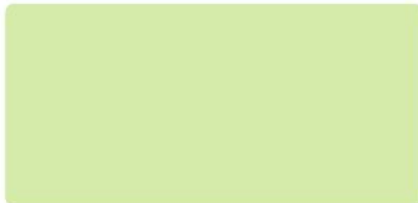
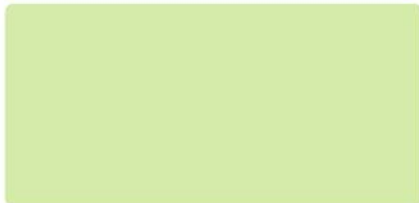
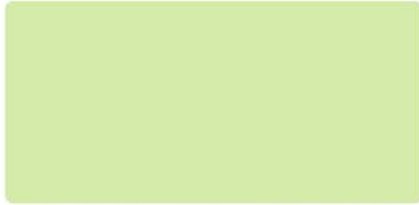
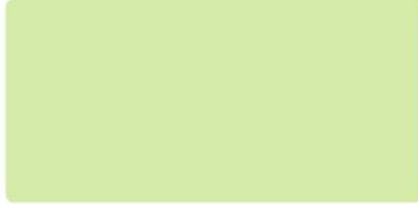




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening the
Local Foods System
and Downtown
Revitalization:

Actions and Strategies
for Middlesboro,
Kentucky

September 16, 2016



Community Story

Nestled one mile to the west of Cumberland Gap, Middlesboro is the largest city by population in Southeastern Kentucky, and one of two incorporated communities in Bell County. The other is Pineville, the county seat. Middlesboro is located in the Tri-State area of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, with the neighboring states only a 10-minute drive away. Historically, this region has served as an important gateway to the west. Native Americans and bison used the narrow pass to cross the Cumberland Mountain range long before Europeans, including Daniel Boone, explored the area in 1775. Native Americans who populated the area included Wyandotte, Shawnee, Mingo, Tuscarora, Delaware, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creek Indians.¹



Figure 1 - A mural showcasing downtown welcomes visitors to Downtown Middlesboro. Image Credit: Jen Walker

In addition to the adjacency of the Cumberland Gap, development in the Middlesboro area was also shaped by a meteorite that collided with this portion of Earth an estimated 300 million years ago.² While this level topography allowed for a planned city to be developed in the 1890s, it also changed the hydrology—unlike neighboring communities Middlesboro and surrounding areas are often faced with flooding and swampy soil conditions.³

Although tens of thousands of European settlers passed through the Cumberland Gap in the 18th and 19th centuries, not many stayed in the area. It wasn't until the 1890s when a Scottish entrepreneur, Alexander Arthur, and British investors acquired thousands of acres of flat land in what is now Middlesboro that the city began to take shape. Arthur and his colleagues created a town plan based on English traditions, established companies, and provided basic services. The town became known as the "Magic City" and was incorporated in 1890. However, the boom and bust of the iron ore trade, two early fires that destroyed the fledgling city, a lack of reliable transportation for industrial production, and foreign bank failure all conspired to prevent Arthur's vision from being realized. Yet what does remain from this period include wide streets and sidewalks and historic architecture that are largely able to be preserved. The Elks Home, built as a convalescent home in 1911 by the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, later became Middlesboro Hospital before falling into disrepair in the 1980s and is now owned by Discover Downtown Middlesboro, which has proposed significant renovation of the building to return it to community use and to help stabilize the downtown core.⁴

The Cumberland Gap tunnel was completed in 1996, and connects Middlesboro to the communities of Cumberland Gap and Harrogate, Tennessee, and Lincoln Memorial University, also in Tennessee. This

¹ Oehlerking, M., (2013) Historic Preservation Plan: City of Middlesborough, Kentucky. Approved by the Historic District Commission. Retrieved from: http://www.downtownmiddlesboro.org/planning/Middlesborough_Historic_Preservation_Plan_Feb_2014.pdf on June 2, 2016.

² Tabler, D., (2011). The Town Built Inside a Crater. Appalachian History.net. Retrieved from: <http://www.appalachianhistory.net/2011/11/town-built-inside-crater.html> on June 2, 2016

³ Oehlerking, M., (2013) Historic Preservation Plan, see 1 above.

⁴ Oehlerking, M., (2013) Historic Preservation Plan, see 1 above.

tunnel allows for greater connections between Tri-State communities and facilitates commerce and tourism.

The population of Middlesboro has remained at around 10,000 residents for several years; Bell County hosts an additional 18,000 residents.⁵ The rate of obesity is higher in Middlesboro (35.81%) than the Kentucky average (33.01%), reflective of overall poor health conditions in the community. Additionally, Middlesboro's rate of diabetes is 13.47% which is 2.84% higher than the state average of 10.63%. Compounding the health issues is the prevalence of persistent poverty: the unemployment rate in the county is 10% and the poverty rate is 33%.⁶ It is for these reasons that the area was named a Promise Zone and USDA Strikeforce Community. Specific to food access, the rate of food insecurity in Bell County is 22.6% (or 6,430 people) compared to the 16.4% Kentucky average.⁷

Major employers in the area include the Bell County and Middlesboro City School Districts; the Appalachian Regional Healthcare Hospital; local, state, and federal governments; Walmart; Middlesboro Coca-Cola Bottling Company; Duraline Plastics; and Cumberland Gap Provision Company. Local stakeholders hope to increase employment through growing tourism in the area, especially active and outdoor tourists, and by growing the local food economy. A burgeoning trail system in downtown Middlesboro, and plans to connect that to the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, could also serve to jump start the local economy.

Many organizations and agencies in Middlesboro are responding to the economic conditions and the poor health outcomes of many residents by increasing access to fresh, healthy food and making local food part of the community's economic and community development strategies. In 2015, Middlesboro requested assistance through the [Local Foods, Local Places](#) (LFLP) program to develop an

LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Isaac Kremer, Discover Downtown Middlesboro - downtown revitalization, trails

Ben Shaffar, Kentucky Department of Agriculture (Frankfort) - local foods

Emily Cornett, AmeriCorps VISTA, Discover Downtown Middlesboro - entrepreneurship, building renovation

Jeannie Redmond Allen, Selling to the World / The Palace - entrepreneurship, downtown revitalization

Donna Smith, President, Discover Downtown Middlesboro and Middlesboro Garden Club - community gardens, downtown revitalization

Ann Madon, artist, entrepreneur and resident

Michael Slusher, CEO, Appalachian Regional Health Care - Middlesboro

Richard Smith, Manager, Food City

Joshua Trospen, Assistant Principal, Yellow Creek Elementary School

Figure 2 – LFLP Steering Committee in Middlesboro

⁵ <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/21013,2151924>

⁶ Obesity and diabetes data sourced from Healthy Food Access Portal Mapping Tool, <http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/get-started/research-your-community>

⁷ Food insecurity is a state of being without reliable access to sufficient quantities of affordable, nutritious food. Data sources and information: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2013/overall>

action plan for promoting local food systems and healthy, walkable, economically vibrant communities. The goals of the LFLP program are to create:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses.
- Better access to healthy, local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- Revitalized downtowns, main streets, and neighborhoods.

The LFLP program is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the 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). Middlesboro was one of 27 communities across the United States selected to participate in the program in 2016.



Figure 3 - The community tour, organized by Isaac Kremer, Director of Discover Downtown Middlesboro, included recent downtown improvements such as this pop-up park. Image Credit: Jen Walker

An LFLP Steering Committee was formed in Middlesboro in preparation for this technical assistance award, and is comprised of a wide variety of community partners (see Figure 2). The Committee intends to formalize their group through regular meetings, community events, and partnership on projects to implement the goals and actions outlined in this report. However, prior to the LFLP process, these engaged stakeholders had already achieved numerous successes. With leadership from Discover Downtown Middlesboro (DDM), in 2013 a five-year strategic plan for downtown Middlesboro was created, and the community held a Better Block event that created engaged community spaces downtown, including a pop-up shop and parklets. In 2014, Discover Downtown Middlesboro formed a partnership with the National Park Service, and the University of Kentucky Department of Landscape Architecture served to design a city-wide trail system. A 2015 grant from the Levitt Foundation helped DDM construct a centrally located outdoor music venue where 10 summer concerts were held, with another round happening in 2016. DDM was one of only 15 communities in the country to receive this Levitt Foundation support, and the only community to win the grant for two consecutive years.

In their request for LFLP technical assistance, Discover Downtown Middlesboro and the LFLP Steering Committee named better coordination among local and regional efforts, with specific attention to low-cost, citizen-led efforts—especially nutrition education and the need to support the local economy—as primary goals. Additionally, the Steering Committee wished 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 document the engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps for achieving the community's goals.

The LFLP Steering Committee (Figure 2) helped plan the workshop and will guide the community's initial steps to implement the resulting action plan. 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 four shown later in this report and in Appendix A, and reflect the holistic, collaborative approach to community development already underway in Middlesboro, Kentucky.

Engagement

The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP has three phases, illustrated in Figure 4 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 community workshop was held on March 7th and 8th, 2016, and included a small lunch gathering with the Steering Committee members and regional, state, and federal partners; a tour of the community; and an evening community meeting at The Palace—a downtown incubator space for local artists and businesses—in Downtown Middlesboro (Day 1); and an action-planning session, also at The Palace (Day 2). The community meeting and all-day working session were well attended by key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders. The workshop sign-in sheets are provided in Appendix D.

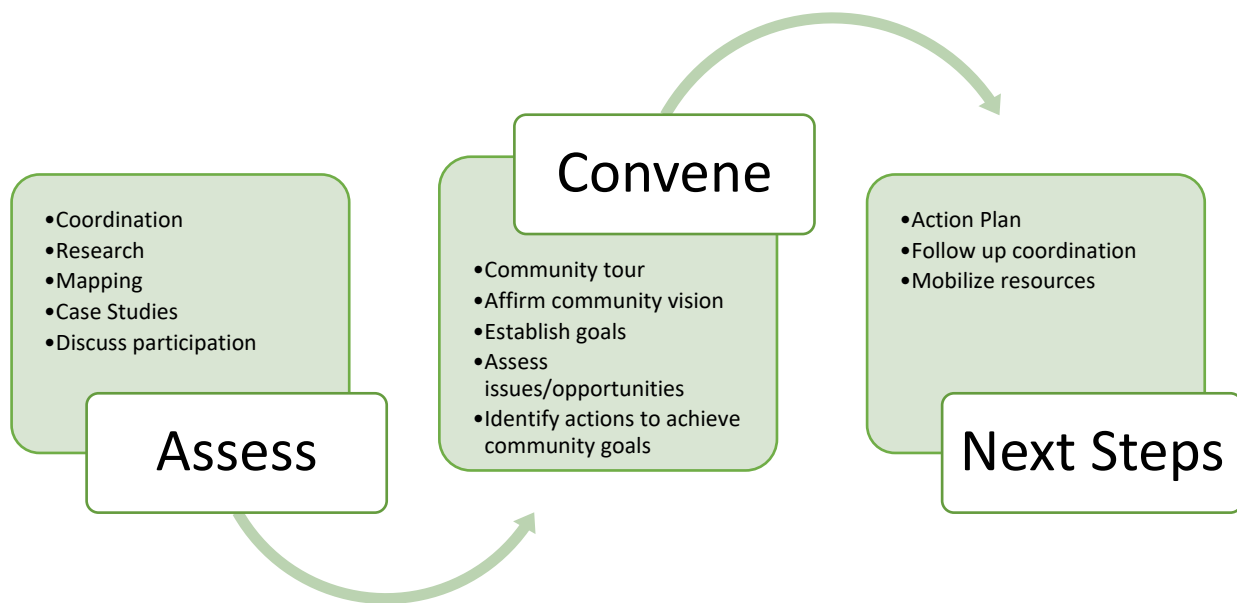


Figure 4 - Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on March 7th with key stakeholders at The Palace to introduce the project and the local leadership committee, consultants, and federal agency representatives. Following the luncheon, the Steering Committee led a tour of key places and projects in the Middlesboro area including the Levitt AMP Middlesboro Pop-up Park, the Elks Home, downtown pop-up parks recently created by DDM, Food City (the regional grocer), a new commercial building, the Appalachian Regional Healthcare hospital facility, and the Yellow Creek Elementary School. The tour provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities, and allowed for informal discussions about the local food system and placemaking efforts. A number of the locations visited are shown in pictures here and in Appendix H.

Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Workshop

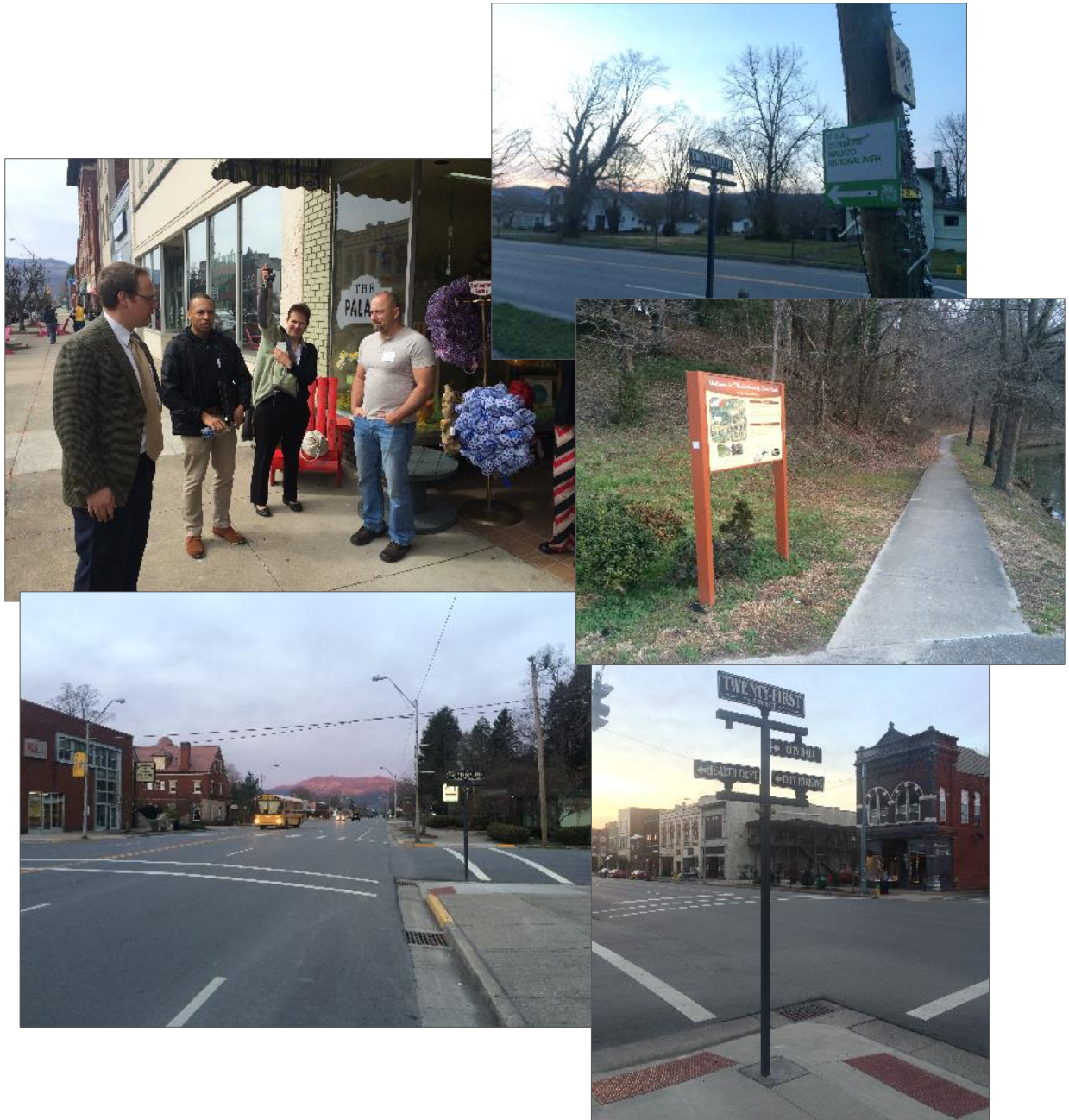


Figure 5 - Image collage from tour. Clockwise from top left: Workshop participants prepare to start the community tour after a luncheon at The Palace. Wayfinding signs encourage walking in downtown Middlesboro; trailhead for the Middlesboro Canal Walk describes the history and amenities along the two-mile trail; permanent wayfinding signs in the downtown core lend a sense of place and history; the natural beauty of "Crater City" shines in the morning light. Photo credits: Jennifer Walker, Poiesis.

Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Workshop



Figure 6 - Photo collage from tour: Clockwise from top left: A pop-up park adjacent to The Palace was an early project of Discover Downtown Middlesboro (DDM); Levitt Park, across the street from The Palace and another project of DDM serves as an important community gathering and celebration space; the rich history of Middlesboro is displayed in a Cumberland Avenue storefront; Richard Smith, general manager of Food City, discusses the opportunities and challenges of increasing local food sales and placemaking to Isaac Kramer (DDM Director), and state and federal partners on the community tour; panoramic view of downtown Middlesboro; Michael Slusher, CEO of the ARH Middlesboro Hospital, talks to workshop participants about their community-wide health initiatives; local residents and federal partners gather to being the community tour. Center: the mosaic detail on the foyer floor of the Elks Home building.

Vision and Values

The first night of the workshop was attended by over 35 Middlesboro residents and several regional partners representing state and federal agencies. Isaac Kremer, Executive Director of Discover Downtown Middlesboro and organizer of the LFLP Steering Committee, welcomed attendees to the event and spoke about the community's ongoing efforts. He outlined the goals of the workshop process as well as the larger, longer-term goals of the Steering Committee. The consultant team introduced the topics and program overview with a short presentation. Community members and other attendees were asked to write on post-it notes three challenges and three opportunities for building the local food system and bringing new life to downtown Middlesboro. Those ideas are summarized in Figure 7 and presented in Appendix B.

The themes shared during the opportunities and challenges session revealed 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 trails within Middlesboro and connecting to the National Historical Park. It was against this positive, forward-thinking backdrop of values and visions for the future that the remainder of the workshop was built upon. The first day concluded with a review of the workshop goals and discussion about the direction for action planning to follow the next day. These goals were further refined, evolving into the action plan implementation tables that are summarized below (full version in Appendix A). In addition, creating the action plan, the second day of the workshop included presentations of case studies by the consultant team covering farmers market best practices, food system and trail assessment, entrepreneurship, farm incubator programs, and other food system-related technical information (presentations available in Appendix G).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges:

- Lack of jobs and economic base
- Relatively high levels of poverty and persistent poverty
- General resistance to change and pessimism
- Lack of local agricultural economy

Opportunities:

- Potential for more local agricultural production and a market to support it
- A more diverse and authentic local economy and food system that captures more of the visitation and tourism in the region
- Enhanced downtown with history preserved and more new businesses
- Regional competitiveness and cost of living
- Organizations working in a more coordinated manner

Figure 7 - Workshop Participants' summarized thoughts on the challenges and opportunities present in the local food system and downtown revitalization efforts.

Action Plan

The culminating product of the workshop was a strategic action plan to guide implementation. The plan is organized around four goals and includes actions the participants brainstormed at the meeting and during follow up calls. 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 are contained in their full detail in Appendix A.

GOAL 1: Further develop and complete citywide trail system as an asset for healthy living and tourism.

A well designed and implemented trail system that connects downtown Middlesboro and the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park will serve to attract adventure tourism to town, generating visitors and revenue to restaurants, lodging, campgrounds, museums, entertainment, shops, and other services. Pursuing funding to complete the trail system is a high priority, as is implementing wayfinding signs so that the trail is more visible to visitors and residents alike. Slowing vehicular traffic through Middlesboro will also serve to create a more walkable downtown—widening the 15th Street bridge (to accommodate the trail), slowing vehicular traffic on Cumberland Avenue, and developing more public parking options all work toward this goal.

- **Action 1.1:** Complete Trail Town designation process.
- **Action 1.2:** Pursue 2016 and 2017 TIGER Grant (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery).
- **Action 1.3:** Develop wayfinding signs so that the trail is more visible to visitors and residents.
- **Action 1.4:** Widen the 15th Street bridge to accommodate the trail.
- **Action 1.5:** Slow vehicular traffic and re-design Cumberland Avenue to be more pedestrian friendly.
- **Action 1.6:** Develop public parking options in downtown Middlesboro.

GOAL 2: Repurpose Elks Home building as a catalytic project.

The Elks Home building holds a central place both in the physical landscape of downtown Middlesboro as well as in the history of the community, and presents an opportunity to contribute to the growth of the local food system and support other local artisans. Currently, the building is unstable, with the possibility of collapse, and contains contaminants such as lead, mold, and asbestos. DDM has developed ideas for the repurposing of the Elks home, and this goal serves to foster concrete funding, investors, and plans to carry those ideas through to completion.

- **Action 2.1:** Secure funding to stabilize the shell of the Elks Home building.
- **Action 2.2:** Invite potential investors and developers to view the building and to consider opportunities for partnering with Discover Downtown Middlesboro in its renovation.
- **Action 2.3:** Solicit assistance from University of Kentucky architecture students to create conceptual plans for potential uses of the building.

GOAL 3: Foster local entrepreneurship, economic development, and the tourism economy.

A central theme that emerged from the workshop was the need to coordinate and foster opportunities for community members to participate in economic development through entrepreneurship, especially

in the downtown corridor. The actions in this goal serve to coordinate and facilitate these efforts and to promote tourism, active use of downtown Middlesboro, and more participation in gardening and farming of local food.

- **Action 3.1:** Help entrepreneurs access capital by creating resource documentation about existing opportunities for financing a new or existing business.
- **Action 3.2:** Design digital walking tour maps to help tourists know what there is to do and see in Middlesboro.
- **Action 3.3:** Establish a committee to explore options for farmers to market their goods.
- **Action 3.4:** Develop signage to direct people into downtown (from State Highway 74 as well as US Highway 25).
- **Action 3.5:** Develop a marketing plan for Downtown Middlesboro and nearby businesses and attractions.
- **Action 3.6:** Stimulate building renovation downtown via rent-lowering arrangements for business owners that rehabilitate buildings.
- **Action 3.7:** Identify current activities for children in Downtown Middlesboro, and identify opportunities for creating more family-centered events.

GOAL 4: Partner with healthcare and educational institutions as economic assets and as providers of health and food education and services.

Although workshop participants reported that there are many opportunities for health and wellness education, they are highly underutilized. Greater coordination of these classes among the agencies and organizations that offer them will go a long way to increasing participation. Additionally, building upon existing infrastructure at local schools to offer more farm-to-school activities will also help engender a healthier future population. Assessment is another primary focus of accomplishing this goal: Appalachian Regional Healthcare conducts a periodic Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) which will be complete by early summer. LFLP Steering Committee members can help to implement recommendations. Relatedly, conducting a Community Food System Assessment for Bell County will help to identify specific challenges and opportunities present in the food system. The common theme of actions in this goal area is partnership, and better partnership will come from expanding the Steering Committee group to include more partners, and by holding regular cross-agency organizing meetings.

- **Action 4.1:** Continue to offer diabetic and women's health education services, and cross-promote what is available.
- **Action 4.2:** Explore using existing greenhouses and school gardens at local schools to grow fresh fruits and vegetables and to teach gardening to children.
- **Action 4.3:** Assist Appalachian Regional Healthcare in implementing the Community Health Needs Assessment recommendations once needs are identified.
- **Action 4.4:** Expand the healthy and local foods efforts to include other partners in the community and region by holding regular cross-agency organizing meetings.
- **Action 4.5:** Conduct a Community Food System Assessment for Bell County.

Implementation and Next Steps

Three post-workshop conference calls were held during March, April, and May 2016, following the workshop. The calls were held with the LFLP Steering Committee and a few additional stakeholders

Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Workshop

whose interest was cultivated during the workshop. They worked to refine the action plan and add clarifying language.

Additionally, in the time between the workshop and finalizing this report, Middlesboro has been busy with numerous projects and initiatives, including:

- In June 2016, DDM attended the SOAR summit in Pikeville and was pleased to have the co-chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission share the community's local foods work before more than 1,000 participants that were present. The following day he and 20 other state and federal officials from the ARC, USDA, CDC, NCSC, EPA, and White House Rural Council visited Middlesboro to see the community's work firsthand. This included a presentation at The Palace and then a tour of the downtown area visiting many businesses, potential development sites, and culminating in planting some vegetables to start our demonstration garden on the Levitt lot.
- The Summer Feeding Program was expanded to include numerous public housing sites, with food provided by the Middlesboro Independent School District. All that was required was making a connection between the Public Housing Authority and schools to arrange for transportation of food with public housing vehicles between the sites. This happened when officials from HUD and USDA were present during the Local Foods, Local Places workshop and thanks to two separate meetings they held while in town.
- Unfortunately, Middlesboro did not receive an EPA Brownfield Cleanup grant, and the community is still investigating funding to clean up the environmental contamination from the building.
- The Kentucky Department of Agriculture has become a strong partner through their Kentucky Proud program. The community plans to use Kentucky-sourced chicken wings from Critchfield Farms for their popular Wing Fling event in August. Recently a pop-up restaurant called The New South opened on the site of the Levitt AMP Middlesboro Music Series featuring Kentucky Proud items. The community expects this is the start of a robust collaboration, making Middlesboro a model for embracing local food as a centerpiece of revitalization which other communities may follow.

Appalachian Regional Commission Implementation Assistance

The ARC is making available to each of the LFLP communities in its service area some implementation funding assistance of up to \$20,000 per community. The funding is to be targeted towards specific actions identified in the workshop and post-workshop action planning effort. Action Items 3.6 and 4.2, were identified as priority areas by the community for this targeted funding assistance. Two projects are described briefly below.

Project A - Develop a marketing plan for Downtown Middlesboro and nearby businesses and attractions (Action 3.6)

Funding will support the development of a marketing plan for Downtown Middlesboro and nearby businesses and attractions. Coordinated and cohesive branding of City of Middlesboro will help to draw tourists and visitors to the community. A marketing plan includes logos, mottos, and a central message that the community has adopted as the way that they would like to present the City of Middlesboro to potential visitors, tourists, and new entrepreneurs. The marketing plan will support other action areas identified in this plan. These steps include identifying community and regional assets that the

community would like to promote; identifying key people and organizations that market Middlesboro—businesses that cater to visitors, restaurants, tourism agencies and museums, recreational facilities, and others; developing a concise set of talking points and logos; and creating a media and implementation strategy to utilize the marketing materials. Additionally, a marketing plan could include cost estimates and funding sources for implementing the marketing plan. This plan will help create consistency across agencies and across time and is expected to cost \$10,000.

Project B - Explore using existing greenhouses and school gardens at local schools to grow fresh fruits and vegetables and to teach gardening to children (Action 4.2)

Funds will be targeted towards growing fresh fruits and vegetables and to teach gardening to children. Many schools are utilizing farm-to-school programs to teach kids where food comes from, and to expose kids to new foods in order to improve their nutrition. This action is important for the near-term improvement of child health and nutrition, and for the long-term cultivation of Middlesboro residents who are interested in pursuing the production of food as a vocation. The location selected for the demonstration project is the Levitt AMP Middlesboro Park downtown. This will help to create a critical mass of activities there throughout the summer months including the garden, concerts, and other placemaking activities and events such as outdoor movies.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Tables
- Appendix B – Network Map and Workshop Feedback
- Appendix C – Community Data Profile
- Appendix D – Workshop Participants
- Appendix E – Funding Resources
- Appendix F – References
- Appendix G – Workshop Photo Album