

Regional Food System Plan - Concept Paper & Draft Framework

March 23, 2018

Goal: Create a plan to promote & develop the Regional Food System for the Triangle Region of North Carolina. Outline the purpose, process and timeline associated with the effort.

A Case for Action:

- There is clear economic development opportunity in all aspects of the food system but particularly in the areas of processing, distribution, and retail/wholesale consumption markets.
- There is acute awareness of food system issues (access, health, local production, farmland protection, local markets, etc.) and opportunities (food system-based economic development, improved health, community and resource-based systems, jobs, positive social determinants of health, etc.), growing political support (local, regional, and state and federal), and most importantly, a highly informed market which demands this response.
- The current system is fragmented and there is no current infrastructure to facilitate shared decision-making related to regional food system investment. A well-articulated regional concept can result in shared understanding and collaboration; furthermore, an actionable schematic will allow the various stakeholders to visualize the power of that system as well as stimulate investment and growth in that sector.
- The current thinking is often too localized with regard to market demand, supply chain, and resource base. For instance, it isn't likely that every county/municipality has the same needs for; an incubator farm, culinary incubator, aggregation hubs, processing facilities, institutional purchasing, etc. nor do they have the same resource base (dramatically different soils and topography in our region) and production capacity (farms, farmers, production system types, etc.) to supply farm product.
- We have an enormous capacity for farm production in the Triangle region, beyond in the adjacent rural counties, and throughout North Carolina. The regional capital for this effort is enormous and we suggest is , unique to this area. A well-managed regional food systems plan could become a national example of success. The regional resources and market demand of the Triangle Region provide possibly the best opportunity in the nation to accomplish a realistic model for resilient, regional food systems.

Timeline & Initial Process: Through a facilitative process engage and Invite resource people and stakeholders at appropriate steps.

April - June, 2018

- Creation of program statement and goals
- Adaptation of known development systems and techniques
- Identification of members and roles
- Collaborative infrastructure created for concept development & shared decision-making

July – October, 2018

- Assessment of political, legal, economic, environmental, governmental, and social inputs
- Analysis of existing data, shared interest and market-driven demands
- Articulation of shared understanding & mutual interests

November, 2018— January, 2019

- Plan for Public Messaging and broad Engagement of Stakeholders
- Convene stakeholders in February
- Seek public and private investment collectively in vetted priorities

Justification and context:

In response to recent activity and interest in a regional approach to food systems and economic development, the staff team of Cooperative Extension and Economic Development among Wake, Durham, and Orange counties has met to discuss options for moving forward. This is an initial concept draft of some of the issues and opportunities we have discussed to date.

The components of a food system may be thin-sliced into many parts but five major areas capture the basics; 1) production, 2) processing, 3) distribution, 4) retail and wholesale consumption, and 5) waste. There is clear economic development opportunity in all aspects of that system but particularly in the areas of processing, distribution, and retail/wholesale consumption markets. Robust development of the economic drivers will create market for regional and statewide growers and provide positive benefits for agriculture, including more diverse markets and conservation of farms and farmers.

Our recent efforts in agriculture and food systems economic development have led to the realization that one of the most effective approaches to address these needs is on a regional level, rather than county by county. Most recently we have been promoting and developing a concept for a regional food systems plan for the Triangle Region of North Carolina and have just recently catalyzed and participated in early meetings among the three main market counties; Wake, Durham, and Orange to begin the planning process. This follows many months of initial discussions among many regional stakeholders who are working in several aspects of the food system. The timing could not be better here in the Triangle for a regional plan. There is acute awareness of food system issues (access, health, local production, farmland protection, local markets, etc.) and opportunities (food system-based economic development, improved health, community and resource-based systems, jobs, positive social determinants of health, etc.), growing political support (local, regional, and state and federal), and most importantly, a highly informed market which demands this response.

The Triangle has long been a leader in North Carolina, and nationally, in its support for a healthy environment, strong and inclusive social framework, and a creative and resilient, locally-based economy. Current political and administrative leadership within the region is strongly supportive of these efforts in many ways. The current need is to bring together many of the disparate (governmental, non-profit, and private) efforts regarding local food and agriculture in a sophisticated and realistic regional plan which will result in articulated opportunities for private businesses to more easily respond to local and regional food systems markets.

Many localities are highly motivated to create components of a food system but are typically approaching the effort from a geopolitical reference point e.g., “how can we promote our county/city as a leader in this effort?” This is based in genuine intent to improve the system but is often too localized with regard to market demand, supply chain, and resource base. For instance, it isn’t likely that every county/municipality has the same needs for; an incubator farm, culinary incubator, aggregation hubs, processing facilities, institutional purchasing, etc. nor do they have the same resource base (dramatically different soils and topography in our region) and production capacity (farms, farmers, production system types, etc.) to supply farm product.

Many areas are beginning to see agriculture and the greater food system as a desirable and appropriate industry for healthy and resilient economic growth, as does North Carolina in general. The Triangle has one of the largest and most aggressive markets for local, healthy food in the state and region. It makes perfect sense for this area to become the center of a regional “hub and spoke system” which would greatly increase opportunity for growers and food system businesses in meeting this regional demand. We have an enormous capacity for farm production in the Triangle region, beyond in the adjacent rural counties, and throughout North Carolina.

The key challenges, we believe, include; 1) creating multi-county collaboration which is perceived to be beneficial to Durham, Orange, Wake and 2) creating understanding of the value of a regional food system in providing appropriate economic development as well as improved human and environmental health. We believe a well-articulated regional concept can result in that understanding and collaboration. We will certainly continue the discussion regarding the benefits and needs of a regional food system but an actionable schematic regional plan will allow the various stakeholders to visualize the power of that system as well as stimulate investment and growth in that sector.

Some important influencers in the region include; Orange, Wake, and Durham Counties, the major universities, Cooperative Extension, the regional community colleges, the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) at NCSU, particularly the Community Food Strategies Team, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA), The Global Food Policy Institute at Duke University, Triangle J Council of Governments, the NC Department of Commerce, particularly Napoleon Wallace, Deputy Secretary of Commerce for Rural Economic Development, the North Carolina Economic Development Partnership (business recruitment entity), the North Carolina Rural Center, our food councils in the region, local chambers of commerce, and regional health systems. All of these entities, and others, are working in various capacities to address regional food system issues. However, there is not a defined, comprehensive effort among the group. Creating that would be the focus of this project. The regional capital for this effort is enormous and we suggest is , unique to this area. A well-managed regional food systems plan could become a national example of success. The regional resources and market demand of the Triangle Region provide possibly the best opportunity in the nation to accomplish a realistic model for resilient, regional food systems. Each of these entities, and other, is an outreach and communication channel and collectively they represent a significant resource base for this effort. Each is working in various capacities in agriculture, health, food systems, planning, and economic development. Additionally, each has significant reach in terms of membership and audience.

Design and development of any system results from good management, and management is about structure and process. The most important outcome for this effort is the development of a structure which includes all of the important stakeholders and outlines their relationship to the whole, and a design and development process which moves that structure forward to tangible outcomes. The development of a functioning regional food system is like any other development project and it involves; programming (functional goals), analysis (political, legal, economic, environmental, governmental, and social), concept development (this is where the financial model begins to parallel the physical model), implementation and evaluation. That structure and process for a regional food system can become a replicable model for others in the United States and beyond.

As mentioned, this development process is like any other in that it requires structure and process. That structure and process exists for other development efforts where there are development teams who are focused on specific outcomes; products, services, businesses, non-profits, healthcare, physical developments (commercial, residential, institutional) and so forth. In this case there are not regional food system developers whose sole purpose is the development of these systems.

Using real estate development as an example, we see a structure and process which results in a tangible outcome, e.g.; mixed-use development, park, hospital, school, etc. The resources associated with these developments include; developer, planners, architects, landscape architects, environmental consultants, engineers, surveyors, investors, construction experts, project managers, financial managers, entitlement and permitting entities (local state, federal). Each fits into a specific structure which is managed through a specific process through to implementation. The key is to create a concept which is not only feasible but attractive to entrepreneurs, existing businesses, investors, and the market.

The process for developing a regional food system is no different. Many of the resources and tools needed to complete the project already exist, just not in a development structure model specific to regional food systems. Therefore the goal is to propose a structure, identify the required individual tools and resources to fill that structure, and to craft a development process specific to a regional food system. We propose to utilize the knowledge of staff and select resource persons and entities in the region to propose a structure and process for this project.

Therefore, the goal for this initial phase is to craft a concept structure and process for developing a regional food system for the Triangle region of North Carolina. The initial team of staff from Wake, Durham, and Orange counties will meet regularly to begin this process and reach out to practitioners and other resource people in this initial phase as needed for input. Once we have enough information we will offer a draft plan which can be the framework for the next phases of implementation. This initial process will involve; 1) creation of a program statement (functional goals for the effort), 2) adaptation of known development systems and techniques, 3) identification of the team members and their roles, 4) proposing a concept development collaborative (i.e. who is the entity that will act as “developer”), 5) a general assessment of the political, legal, economic, environmental, governmental, and social layers which will impact the effort and possibly need adaptation, and 6) development of a conceptual procedure model.