

Growing Appalachia: Local Foods & Community Development in Knox County, Kentucky

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Barbourville/Knox County

Knox County is located in southeastern Kentucky in the central Appalachian coalfields. The county has a rich history of pioneer settlement, railroad development, and industry. The population of the county is nearly 32,000 people. It offers several parks and recreational facilities and is home to Union College which was established in the county seat of Barbourville in 1879.

Knox County is a federally designated Promise Zone county and a USDA-designated StrikeForce county. The county has a number of health and economic issues to overcome, with a 7.3% unemployment rate, 36.5% poverty rate, 31% obesity rate, and growing problems with drug abuse. There are few outlets in the county to access fresh, local produce and few businesses offer healthy options. Knox County has lots of potential for developing the local foods economy. Recent developments in the county highlight the possibility for Knox County to become a leader in local foods and sustainability in the region.



Local Foods, Local Places

In the fall of 2014, the city of Barbourville, Kentucky, was selected as one of 26 communities nationwide to participate in the “Local Foods, Local Places” program. The city in partnership with over two dozen local community organizations submitted a letter of interest for the grant to partner with several federal agencies including the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and Delta Regional Authority (DRA).

The program works to:

- Boost economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses, and foster entrepreneurship.
- Improve access to healthy local food, particularly among disadvantaged groups with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Revitalize downtowns, main street districts, and traditional neighborhoods by supporting farmers markets, food hubs, community gardens, community kitchens, and other kinds of local food enterprises, and by providing people with affordable choices for accessing those amenities, such as walking, biking, or taking transit.

In the spring of 2015 the community began a series of conference calls with state and federal partners. The calls led up to a summer community workshop followed by another series of conference calls, planning, and technical assistance to implement action items related to local foods in the county



GROW APPALACHIA

Lend-A-Hand Center Grow Appalachia Gardening Program



LEND-A-HAND CENTER

In 2014 the Lend-A-Hand Center became a partner site for Grow Appalachia—a program administered by Berea College that partners with community organizations throughout the region to promote food security and access to healthy, local food. Grow Appalachia believes, “When food grows, communities and families grow too.” The Lend-A-Hand Center is a small, nonprofit community service organization in Walker, Kentucky, that was begun in 1958 by Irma Gall and Peggy Kemner. The organization has served the Stinking Creek watershed of Knox County providing a variety of services including nurse midwifery, a clinic, home healthcare, educational programs, and volunteer opportunities. The Lend-A-Hand Center Grow Appalachia Project is designed to break down barriers to gardening and build community, addressing food security issues in Knox County through providing resources and technical assistance for home and community gardens. The program works with families in the Stinking Creek area, community gardeners, and partner organizations in the county to expand gardening possibilities to use organic gardening techniques to help “grow as much food for as many people as possible.”



Local Foods, Local Places Workshop

June 16-17, 2015, Barbourville, KY

- Tour of community with federal partners
- Introductions
- Challenges & opportunities with local foods in the area
- Case studies
- Mapping Exercise-assets, opportunities, needs in the community
- Poster brainstorming for local foods goals: Why important, measures of success, time frame, roles, costs, and possible funding sources

5 goals:

- Evaluate options for a location for seasonal and mobile farmers’ market.
- Identify sustainable model for farmers’ market organization, finance and governance.
- Expand access to local foods by making it affordable and available at local markets through programs such as SNAP, WIC and EBT.
- Seek opportunities to expand use of local food in local businesses and institutions and the sale of local foods to local customers.
- Leverage the local food network to support economic and community development through connections to youth, development of food-related businesses, and promotion of tourism

Knox County Farmers’ Market

A small group of representatives from the Knox County Health Department, Lend-A-Hand Grow Appalachia, Union College, and community members began meeting in late May 2014 to start a farmers’ market. The grand opening of the Knox County Farmers’ Market was less than a month later in the parking lot of a local law office in Barbourville. The opening was amazingly successful, with both a large crowd and a large, diverse group of vendors as the market was met with great support from the community. The market continued every Thursday evening through the month of October while a board formed to oversee the market. The 2015 market was moved to the Knox County Extension Office parking lot after growing out of its original location. Although the location change was a major shift, a large customer base has followed the market and new customers continue to attend every week. The farmers’ market board, with the help of members from many different community organizations and partners, continues to plan ways in which the market can continue to grow and expand. With the help of the “Local Foods, Local Places” initiative, many ideas for the market have been discussed, including a mobile market, a permanent structure to house the market, multiple market meeting dates and locations, a community food system assessment, and an online and print directory of local producers.



Next Steps

The “action plan” developed through the “Local Foods, Local Places” project will serve as a guide for ongoing local foods and community development initiatives in the county. Union College and the University of Kentucky will continue collaborating with the Farmers’ Market and the community on initiatives including marketing and website design.

