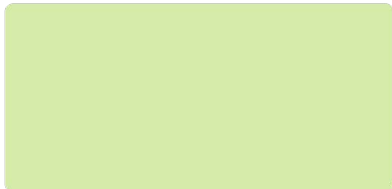
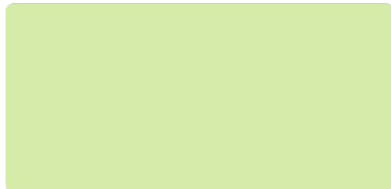
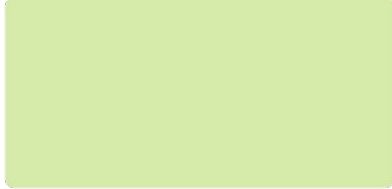
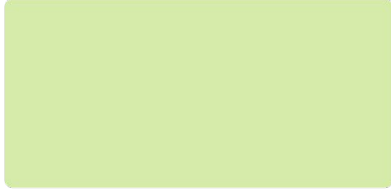




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for Local Foods, Local Places Initiatives

Connellsville, Pennsylvania

August 3, 2016



Community Story

The City of Connellsville is in Southwest Pennsylvania, in Fayette County. Located along the Youghiogheny River, the City boomed in the early 1900's as an industrial hub for coke production and coal mining, earning the reputation as the "Coke Capital of the World." During the height of its industrial success, the city had more millionaires per capita in the entire nation and the population peaked at around 22,000 residents. Following the decline of the coal and coke market, Connellsville's economy suffered significantly.¹

The City is approximately two square miles with a population of almost 7,600 residents as of 2010² and has remained relatively the same over recent years. Over 30% of the population is above the age of 65 and as of 2014, approximately 26% of the City's residents fall below the poverty line³

Connellsville's downtown has seen notable revitalization in recent years. With its historic buildings, grid of streets, an Amtrak Station and the Greater Allegheny Passage (GAP) Trail running through it, the town is seeing growth in tourism related businesses. There are two Bed & Breakfasts in town, and a new hotel is currently under construction. The Fayette County Cultural Trust operates Downtown Connellsville which is an organization focuses on supporting downtown business growth and activity. Downtown Connellsville opened the Connellsville Farmers and Artist Market about 5 years ago, and in 2014 opened the Connellsville Canteen Museum and Café which regularly hosts downtown social and business organization events. Downtown Connellsville and the Connellsville Redevelopment Authority have helped to open many new businesses in downtown and bring historic vacant buildings back to productive use.

In addition to revitalizing the economic vitality of its downtown, the City of Connellsville, the Redevelopment Authority and Downtown Connellsville are interested in growing the local food system to further support economic activity in the region and improve health outcomes for its citizens. Adult obesity in Fayette County is at 33.5% and the rate of adults with diabetes was almost 10% in 2015.⁴ Although the county is performing poorly on these health indicators, they are relatively matched



A mural completed by a local artist in downtown Connellsville *Image Credit: Renaissance Planning.*



Connellsville Farmers and Artists Market located downtown. *Image Credit: Downtown Development Authority.*

¹ <http://www.fay-west.com/connellsville/historic/>

² Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

³ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

⁴ Source: CDC Community Health Status Indicators 2015

statistically with similar communities in the United States. Fortunately, Connellsville has many community health advocates such as Highlands Hospital and its Diabetes Center, and the Healthy Lifestyles Task Force. These groups are eager to advance local foods goals to improve access to healthier eating options and to promote people living a more active lifestyle where physical activity is part of daily life.

There are a fair share of farms and producers in Fayette County with over \$27 million in agricultural sales as of 2012. However, only about 5% of those sales are direct to consumer transactions. These types of sales include local vegetables, fruits, and meats at farmers markets, roadside stands and CSA's. These numbers indicate that there is in fact the presence of a substantial number of farms in the county, but the problem is getting these local products to consumers and increasing awareness that these resources exist locally.



Connellsville stakeholders walking the GAP Trail through downtown Connellsville. *Image Credit: Renaissance Planning.*

In 2015, members the Connellsville Redevelopment Authority requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to develop and action plan for advancing the local food system, continuing to strengthen the economic activity in downtown and improve public health outcomes. 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), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). The outcomes of this technical assistance 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 that is the economic anchor of the community.

The City of Connellsville received technical assistance in 2013 through the Livable Communities in Appalachia program, a predecessor of the Local Foods, Local Places program. Building on these prior efforts, the community requested this round of technical assistance to help them identify specific strategies to strengthen the existing farmers market, increase local food offerings in downtown restaurants and B&B's, make local foods and products an integral part of the Connellsville brand, and provide better access to fresh produce for lower income residents and seniors.

The remainder of this report and appendices documents the LFLP technical assistance engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps for achieving the community's goals. Over the course of the three planning calls and workshop discussions, the community's goals evolved from those in the initial request for technical assistance to the five shown later in this report and in Appendix A, and reflect the collaborative approach to community development already underway in Connellsville.

Engagement

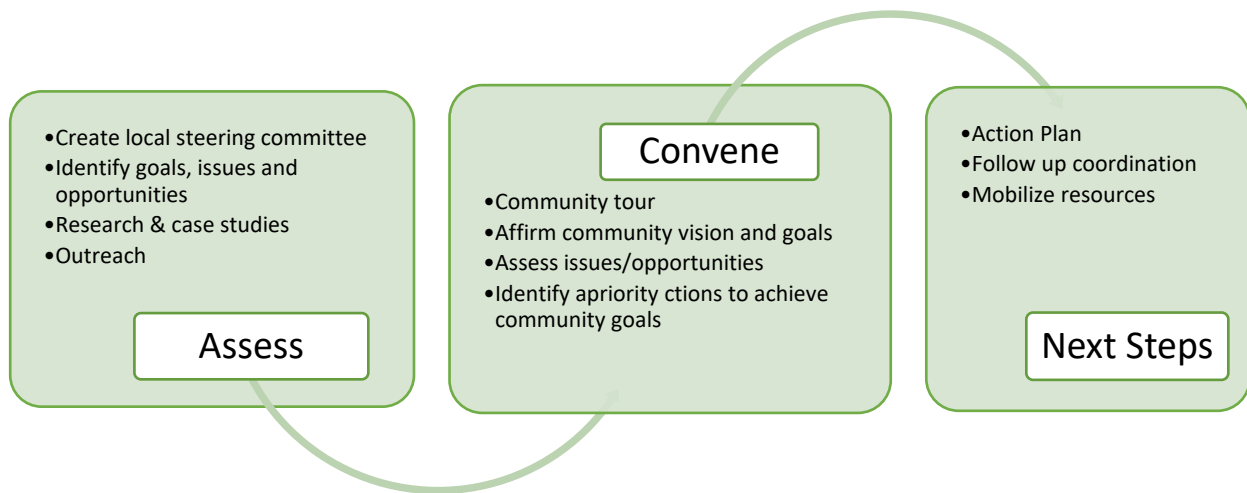
The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP includes three phases, illustrated in Figure 1 below. The assessment phase consists of three preparation conference calls with the LFLP Steering Committee to establish the workshop goals, agenda, logistics, and stakeholder invitation lists. The convening phase includes the effort’s capstone event—a two-day workshop in the community. The next steps phase includes three follow up conference calls as well as process reporting and documentation.

The site visit was conducted over two days—April 20th and 21st, 2016: a small lunch gathering an evening community meeting at the Connellsville Canteen. The community event and workshop were well attended by key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders (attendance list in Appendix C).



Community meeting room at the Connellsville Canteen with workshop participants. *Image Credit: Renaissance Planning.*

Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram





Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on April 20th at the Connellsville Canteen with key stakeholders, and federal agency representatives. Following the luncheon, members of Downtown Connellsville led everyone on a walking tour of Downtown Connellsville which included stops at local shops, the Greater Allegheny Passage (GAP) Trail, the site of the farmers market, the construction site of the forthcoming hotel. The tour provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities present in Connellsville, and allowed for informal discussions about the local food system and place-making efforts.



Top: Day 1 Community tour stop at new hotel, Cobblestone Hotel & Suites, under construction; Bottom: Bike rental shop at the site where the GAP Trail meets downtown Connellsville. Images Credit: Renaissance Planning.

Vision and Values

The first night of the on-site technical assistance included a workshop attended by over 35 Connellsville residents and several regional partners representing state and federal agencies. Members of Downtown Connellsville welcomed attendees to the event and presented a brief history of the City of Connellsville and highlighted recent achievements in the community in revitalizing downtown over the last 7 years. The consultant team then introduced the topics and program overview with a short presentation. Community members and other attendees were asked to write on notecards their response to the statement, “This I believe about local food in Connellsville...” which prompted participants to think about the opportunities present in area. Those ideas are summarized in the box to the right.

After a locally catered dinner, participants at the tables completed a food system diagramming exercise in which they listed existing components of the food system, components that do not yet exist but are needed, and the connections between those components (see Appendix G) The themes shared during the opportunities and challenges and mapping exercises reveal many of the group’s aspirations for increasing local vendor attendance at the Connellsville Farmers and Artists Market, strengthening visibility and marketing of local products and capitalizing on tourism, improved health and wellness strategies, and increased opportunities for lower income and senior populations to have access to local, fresh food.

I BELIEVE THAT...

Growth & Identity Opportunities

The local businesses in Connellsville make it a true community and is inviting to visitors and tourists. We need the empty storefronts to downtown to be filled with new businesses.

Community Health and Wellness

Connellsville can become a model of wellness, which can be achieved by valuing our health, our community, and our future through local resources such as foods, innovators and entrepreneurship.

Community Desire

Connellsville residents are passionate about moving their community forward and have the ability to mobilize their efforts and become a hub for the local food movement.

Additional Locations for Market

If Connellsville had a larger tent for farmers market or a covered test kitchen, the City could bring in more vendors and cooking demos and courses for farmers market visitors.

On day two of the technical assistance effort, the consultant team facilitated a day long workshop with a group of local stakeholders. This workshop began with a recap of the vision, values and goals and then transitioned into case study presentations covering community existing food system assessments, models to attract additional customers and vendors, farmers market best practices, food system and trail assessments, entrepreneurship, farm incubator programs, foods entrepreneurship and placemaking techniques, and other food system-related technical information (see Appendix F for case study slides). The follow on discussions and exercises evolved into a refinement of the goals and the action plan implementation tables that are summarized below (full version in Appendix A).

Action Plan

The culminating product of the technical assistance and workshop efforts is a strategic action plan to guide implementation of the community's priority goals. The plan is organized around five goals and includes actions the participants brainstormed at the meeting and during follow up calls that are designed to achieve those goals. The action plan matrix helps to further clarify, prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for moving forward on these actions. The goals and actions that are part of this plan are summarized below and contained in Appendix A with full details including organizational leads, potential funding, timelines and measures of success.

GOAL 1: Increase number of vendors and customers at farmers market in downtown Connellsville

Farmers markets that function as destinations for shoppers and families have more a consistent turnout of customers, and those customers are more likely to shop for a longer period of time. The Connellsville Farmers and Artists Market, currently supported by Downtown Connellsville, a program of the Fayette County Cultural Trust, needs several additional activities to expand both the customer base and vendor base that are beyond the mission and responsibilities of the Redevelopment Authority. Therefore there is a need to establish a new Local Foods, Local Places Committee that can take on these efforts and other tasks outlined in this action plan with various representatives. There is also a need to further identifying regional food growers and producers to support diversification and increase supply of local food offerings at the farmers market, and at other local food outlets. The establishment of a list of growers/producers is step one in beginning this process and further increasing shared knowledge about existing regional food-based resources. This effort can build upon/pull from other similar efforts in the region (e.g. Republic Food Enterprise Center, Edible Allegheny, and Sustainable Pittsburgh). The customer base at the farmers market is currently not large enough to attract additional vendors. This can be strengthened by supporting broader goals for matching up local food production with local consumption. New signage and the acceptance of SNAP/EBT benefits can also bring in new customers. Additional benefits can also accrue to other downtown businesses based on increased pedestrian traffic during market hours such as thoughtful programming (yoga classes, cooking demonstrations, health screenings, music, local restaurants cooking with local food, etc.) oriented around food, nutrition and health can also reinforce healthy living goals desired by the community. The establishment of a permanent structure (pavilion or building) is a potential way to increase visibility, provide more conveniences for vendors/customers (bathrooms, electricity, etc.), protect the event from inclement weather, and provide a higher sense of permanence that would make it more reliable/attractive to customers. This permanent space may be appropriate when a critical mass of vendors and customers is reached and the market sees demand for expanded hours/days of the week.

- **Action 1.1:** Establish a new steering committee to support growth of the Connellsville downtown farmers market
- **Action 1.2:** Define 'local' for the community (e.g. 100-150 mile radius) and establish a database and guide of regional farmers (specialty crops, livestock, etc.) and local food producers (including specialty value-added products); conduct outreach to bring new vendors to the market.
- **Action 1.3:** Increase number of customers coming to the market by adding additional programmatic activities/events, improving advertising/outreach through additional signage and online postings (e.g. Facebook page), and enabling acceptance of EBT/SNAP benefits (see Action 4.1)
- **Action 1.4:** Establish a permanent location for the farmers market in downtown.

GOAL 2: Increase local food offerings in downtown restaurants, bed and breakfasts' (B&Bs) and new hotel.

There is a need to better align local demand and local production by providing additional sales through local restaurants, hotels and shops (for value-added products). Featuring local foods at local establishments also helps educate and advertise to local residents what is available (including highlighting vendors who might be at the farmers market) and reinforces transparency between businesses/producers. Additionally, highlighting local food offerings at local establishments can further the tourism goals by reinforcing the distinctive experiences and local culture in Connellsville. Highlighting healthy local food options at restaurants can also appeal to visitors who are in town on bike via the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) trail and may be seeking healthier eating options. Strengthening the local food system benefits from a well-established brand that reinforces the cultural, social, and economic benefits associated with buying local. The brand can also be used to further marketing and advertising efforts to visit downtown Connellsville, and it can also strengthen visibility and demand for local farmers associated with the brand. There is also a need for outreach to make local buyers aware of both the options to buy local and the cost of doing so. With additional outreach and a matching up of buyers with local producers, additional food can be sourced in local restaurants, B&Bs, retail, etc.

- **Action 2.1:** Work with the Local Foods, Local Places steering committee on Action 1.2 to establish inventory of local growers and producers. Engage Chamber of Commerce to identify potential restaurants, B&Bs, and hotels looking to use/sell local foods and products and help establish relationships.
- **Action 2.2:** Define what local means for Connellsville businesses (coordinate with Action 1.2) and then create new 'brand' and advertising campaign and program that can be highlighted by local businesses (on menus, website, signage, etc.)
- **Action 2.3:** Conduct outreach and education to restaurants and B&Bs on financial feasibility of local food offerings and increase total amount of local food offerings in local establishments.

GOAL 3: Integrate local value added foods into economic development (with a tourism focus) strategy

There is a need to ensure that the town can capture as many riders as possible to shop, eat, and stay locally. There are existing groups such as the Laurel Highlands Visitor's Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce that can work to emphasize the 'experience – based' tourism. Current signage is limited, so more effort is needed to advertise all there is to do in the city. The Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) Trail brings people directly into downtown Connellsville. The community could benefit from not only physical

signage improvements, but also an online presence to encourage trail users to eat, stay, shop and do activities in Connellsville. Additional effort is also needed to highlight/reframe the local story of Connellsville with a greater emphasis on opportunities to buy and eat local, fresh foods. Activities could be targeted and advertised as part of the larger “visit Connellsville” campaign. These types of activities can further reinforce the “buy local, experience local” ethos that becomes part of the local brand. The city already has some local products, such as Republic Food Enterprise Center products, featured in local retail establishments, yet these products reflect untapped local sources of ‘authentic’ local foods/cultural offerings. Additionally, the Republic Food Enterprise Center is a food hub for Fayette County with a commercial kitchen available for makers to create new products. Advertising these and other local products could be used in promoting unique events and festivals where you can experience authentic and one-of-a-kind local foods, local crafts, etc. Events can also serve to educate the local community about local assets, including local foods and local craft offerings, and they can improve local demand.

- **Action 3.1:** Develop and implement new signage and online advertising to guide trail users to local businesses.
- **Action 3.2:** Work with local farmers, restaurants, and other food-related businesses to identify potential ‘experience-based’ tourism options.
- **Action 3.3:** Identify existing and potential local value-added products (e.g. Republic Food Center Enterprise products, jams, St. Rita’s sauce, etc.,) and begin a program to increase production and sales in local stores.
- **Action 3.4:** Identify a regular program of festivals/events that are unique to Connellsville and incorporate advertising of these events into other advertising/outreach efforts to buy local/experience local (e.g. signage, GAP Trail apps, etc.). Use events to highlight local vendors/products.

GOAL 4: Make local healthy foods more accessible to lower income populations and seniors

Making local foods available to seniors and lower income Connellsville residents supports the City’s healthy lifestyle goals and also strengthens the buying power and demand of local foods and produce. Many community members in Connellsville already receive SNAP/EBT benefits. This represents buying power locally, and can be even stronger with the double bucks program, which gives SNAP benefit recipients more buying power. The City also provides Senior Boxes, which are delivered to low income seniors in the community. The contents of these boxes comes from the Pittsburgh Food Bank which distributes to the Fayette County Community Action Agency. The local food bank and Community Ministries can work to increase the availability of fresh food options in these boxes among community members and seniors. Currently they don’t include many fresh offerings. Community Ministries can also partner with other local organizations on educational offerings such as food preparation.

- **Action 4.1:** Work with local USDA FNS contacts to establish SNAP/EBT program at Connellsville farmers market and promote it locally.
- **Action 4.2:** Expand fresh produce offerings at Community Ministries Food Bank and get those offerings distributed and consumed by local clients by incorporating nutrition/cooking education.

- **Action 4.3:** Initiate outreach needed to get more fresh produce included in the Senior Boxes currently provided by Fayette County Community Action.

GOAL 5: Promote healthy lifestyles and continue strengthening walking, biking infrastructure, and opportunities for exercise in daily activities.

Connellsville is looking to achieve, wellness and a healthy community was a prominent goal. A walkability and bikability audit can help identify the key infrastructure issues and opportunities for improving the safety and convenience of walking/biking locally and serve as an educational opportunity to increase awareness of potential issues. This audit can lead to longer term mobility goals such as a prompt a revisit and refine the Connellsville Bicycle Master Plan, the potential development of a larger multimodal transportation plan for the City which identifies specific infrastructure and signage projects. A more attractive, safe and accessible community has the potential to create better health outcomes. Additionally, making Connellsville a safer place to walk and bike can bolster downtown as a key destination for locals and tourists. Connecting the GAP Trail to a larger bicycle and pedestrian network in the city also helps to bring people into town to visit local shops and businesses. The creation of a wayfinding and stronger signage system that can tell residents and visitors how long it takes to walk or bike to different community destinations such as restaurants, retail, cultural and historic sites, parks, lodging, etc., can function to encourage more walking and biking. This wayfinding program can be coordinated with the need for additional signage and orientation to the community as describes in actions 3.1 and 5.2.

Regularly holding community events sponsored by the City, and its partners can reinforce the community commitment to issues surrounding health and also provide venues for fun, social physical activity. The location and timing of these events can also be strategically targeted to reinforce existing community activities/efforts around local foods (farmers markets, festivals) and local placemaking activities (community gardens, parks, cultural sites, etc.). The longer-term objective is to promote healthier lifestyles community-wide, so a review of existing City policies related to physical infrastructure, programs, procurement, etc. can strengthen awareness and leverage scarce resources towards reinforcing health goals and objectives.

- **Action 5.1:** Conduct a walkability and bikability audit of Connellsville.
- **Action 5.2:** Implement needed additional infrastructure in community to support safe, convenient, and enjoyable biking and walking opportunities.
- **Action 5.3:** Develop and implement new ‘walk to x, y, z in 5 minutes’ signage program to improve wayfinding for visitors and residents on foot or on bikes (coordinate with Actions 5.2, 3.1)
- **Action 5.4:** Develop program of healthy events (12 months, 12 Locations)
- **Action 5.5:** Incorporate public health goals into every city policy.

Implementation and Next Steps

Three post-workshop conference calls were held during May and June 2016, following the workshop. The calls were held with the local points of contact to refine the action plan, add clarifying language and identify potential projects for ARC Implementation funding. Moving forward this document serves as the framework for ongoing implementation activities by local stakeholders in advancing Local Foods, Local Place based goals and initiatives.

Appendix

Appendix A – Detailed Action Tables

Appendix B – Participants

Appendix C – Local Mapping

Appendix D – Funding Resources

Appendix E – References

Appendix F – Local Food System

Appendix G – Action Brainstorming Notes

Appendix H – “This I Believe” Statements

Appendix I – Workshop Presentations