

An Action Plan for Building a Healthy Community in the Danville Region: People, Farms, Economy



The Danville region has long relied on its natural resources as a source of economic and community strength. Its farmers have provided quality foods and income for the region. Its loggers and foresters have provided both jobs and the raw materials for the furniture and paper industries. And food processors, furniture and paper manufacturers take raw natural resources and increase value, income and jobs.

The days of natural resources leading the regional economy are over but it remains a key economic force. Roughly 7,500 people in the region are employed in food and natural resource related employment, about 13 percent of the total economy. But the value of this industry, particularly local food production, goes beyond the direct economic impact.

Locally sourced foods create a sense of community, connecting people in towns and cities to the rural parts of the community. They teach us about where our food comes from, not just from a box bought in a grocery store, but from a farmer who tills the soil, milks the cows and makes the cheese and wine. Locally grown foods provide healthy and high quality alternatives to processed foods or fruits and vegetables grown thousands of miles away.

More and more communities are rediscovering the value of locally grown and processed foods – in their homes, schools, hospitals, nursing homes and the workplace. Many of the ideas for increasing the vitality of the local economy and the health of its citizens through building a stronger local food system can be applied in the Danville region.

Goals

After examining the region’s agricultural economy and local food system we believe the following five goals provide the best opportunities to capitalize on the region’s food system:

- 1. Increase the supply, quality & availability of local foods**
- 2. Increase institutional demand for local foods**
- 3. Improve marketing & distribution of local foods**
- 4. Increase affordability of fresh local foods**
- 5. Increase community education on healthy eating & local foods**

Strategies

Across America, communities have discovered many strategies to meet similar goals. But what will work to help the Danville region, its people, farmers and economy increase the role of locally sourced foods? Here are some that we think fit the Danville region and meet the goals identified above.

It will take many stakeholders within the Danville region to implement the strategies and meet the five goals. Success requires collaboration, energy and enthusiasm. The region’s citizens and businesses will play a key role. The school systems and governmental agencies will provide key support and resources. The agricultural and health communities will buy into the goals and strategies. Finally regional foundations must play roles in energizing, convening and funding various initiatives.

Strategy 1: Hire a *regional market connector* or coordinator on a three-year trial basis to bridge the gaps between farmers, people in the community and its businesses and institutions. Impacts all five goals

The market coordinator will serve to connect the producers to the consumers within the local food system. He or she could help create cooperatives of farmers and processors of local foods who can provide the necessary volumes, quality and consistency needed.

Strategy 2: Create onsite markets for major employers in the region including hospitals, schools and colleges, government agencies and manufacturers. Impacts goals 2, 3 and 4

Onsite markets bring local foods to buyers in a convenient and consistent manner. Typically employees commit to purchasing specific volumes and types of foods though other strategies can work. The employers provide the place and the market connector provides the glue between the buyers, sellers and the companies.

Strategy 3: Convene large institutional buyers (hospitals, nursing homes, local colleges, assisted living facilities, etc.) to discuss how they can increase their purchases of locally produced foods. Impacts goals 2, 3 and 4

To make it feasible for institutional buyers to use locally produced foods requires their commitment, the availability of consistent and reasonably priced food, and a connection between the suppliers and the buyers. This is a sometimes complicated process and one that will require planning, cooperation and local commitment. There is a key role for regional and local foundations and the market connector in this process.

Strategy 4: Work with physicians, medical clinics and hospitals to educate and encourage consumption of fresh and healthy foods. Impacts goals 3, 4 and 5

People usually go to doctors when they are sick, but doctors also play a key role in preventing health problems from occurring. Brochures and other materials on the health impacts of eating healthy local foods can encourage healthier lifestyles. In addition, many doctors and clinics are giving away “local dollars” to patients that can be redeemed at local farmer’s markets on fresh local foods.

Strategy 5: Develop a website that promotes local foods and connects farmers to consumers. Impacts goals 3, 4 and 5

Regions in North Carolina and Virginia have developed very effective websites and marketing programs to promote the production and sale of locally grown and processed food. The “Buy Fresh! Buy Local” program in North Carolina is an example. These programs can encourage the sale and purchase of local foods in grocery stores and other outlets, but they also are a great channel for promoting restaurants that feature local foods on their menus. The website would be a key asset for the work of the market connector.

These are just a few examples of how the Danville region can build healthier people, farms and economy and community. Success though will require dedication, commitment and hard work for the people and institutions of the Danville region.