



# IMPACT OF NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION LOCAL FOOD PROGRAMMING ON DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of NC Cooperative Extension local food programming on downtown redevelopment in sixteen NC Main Street communities. It includes findings on how both farm to table restaurants and farmers markets have impacted downtown development and makes recommendations on how Extension and local downtown development staff can better work together to create vibrant downtown communities.*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the definition of “local food” varies widely depending on geographic location, climate, and consumer perception. However, most researchers agree that the “local foods movement,” described as purchasing and consuming food that minimizes the distance between producers and consumers,<sup>i</sup> has been driven for decades by consumer, business and institutional interests, and that “local food systems” include a diverse representation of restaurants, farmers markets, and small businesses interconnected in such ways as to link local production to local consumption. Local food systems have also been lauded as a strategy for sustainable community and economic development because they support small businesses and local family farms and are environmentally friendly due to lower fossil fuel consumption<sup>ii</sup>. Some studies also find that locally produced and consumed food creates a more economically vibrant community than an area that does not produce and consume food locally. This impact of local food systems on

both farm and community results from both the transactions that occur between local consumers and local farms as well as the impact of keeping local dollars in the community to be re-spent at other businesses (the multiplier effect)<sup>iii</sup>.

The increasing popularity of Farm-to-Table and Local Food trends has impacted communities positively by bridging the gap between consumers and producers, establishing authentic relationships and bonding within the community, and bringing more visitors into the downtown area.<sup>iv</sup> As the popularity and success of the Local Foods movement increases, including such farm to table trends as chefs incorporating root-to-stem menu items, alternative growing and gardening methods like hydroponics and aeroponics and rooftop and kitchen gardening,<sup>v</sup> it is important to consider the impact that the movement has on downtown development, particularly in rural areas. The rise of the local food movement has been noticed for some time, but studies on the mixed qualitative and quantifiable economic impacts of the local food movement on rural downtown development have so far been largely neglected.



## PURPOSE

This economic impact study seeks to enhance existing anecdotal data by seeking information on the direct impacts, such as job creation, profit of business owners, and tax revenues, and indirect impacts, including stimulating development downtown, that the local food movement has had on towns in rural North

Carolina. This research is important because market trends are evolving and diversifying. Studies in the past have hinted at the economic impacts of farmers markets and the trends of farmers market visitors to shop at other stores when making a trip to the farmers market located near other retail businesses (Project for Public Spaces. 2008). However, this study differs because in addition to understanding the direct and indirect impacts of farmers markets, it also examines the role Cooperative Extension's Local Food Programming has played in downtown revitalization in rural North Carolina.



## CONTEXT

This qualitative study was conducted in 2018 and seeks to understand the impact the NC Cooperative Extension Service, through programming that supports local food system development, has had on the revitalization of the downtown areas in North Carolina small towns. Because of its mission to create economic, societal, and intellectual prosperity for all North Carolinians through research-based agricultural, food, and youth programs,

Extension has historically played a role in the startup and launch of farmers markets throughout the state. This study intends to discover what impacts "successful" farmers market have on downtown development as well as what conditions supported that success, including best practices by Extension directors and agents. Similarly, this study reviews the role of farm to table restaurants in downtown vibrancy of small North Carolina towns, and the extent to which Extension supported the success of these restaurants, if any.

The study was inspired in part by a conversation between the study's author and Liz Parham, Director of NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center. At the 2015 Main Street Conference Parham attributed the revitalization of many Main Street communities, at least in part, to the rise of local food businesses in these communities. This study intends to determine whether local food has played a role in the revitalization of NC Main Street communities and to what extent Extension contributed to that effort.

## METHODS

The first phase of the study method consisted of phone interviews of two separate classifications of participants: (1) county Extension directors and (2) town managers/downtown developers/planners. Participants were selected based on a list of North Carolina towns provided by the NC Department of Commerce using the following 3 criteria:

- a) Less than 50,000 inhabitants;
- b) Participation in the NC Main Street program; and
- c) Location of an established farm to table restaurant or farmers market in its downtown area.

Thirty-two towns were identified on the NC Department of Commerce list. Data for the study was collected from sixteen towns across the state. The other sixteen were not responsive to our request for information.

Each class of participants was asked a standard set of questions surrounding the impact the farm to table restaurant or farmers market had on the vibrancy of the identified small town, as well as what role, if any, Extension played in the development or operation of such restaurant or farmers market.

Every effort was made to recruit both the county Extension director and the town manager/downtown developer/planner for each identified community to participate in the study. Ten town managers/downtown developers/planners were interviewed, and eleven county Extension directors were interviewed. However, only 5 of the towns studied had responses from both participant classes.

In addition to the interviews collected in the initial round, an online survey was distributed to restaurant owners and farmers market managers in the sixteen towns from which data had been gathered. Seven responses were recorded.

An additional snowball set of respondents was generated through the interview process of the town managers/downtown developers/planners and the county Extension directors. This set of respondents was identified as business owners who could provide insight on the revitalization of the downtown areas; however, only two interviews were granted and because of the small sample size, this feedback has not been incorporated into the results of this study.

## RESULTS

The first phase of the study consisted of interviews of town managers/downtown

developers/planners identified by the NC Department of Commerce as having knowledge of the successful farm to table restaurant and/or farmers market located in their respective Main Street communities. There were ten participants in this phase of the study.

### Town Manager/Downtown Developer/Planner Interview Results

#### ***Town Manager/Downtown Developer/Planner Awareness of Extension Services***

A major goal of the study was to determine the impact, if any, Extension programming in local food system development has had on downtown revitalization efforts. To that end, the first interview question asked of town managers/downtown developers/planners explored their awareness of their county's Extension office. 100% of respondents indicated an awareness of the county Extension office, and 80% indicated that they knew their county Extension director. Drilling down deeper into the relationship with Extension, 100% of the town managers/downtown developers/planners who were interviewed also responded that they had worked with or otherwise had had contact with county Extension agents. The nature of that contact included development of farmers markets, outdoor development (including streetscapings, trails, and trees), community-wide events, and collaborating on grant applications. *However, only one of the town managers/downtown developers was aware of any connection Extension had had with the establishment or operation of a farm to fork/table restaurant.*

#### ***Impact of Farm to Fork/Table Restaurant***

Nine out of ten town manager/downtown developer respondents confirmed that there was at least one dining establishment in their downtown area that held itself out as a "Farm to Fork/Table" restaurant.

When asked how the Farm to Fork/Table restaurant may have impacted the downtown area, 80% of the respondents indicated an increase in pedestrian traffic, especially evenings and weekends. Ninety percent (90%) responded that vehicular traffic had increased, and 80% replied that there had been new business openings in the downtown area, mentioning pubs and retail specifically. When asked whether they had noticed anything else in terms of retail activity, they mentioned that retail activity generally had increased, downtown had “changed”, and in one case, there was an “increased commitment to local ingredients by local businesses”. One respondent replied that downtown retail businesses had changed their hours to coincide with the hours of the farmers market/restaurant, while another respondent mentioned that getting businesses to extend their hours was a challenge.

Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents attributed at least some of the increased retail activity to the presence of the Farm to Fork/Table restaurant in the downtown area. Of those responses, fifty percent (50%) gave credit to the restaurant as the driving/anchor/pioneer business that launched the downtown revitalization effort. The other fifty percent (50%) were of the opinion that the restaurant brought people and businesses to the downtown area.

### ***Impact of Farmers Market***

Nine of the ten town manager/downtown developer respondents confirmed that there was a farmers market in the downtown area, and six of the nine respondents were aware of Extension involvement in the development of the farmers market, either as the developer or the manager.

Eight of the nine respondents believed that the farmers market had had a positive impact on the downtown area, evidenced primarily by

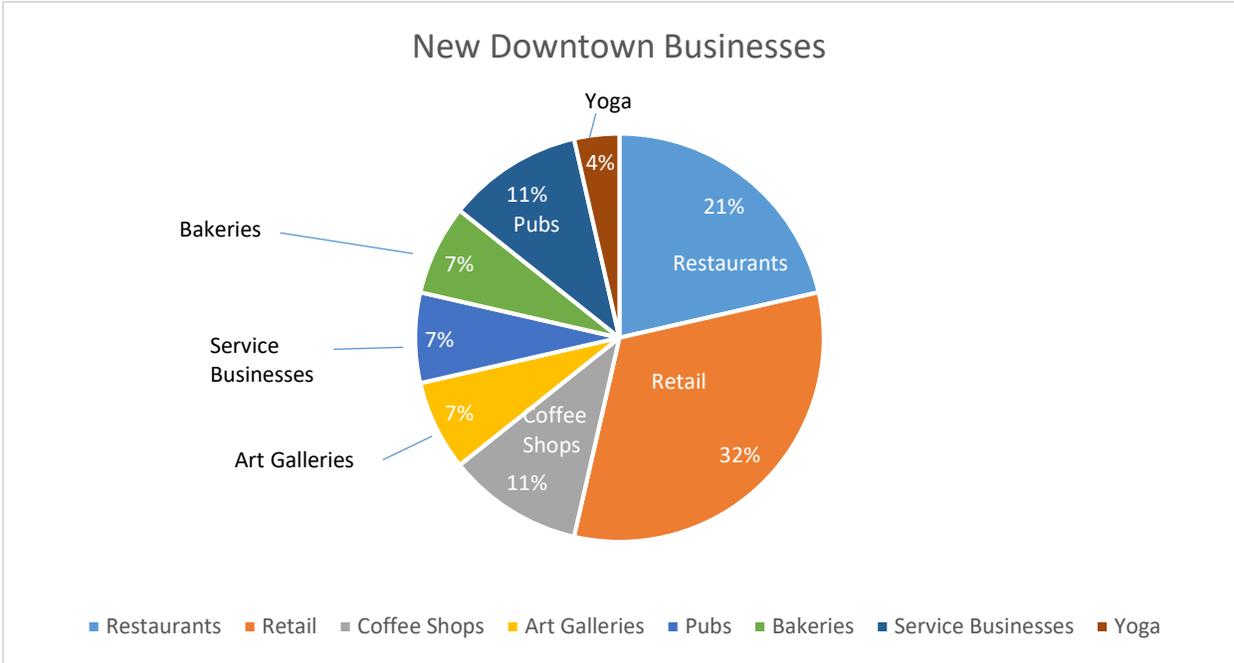
increased downtown traffic. However, one respondent stated that the farmers market was not “well shopped”.



### ***New Business Generation***

When asked what types of new businesses had located in the downtown area since either a Farm to Fork/Table restaurant or farmers market had opened, respondents gave a variety of answers, as shown in the pie chart below. Roughly half of new downtown businesses fell within the food and beverage retail industry, including restaurants, pubs, bakeries, and coffee shops. The other half of new downtown businesses was categorized as “retail,” with art galleries, services businesses, and yoga being specifically identified.

Seven of the nine respondents believed that the new downtown businesses cross-marketed with each other independent of downtown association activities and specifically mentioned that local produce, baked goods, and beer/wine were sold in the restaurants.



The town managers/downtown developers were also asked whether there were other factors that have impacted their downtown redevelopment. Seventy percent (70%) described streetscaping projects as having a positive impact; fifty percent (50%) suggested that parks had contributed to their downtown revitalization efforts; and sixty percent (60%) listed festivals/events as contributing to positive downtown changes. **Interestingly, eighty percent (80%) stated that these improvements were initiated during or after the development of the restaurant or farmers market.**

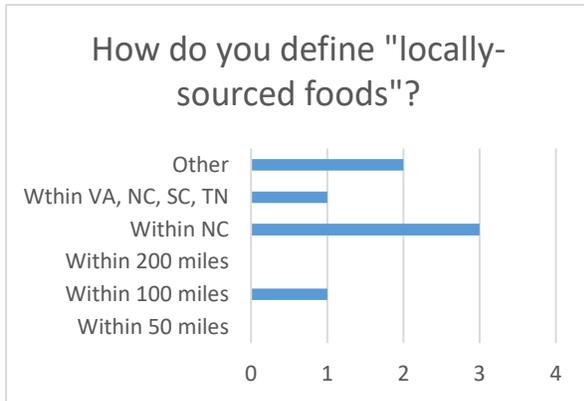
The final questions of the interview of town manager/downtown developers asked whether they believed the changes in their downtown area had come in part as a result of a preference by their community’s residents and visitors to “buy local.” Eight of the ten respondents believed that the changes were derived from this preference (two respondents replied “maybe”). When asked whether they thought this preference was based more from a drive to “buy local” or to “buy local food,” the majority believed it derived from the drive to “buy local,”

or a combination of “buy local” and “buy local food.”

**Restaurant Survey Responses**

Town managers/downtown developers and planners were also asked to confirm the reputation of one or more restaurants in their towns as a “farm to table” restaurant. Researchers followed up with the restaurant owners identified by the town managers/downtown developers to request the completion of an online survey.

There were seven restaurant owner respondents to the online survey. The first question asked the restaurant owner was to give their definition of “locally-sourced foods.” Three owners answered that food sourced anywhere within the state of North Carolina qualified as “local.” One owner answered that they considered local food to come from a larger 4-state region. One owner answered that food was considered local if it was sourced with a 100 mile radius of the restaurant location. Two owners answered “Other.”



The bar graphs represent the percentage of responses to each category, based on 7 responses to the survey

The two respondents replying “Other” explained their response in the following manner. One respondent indicated that they had a “tiered approach,” with a preference for “hyper-local,” which they defined as within 50 miles. In descending order they would draw from the neighboring counties, then a state region, then the entire state, and finally from the Southeast United States. This respondent also stated that they identify the geographical source of every menu item.

The second respondent who replied “Other” when defining “locally-sourced foods”, stated that where they purchase depends on the “level of specialization” of the product. Collards were purchased within 15 miles, but Heirloom benne seeds were purchased from a neighboring state.

The second survey question asked the restaurant owner what percentage of food offered in their restaurant did they consider to be “locally-sourced.” Five of the seven respondents answered that 25-50% of the menu items was locally-sourced. One respondent answered that 51-75% of the menu items was locally-sourced, and one respondent answered that greater than 75% of the menu items was locally-sourced.



Restaurant owners were also asked what types of food offered on the menu were locally-sourced. All of the respondents replied that meat/seafood, herbs, alcoholic beverages, vegetables, and fruit were locally-sourced. Six of the seven respondents replied that dairy items were locally-sourced in their restaurants, while four of the respondents replied that baked goods, and two of the respondents replied that condiments and sauces, were locally-sourced in their restaurants.



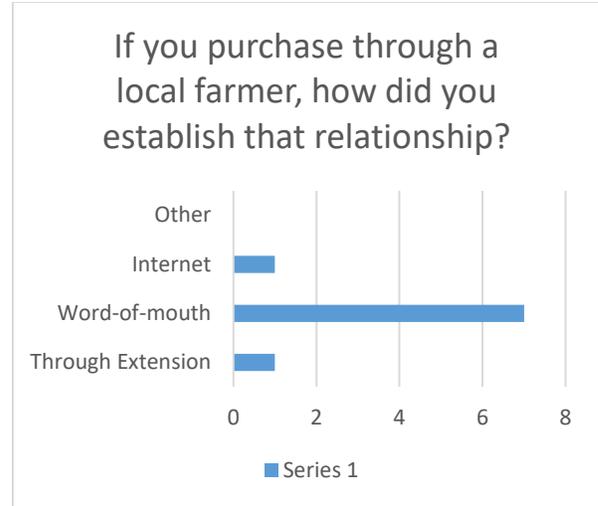
When asked whether their menu states that their food is locally-sourced, all restaurant owners responded affirmatively. Most of the references to local appeared by menu item; two

of the seven respondents specifically highlighted the farms they work with, and two included “Got to be NC” or “Appalachian Grown” logos on their menus. Interestingly, one of the restaurants did not advertise that it serves locally-sourced food, but the majority of them promoted themselves as purveyors of “local food” through their web sites and social media. All of them used such terms “Non-GMO, Organic, Seasonal, Small Farm, Sustainable, Humanely Raised, Local, Fresh, Farm Fresh, or Animal Welfare” when describing their menu items.

Restaurant owners were also asked how they acquired their fresh, locally-sourced foods. All of them had a relationship with one or more farmers. Six of seven respondents buy at the local farmers market; four of seven purchase “local” through a distributor or wholesaler, and one respondent indicated that they grow their own local food.

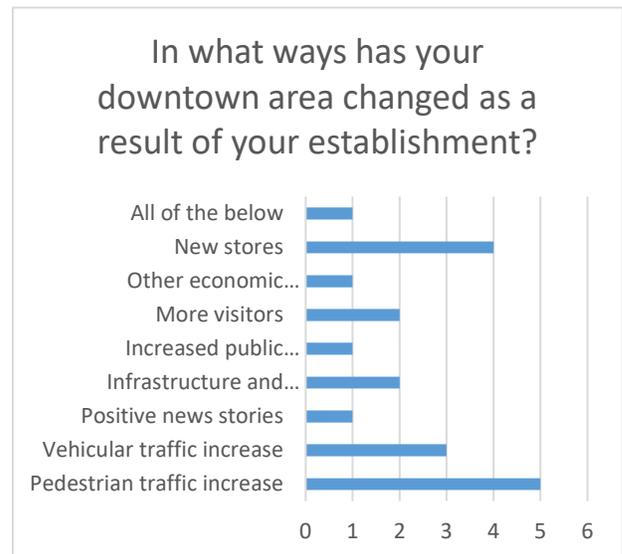


When asked how they established their relationship with one or more local farmers, all of them came to know of the farmers who source them through word of mouth. One responded that first contact had come through the internet, and one responded that Extension had provided the introduction.



When asked whether they purchased any of their processed menu items from vendors directly in their community, all responded that they did, with alcoholic beverages and coffee representing the bulk of such locally processed menu items.

Like the town managers/downtown developers/planners, all restaurant owners confirmed the generally-held belief that their dining establishment had impacted the downtown area. In most cases, the restaurant owners listed increased pedestrian traffic and new store openings. Three of the seven respondents indicated that there was increased



public investment, including infrastructure and aesthetic upgrades.

### Extension Interview Results

Eleven county Extension directors or agents were interviewed in the second phase of the study.

#### ***Questions regarding Extension's support of Dining Establishments***

In their interviews, Extension staff was given the name of a dining establishment (including breweries), food store, or farmers market located in the county they worked and was then asked to verify whether they believed it had had a positive impact on downtown redevelopment. Once so verified, several follow-up questions were asked to determine the level of involvement Extension staff had had in the business' launch or continuing operation. Twenty-eight businesses in 13 counties comprised the interview topics.

Across the board, Extension staff played no role in the launch of a farm to table dining establishment, but most respondents had been involved in the startup of a farmers market, or in one case, a local food market. However, if approached for assistance by the dining establishment, Extension routinely connected the dining establishment with farmers who could source them. In more cases, Extension acted as the initial channel through which farmers, looking to supply the dining establishment, could connect. In other words, Extension was more likely to be proactive with respect to assisting the dining establishment when asked by the farmers to do so.

#### ***Questions regarding Extension's support of Farmers Markets***

The study shows that the launch and support of a downtown farmers market more typically falls within Extension's purview, which fact was also

borne out by the interviews of the town managers/downtown developers/planners. 100% of the Extension participants interviewed indicated that they had some role in the launch or development of a farmers market. In some cases, the relationship Extension had with the farmers market leveraged the connections it made between dining establishments and farmers.

#### ***What role has the farmers market played in downtown revitalization?***

When asked whether they agreed with the statement that the farmers market was having an impact of the development of the downtown core of a particular community, 100% of the Extension staff believed that it was. Sample statements include:

CD92 "It adds vibrancy to our community . . . is located in a really nice spot on Main Street, and is a draw for community members."

CD90 "It (has had) a large impact on the growth of XX, with some overflow into YY as well. I wish they would recognize it as such . . . the town does, but I don't know that the local government gives it enough credit. . . . It's vibrant, with a lot of people there, good growers."

CD64 "(Our work building the farmers market) has put us in a position to be more involved in economic development and pushing more foot traffic through the market. . . . Our staff as a whole is headed down that avenue of creating relationships. We're also trying to create a relationship with the Chamber's tourism person. (We're) involved in lots of connecting pieces . . .

This perception of the positive impact farmers markets have in a downtown area was shared by the town managers/downtown developers and planners interviewed for that community.

***Questions regarding Extension's role in downtown development.***

According to survey results, Extension's role in downtown development efforts had three primary labels, that of: Connector, Resource Provider, and Marketer and Agribusiness Promoter. These characteristics are consistent with the Extension mission of creating economic, societal, and intellectual prosperity for all North Carolinians through agricultural, food, and youth programs.

**Connector**

When asked whether they helped connect farmers or producers with a dining establishment, farmers market, or other food business that was the subject of the interview, all Extension staff replied that they had made connections in some form or fashion. When it comes to dining establishments, connecting help from Extension, however, sometimes was more passive, than direct.

CD 12 "When I have people come in that are looking to sell, especially your niche products like mushrooms for example, I can suggest some of the restaurants that might be buying . . . .So basically I give them names of restaurants and tell them they can check."

CD 12 "When farmers call me looking for sources for vendors I tell them to check with XXX. I feel like I don't do a lot, but I do that much."

However, four Extension respondents have taken a far more proactive approach to assisting dining establishments.

CD 23 "We provided support in helping them source local food from our farmers. To help them know which farmers had which products and help them make direct connection with those growers."

CD 54 "We work a lot to get our restaurants and businesses to use our producers. Sometimes a chef will call us saying they're looking for (X) product, or a farmer will call us and tell us they want to grow something the restaurants can use, and we will help hook them up with that. For example, "I have free range pork, and I want to see if they're interested.' So, we serve as a connection primarily."

CD90 "I did a cold call with him in the beginning. I stopped by, sat down with him and talked one afternoon when I knew his rush was over, and we discussed the principles of local foods and why he chose to already highlight some and how we could work together to improve that for him and for the farmers. So I think that that dialogue with him made us trusted partners and good friends. So from that point on . . . , I steered a lot of people towards him to at least try selling to a restaurant. He was easy to get along with and understood the hurdles and issues the growers were overcoming. That's one of the hardest things – a lot of chefs want to be local, but they don't fully understand the effort that it takes or when crops aren't what they thought it

would be. Some chefs can get upset pretty quickly (when they don't get the quality product in the timeframe they need)."

CD90"XX moved out here and made a huge claim to be local, organic, etc., but we were disappointed to see that they weren't buying much at all locally. Truth is, we had to reach out to them because to my knowledge, they've only bought a little bit, which was really disappointing to farmers. They seemed to know the value of local foods, used it for marketing, but nobody is seeing a lot of it being purchased. We're having to get them to prove that they mean what they say. Many restaurants buy one thing locally and call themselves a local food restaurant, so helping them understand that volume and consistency is important is difficult."

In one case, Extension staff connected the dining establishment with leftover harvest. In another case, Extension staff connected hog growers with the local brewery who had grain byproduct from the brewing processing. The hog growers now pick up the leftover grain at the brewery's backdoor to supplement their hog feed.

Farmers Markets, however, reflect a far deeper level of connection and Extension engagement. All Extension staff understood support of their local farmers market to be one of their official duties. In all cases, that support consisted of connecting local growers with the market.

CD 12 "When people call and want to know where a farmers market is located, or want to fill out an application, that

sort of thing, I direct them to (Main Street). I have to do their Grower's Certificate, so I visit the farmers and I also visit the market . . . I'm over there pretty regularly talking to the farmers."

CD 50 "The Horticulture Agent here years ago worked to develop the . . . Farmers Market, and then she has worked closely with the vegetable producers that are at that market, and then that market supplies to the (dining establishment)."

CD 90 "I think it's important to include the XX Farmers Market (as having an impact on downtown redevelopment). . . . When I was growing up I went to that market, and there were 3 or 4 trucks from South Carolina every Saturday and they didn't have a manager. So when I (joined Extension), we put together a board, got money from the county to hire a manager, and turned it into a 'local only' market. Now, the food has to be produced within 100 miles of the market. We grew it from 3-4 vendors to 46 vendors. That market changing, and having the arts, crafts, and cultures that it has, has really changed downtown. Saturdays are starting to pick back up and people are starting to go downtown to shop, where when I grew up people didn't go downtown for anything. So it's a slow process, but it's getting better."

### Resource Provider

In addition to facilitating market and chef/farmer connections, Extension staff provide needed technical assistance to farmers

in order to ensure quality product at both the farmers markets and dining establishments. Extension staff also direct growers to other resources who can help them with their business planning. One Extension staff responded:

CD23 “As potential new members go online we help them take a look at what niche products they could produce that are not currently available for sale at the market and capitalize on those opportunities. We also work closely with the . . . community college small business center to kind of guide them in the upstart of their business.”

In addition, several Extension staff write grants or leverage county funding to pay salaries of market staff, construct or improve facilities, or cover marketing and web site costs. In many cases, Extension plays a pivotal role in the startup of the farmers market, but over time phases out of the hands-on role and moves into a support function. For example, one Extension staff mentioned that although the town government had taken over the operation of the farmers market, the Extension office still “handled the WIC program”, i.e., the farmers market coupon program.

### **Marketer and Agribusiness Promoter**

The extent and degree to which Extension staff markets or promotes farm to table dining establishments or farmers markets in their community depends in large part on the relationship, if any, Extension has with the city office or organization promoting downtown development. The closer the relationship with that office or organization, the more active Extension is in promoting restaurants offering

menu items sourced with local food or markets offering local food for sale.

CD23 “I have a close relationship with the city manager, and we are always brainstorming around ways we can enhance and improve (our downtown) to bring additional resources for redevelopment efforts. I also work closely with the executive director of (the downtown development organization) that serves small businesses. She and I are partnering in ways to integrate the (farmers) market into the center of the city master plan that is just being developed. We are looking at several strategies, including long range strategic planning, that will make our market highly sustainable in the long run.”

CD54 “We are part of the downtown coalition. Any business that opens up that we can help with, we’re there, because it’s all connected to where we are. XX Street used to be a bit of a mess, years ago, and when the brewery came and we tried to revitalize the farmers market and local food movement, and XX restaurant came in, we had a lot of businesses open up on XX Street. It’s a much more booming area than it used to be 15 years ago.”

All of the Extension offices interviewed have some affiliation with the farmers markets in their communities, providing technical assistance through advocacy, grantwriting, fundraising events, quality control, market inspections, EBT access, organizational development, as well as marketing. As a result, Extension actively engages in promotional activities related to the

farmers markets, building consumer awareness of healthy local food options, and participating in community buy local movements. Service on a downtown development committee or joining the local chamber of commerce is often the start of a more vibrant engagement between Extension and local economic development that leads to the establishment of a farmers market in the downtown area. In addition, because Extension is often seen by local government as the expert on farmers markets (and how to get money for them), Extension will be the applicant on a grant, which will include funds for marketing. As one Extension staff put it:

CD92 “Our role was really the implementation of Electronic Benefits Transfer and Marketing. We did a lot of marketing through the grant, and some partners on the grant went door-to-door inviting people to the market. We reached out to Spanish speaking communities in our area by translating materials to Spanish. Marketing, access and outreach to the farmers were big pieces (for Extension involvement in the market).”

CD95 “Our office has assisted XX to receive a Local Food Promotion Grant. Our office wrote the grant, participated in the meetings, and helped develop a “XX Grown” Marketing Campaign. From that campaign we had bumper stickers, chalkboards, etc. funded. The grant supported a group called XX to work with restaurants to encourage them to highlight local foods and ingredients used at their restaurant. “

## CONCLUSIONS

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) makes the following claim regarding farmers markets:

“Successful public markets are the heart and soul of downtowns and neighborhoods, infusing our cities and towns with new energy and social and economic activity. Public markets, even if they only operate one day a week, act as an anchor for local businesses, encourage spin-off development, enhance tax bases and real estate values, and ultimately keep local dollars in the local economy. Markets attract new life to a downtown and encourage customers to spend more money and time, not just in the market, but in nearby shops and businesses. In a PPS survey of over 800 customers from a variety of indoor and open-air markets around the country, PPS discovered that 60% of market shoppers also visited nearby stores on the same day; of those, 60% said that they visited those additional stores only on days that they visit the market.”<sup>vi</sup>



Retrieved from <https://www.pps.org/article/the-benefits-of-public-markets>

Based on the results of this study, economically healthy and vibrant farmers markets located in

downtown areas are bringing the same benefits to strong Main Street communities in North Carolina. Extension's role in these public markets is to help establish, monitor and support their operation and success.

Successful farmers markets appear to result from strong collaborative efforts between Extension and town managers/downtown developers/planners. This is consistent with recommendations made in *The Center for Environmental Farming Systems' A Government Guide to Building Local Food Economies* (CEFS Government Guide) listed in Reference (iii). Without a supportive local government providing infrastructure and possible funding to the market, farmers markets will sometimes struggle, especially if they have been located outside of the downtown core or other area targeted for redevelopment.

The CEFS Government Guide also makes recommendations regarding the role government can play in not only the support of farmers markets but also other local food related businesses.

"Planners are uniquely positioned to support initiatives to increase access to healthy and local foods while supporting farmers and food businesses. While food policy councils are effective community advocates, and agricultural advisory boards of all kinds can provide specific resources to local governments, planners have the capacity and skills needed to help communities address long-term, big-picture food system goals. As the APA acknowledges, planners are trained in "the analysis of the land use and spatial dimensions of communities, externalities and hidden costs of potential policy decisions, interdisciplinary perspectives on community systems like the food system, and ways to link new goals like

community food systems into sustainable and healthy community goals."

The planning role of the town manager/downtown developer/planner is key to downtown development tied to local food. Extension should seize the opportunity to tap into downtown planning efforts, either by serving on a downtown development committee or by developing a strong relationship with the local planner, and recommend local food business as a major strategy for development.

Large or small, all downtown development should begin with a plan, have a strong brand and retail focus, focus on clustering (places that sell food, destination retail shops with good signage, and places open after 6 pm), have one or two anchor tenants, include downtown residential, have parking solutions and public washrooms, include "gathering places", community gateways, and wayfinding systems, incorporate intimate surroundings and provide activities and entertainment.<sup>vii</sup> A farmers market can serve as the gathering place, and one or two farm to table restaurants located close to the farmers market can build, for example, a cluster of businesses for a "healthy food" hub.



Extension's role in the support of farm to table restaurants is less-defined and consequently, many Extension staff do not see the opportunity

a farm to table restaurant can provide to both local farmers and the downtown core. By strengthening their relationship with the downtown developers/planners, Extension will be more “top of mind” as a resource for the restaurant entrepreneur. Extension’s involvement with that restaurant should commence early on in its business planning so that its menu ingredients can be more readily sourced locally as opposed to relying on large food distributors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For Extension staff:

- Strengthen relationship with local personnel tasked with downtown development, including planners, town managers, downtown developers, tourism offices, and chambers of commerce or other service organizations.
- When the town is considering a plan for downtown development, especially one designed to focus on local food system development, ask to have a seat at the table.
- Keep your finger on the pulse of downtown activity. When you hear rumblings about a new restaurant or other food business, confirm the specifics with local downtown development personnel and introduce yourself to the entrepreneur as a resource for local product.
- Support those restaurants who market themselves as farm to table (but who buy less than 25% of their ingredients locally) by educating them on the type and availability of local food product. Consider hosting a Grower-Buyer Meetup.<sup>viii</sup>

- Reach outside of your county into your region to identify farmers who offer meat, dairy, and produce.
- Encourage restaurant owners to list the farms they source from on their menus or other signage.

### For local Downtown Development staff:

- Get to know your Extension office.
- Involve Extension in more than just planning for a farmers market. Use their knowledge of local agriculture to consider recruitment of other types of local food businesses that may be needed or wanted in the community.
- When planning for a farmers market, keep in mind that in many Main Street communities, the farmers market catalyzed other town improvements, like streetscapings and other infrastructure. Consider starting a “demonstration project” centered around local food when redeveloping one or two blocks of a downtown. Kinston is a good example of this approach.
- Consider connecting downtown visitors with agritourism opportunities in the county. Create an “arts and ag” festival (Rowan County is an excellent example of such out of the box thinking.)<sup>ix</sup>
- Encourage downtown businesses to cross-market with one another and align their business hours so that there are a number of open businesses clustered around the same theme.
- Encourage restaurant owners to list the farms they source from on their menus or other signage.

## VALIDITY

The results of this study represent only a sliver of small towns in North Carolina and thus some of the findings could be challenged because of the small sample size. In addition, feedback was gathered from both town managers/downtown developers/planners and Extension staff in only

five of the thirty-two communities suggested by NC Department of Commerce. A larger survey of farm to table restaurants should be conducted to establish a metric of authenticity and help consumers make meaningful farm to table restaurant decisions.

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