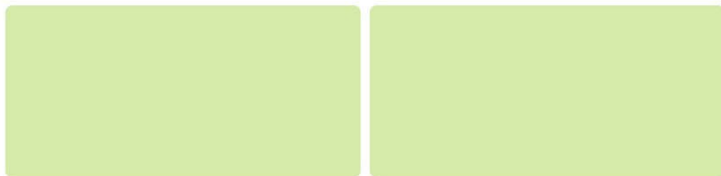




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES



COMMUNITY
ACTION PLAN

Martin and Dresden,
Tennessee

June 27, 2016





Community Story

Martin and Dresden are two of five incorporated towns located in Weakley County, Tennessee. Dresden is the county seat, while Martin is the largest city and home to the University of Tennessee at Martin. Situated in the northwestern corner of Tennessee, the region boasts bountiful natural resources and productive farmland. As one of the state's leading agricultural producers, Weakley County was first known for



A mural highlights the agricultural economy of the region in downtown Martin, TN. Image Credit: Jen Walker

corn production before soybeans surpassed that crop as the leading commodity grown. Other crops include sweet potatoes, cotton and wheat, and there are several large hog producers in the county.¹ Although Weakley County is known for its large agricultural producers, several small farmers growing food for local consumption have achieved recent success, and there is a growing demand for more local food.

Weakley County was established in 1823 on land ceded by the Chickasaw Nation through the Treaty of 1818. The location of present-day Dresden was selected as the county seat shortly thereafter because of its hilltop location and adjacency to one of the only natural springs in the area. The town of Martin was established in 1873, although agricultural production and trade had been present for several decades prior. The Nashville and Northwestern railroad was extended through Weakley County in 1861 with stations at Gleason, Dresden, Ralston, Martin, and Gardner. This transportation system, along with good soils and ample rainfall, provided the initial infrastructure necessary for the region's agricultural producers to thrive.

The population of Weakley County was 34,000 as of 2015², with roughly 11,000 of those residents living in Martin. Dresden's population, by contrast, is just under 3,000 people. Like many rural areas in the United States, the population of Weakley County has been declining in recent years. The poverty rate of Weakley County is 21.5%, which is 6.7% higher than the national average. Forty-seven percent of the County's school-aged children participate in the free and reduced lunch program. Weakley County was recently named a USDA Strike Force County in an effort to address this persistent poverty in the area.

Access to fresh, healthy food is a concern of some community members in Weakley County, especially among lower-income families with children and senior citizens. The obesity rate in the city of Martin is 34.5%—slightly higher than the 33.5% average obesity rate for Tennessee, and 86.3% of residents report that they consume less than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. The rate of child food insecurity is 29.1% (2,000 children) for the city of Martin, compared to the state of Tennessee rate of 25.4%.³

¹ Weakley County | Entries | Tennessee Encyclopedia. (March 2011). Retrieved April 10, 2016, from <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1480>

² <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4746240,47183>

³ <http://wwwn.cdc.gov/CommunityHealth/profile/currentprofile/TN/Weakley/>

Local Foods, Local Places Action Plan – Martin and Dresden, Tennessee

The agricultural sector employs 26% of the workforce in Weakley County⁴. Other major employers include the University of Tennessee at Martin (1,000+ employees), MTD Products (725), Weakley County School District (600), Volunteer Community Hospital (300), Walmart (250), Northwest Community Development District (250), the City of Martin (150), and numerous mid-sized manufacturing and distribution companies.

There are several agencies and organizations with missions intended to further economic and community development present in Weakley County. The Northwest Tennessee Entrepreneur Center (NTEC),—a local nonprofit organization and one of the lead agencies for the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) technical assistance, is headquartered in Martin. NTEC serves to support new and existing entrepreneurs by connecting businesses to resources, including access to credit and capital, a mentorship program, networking, and technical assistance. The University of Tennessee at Martin has a strong College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences department and offers much to the local community through opportunities for partnership and learning. In the fall of 2015, community members from Martin and Dresden formed the Local Food Network to begin bringing together different organizations and community members interested in advancing the local foods system in the region.

The cities of Martin and Dresden have been engaged in developing their respective historic downtown districts, promoting recreation and economic development through trail and greenway programs, and promoting local foods through sponsoring farmers markets. Each community recently constructed a new farmer’s market pavilion and both continue to coordinate the Martin and Dresden farmers’ market activities.

In 2015, members of the Local Food Network (LFN) Steering Committee requested assistance through the national Local Foods, Local Places program to develop an action plan for advancing the local food system and continuing to strengthen their downtowns, improve public health outcomes and foster economic development. 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:



Top: City of Martin Farmers Market pavilion located in the historic downtown; Bottom: City of Dresden Farmers Market pavilion located just outside of downtown adjacent to the Green Rail Trail. Images Credit: Jen Walker

⁴ http://www.city-data.com/county/Weakley_County-TN.html

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

In their request for LFLP technical assistance, the City of Martin and the City of Dresden named better coordination among local foods producers and interested consumers—especially nutrition education and the need to support the local economy—as a primary goal. Additionally, the LFN Steering Committee hoped to generate greater interdependence between the rural and urban areas of the county through increased attention to the social, cultural, economic, and environmental opportunities afforded by local foods efforts.

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 holistic, collaborative approach to community development already underway in Martin, Dresden, and the wider Weakley County community.

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 between the LFLP team and the local 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.

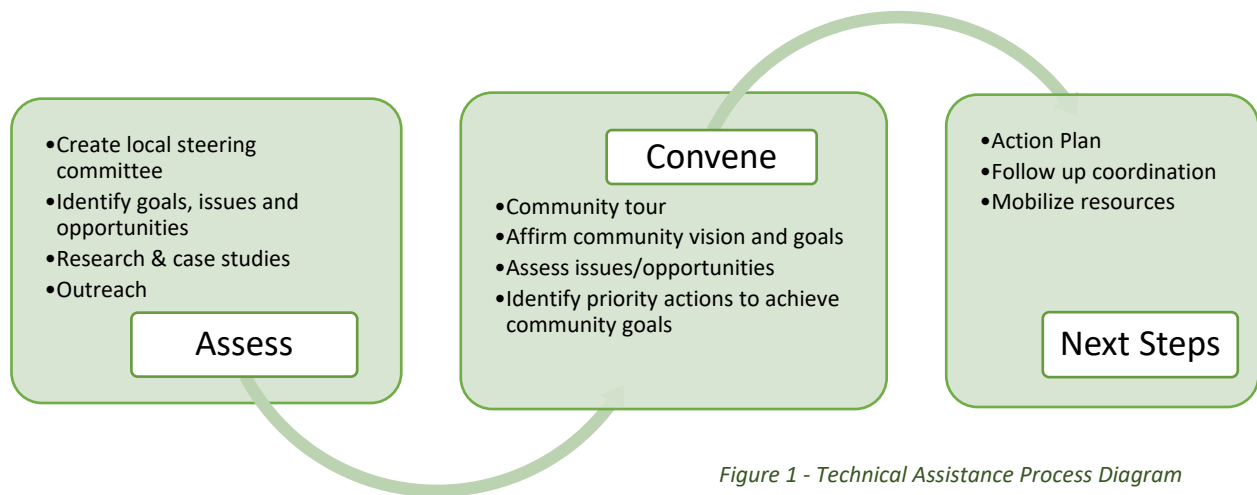


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

The site visit was conducted over two days—March 21st and 22nd, 2016: a small lunch gathering at the Northwest Tennessee Entrepreneur Center office, community tours of Martin and Dresden, and an evening community meeting held at the Purple Iris event space in Dresden (Day 1) and a community workshop at the Northwest Tennessee Development District offices in Martin (Day 2). The community event and workshop were well attended by key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders (attendance list in Appendix C). The Local Food Network published the first Weakley County Local Food Guide just prior to the LFLP workshop, with the public meeting on the first day serving as the official launch of this important effort. This public meeting was the first in a planned series of community forums called “Using Food to Build Community,” providing an ongoing platform for Weakley County residents to gather and discuss issues and opportunities around strengthening the local food system.



Day 1 evening workshop held at the Purple Iris in Dresden. Approximately 80 people attended the event. *Image Credit: NTEC*

Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on March 21st with key stakeholders at the Northwest Tennessee Entrepreneur Center to kick-off the project with the local leadership committee, consultants, and federal agency representatives. Following the luncheon, the Steering Committee led everyone on a tour of the Martin and Dresden communities including Festival Park, the Martin Farmers Market, UTM Campus, the Brian Brown Greenway, Weakley County Recreation facilities, the McWherter Civic Center, the Greenrail Trail, Dresden Farmers Market, and Downtown Dresden (Court Square). The tour provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities present in Weakley County, and allowed for informal discussions about the local food system and place-making efforts.

Vision and Values

The first night of the on-site technical assistance included a workshop attended by over 80 Weakley County residents and several regional partners representing state and federal agencies. Members of the local LFLP Steering Committee welcomed attendees to the first “Using Local Food to Build Community” event and presented the recently completed Weakley County Local Food Guide. The consultant team 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 Weakley County...” which prompted participants to think about the opportunities present in the area. Those ideas are summarized in Figure 2.

After a locally-sourced and catered dinner, each table 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 economic revitalization, improved health, entrepreneurship opportunities afforded by local foods, community pride, increased coordination among partner organizations, and connected trail and greenways between communities.

On day two of the technical assistance effort, the consultant team facilitated a day long workshop with a smaller group of local stakeholders. This workshop began with a recap of the vision, values and goals discussed the previous evening and then transitioned into case study presentations covering farmers’ market best practices, food system and trail assessments, entrepreneurship, farm incubator programs, and other food system-related technical information (see Appendix F for case study slides). The resultant 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).

THIS I BELIEVE...

Growth Opportunities

There is ample opportunity for new farmers (young and recent retirees) to start profitable farm businesses. Local farmers markets are a big asset, and are growing.

Community Consensus

Weakley County residents agree on a positive community vision and are interested in local foods as a way to make the region a better place to live. A stronger local food system will create a healthier community—economically, socially, and physically, and environmentally.

Need to Spread the Word

While the farmers market and growers are a strength, more advertising and publicity is needed to get the word out to all Weakley County residents about the benefits of supporting and eating locally grown food.

Community Equity is Important

Strengthening the local food system provides a vehicle for social and economic justice, through making healthy local food available to everyone. Teaching gardening and cooking skills is an important part of community equity.

Figure 2 – Highlights from THIS I BELIEVE Activity

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 specific actions selected by Local Food Network participants 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: Make the Dresden and Martin Farmers Markets destinations for farm businesses, local arts, healthy living, family and visitors

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. A destination farmers market will grant farmers and other vendors at the market with the potential to sell a greater variety and quantity of goods, and for local entertainers to showcase their talents. Additionally, this action to increase spillover sales for surrounding business owners, and to activate the town center (Martin), and greenway (Dresden) during market times. Education for market vendors will help with marketing, creating better displays, navigating certification programs required to sell to restaurants and stores, and other knowledge that will support an increase in their sales at farmers markets and other outlets.

- **Action 1.1:** Program more arts and entertainment as part of regular market; expand market offerings to include handmade high quality (juried) arts and onsite live music.
- **Action 1.2:** Develop a farmer's market vendor education program to help farmers improve their businesses.

GOAL 2: Empower and develop local people and organizational capacity to advance local foods, local place-based initiatives

Regularly held and well attended meetings of the Local Food Network Steering Committee—along with subcommittees to tackle discreet objectives and a bi-monthly newsletter to communicate efforts and celebrate successes—can provide a consistent venue for continuing discussions and conducting the networking and partnership-building necessary to advance local foods and local place-making goals. These methods offer stakeholders a chance to share successes and solicit advice and support for moving through difficulties, building on the momentum cultivated at the March Community Forum and encouraging ongoing engagement among the wide diversity of community stakeholders the Network has convened.

- **Action 2.1:** Establish regularly occurring meetings of the Local Food Network Steering Committee.
- **Action 2.2:** Establish Local Food Network subcommittees and subcommittee goals and tasks.
- **Action 2.3:** Provide bi-monthly communications (newsletter) to Local Food Network to report out on and celebrate progress and encourage additional participation in upcoming initiatives.

GOAL 3: Make downtown Dresden and Martin thriving places that support local business growth, local foods and better public health outcomes.

There is a need for more activity in downtown Martin and Dresden to draw people in and help build the perception that each location is the ‘place to be’. Additional activities can create more foot traffic to support local businesses, farmers markets, encourage use of the existing/proposed trails, and spur interest in filling vacant storefronts or underutilized properties for new businesses and activities, while making downtown areas more visually appealing can encourage people to visit and spend more time in the downtown areas. A program to connect Weakley County downtowns and main streets by a countywide network of bike paths and on-road bike lanes can help to promote active and healthy lifestyles and encourage recreational-based tourism. Local maps of the trail and greenway networks can highlight key destinations and activities (such as farmers markets) in each downtown as well as points of interest along trails in between, encouraging both residents and tourists alike to utilize trails and participate in community activities. Improved signage will promote the fact that there is a “there” in downtown Martin and Dresden: the range of activities and destinations within walking or biking distance, the diversity of shopping and restaurant opportunities, and spaces for special events and celebrations.

- **Action 3.1:** Develop a program of community events to regularly occur in each downtown (potentially alternating between communities) that highlight local foods, public health and local businesses.
- **Action 3.2:** Advance downtown beautification and cleanup efforts with an emphasis on improved greenspaces planted with native and/or edible plants.
- **Action 3.3:** Establish countywide greenways and trails program, including consistent mapping and signage.
- **Action 3.4:** Implement improved signage and wayfinding to get visitors to downtown Martin and Dresden and to assist visitors and locals navigating around downtown once they arrive.
- **Action 3.5:** Complete a downtown multimodal transportation and parking study for both Dresden and Martin.

GOAL 4: Grow farming businesses and local food entrepreneurs

A coordinated outreach and marketing plan to promote the environmental, economic, community, and health benefits of local foods will increase community awareness of value and opportunities of growing, buying, and selling locally, and have a collective impact of increasing the size of the market for local foods. Continuing education programs—especially those offered online or at convenient times for local residents—will help to encourage and prepare entrepreneurs for business. There currently exists a wide array of existing programs and educational opportunities offered by many different agencies; coordination and promotion of these existing opportunities will help get the word out, especially among students and younger residents. A shared use community kitchen or a commercial processing facility may help in growing local food entrepreneurs, and conducting a thorough survey and assessment/feasibility study will help to identify the specific facility that could be most useful.

- **Action 4.1:** Create and adopt a community outreach and marketing plan that promotes the benefits and opportunities of growing and buying locally-grown.
- **Action 4.2:** Conduct an inventory of existing programs, educational opportunities, and business development resources and create a comprehensive resource document for interested farmers

and entrepreneurs. Use research findings to further refine program offerings identified in Action 4.3.

- **Action 4.3:** Provide locally available (and web/mobile enabled) continuing education programs that serve new and established local food businesses.
- **Action 4.4:** Engage and encourage youth to participate in local farmers markets by providing shared and/or free booths at the market and vendor mentoring opportunities.
- **Action 4.5:** Explore the potential creation of a shared community kitchen or commercial processing space in Weakley County.

GOAL 5: Provide education and increase awareness of the benefits and opportunities of a strong local food, local place-making program

Despite a strong agricultural ethos in the region, there are many local community members that are unaware of the potential for growing and/or purchasing locally-grown healthy foods. Production, preparation, and consumption are all areas where increased awareness and education is needed to grow interest and participation in the local food economy by a broader base of community members. New partnerships among different organizations, businesses and institutions could be leveraged to enhance current community educational efforts. Specific attention to youth and retiree involvement can help to create the next generation of food entrepreneurs and support healthier lifestyles.

- **Action 5.1:** Develop specific classes targeted to the general public on fruit and vegetable gardening and preparing healthy meals from locally grown foods.
- **Action 5.2:** Establish marketing and outreach programs (combined with action 4.1) geared toward the general public that promote the benefits and opportunities for eating healthy locally grown foods and living more physically active lifestyles.
- **Action 5.3:** Establish new partnerships to promote local foods, healthy lifestyles and local economic development efforts in coordination with action 2.2.
- **Action 5.4:** Engage youth and retirees in local food entrepreneurship, healthy eating and living programs and buy local economic development (conduct in concert with actions 2.3, 4.1., 4.2, 4.4 and 5.1).

Implementation and Next Steps

Three post-workshop conference calls were held during April 2016, following the workshop. The calls were held with the LFLP Steering Committee to refine the action plan, add clarifying language and identify potential funding sources for specific actions or projects. Moving forward this document serves as the framework for ongoing activities by the Weakley County Local Food Network and other local partners.

Appendix

- Appendix A – Community Action Tables by Goal Area
- Appendix B – Local and Regional Maps
- Appendix C – Participants and Steering Committee
- Appendix D – Funding Resources
- Appendix E – Additional References
- Appendix F – Presentations
- Appendix G – Community Forum Comments
- Appendix H – Food System Diagramming
- Appendix I – Action Step Brainstorming by Goal Area