

Stakeholder Interviews Report for the Local Food Steering Committee

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Roanoke Valley-Alleghany

REGIONAL commission

I. Introduction to and contents of the Local Food Report

In May and June of 2019, intern Colie Touzel of the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission scheduled and conducted twenty phone interviews with stakeholders across the region to discover information on local food programs, initiatives, and access. These stakeholders were recommended by the Local Food Plan Steering Committee and consisted of local restaurant owners or chefs, farmers, nonprofits, and other prominent figures or organizations in the region. These interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to over an hour with ten questions asked in total. The interviews were transcribed simultaneously and then edited for minor corrections afterwards. The interview questions were as follows:

1. *What is your organization's mission?*
2. *How does your organization impact the local food system?*
3. *What programs or activities are you currently pursuing regarding food access, food security, farmer support, or other aspects of local food? What is/are the goals of the program(s)?*
4. *Does your business or organization work with farmers or consumers directly? What are their main concerns?*
5. *From a local and regional government perspective, what would most help you achieve those goals?*
6. *When surveyed, farmers suggested that educating consumers would be the most helpful way to increase their profit. Do you have any suggestions of how to collaborate with farmers and reach consumers in a positive and educational way?*
7. *When surveyed, 100% of consumers said they want to purchase more local food, but when asked why they do not, some mentioned the lack of access in stores and the high prices. What can we do to help combat these issues together?*
8. *How can we get more people involved in local food networks and initiatives?*
9. *What is your vision of a healthy food system in the Roanoke region?*
10. *Do you have any other comments you would like to share?*

The rest of this report will detail excerpts from the interviews as well as contextual information about the interviewees' organizations and the wider community. No interviewee nor organization is listed nor quoted in any particular order. The report will be organized as follows:

Section II: Agencies

Agencies interviewed include:

- Virginia Cooperative Extension in Roanoke, Botetourt, and Franklin Counties
- Local Environmental Agricultural Project (LEAP)
- Freedom First
- Carilion Clinic and Morningside Urban Farm
- Chesapeake Bay Food Systems Network

Section III: Farmers and the Roanoke Community Garden Association

Farmers and organizations interviewed include:

- Roanoke Community Garden Association
- Lick Run Farm
- Ikenberry Orchard
- Four Oaks Farms
- Apple Ridge Farms
- Homestead Creamery
- Garrett Farms

Section IV: Restaurants

Restaurants interviewed include:

- Garden Song Eco Café
- Fortunato
- Local Roots

Section V: Informing the public

- What does 'local' mean
- Finding information

Section VI: Future Vision

- The need for a Local Food Coordinator
- Stakeholders' ideas for the Roanoke region

II. Agencies

VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Virginia has two land-grant universities, Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, which are dedicated to providing practical and challenging education no matter where a student comes from. These universities also work with agents from Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE).

- We work as liaisons between the researchers from the universities and the farmers and citizens of Virginia.”

VCE agents specialize in a particular area of agriculture or animal husbandry and are experts in their field. An agent resides in every county of Virginia and attends in-service trainings at the universities to bring back information for their counties’ farmers and producers.

- “The mission of a VCE agents are to be on-call, so to speak, for farmers—and citizens with agriculture related inquiries—and to share research and new practices from the universities.”
- “Hopefully the training and learning go both ways because the farmers will stumble upon problems before researchers will, and then the experiences can be reported back through us.”

VCE offices act as learning centers for their counties. They provide gardening information for people who want to contribute to a community garden.

- “We introduce people who call in who are in need of food or wanting to get in touch with a food bank to Heavenly Manna and Stepping Stone as well as some churches. United Way has some community gardens and the Master Gardeners partner with Lake Christian Ministry who help spread the food to the community...Franklin County’s Master Gardener Club put together a 10-page local food guide that includes a directory of farm stands, U-pick, and where and who sells products in Franklin County.”
- “Foot Hill’s produce auction in Boone’s Mill runs on Tuesdays and Fridays at 9am. People can purchase local products in bulk. These products are seasonal from local farmers in the county.”
- “We have a program on WSSR called ‘Living Local’ that helps people understand more about what the Extension does. There’s a different agent on every time.”
- “Presbyterian community center: People are sharing the produce Community Garden Association charges \$30 per plot, they donated two plots to our program and then those people go back to the PCC and do an exercise

program: varies by week—3 to 7-8. PCC has a program called ‘Getting Ahead’ that helps people get out of poverty.”

They provide several programs including 4-H development summer programs and camps for youth as well as after school programs and the Boys and Girls Club.

- “We have to start with kids and engage younger generations with fresh food...teach them how to grow and cook and involve them in the process of cooking. The boys and girls club held a harvest dinner at the end of the season with all the vegetables we’d grown in the garden and a parent came up to me after the dinner and told me, ‘My child has been talking about this for the past 10 weeks, but I didn’t realize until now how important it was.’”

VCE stakeholders and other stakeholders in the restaurant and farming business mentioned that they would love to provide more classes with food preparation.

- “I remember about seven years ago participating in a program with Roanoke Cooperative Extension and we met once a week with ten single mothers based on income. We taught them how to make healthy meals with local produce that tasted good and were affordable and could feed 2-3 children for two days for \$12, that way they only had to cook every other day. We cooked a vegetable lasagna with swiss chard because that’s what we were able to get. It was a great program.”
- “I used to teach an educational program in the past and need to do it again soon. It’s much cheaper if you buy a half of a steer or a whole hog and put it in your freezer instead of a pork chop or a pound of ground beef. You’re going to need to know how to pre-plan: you’re going to spend \$3,000 at one time and you have to buy a chest freezer and know how to cook with frozen meat.”

VCE provides hands-on learning experience and provides demos county-wide, so these experiences keep VCE a prominent part of the community.

- “One thing that makes us different is the internet can’t provide hands-on learning experience. We do demos on a county-wide basis. We bring the research and technology and new science from Virginia Tech back and into the farmer’s hands, so when the farmers have an issue, they come to us.”
- “The farmers market in Botetourt is really doing well this year. I’ve been helping farmers put together business models and try to cut expenses. If the farms make money, then they’re buying more and so they’re helping the economy. When farmland and farmers no longer make money, that’s when farmlands get sold and developments get built and they fall apart...In previous years I saw farmers spend their whole Saturday at the market not making any money, and it’s tough to tell them to keep doing this. But finally,

it's starting to change...If the farmers can sustain themselves on the backs of the southern, more affluent consumers, then maybe the market can eventually start offering SNAP benefits and the rural folks in the north can start coming to the market, too."

VCE agents are more than just agricultural specialists, they are there for their communities. The Commissioner of Agriculture at Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service (VDACS) has a farm task force to better help the farm community. The task force is made up of people from different agencies.

- "I've had to take mental health first aid classes because farmer suicide has increase more than ever before. This is very disheartening because the farmers I work with are like family. We're their ear. They vent to us and we're here for them in more ways than one."

LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGRICULTURAL PROJECT (LEAP)

LEAP is a non-profit that connects local farmers, producers, culinary entrepreneurs and community members together. They have a Farm Share, Mobile Market, and operate two Farmers Markets. They also created a commercial kitchen in Roanoke's West End. They work with Virginia Fresh Match, a SNAP match food incentive program which has funded \$1.8 million in match state-wide over three years.

- "The markets who are involved in VA Fresh Match have the same labeling, training, marketing, and incentive funding, and work together to be more effective with our time...Now we need more longer and permanent funding and not just ebb and flow based on what might be available. Roanoke Co-Op is the second pilot site for VA Fresh Market which started 2 weeks ago. With this, people with SNAP can get 50% off their produce."
- "Locally, we're hoping to build out the Food Hub wholesale. We will have to do a farmer training—this is a multi-year goal."
- "We're working with Apple Ridge Farms on more production and farmer incubator sites, but that is two years out. This is a clear need, but it's not a direction we've gone in before. If we want to increase the local food system, we need to integrate the farmers locally."
- "Outreach and education is how we'll get more people involved. We're putting on a film series and it's the first we've ever done. It's hard to pay for programs that benefit everyone and if it's just one organization doing it, it's hard to benefit everyone. At some point, we said we have to just go ahead and do this to get the conversation started. We work a lot with the VCE and they do a great job with cooking classes and other educational programs. We don't duplicate the work they do, but those programs aren't attended as well as they should be. People are busy. We all have ownership, and no one has control."

FREEDOM FIRST CREDIT UNION (Freedom First)

Freedom First Credit Union is a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) that provides financial services to all individuals promoting inclusiveness and supports diversity in a way that does not often fit the traditional model.

- “When we picked that location, we created a farmer’s market off to the side and a space for a food kitchen inside. As a CDFI, we can access funding for a food initiative. I have a strong belief that financial fitness is tied to food. When we are stressed it can lead to drinking, drug use, over eating, so we’re starting to do a lot of work in our neighborhoods around food.”

Freedom First provides employee incentives to eat locally.

- “To support LEAP with food shares you have to pay up front, but if I have an employee who wants to sign up for the food share program, I’ll front the money and the employee can deduct it from their paycheck over time, plus they get a \$50 bonus for signing up. One person from the office goes every week and picks it up, so we don’t all have to go. It’s similar to Carilion’s model for their employees.”

Freedom First provides financial support for immigrants, students, and adults.

- “If farming is all an immigrant knows, we provide services that can help with technical assistance through education like starting up a business or a business plan and then we structure a financial loan. If we could improve the distribution process and bring food into areas where people need it the most and eliminate the barriers, we would.
- “We provide financial education to students and teach classes about the importance of savings and budgeting and how making the right food choices can affect your pocket. We give money to students to buy fresh produce at the markets, but also we teach them to plan ahead and budget and how to plan their next meal. Impulse behaviors aren’t the best in the long term. We’ll be teaching adult classes soon, too at the Financial Empowerment Center for Roanoke citizens. We’ll teach budgeting, savings plan, how to save for a home, save for transportation, how to watch out for predatory lending pitfalls, and more.”

Freedom First’s concerns for the community.

- “There needs to be more education on how SNAP benefits work so more people have access to it. Food preparation process is a struggle. I’m glad VCE helps in planning meals and making it. But how do we get it from the farmers to the people who need it most? Transportation is a barrier, and food access in our lower income neighborhoods.”

- “If LEAP had the support from local government, that’d be the best source of the government’s energy.”

CARILION AND MORINGSIDE URBAN FARM

Morningside Urban Farm is a project of Roanoke Community Garden Association in collaboration with Carilion Clinic. In addition to community gardening, they provide regular classes including food demonstrations, yoga, and courses focusing on holistic healing. The farmer, Cam, also owns and operates his own farm, Garden Variety Harvests. One main goal of Morningside Farm is to implement health strategies and provide the community with the ability to grow their own produce. Not only do they want to provide a communal space for people to participate in classes to expand their horizons, but also they want to promote healthy living and career opportunities and networking for the wider community.

- “When people attend classes there is fresh produce available for them to take. Morningside is more about building education and community; it’s about bringing people together around food. If there is still leftover food, and we happen to have extra, we give it away to a food bank.”
- “There’s a lot of support from other people wanting to provide classes. The younger generation part is very exciting. People are shocked to find out that Cam wants to farm for a career. He hopes they’re sparking interest in younger children.”

However, they realize that there is still a long way to go and one urban farm, and not even multiple urban farms like Morningside, can make the necessary changes to fix the depth of the problem. It is necessary for younger people start farming, for more people to understand how important fresh, local food is for their health and environment, and that funding become more accessible to organizations and people.

- “The candle is burning from both ends—we’re not going to feed the southeast with ten farms this size, but we’ve proven that this works by taking a small piece of the city with a little grant funding and turning it into a small urban farm. However, we’re not going to solve this problem with small urban farms. Not enough young people want to be a part of this. It’s laughable that there are parts of northwest that the closest grocery store is three miles away. Maybe the government can work with [grocery] stores to make it a profitable venture and give [grocery stores] free rent for five years.”
- “SNAP matching is not an infinite pool of resources.”

Carilion Clinic and Morningside Farm are interested in the intersections of consuming healthy food with a medical perspective in mind with the consideration of the aging community and their needs for additional medicines might be alleviated with more access to healthy eating and better exercise.. There are some communities and doctors who prescribe healthy food to provide more accessibility, which is

suggested below.

- “Access to healthy food also addresses other costs that could disappear. Food helps assess the health of a community so that all levels of health are being addressed. Some people could get a “Fresh food RX” prescription where they could go to the doctor’s office and get access to healthy food that way.”

Partnering with an expert from the wider community gives folks a chance to learn new skills and also learn about the expert and how important it is to support other regional food experts. A local food group has partnered with Morningside where they will be the host for a series of events called the “Loving Local Food” series.

- “They’ll have Matt Lints from Local Roots put on food demos and we’ll give away food. The first event will be the Summer Solstice festival and there will be fruit, cherries raspberries, summer squash. The 2nd event will be August 1 focused on corn and late summer veggies. These are supposed to be less intimidating for people and give them a chance to ask questions of experts and have them start thinking about what’s in season and what does eating in season mean and how to cook with more variety! When one of the best chefs in Roanoke shows you six different things you can do with cherries, this helps that creativity!”

CHESAPEAKE BAY FOOD SYSTEMS NETWORK (CFN)

CFN is managed by Local Concepts, a network management team who connects with food systems work and then broadcasts that information. Local Concepts hosts webinars about food systems to their 5,000 registrants and change makers. CFN is a national agency which helps showcase important food systems work in Southwest Virginia. This ability to broadcast to others provides food systems lessons to a wider audience and further network building not only statewide, but also nationwide. One of CFN’s major goals is to make sure everyone has a voice and is being represented.

- “CFN focuses around the facts. We can’t do this work unless we’re led by the people who have been most marginalized in the process. We are building more democratic processes and elevating the voices of people of color and others who haven’t spoken up. So, we must broadcast and connect, but we also center our work around equity internally on our steering team.”
- “Our newest working group is called ‘Community Ownership and Prosperity Action Team.’ The group was chosen through an open application process and they are funded to work together for a year and a half. Their goal is to dismantle racism through the food systems and write guidelines and strategies to help prosperity. Their guideline should be written by the midyear 2020.”

III. Farmers and the Roanoke Community Garden Association

Several farmers were interviewed from all across the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Region. Some are in transition, some are small, urban farms, and some are large, wholesale farms. Some only grow one type of crop, and some grow a variety of different crops.

The Roanoke Community Garden Association was also interviewed and is included in this section. It is also in transition because it is trying to grow its locations and it has new leadership, but it also wants to make sure it is moving at a steady pace and doing the right thing for the communities it develops in.

One stakeholder noted the importance of humanizing farmers. The connection to where food comes from has been so disconnected that it is difficult to make that reconnection. Therefore, it is necessary to show where the farmers come from as well as where the food comes from.

- “Consumers need to be taught that these farmers are humans who have families and they aren’t evil and aren’t trying to do horrible things. They’re not being paid off by corporations...it is necessary to humanize industrial farmers, scientists, and researchers in order to make consumers feel more connected and positive to where their food comes from.”
- “Go to the Farmer’s market and meet the people who produce the food, how they produce it, and ask why they produce it—a farmer doesn’t do what they do for no reason, especially when it’s so hard to make a living as a farmer.”

Communication is especially important in a farmer’s job. The reasoning behind why farmers are in their line of work was brought up time and again in the interviews: it is not because of the money, because there is none. The reason behind farming for many of the interviewees has to do with developing relationships; communicating with their community is a key goal for farmers.

- “We talk with our customers every single day. We talk to them face to face and answer them honestly. If we don’t know something, we find it out and get back to them. Interaction, face to face. Most people that grow on the scale that we grow pack and ship, but we’re different. We used to do that, but we stopped. It’s not easy, but it works for us. I wouldn’t recommend it. There’s nothing about an apple or farming that has any profit in it. We’re the last generation who will do this.”
- “We’ve created HCAT: Healthy Community Action Team with several partners to develop a sustainable food system with a readiness survey and assessment and see if the community is ready on an interest level and see where their knowledge of particular issues is. Then we can see where their interest in the solutions is—like do we need a grocery store, cooking classes, etc. Does the community know that this is even happening; do they even know that this

needs to happen? If so, we can proceed to the surveying. But if they don't know there's an issue, there needs to be education.”

In organizations like the Roanoke Community Gardens Association, where there are member dues, they still provide the ability to waive those fees. It is more important to the organization for the community to have access to gardening and community networking than making money off of every garden plot.

- “We build communities through gardening...if the gardening succeeds: great, but the community part is the most important part.”
- “We provide fee waivers or reduced fees. We have a few gardeners who take advantage of that and that's awesome because that means those people are invested already. Community gardening is a very hands-on level of local food access. Not all of our gardens have to be structured. Not only one person can be the sole beneficiary...everyone grows and shares, or everyone grows and shares it with a community that needs it.”

When communicating with their customers, farmers have to make sure they know what their customers are looking for. In this way, farmers can better prepare for their future years and how to better serve their community.

- “Customers are interested in how the animals are treated as well as what the animals eat. Then the process that happens once the milk is out of the cow, like with minimal pasteurization and added ingredients. We do a lot of promotion and talking with consumers through call, email, Facebook, demo and free product, and asking in person. We have conversations with our customers.”
- “They're worried about climate change and how that's going to affect agriculture: flooding, pests and disease, new pests and disease.”
- “Many people ask if we're organic and when we say we're not, they go ahead and buy our apples anyway. They always like the freshness and number of varieties we sell. We sell more apples to the public than anyone we know of.”
- “They're concerned about access to grocery stores and being involved in something positive that makes their community look and feel good.”

Several farmers have programs in place with schools either for educational purposes or to provide the schools with healthier food and beverage options.

- “We're working with local schools to get local milk in school systems with a washable cup.”
- “We've done an agritourism program for school groups for 12 years now.”
- “I really enjoy selling to the local school system and hearing that the kids are liking to eat the salad! This is impacting how the kids are going to view their futures and impacting them positively.”

Other farmers provide more hands on activities. In the quotes below, they reflect on the impact they are making on the youth and how they want to continue making these connections, because when the farmers make an impact on the youth who learn on their farms, the youth, in turn, are making a difference out in their communities and teaching others about what they have learned.

- “We impact the local food system through community education and sustainable agricultural practices, youth focused engagement and hands on activities—some of these programs include: gardening, a youth-run farm stand, agricultural education like hoop house work, seed propagation, harvesting, watering, maintenance, weeding, connecting with other organizations, and developing relationships.”
- “Students like putting their hands in the dirt and creating food and beautifying their community.”

Many stakeholders noted the price of farming, land, and how farmers are not being paid what they should be for food. One mentioned their own transition from a vegetable farm to hemp farming. Many stakeholders spoke of diminishing farm practices and farm land and how that is taking a toll on their desire to keep doing what they love to do.

- “We’ve been a vegetable farm since 1945, through three generations, but now we’re in transition going through CBD purchase production. We’ve got three acres of row spaces to experiment and we’re still growing vegetables in addition to hemp. If this works out, all of the employees, including me, should make 50K a year. The plan will be to purchase assets that all of the employees can use. I want everything to be equal and profitable for everyone. We will still grow vegetables and we’ll take it to the farmer’s market and give it away for free.”

Some interviewees spoke of their experiences with regulations and certifications.

- “We’re a GAP certified farm and we’re very serious about food safety. There have been so many outbreaks all over the world due to contamination because products have been handled multiple times. There are multiple avenues for bacteria and infection and it’s difficult to find out where and how that happens, but when you buy local, you can find out where that happens quickly! If we’re contaminating our food, we’re not going to be in business. We’re doing everything we can to protect what we provide to our customers who are ultimately our friends.”

However, no matter how safe the food is, customers cannot buy food if it is too expensive for them.

- “People that need food don’t even recognize that it could be an option if it’s not affordable.”
- “Kids today: they understand about food quality, but no one can afford to buy it.”

Several stakeholders had suggestions about subsidization of farming.

- “Subsidize the right kind of farming. These are systemic issues; the city of Roanoke isn’t going to change that. Roanoke needs to invest in its communities of color, entrepreneurs and in the people who will make this successful and change in ways we invest in planning. We must support low income communities and they need to take on some leadership.”
- “Don’t charge us taxes. But small business is what pays the bills in this country, so no, that won’t work. The local government isn’t going to give you a break and it wouldn’t help us to sell in other stores.”
- “Local food for the working class is outside of their price range and they don’t qualify for the subsidy, so they don’t buy it. They’re not going to allocate their portion of their income to this...People who are willing to pay enough to justify local produce are often wealthy people with disposable income who don’t have to worry about the cost.”
- “Local food is labor intensive and finding the help to do that is very difficult. It’s hard to market. LEAP’s Virginia Fresh Match isn’t sustainable and can’t go on forever—it’s dependent on government and private contributors which makes it possible for people to afford but only on a bribery basis. But are they willing to pay, especially a true cost? We don’t make the true cost of labor. I tried to sell to a sub shop but she’s competing with Subway. She had to buy cases of pesticide drenched produce from Mexico to compete with Subway.”

Stakeholders also noted the need for support from the government. This topic will return again later in the report.

- “Speak up more as a city and a state for local foods. Talk to city council and go to Richmond, politically, to stand up for local food.”
- “Make policies about how the school board purchases food, and how government buildings purchase food and how they supply food for employees. There needs to be more purchasing and promoting based on these values. Then the government needs to take steps to share what they’re doing and reach out to others, so others catch on. Be allies: offering up space for groups to meet, or a meal for a meeting. Think about where is it difficult for groups to meet? I remember a few years ago the Regional Commission helped plan a Buyer/grower connector meeting at the higher education center; it was a meet and greet. Using examples of what the Regional Commission has done in the past could be helpful; recognition is important because some people may not know. They could also be a voice for change at the state level.”

- “Social services or the local government should direct a volunteerism or education program to support access for healthy nutritious food where people who need volunteer hours can be trained in food agriculture and this would count as their minimal required hours for whatever service they’re trying to receive: SNAP/whatever program.”
- “I’m afraid of governments because governments have a fixed framework: they don’t have a category, they don’t know how to think when they come out to the farm. Code enforcers don’t know how to think outside a blade of grass that can’t be above 9 inches tall. This isn’t a suburban lawn: the city doesn’t have a meta-land category. I’m doing something different and when other people complain, and the government has to come out, they don’t understand.”

Stakeholders also had suggestions on how to make better connections between farmers and the local and regional governments. Stakeholders mentioned farming is a full-time job and it is important that support be provided, however, it is also necessary that there be a willingness to cooperate on both sides with a time that will work for everyone.

- “If a farmer will not be able to make it to a meeting, maybe they need to have a representative for their farm.”
- “Timing—11am doesn’t work. Either first thing in the morning or later in the afternoon would be better. Citizen groups, meet at grocery stores, have a panel across the community would be very successful, night meetings.”

Stakeholders noted suggestions for consumers and what they could do if they were interested in pursuing more local food initiatives or just wanted to show their support.

- “If they want local, fresh food, grow it themselves. Most people don’t do a garden anymore. When I was growing up, everyone had a garden. As far as access, we’re open 7 days a week. I don’t know how more accessible we can be. The customer wants us to have Wal-Mart prices, we’re not going to.”
- “Learn how to cook...teach cooking at a young age, people don’t have the experience with produce or meat anymore.”
- “Habits are so important and so hard to break when it comes to food, you have to start young. Work with schools, school lunches, engage with teachers and nutrition. Farmers don’t have time to do that themselves, they’re busy just being farmers, so the education piece is important that all the non-profits we have in Roanoke need to step in and be a part of.”
- “Get people interested in growing their own food and eating healthy—once they’re used to it, they won’t go back. I refuse to eat corn out of the grocery store. A farmer farms to provide healthy food for the people that live around them, not because of the money”.
- “Buy what’s in season. I can’t buy Virginia avocados. We have to think about the sacrifices we’re willing to make.”

To conclude this section, this stakeholder asks a poignant question that encompasses this whole report.

- “How do we create a local system to protect ourselves against a system that doesn’t put all its eggs in one basket and instead creates a variety of ways to provide food for its population? It’s multi-faceted with tiers: gardening, supporting small farms, community composting, soil health office, etc. There’s a lot of creative ways to talk about these problems that we’re going to continue to face.”

IV. Restaurants

Serving fresh, local food is slowly becoming more popular in the Roanoke region and the businesses interviewed are the pioneers working with local farmers to bring the freshest ingredients to the plate. Several of these businesses have been here for years, but one is extremely fresh. All of the stakeholders' work involves partnering with the community on multiple levels to deliver fresh, local food, of which they are all deeply passionate about.

One stakeholder succinctly describes why they serve fresh local food to the community. It is not just a way of eating, but it is a way of living.

- “It’s healthful for our bodies to eat what’s nearby. Our bodies are tuned to what’s growing nearby. That’s how people have always lived until agrobusiness took over after WWII. It’s important to work for mother earth and serve food that’s grown that feeds the earth in a way that’s sustainable instead of depletes it. Farmers aren’t getting government subsidizes, so we pay farmers what they’re asking. That’s why our restaurant is more expensive.”

Delivering the freshest foods available, restaurants have to be in constant contact with farmers. Below highlights the details of some of the ongoing deliveries and communications between farmers and the restaurants.

- “January-April, we’ll take whatever we can get and supplement with a bigger company, Cavalier, out of Charlottesville that is able to get local produce out of Charlottesville because of some greenhouses there. April-October, we purchase from multiple growers once a week. I go to the market on Saturdays as well. We get lamb and pork once a week year-round from two farms—one is 2 hours away and the other is one and a half hours away. Combined with the other restaurants who use local growers, every week the local growers will come by directly hoping to sell to all the restaurants. When this first started, there wasn’t much variety in what was being grown, and now that’s changed a lot. Before it was just kale, salad greens, and herbs, but now farmers are growing stuff specifically for restaurants that consumers wouldn’t buy like fava beans, escarole, radicchio.”
- “Several farmers deliver once or twice a week. Mushroom foragers just turn up whenever. We get fish and seafood once a week.”
- “We used to buy a lot from Patchwork farm but they don’t sell much anymore, they just sell wholesale. We buy a lot from Thornfield, but the majority of our sales come from wholesale or crop sale/CSAs.”

Communication is extremely important between the farmer and restaurant, but a lot also depends on how well business is going for the restaurant and, vice versa, how well the crops are growing for the farmer.

- “Growers are mostly concerned about the business. We are an Italian restaurant, so our main product is tomatoes. Last year with all the rain, it was really bad for us. At the same time, if we aren’t, farmers aren’t getting our business.”

Therefore, it is important for restaurants to keep their customers happy and offer to a wide variety of people. One stakeholder notes that they try to appeal to a diverse crowd, but sometimes it is difficult.

- “There are two types of customers, the ones who come in wanting to eat whatever you give them, and the ones who are so excited about what they’re eating and ask a lot of questions, but they’re all positive questions.”
- “I see the same people coming in weekend after weekend, they’re the only ones able to do that, so they’re the only ones able to come to events. It’s tough to get people out on Saturday mornings. I see people at Grandin market and those people aren’t the same people at the restaurant, so those people are the ones buying for themselves. If people can afford to eat out every night, they’re not going to purchase from the local market. It’d be great if we could get the lower middle class to come in and buy stuff, that’s why we do specials certain nights of the week. I’ve learned from working in restaurants all my life that if you just cater to one demographic, they’ll just leave you for another restaurant eventually.”

These restaurants are constantly thinking of ways to stay connected, and not only to they support local farmers and deliver fresh ingredients to the plate, but they also give back to the community.

- “We put on many dinners that are percentage-night where a percentage of the money is given away to an organization in the community. It goes back to the local community.”
- “We have a pay-it-forward program on our communal bulletin board where someone can write the dollar amount they’ve paid for on a ticket and leave it, so if someone comes in who can’t pay for a meal or something, they can use that ticket.”

Restaurants understand the importance of youth participation. Several stakeholders have programs where they work with young people or one of their chefs partners with another organization.

- “Next week I’m meeting with the YMCA at Roanoke Community Garden with 8-12 year olds. It’ll be around 35 kids. We’ll look at what they’re growing in the garden and then we’ll come back to Local Roots to see what those foods are like when you cook and eat them.”

One stakeholder mentioned a program that they think should get funding to return.

- “‘Happy Healthy Cooks’ was this great program about 6-7 years ago by this woman, Heather Quintona. She would come once a week and there would be a theme for certain parts of the year or for a cultural event or holiday. The kids would bring food in and they’d meet and she’d teach them how to cook it and then they’d eat it. She’d ask them what they liked to eat at the beginning and end of the year to see how it changed. She’d educate parents too. Eventually, she couldn’t get enough money. It’d be great to add a line item on the city or whoever’s budget for hands-on education in schools for something like that again.”

V. Informing the public

WHAT DOES 'LOCAL' MEAN?

Several stakeholders wanted a designated definition for the term 'local,' because the definition changes from individual to individual. Some thought it would be helpful if the USDA could specify a definition.

- “Everyone’s definition of “local” is different and, therefore, Charlotte is just as local to us as Richmond is. Homestead Creamery is the only glass bottle milk company in the state. We also sell as far as Florida and it’s still considered local.”
- “We made a presentation to a huge chain (Kroger) and tried to go through all the hoops, but it fell apart because they didn’t have time for us. Telling the truth in advertising should mean something. Businesses think it’s okay to buy it for less than it’s able to be grown for. Nobody has the desire to sell the value of buying local food. What’s a definition of local food? I’ve asked people, “What is local food to you?” and there are so many different responses. I’d like to see a definable answer for that somewhere—maybe USDA could put one out.”

Another stakeholder noted the strength that is placed on all words and that they be reevaluated.

- “We need to be clearer on what words resonate with consumers. ‘Sustainably’ and ‘fair labor’ might not matter, some people might not know that some farms treat their employees horribly.”

Among other words, since the definition of 'local' is contested, the reason behind why it is important to buy local food can be even more difficult to understand for some consumers. For this reason, finding information about local food needs to be easy for the consumer, however, several stakeholders mentioned that many people are not aware of where to find information on local food.

- “Some websites aren’t working anymore and some places of business do not have websites or are not able to keep them updated.”
- “Each county has a directory, but it’s not an efficient use. Consumers don’t want to have to go to each county to slog through to find what they want. People choose the easier way.”

Moreover, it is important that when consumers purchase local food, that they have some plans for what to make with it. Many stakeholders had already tried creative ways to introduce consumers to local foods.

- “When people are presented with something that is beyond what they do day-to-day, something not in season, recipes would help. People are much more visual. They need help knowing what to do with the produce.”
- “Susana with Thornfield made little postcards on the table that promoted her and where she was going to be next and which markets she would be at.”

Some stakeholders had ideas for how to promote local food in general and how to reach out to the public and help bring more people into the local food initiative.

- “Getting people involved is a process. We need to be aggressive and be out there—TV commercials are in your face, people have it memorized. Let’s do the same thing with local food and food security and drill it in peoples’ minds. People are being fed what they’re exposed to, so we might as well feed them something good.”
- “We need help with farmer perspective marketing and education and branding. The messaging that farmers are up against is corporate. VA Fresh Match was a free line marketing campaign so there wasn’t as much of a lift. There is a plan for an integrated website through LEAP, but we need funding for it.”
- “We need to do a PSA or marketing campaign showing why it’s important to support the local economy and how even one dollar spent locally has a multiplier effect within our community. It really does come back to them, 3-4-5 times over. Let’s create an infographic on how that process works.”
- “It takes creativity and a merging of artists and a mindset of business and awareness to make a difference. I have a vision of a community of food growers, artists, healers—all of these people who love and care for the environment, our most authentic self—usually these people are all in different sections, but if we can bring them together and promote local food through music and art and a merging of people through these different scopes of the community, maybe there’s something there. We can encourage and inspire people to join in the dance.”

Many stakeholders recognized that the future of farming is with the younger generation and that farming will die without Youth getting on board. Appealing to youth also related to marketing strategies and helping people understand that farming and growing food can be youthful.

- “We need to lower the age of farmers.”
- “Social media marketing plays a key role in education—Cam is a younger person though, he recognizes that. He suggests a willingness to participate in the education and make agriculture and local food feel like a normal part of everyday life and not something that happens out in the country.”

VI. Future Vision for the Roanoke region

DESIRE FOR A LOCAL FOOD COORDINATOR

Many stakeholders mentioned the term ‘Local Food Coordinator,’ specifically, and wanted this person to be in charge of food policy for the region. The following quotes in this section come from questions five and nine. Stakeholders implore the government to hire a Local Food Coordinator and have a local centralized office that organizes a database for the region. These quotes highlight what a Local Food Coordinator’s job would entail and what they would do for the region.

- “Create an organizer who’s truly committed to the process and action based—someone who gets local legislators on board, who provides opportunities and pushes initiatives forward... no one is actually doing it now. They need to educate everyone involved in the process.”
- “Have the government designate a Food Policy Coordinator to do some of the following: relay different organizations information, create a guide directory or database of everyone in the region, and find local grants that municipalities can go after.”
- “Unifying services is really important and necessary, like finding out what everyone else is doing and planning. A way for consumers to ask questions consumers at a Local Food centralized office where consumers could be connected to the broader network.”

Several stakeholders mentioned a database where everything could be organized for consumers to be directed towards.

- “A database for customers to search and find would be great. Or some sort of recognition for our business being more eco-friendly and more mindful for providing organic food that our customers put in their bodies. This could encourage other restaurants to go bio-degradable if there was an incentive for restaurants to do that, like a Green Business Database or a Sticker that customers saw when entering the establishment.”
- “People aren’t hearing what’s available to them almost in their backyard. We grow year-round, and we grow crops that aren’t usually grown year-round. We need an organization, like one centralized office, to take the reins through PSAs to make the general public aware, “hey do you know this is available in these counties?”
- “Create a central clearing house and acknowledge that it isn’t under the purview of one place, but it’s a joint buy in and benefits everyone. Access, affordability, and health need to be a part of the plan... This needs to be rooted in our thoughts. Distribution, licensing, regulatory...any support that can be provided. Right now, only individuals are directly supported and there’s no support coming from the localities.”

One stakeholder noted that a Food Policy Coordinator would be helping with education as well as accessibility.

- “Constant engagement in educational activities is a must. There would be a Food Policy Coordinator...Policy focuses and education would be the top priority.”

The following quotes relate only to question nine which gave stakeholders the opportunity to voice their dreams for the future; a chance to give words to a vision in the Roanoke region.

Some stakeholders were very specific in their visions and how it would affect the direct community.

- “I’d love to see the Westend market work. It’s running but it’s not doing what it was intended to do. It needs to serve more of the community.”
- “McDonald’s would be coming to a local farmer to buy their lettuce and a cow. The food consumed in any given spot would come from that region. Food would be available to the store within 24 hours of it being picked. Where everybody doesn’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.”

Some stakeholders were more broadly thinking how it would affect the wider communities as well as their own specific business.

- “Access for everyone...transportation plays into that, as well as affordability. We are fully aware that our product isn’t affordable for everyone. It depends on how you look at it—it costs more because we’re paying our farmers more.”
- “It’d be helpful to have a partnership with visit VA Blue Ridge as a tourism destination. Hire travel writers and workforce development.”
- “Diverse in the products that are being offered. Like everything that people consume on a regular basis and then offer exotic things that we look for occasionally. Farms should be professionally run in terms of the farms themselves. The farmer would be educated enough to understand their role, so they weren’t putting people at risk. There would be follow-ups, and the tools necessary would be available, so the health and safe food chain stayed intact at a minimal, if not free cost, because it becomes very expensive and time-consuming to make sure all of these things are run properly.”
- “If corporations could relax and let local, individual stores work with local farmers and allow a local farm to supply to a grocery store--that would help. The thing is uniformity doesn’t exist--local food is diverse.”
- “Farmers would get first bid on procurements on schools and hospitals. Getting GAP certified and things sourced locally. We’d have transportation for all with bus lines that went specifically to farmers markets and grocery

stores, with no connecting line! Everyone would be happy and healthy and connected with one another.”

Some stakeholders suggested that the local and regional governments should support farmers and educate consumers with grants and sponsorships. Another stakeholder suggested that businesses can be investors.

- “If there’s a way to keep the costs down for those individuals who can really benefit from it with grants or if farmer’s markets can get sponsors, then that would be great. Businesses need to know why it’s important to sponsor your employees in giving them access to food and farm shares and also educating businesses on why they need to support these farmers. There should be a way to subsidize that through local governments or grants or corporate sponsorships. Find a champion who truly believes in food access.”
- “Build relationships first and then incentivize with food opportunity, job opportunity, work or volunteer hours. Make it fun and engaging. It’s not a chore. We need to be culturally sensitive and appropriate, too. I like kids to think they’re not learning.”
- “Maybe if there were bigger grocery stores and we could connect more with them, like there could be a community space in the grocery store where workshops can be held. This is a conversation that has to happen for many years before any impact is made...Outside of consumers, connecting with schools and kids is important.”

Other stakeholder recognized the importance of education and having active programs and youth participation.

- “A little more involvement with more programs on educating people how to cook. Younger people don’t grow up in households cooking, so no one knows how. Most of my employees don’t grow up in households where there was cooking; their passion comes from TV perhaps.”
- “Make sure that people can get around and can be active and grow gardens and be outdoors and be safe and be healthy. We can’t just talk about eating healthy without mentioning the activity part too. Be all inclusive, activity area built around a garden area. Government partners cannot be afraid of failure. Sometimes you’ll step in a pile, but you can’t be scared. You have to keep trying and do the next thing. Do another creative idea. Don’t be afraid of failure.”

One stakeholder brought up many necessary points in their vision, stating that the regional and local governments need to support local food more because the stakeholders cannot keep doing it alone.

- “More farmers who can make a living farming and more people who want to support them. Whether that’s through schools, restaurants, and having it be a

part of the conversation at a locality and regional level. We need to make a concerted effort to talk about it in land use planning. There's open space land dedicated to agriculture, but it's for the wealthy, that's who can afford it. I'd like to hear that there's support and conversation about food access and production on a regional level or if a locality steps up and shows that it's needed and there from an economic or tourism standpoint. A small organization can't do it alone with little support. We've made headway, but there's a downside if it's assumed [a small organization is] able to do it all [by ourselves]."

With these visions fresh on the reader's mind, it is with great hope that this report will spark the desire to join their efforts in connecting with one's community and supporting local food.