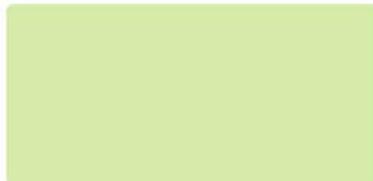
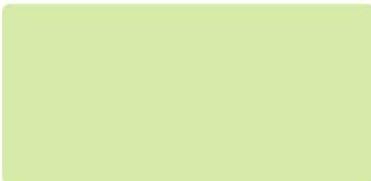




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for Strengthening Youngstown's Neighborhoods through Local Foods

Youngstown, Ohio

June 26, 2015



Community Story

Youngstown is a city going through a process of transformation. New technology-based businesses are flourishing downtown, long-vacant buildings such as Wick Tower are being repurposed, and city residents are finding new uses for empty lots including more than two dozen community gardens and seven urban farms. The city's investments in local foods and local places are having a visible impact.

These developments represent significant change for a city that for much of its life was an industrial hub, turning out steel products that built the nation. These plants, clustered along the Mahoning River, employed thousands of people at their peak and fueled rapid growth in the city. Youngstown's population reached about 170,000 people in the 1930s and held steady until the 1960s. But between 1977 and 1981 the city saw five major steel mills close, eliminating nearly 25,000 jobs. The city's population rapidly declined and today stands at about 65,000.

The closure of the steel plants and loss of population depressed the real estate market and reduced demand for businesses that provided services to the plants and their employees. As a result, today the city has many vacant or abandoned properties that are a burden on the city's tight financial resources. While the city's population has declined, its infrastructure has not contracted at the same pace.

While the city still faces many economic challenges, there are many signs of change in 2015. Downtown Youngstown is awakening with new restaurants, apartments, and planned hotel rooms. Downtown benefits from its proximity to Youngstown State University (YSU), which is located just north of the central business district. The city has also seen a return of a small number of steel jobs with the opening of the Vallourec Steel Mill. The city's vacant properties have also become a source of renewal and revitalization, with people across the city producing food in about 25 community gardens and seven urban farms.



Figure 1: Downtown Youngstown is attracting new investment, raising hopes for the city's future.

Youngstown's emerging local food economy is an exciting model for other communities that have extensive vacant properties. Local growers sell through three farmers markets, a community supported agriculture program, a farmers cooperative, and soon through a retail food cooperative that is set to open in the summer of 2015 in an emerging neighborhood food cluster just north of YSU that the local business association is calling NOMA. This area is also home to the Common Wealth Incubator Kitchen, which is supporting the development of new food-related businesses that may become major job providers in the future, and will soon include a locally-owned cafe. This cluster of three businesses at the intersection of Elm Street and Baldwin Street is helping to revitalize a city neighborhood just north of downtown and Youngstown State University, and near the historic Wick Park.

While the growing local food economy will not replace the void left by the steel industry’s contraction, it is helping to connect neighbors, provide more people with access to healthy food, and may stimulate new food-related businesses that can flourish in Youngstown and create new jobs. Leaders working to build the local food economy have worked hard to get several initiatives off the ground, but have grown concerned that the growth of this new industry is limited by a lack of demand and support from local shoppers, restaurants, and institutions.



Figure 2: Lady Bugs Farm is an example of how Youngstown is putting vacant lots in the city's neighborhoods back to productive use.

Recognizing this obstacle, the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC) in 2014 submitted a request for planning assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program. The new 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 the YNDC and several other stakeholders in Youngstown to develop an action plan for building the local food economy. Implementing the actions to build up the local food economy that are described in this plan can bring several benefits to the community including:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and business.
- Better access to healthy local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- A revitalized downtown and neighborhood commercial corridors that are the economic anchors of the community.

Engagement

Youngstown hosted a workshop on April 23 and 24 to develop this action plan. The workshop brought together key local, state, and federal agency representatives to envision how a stronger local food economy could improve quality of life, connect people, create jobs, and revitalize neighborhoods. The outcome of the workshop was this action plan, which lays out several critical next steps.

Among the attendees were local and regional representatives of the city, Youngstown State University, the Eastgate Regional Council of Governments, elected officials, and residents involved in gardening, urban farming, development, and businesses. Local representatives of the Common Wealth Kitchen Incubator, Lake-to-River Food Cooperative, the 30-Mile Meal Project, and Grow Youngstown were also heavily involved in



Figure 3: Workshop attendees putting the finishing touches on this action plan.

planning and participating in the workshop. Several state and federal officials also participated including representatives from the Ohio State University Cooperative Extension, the USDA Farm Service Agency, EPA, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Contractors from Renaissance Planning facilitated the workshop. Workshop attendance is provided in the appendix.

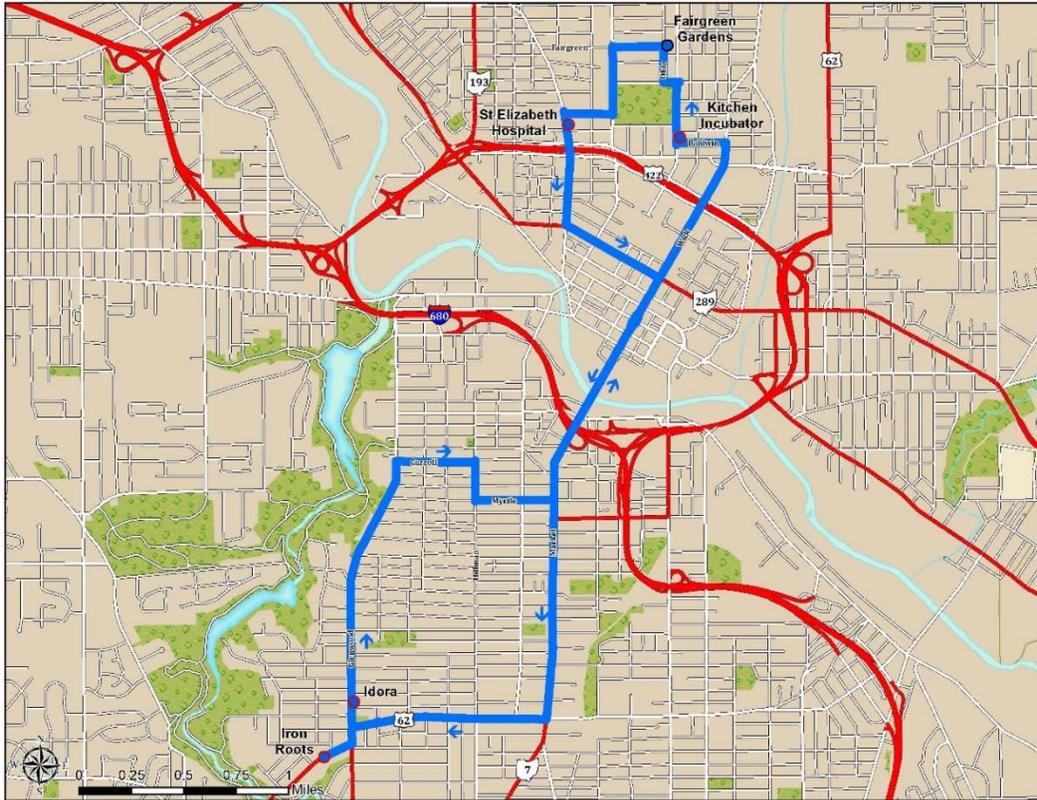


Figure 4: The workshop included a tour of key sites including the kitchen incubator, which is part of the emerging food cluster in Wick Park, and the Iron Roots Urban Farm. The map below shows the tour route.

The workshop included three sessions. The first session encouraged discussion about participants’ vision for the future of the local food economy. The second and third sessions explored challenges and opportunities for growing the local food economy before arriving at a set of goals and actions to achieve these goals. The goals this action plan supports are:

1. All people at all income levels and of all races and ethnicities in Youngstown feel a connection to local foods, see the benefits, and find local products they desire.
2. Youngstown State, local schools, hospitals, and other anchor institutions are purchasing a share of their food needs from local producers.
3. The food cluster in Wick Park is connected to Youngstown State, downtown, the park, and surrounding residential neighborhoods through safer and more welcoming pedestrian paths with features that distinguish the area.
4. More people are aware of the benefits of local foods and are demanding them at local stores and restaurants.

During the final work session, attendees identified specific actions that the community can take to achieve these goals. Figure 5 is a summary of the workshop process.

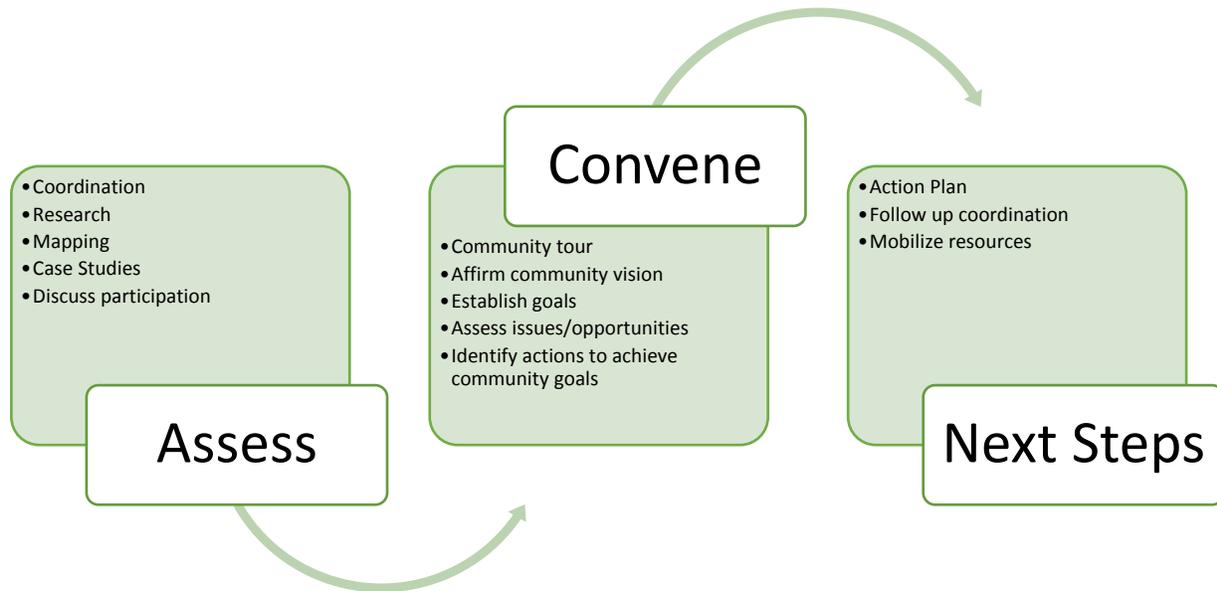


Figure 5: Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

The workshop and this action plan support a vision for the future of Youngstown in which a growing number of people are turning to local producers for their food needs. This leads to better public health, vacant lands returning to productive uses, and new flourishing food-related enterprises. Workshop participants translated this vision into an overarching goal, which is to:

- *Shift 5 percent or more of food purchases in Youngstown to local growers and producers, and increase supply to meet the higher demand.*

Such as shift would put vacant land back to productive use and support food-related enterprises resulting in new jobs. By capturing a small portion of the nearly \$103 million on food and \$12 million on fresh fruits and vegetables residents spend each year, Youngstown will realize substantial economic development.

Those figures are only for people living in Youngstown proper. The economic potential of such as shift in the broader region and in Northeast Ohio would be far greater. In fact, a recent study found that a 25 percent shift to local could generate nearly 20,000 jobs in Northeast Ohio, with about 2,500 of these jobs coming in Mahoning, Columbiana, and Trumbull counties.¹ These figures underscore the importance of this vision as an organizing aim of the community and this action plan.

¹ Masi, Brad; Shaller, Leslie; & Shuman, Michael H. The 25% SHIFT – The Benefits of Food Localization for Northeast Ohio & How to Realize Them. December 2010.

Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

Less than one percent of the food that Americans consume comes from local sources. Clearly there are some major challenges to shifting a significant amount of consumption to local suppliers. But changing consumer preferences also represent an opportunity to tackle some of these challenges. Workshop participants explored the challenges and opportunities for achieving the community’s vision. The strengths and opportunities listed below represent trends or actions that can unlock some of the potential of local foods in Youngstown. The challenges are items that may hold the community back if they are not addressed.

Strengths

- **Existing Programs that Support Local Foods** – Youngstown has up and running several programs to connect suppliers and customers of local foods. These include multiple farmers markets, a local food hub (Lake to River: <https://www.localfoodmarketplace.com/laketoriver/>), a promotional program (30 Mile Meal: <http://30milemealms.org/>), urban farms, community gardens, and a community incubator kitchen. A lot of effort and resources have been expended to set these programs up. The key now is to fully utilize them.
- **Hard Working People with Pride in the Mahoning Valley** – The region has an industrious history. While most of the steel manufacturing jobs have left, the region and its people have a history of hard work and take pride in their hometown. Local foods are a new avenue in which to put these skills to work.
- **Substantial Potential to Increase Supply of Local Foods** – Food expenditures constitute a large share of most household budgets. But very few of these expenditures go towards local products. The economic potential of shifting even a small share of household food purchases to local suppliers is huge. This shift will grow cyclically as current producers, eager to expand, respond to increasing demand.

Challenges

- **Low Demand for Local Foods** – Despite the tremendous amount of money spent on food each year by Youngstown residents (about \$100 million), and the programs in place to connect local suppliers with local customers, the demand remains soft. Several of the issues listed in this section contribute to low demand.
- **Communicating the Value of Local Foods** – Prices are a critical factor that influence the food purchasing decisions of households. Many households view local produce as being too expensive. It is important to counteract this perception with facts and new marketing messages. It is also critical to raise awareness of programs designed to lower the cost of fresh local produce for low income families (including double bucks programs) and draw new SNAP and WIC users to local markets.



Figure 6: The Iron Roots Urban Farm has a pair of large greenhouses.

- **Coordinating Existing Local Foods Efforts –** Common Wealth, Grow Youngstown, the YNDC, and many other partners support the vision of a more robust local food economy driven by a shift to local producers. But these groups are also working independently on their own initiatives. Coordination among them is important so they are not duplicating efforts or sending mixed signals to potential customers.
- **Limited Year-Round Product Offerings –** Grocery stores sell fresh fruits and vegetables year round. Local producers are constrained by the calendar and growing conditions. Value-added products, such as jams or frozen fruits and vegetables, are one option for partially overcoming this challenge. However, this remains a limitation that keeps locally-grown produce from commanding a greater share of the market.
- **Competition from Cheap, Unhealthy Foods –** Local foods must also compete with cheap alternatives, especially in the form of processed foods that provide a very large bang for the buck when it comes to calories. While these foods are dense in calories, many of them lack the nutritional benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables. The Mercy Health system has been a huge supporter of programs to change the eating habits of individuals accessing their services, but much more needs to be done to educate the public about the health benefits of fruits and vegetables.
- **Poor Understanding of the Economic Benefits of Local Foods –** Workshop participants also described a lack of buy-in from local elected officials and community leaders that fail to recognize the economic benefits of local foods. The workshop provided evidence of the benefits of local foods and led to a desire to focus on new approaches to advertising and marketing.
- **Need for Local Foods to be More Inclusive –** During the workshop some people shared their feelings that low income and African-American neighborhoods do not think local foods is for them. Some people view local foods as an interest of middle and higher incomes residents. Overcoming this challenge will demand more outreach and special attention to the types of products that are offered for sale at farmers markets.



Figure 7: A local entrepreneur working on her trail mix recipe at the incubator kitchen.

Opportunities

- **Cohesive Branding and Unified Marketing –** Each of the programs for promoting local foods has its own brand and conducts its own marketing. Combining marketing efforts under one brand that promotes foods grown in the Mahoning Valley could increase consumer recognition and demand of local foods. It will also help overcome the challenge that some of the programs lack a visible public profile.

- **Getting Mid-Sized Farms to Switch to Food Production** – Most of the farms supplying local markets are small. The region has many mid-sized and large farms that could contribute to the supply of locally-grown food by dedicating a small portion of their land for food production. Providing clear evidence of growing demand is central to this transition.
- **Getting More Schools to Buy Local Foods** – Local school districts serve thousands of meals every day and present a large opportunity to increase sales of local foods. The USDA Farm to School program can help with funding and technical assistance. Youngstown State University is another key partner for growing the market for local foods. The campus is located just south of the emerging food cluster in Wick Park.
- **Heritage and Culinary Tourism** – The region is known for food products, such as pierogis. With many former residents spread across the country, there is opportunity to sell such products widely and to draw in people for events celebrating the food heritage of Northeast Ohio.
- **Food is Exciting and Unifying** – Everyone eats food, which makes it less polarizing than other topics in American culture. People generally get excited about new ways of preparing food and opportunities to buy and consume products that are associated with their home. Food is an economic development tool that people from many different backgrounds can get behind. Building once-a-year festivals into year-round availability is a needed next step.

Action Plan

This section presents four specific goals and supporting actions that will shift the purchasing habits of Youngstown’s shoppers towards local foods. The actions will help Youngstown overcome the obstacles, or take advantage of opportunities, so that it can achieve these four goals. Goal 1 aims to address the challenge of some people feeling left out of the local foods movement. The second goal addresses soft demand by making it easier for large institutions to buy local foods. The third goal is supported by actions that will use local foods as a mechanism for neighborhood revitalization. And the fourth goal is about spreading the word about the benefits and potential of local foods.

These 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 – All people at all income levels and of all races and ethnicities in Youngstown feel a connection to local foods, see the benefits, and find local products they desire.

- **Action 1.1** – Launch a cooking demonstration program that will hire neighborhood residents to conduct cooking demonstration at different organizations around the city that serve low income populations. The program will hold up to 40 sessions and include materials to promote the farmers market and other local food programs.
- **Action 1.2** – Identify and recruit leaders in low-wealth neighborhoods, particularly in the African-American community, that can act as liaisons to organizations that are rebuilding the local food economy.
- **Action 1.3** – Launch a mobile market that will visit a new neighborhood each month to sell the same local produce found at the permanent markets.
- **Action 1.4** – Reach out to low income housing residents through resident councils to evaluate the need and interest in nutrition education, coaching, and local food tastings. In the long-term, such a program could be coordinated with the mobile market.

- **Action 1.5** – Organize places of worship and community groups to visit farmers markets and local food events. Groups will receive orientation and coupons to make initial purchases. The purpose would be to increase comfort level for shopping at the markets and elicit feedback about the types of products people would like to find at the market.

Goal 2 – Youngstown State, local schools, hospitals, and other anchor institutions are purchasing a share of their food needs from local producers.

- **Action 2.1** – Identify and create an inventory of the main purchasing agents at YSU, local schools, hospitals, and other institutions/businesses.
- **Action 2.2** – Interview each willing purchasing agent to discover their needs (such as quantity, quality, and timing) and select products that local producers may be able to supply, considering the need to start small.
- **Action 2.3** – Create an inventory of products that could be available – including quantity and timing – and publicize to institutions using the Lake to River Food Cooperative’s website and other marketing channels.
- **Action 2.4** – Based on interest by institutions, conduct planning meetings each winter with local growers to ensure an adequate quantity and timeliness of produce demanded by institutional buyers.

Goal 3 – The food cluster in Wick Park is connected to Youngstown State, downtown, the park, and surrounding residential neighborhoods through safer and more welcoming pedestrian paths with features that distinguish the area.

- **Action 3.1** – Plan a 1-day street festival that will appeal to all groups of people in the neighborhood, using the event to raise awareness of the emerging cluster of local foods businesses on Elm Street and seek input from residents on walkability improvements they would like to see.
- **Action 3.2** – Develop a small area walkability plan for Wick Park and the Elm Street Corridor that identifies critical connections, design elements that will encourage walking, and maintenance needs.
- **Action 3.3** – Install wayfinding signs directing people to the Wick Park and Elm Street Corridor, starting with temporary signs to test the concept (possibly during the street festival).
- **Action 3.4** – Paint the three commercially zoned houses on Elm Street owned by Common Wealth bright colors to improve their appearance and contribute to the unique identity that is emerging for the local food cluster.
- **Action 3.5** – Convene Northside Neighbors, City staff and officials, YSU, YNDC, and other stakeholders to share the vision for NoMa and solicit ideas for physical improvements to the area that will make it more walkable and inviting.

Goal 4 – More people are aware of the benefits of local foods and are demanding them at local stores and restaurants.

- **Action 4.1** – Define, build, and clearly communicate the brand of “local food” by developing and delivering a “road show” presentation, marketing materials including videos and maps of local producers, and consumer focus groups to learn more about attitudes towards local foods.
- **Action 4.2** – Expand producer training.

- **Action 4.3** – Expand training for value-added producers, incorporating both food preparation skills and small business development training.

Implementation

High Priority Actions

Youngstown officials and workshop participants started to prioritize the actions described in the previous section soon after the Local Foods, Local Places workshop. The steering committee that organized the workshop came to a consensus that the first and fourth goals are their highest near-term priorities. These are:

- All people at all income levels and of all races and ethnicities in Youngstown feel a connection to local foods, see the benefits, and find local products they desire.
- More people are aware of the benefits of local foods and are demanding them at local stores and restaurants.

As a community in the Appalachian Regional Commission’s territory, Youngstown is eligible for \$20,000 to implement elements of this action plan. The steering committee plans to apply the \$20,000 award to actions associated with the two goals listed above. Specific actions may include:

- Outreach to Places of Worship – Incentive Coupons, outreach to all places of worship in Youngstown, at least 12 organization bringing groups to local markets. Request amount: \$3,500
- Summer and Fall Cooking Classes – Staff time, ingredients, instructor stipends, advertising for events and organizations service low-income participants. Request amount: \$4,000
- Informational Videos – Professional production of 6 local food promotion videos for “road shows.” Request amount: \$4,000
- Design and Printing of Local Food Promotion Booklet - Professional layout, design, and printing of a booklet to promote all area markets, restaurants serving local foods, and local food programs. This includes staff time. Request amount: \$7,500
- Logo for Mahoning Valley Food Coalition (MVFC) and Brochures – Design of new logo by local artist, brochure and flyer printing. Request amount: \$1,000

Livability Principles Advanced by Action Plan

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the Federal Partnerships for Sustainable Communities. The Partnerships includes EPA, DOT, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These agencies have been working since 2009 to incorporate livability considerations into their policies and funding programs. This section describes how Youngstown’s Action Plan supports the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

The action plan calls for improving walkability in the area surrounding the emerging cluster of local foods businesses near Wick Park. The district, tentatively called NoMa, is within walking distance of Youngstown State University and downtown, yet lacks welcoming and continuous connections to those places for pedestrians and bicyclists. The action plan calls for studying how the area could be made more walkable.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

Housing was not a focus area of the workshop. Yet housing affordability is less of a problem in Youngstown than housing quality. Many dwellings are in a state of disrepair and fixing them is not feasible due to low property values that make it nearly impossible for developers to recoup their investment. The YNDC is working to target resources to small areas with the goal of increasing property values and spreading change to adjacent blocks. Converting vacant lots into beautiful community gardens and farms is one of their strategies.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Shifting five percent or more of food purchases to local products could have a tremendously positive effect on the local economy. Such a shift would create thousands of new jobs and provide people with new income and skills. The shift would also create a market for new food-related products or services.

Support Existing Communities

Youngstown has built infrastructure to support a much larger population. This plan calls for actions that will put city properties back into productive use, taking advantage of the city's sunk investments in water and street infrastructure.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The Local Foods, Local Places workshop brought together people from many state and federal agencies. The new relationships formed both within the city and with people outside of the community can attract new resources to support implementation of this action plan. It is important to nurture these new relationships by finding ways to stay engaged with each other. However, there is still a need to get more local participation and involvement from stakeholders in government, the local food system, and community.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

This action plan demonstrates a strong value for Youngstown's communities and neighborhoods. It lays out a path for how Youngstown may use local foods to improve public health and the local economy and rebuild social capital. It recognizes and values the potential that already exists in Youngstown because of its people and natural resources.

Appendices

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