city’s youth emerged as a clear priority. People described a future in which young people learn new skills through growing, cooking, and selling the foods they grow at learning gardens or through programs modeled on the Conetoe Family Life Center. Such programs also would present an opportunity for young people to connect with seniors and learn from them, transferring knowledge across generations while also kindling new friendships and mutual respect.

The city's neighborhoods were another popular topic. Rocky Mount is a city of neighborhoods, many of which are walkable and have outstanding access to the city's extensive park system. Yet there is room for improvement. Many neighborhoods have vacant homes and underutilized lots. They represent potential for neighborhood improvements, such as community gardens. Such gardens could enhance the vitality of fragile neighborhoods, connect vulnerable families and children to real food, and empower them to make healthier food choices.

A third theme that emerged was the need for better racial harmony and to address the long-standing inequities that exist in institutions and within the community, even where those inequities are unintended. The region, like many communities, experienced steep losses in land owned by black farmers due to a history of discriminatory lending practices. The emerging local food economy represents an opportunity to get more young black youth re-engaged in growing local food. It can also train the future generation of farmers in North Carolina as older farmers approach retirement age. The Latino population also has an important role in ensuring the future of North Carolina agriculture.

These visions for how local foods can help transform Rocky Mount and the surrounding communities emerged through discussions during the workshop. The discussion around three particular questions yielded many useful ideas and knowledge.

- How can local foods improve neighborhoods?
- How can local foods transform people?
- How can local foods transform the economy?

The responses are summarized in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 - Thoughts on How Local Foods can Transform Neighborhoods, People, and the Economy



Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

In order to realize its vision, the city and its partners are planning to take action to address obstacles and capitalize on strength and opportunities. This section summarizes workshop discussions that revealed the most pressing challenges and promising opportunities for moving forward. Perhaps the most important takeaway from these discussions is that while Rocky Mount is faced with serious challenges related to race, resources, and collaboration, it is also a region full of potential. Several seeds of change have been planted and are beginning to grow in Rocky Mount. These include programs such as the Conetoe Family Life Center and the city's community gardens, and assets such as the planned Monk-to-Mill Trail, the Imperial Center, the Douglas Block, and Main Street. The Local Foods, Local Places workshop highlighted these, and many other, emerging assets and programs upon which the action plan builds.

Strengths

- **Proximity to Major Metropolitan Centers** – Rocky Mount is located halfway between New York City and Miami with easy access to Interstate 95, the main north-south highway artery of the eastern United States. The city is also only an hour from the Raleigh metropolitan area, which is one of the country's fastest growing markets. North Carolina's Department of Transportation has steadily upgraded U.S. Highway 64 over the years making the Raleigh to Rocky Mount trip faster. The Raleigh metropolitan area is close enough for Rocky Mount products to be marketed as local. Rocky Mount-based producers can probably take greater advantage of this proximity and leverage significant opportunities as urban consumers' demand for locally-grown food continues to rise.
- **Dedicated People** – The Rocky Mount region is home to many people that are dedicated to growing the local food economy. Reverend Richard Joyner saw too many people sick and dying from diet-related diseases and took matters into his own hands to start a successful community garden that has grown into a 25-acre farm where people learn how to grow food and soft skills that will come in useful in other jobs and endeavors. Sue Perry Cole has worked to build the city's network of community gardens. And Maxine White in Greenville supports a thriving network of farmers that sell through a convenient CSA program that reaches a wide range of people, including low income families. Many other people at the local, regional, and state levels are involved in growing the local food economy. These people represent tremendous potential, however, connecting them better is a challenge that will need to be overcome in order to maximize the potential of their work.

Challenges

- **Racial Disparities** –Racial disparities that afflict the United States are especially pronounced in eastern North Carolina. The historical injustices of slavery, sharecropping, and segregation continue to shape race relations and inflict disparities. In 2013 the poverty rate among Rocky Mount's white residents was about 10 percent, while it exceeded 30 percent for black and Latino residents.¹ The poverty rate is an indicator of disparities in other areas such as education, housing, health, and employment. Food is not a panacea, but it is an important mechanism for

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. American Fact Finder. <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. Accessed August 21, 2015.

discussing and tackling health and economic disparities in particular. Policies that improve access to food, especially for disadvantaged people, can have a significant positive impact on society and the local economy.

- **Coordination among Existing Local Foods Initiatives** – One person during the Local Foods, Local Places workshop commented that she was unaware that so many things were happening in the region to build the local food economy. Some people also said they were not aware of existing infrastructure that supports the local food economy, such as processors and distributors. These efforts and facilities could be better utilized and coordinated. One problem is that people are often busy and focused on their own piece of the puzzle. Many lack capacity to reach beyond what they are already doing. But lack of communication is also a major challenge that Rocky Mount will need to address in order to maximize the benefits of the programs and efforts already underway. Insufficient coordination increases the risk that efforts will be duplicated, which Rocky Mount cannot afford given the lack of resources available in the community. Some outreach and connection with local stakeholders is already occurring, but people at the workshop also expressed a desire to see more involvement from the state’s land grant universities, which include North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T. Likewise, some people also commented on their desire for local cooperative extension offices to deepen their engagement. These potential partners may be able to close gaps in the local food economy through their knowledge and financial resources.
- **Access to Resources** – Not only would existing programs benefit from improved coordination, but they could also use an infusion of resources. Programs like Conetoe Family Life Center have proven their value, but have reached a point where they cannot grow any further without financial resources that will allow them to hire and cultivate staff and management. This step is necessary to institutionalize the program and help it reach into places like Rocky Mount.
- **Ageing Farmers** – The average farmer age in 2012 was 59.5 years for Nash County and 60.2 in Edgecombe County. The impending retirement of many farmers is a challenge for the region. It is also an opportunity for young people who would like to farm. Community members who are Latino, whose numbers are growing rapidly in North Carolina over the last two decades, are one potential source of future farmers. However, new Latino residents and other disadvantaged groups face challenges in accessing land and capital. Many would need support overcoming these challenges if they are going to fill the void left by people aging out of farming. Minimizing such barriers to entry for aspiring and beginning farmers is an inherent goal of a farm incubator, which is a strategy the community may investigate in the future.

Opportunities

- **Youth Engagement** – Local foods represent more than economic opportunity and healthy choices. Growing food in a community garden or participating in a farmer incubator program are opportunities for young people to learn work habits and entrepreneurship skills that will benefit them in any type of career they may eventually pursue.
- **History of Agriculture** – Eastern North Carolina has a long history of agriculture. Despite some negative aspects to this history that continue to be felt, the region has people with deep

knowledge about growing many types of crops. The area is especially known for its sweet potatoes with Nash and Edgecombe counties among the nation’s largest growers of this crop.

- **Local Foods Demand** – The demand for local foods in the United States surged during the last two decades. The region’s farmers and future farmers can tap into their knowledge of how to grow popular crops to meet rising demand for local foods in eastern North Carolina and the rapidly growing Triangle region. People at the workshop felt as though the region has a lot of untapped capacity to meet this demand.
- **Formal Organization of Local Food Advocates** – An organization such as a Local Foods Advisory Council can help address the coordination and communication shortfalls described in the previous section. Such an organization would open and maintain communication channels between all of the people and organizations that are working to build the local food economy and improve access to healthy food, particularly for the city’s disadvantaged residents. It would work to prioritize the city’s and region’s food access needs, strengthen relationships, and eliminate duplication of efforts. A separate funder’s network could be organized to seek funds for the city’s and region’s top priorities.
- **Downtown Rocky Mount** – Rocky Mount has a classic eastern North Carolina downtown. The railroad bifurcates Main Street and its tidy rows of brick buildings housing local shops and restaurants. The city recently rebuilt the streetscape to make it more accommodating of bicyclists and pedestrians. The Douglas Block, which is the city’s historic black shopping and entertainment district, also has gotten a facelift and is now home to the refurbished Booker T Theatre and The Prime Smokehouse, which is popular with people from all walks of life and races. Other tremendous assets include the Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences, Rocky Mount Station (Amtrak passenger rail), the Braswell Memorial Library, and the City Administrative Complex. The compact, walkable nature of Rocky Mount’s downtown is in high demand, especially among younger adults that have shown a propensity across the United States to live in such places. Rocky Mount has the infrastructure in place and available land to support growth and development in its downtown area.
- **Strong Cities, Strong Communities Program** – The White House in 2014 selected Rocky Mount for participation in its Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) program. Through this program, the White House sends a team of federal staff to work directly with mayors, providing tailored technical assistance to cut through red tape, increase government efficiency, and build partnerships to help them implement sustainable economic plans.² The SC2 program may be able to help connect actions in this plan with funding or technical resources.

Action Plan

This section introduces the four major goals that emerged through the workshop. The goals address several of the obstacles and capitalize on the opportunities describe in the previous section. Each goal is

² White House. *Supporting Local Communities by Building Capacity and Cutting Red Tape*. April 25, 2013. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/04/25/supporting-local-communities-building-capacity-and-cutting-red-tape>

supported by specific actions, which are steps Rocky Mount can take in the near term to move towards its vision of engaged youth, a strong economy, better race relations, and revitalized neighborhoods.

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 coordination and ownership among organizations involved in growing the local food system in the Rocky Mount region.

- **Action 1.1** – Form a Local Foods Advisory Council that will coordinate the existing and future efforts to grow the local food economy in Rocky Mount and the surrounding region.
- **Action 1.2** – Create a Local Foods Funders Network to serve as a collaborative fundraising organization that builds financial support for local food economy initiatives.
- **Action 1.3** – Develop a directory with contacts and other critical information for all organizations – public, private, and non-profit – that are involved in building the local food economy or whose missions align with such an effort.
- **Action 1.4** – Identify a strong local foods advocate in the Nash County and Edgecombe Cooperative Extensions to actively participate in the Local Foods Advisory Council.

Goal 2 – Build community understanding of how institutional racism and other inequities affect the local food economy, and identify opportunities for systemic change to promote equity.

- **Action 2.1** – Continue to build the local food system by expanding upon existing successful programs and launching new programs to fill in identified gaps, including the current gaps in the inclusion of women, children, and people of color.
- **Action 2.2** – Tell the story of how land loss suffered by black farmers created inequities in the food economy and how people are organizing themselves to make change.
- **Action 2.3** – Create a city-wide book club to read, discuss, share experiences, and learn within small affinity groups as well as together with the larger community.

Goal 3 – Identify a process for evaluating and selecting uses for city-owned sites and using vacant lands to support community-led efforts in neighborhood stabilization and individual empowerment.

- **Action 3.1** – Rocky Mount establishes and communicates a policy that the FEMA mitigation lots it owns will be made available, through an application process, for projects that increase food security and help young people develop job skills.
- **Action 3.2** – Rocky Mount identifies suitable FEMA mitigation lots for agricultural and community uses and removes (where possible) any obstacles to using the lots. Obstacles may include zoning, transportation access, available water, etc.
- **Action 3.3** – Rocky Mount develops an application for people or groups that would like to use city-owned lands, including the FEMA mitigation lots, for programs that build the local food economy.
- **Action 3.4** – Use a combination of data on the location of food deserts and public input to identify the areas of the city with the greatest need for new sources of fresh and healthy food. USDA's Food Access Research Atlas is a reliable source of data on food deserts while public

neighborhood meetings can be organized to gather information on public opinions on the topic of food access.

- **Action 3.5** – Support expansion of the Conetoe Family Life Center model of farmer incubation and youth skills development into Rocky Mount on a suitable piece of city-owned land easily accessible to a large number of the city’s at-risk youth and food desert neighborhoods.

Goal 4 – Create opportunities for better health and economic opportunity through physical activity, healthy local foods, and new skills acquisition.

- **Action 4.1** – Launch a free public program in city parks, potentially biweekly, where food and cooking demonstrations would be held. Each demonstration would showcase a new recipe and the program could be filmed and shared on social media to reach a larger audience. This could be coordinated with the play date program to increase participation.
- **Action 4.2** – Launch a Learning Garden, which will transform the mission of the existing community gardens into a program by which the gardens will form a network for peer-to-peer learning and leadership development.
- **Action 4.3** – Start a walking club in neighborhoods to encourage people to walk for exercise, make use of the city’s investments in parks and trails, and to connect people with their neighbors.
- **Action 4.4** – Identify streets, especially near downtown, where lane widths could be reduced and pedestrian crossing distances shortened without having a negative effect on vehicle mobility or delay.

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 Rocky Mount’s Action Plan supports each of the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

While many of the actions programmatic in nature, several workshop attendees expressed concern about walkability. While the immediate downtown is walkable, the city has several streets that are overly wide for the traffic that they handle. Wide streets support fast vehicular traffic, which harms walkability. Actions 4.3 and 4.4 are a couple of initial steps that Rocky Mount can take to encourage walking and a healthier culture.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

The workshop did not focus on housing. However, it is an important issue in Rocky Mount. The city has some neighborhoods that are in need of new investment. It also has public housing communities with land that could be used for community gardens. While these may not contribute directly to housing affordability, they provide residents with new opportunities to socialize, which can make neighborhoods stronger and safer.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

This action plan enhances the region’s economic competitiveness by support job skill acquisition, particularly among at-risk youth, and by nurturing local producers and potentially new products that can be marketed in eastern North Carolina and the growing Triangle region.

Support Existing Communities

The action plan is focused on Rocky Mount’s existing neighborhoods, and especially those that were hard hit by flooding after Hurricane Floyd. Some of the actions could make healthy food options more accessible in some of the city’s most distressed neighborhoods.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The Rocky Mount Local Foods, Local Places workshop attracted an impressive array of local, state, and federal agency representatives. They were able to share knowledge during the workshop, meet potential new partners, and strengthen existing relationships. It is important moving forward for these partners to stay in contact.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

The action plan recognized the importance of community and neighborhoods to the city’s social and economic well-being. Many of the actions are geared towards connecting people in new ways and reaching across lines created by race, age, income, or other characteristics.

Appendices

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