

Town of Rumford community and economic development planning for agriculture

Final Report for CNE06-005

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2006: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2008

Matching Federal Funds: \$2,500.00

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$7,000.00

Region: Northeast

State: Maine

Project Leader:

[Mark Hews](#)

Threshold To Maine RC&D Area

Project Information

Summary:

When looking at the agriculture sector in Maine we find what appears to be a fairly straightforward production, marketing and distribution system of basic commodities and value added businesses. Upon further examination; however, additional factors exist and are identified that would expand our understanding of why food consumers buy what they buy, where they buy it, and how much of certain items get consumed. The question of how much Maine product is consumed at the local level represents a beginning understanding of a larger food marketing and distribution system that is geared to respond to the consumer market. Understanding this system may be more important in our ability to expand the agriculture sector locally through the River Valley Agriculture Commission.

Consumers today are much more sophisticated in their food preferences and purchasing. They have a vast amount of information presented to them about food products and multiple outlets to get their food. These outlets range from the local farm stand to the large superstores. It also includes a growing reliance on restaurants and fast food eating places for meal solutions as the amount of time to prepare meals at home diminishes. In the basic research completed for this economic development plan, it appears that ease of preparation and conveniences are the driving factors behind this trend towards meals away from home and more prepared food purchases at the local supermarket. With the advent of the Internet and the ability of mainstream media to almost instantaneously communicate information, consumers are well aware of the choices they have in the food market and how best to get the value-added products they want when they want them.

The River Valley Economic Development Plan acknowledges this reality and works to support and increase agriculture businesses that will develop the most practical method to expand local food consumption in Maine and the region. Basic figures exist on what Maine farmers produce and what Maine residents consume. While this

is a good start at understanding where gaps exist in local production and consumption, the Plan will work to help businesses start or expand to take advantage of changing demographics and consumer habits. Aside from identifying new business opportunities or ideas to increase Maine food consumption, the Plan will also provide a framework for looking into other food consumption factors such as consumer tastes and preferences. This expanded understanding of the consumer market can then be translated into usable information by the agriculture sector to start or expand more valued added products businesses or shift production to other more consumer valued products. Expanding the business opportunities to include these other factors will better serve the agriculture sector in the River Valley and help capitalize on trends and opportunities available to it for expanding farm gate receipts and net farm income.

The intent of the River Valley Economic Development Plan is foster the retention and expansion of existing farms and the creation of new agriculture enterprises by capitalizing on the development of needed local agriculture infrastructure, understanding consumer market data, and creation of new businesses and value added foods that will lead to more local products being consumed by the local consumer.

Project Objectives:

The major objective of the project is to assist the regional communities of Andover, Byron, Canton, Carthage, Dixfield, Hanover, Mexico, Peru, Roxbury, and Rumford write an economic development plan for agriculture viability in the region. Together these 10 communities constitute the River Valley Region. As part of the drafting of an economic development plan, the objective is to get each town to incorporate the plan into their comprehensive plan or other economic planning process and actively implement the plan. The River Valley Growth Council, River Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Threshold To Maine RC&D Area are active partners in the process. Another objective of the project is to establish the River Valley Agriculture Commission. This group made up of local representatives of the partner organizations and farmers will help guide the communities on agriculture issues and help with the implementation of the economic development plan. As part of their work the Agriculture Commission will focus on the following strategies:

Agriculture Development: business planning, direct marketing, business attraction.

Infrastructure: Business development, facilities (value added), utilities (energy), river front development.

Town Policies and Regulations: Zoning, tax incentives, ordinances.

Introduction:

In January of 2007, the Town of Rumford in cooperation with the River Valley Growth Council and the Threshold To Maine Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Area created an Agriculture Commission to develop a strategy for expanding the agriculture sector in the River Valley region. The Agriculture Commission is made up of representatives from the Town of Rumford, River Valley Growth Council, River Valley Chamber of Commerce, School Nutrition Services, Threshold To Maine RC&D Area and area farmers. The purpose of the River Valley Agriculture Commission is to integrate the development of the local agriculture sector into the member town's overall community and economic development plans. By positioning agriculture as a key economic and community development strategy, communities can expand agriculture businesses and attract new ones, build the necessary processing and value added infrastructure necessary to support local farms, provide

support services, and address tax and zoning issues favorable to agriculture development and overall rural community viability.

Research

Materials and methods:

The project was overseen by the River Valley Agriculture Commission appointed by the Town of Rumford and endorsed by the River Valley Growth Council. The purpose of the project is to draft a community and economic development plan focused on agriculture. That plan will incorporate strategies to expand agriculture businesses and attract new ones, build the necessary processing and value added infrastructure necessary to support local farms, provide support services, and address tax and zoning issues favorable to agriculture development.

In order to carry out this project, the local Agriculture Commission was formed to draft the plan. The Commission was comprised of members from Town Government, local citizens, the River Valley Chamber of Commerce, River Valley Growth Council, River Valley Technology Center, secondary and post secondary education, and farmers. It was the Commissions charge to draft an economic development plan for agriculture to be presented to the ten towns in the River Valley Region for endorsement by January of 2008. Threshold To Maine provided technical assistance on agriculture issues and economics. The final plan will be mailed to SARE.

Research results and discussion:

Surveys for both customers and farmers for the Agricultural project were completed. Results were compiled. Commission was formed by the Town of Rumford in conjunction with Growth Council. A group in Dixfield area would like to partner and assist however they can. A couple will be part of the Commission. There was not much of a response from farmers in the area. Most contacted were either not interested or only produced hay. Others simply felt they wouldn't be able to spare time for a committee. A few of the farmers recognize in their surveys that the market needs to be held on a weekend or longer hours during the week. Some are in need of financial assistance. Also mentioned from the farmers were better advertisement and too much work for the little or no profit. One comment from a farmer states that people will buy whatever is cheaper or better selection rather than supporting the local farmers.

The general public listed many things that could improve the farmers market. A lot of comments resulted in better advertising and displaying hours and days better. Some did not know even know when they were here. Most that have discovered have done so by passing the market on the road. The majority (not by much) have shopped the market. Word of mouth in this area was the most exposure for the market. The availability of more local products and convenient days hit high numbers. Most citizens work during the day and wish to visit the market after 5pm. It is between extremely important and very important that the products are of high quality. Other very important categories were variety, local products and that many farmers are represented. Different activities at the market were not identified as being important at all. Fresh seasonal produce, location and upcoming products that are well promoted scored very important as well.

The River Valley Agriculture Commission has met twice a month throughout the year. As a result the awareness of agriculture issues in the region has grown and people are much better informed about the opportunity to expand agriculture and

provide more local foods. An example of this was at a recent River Valley Growth Council meeting where members commented that they have heard and seen a lot about the Agriculture Commission and agriculture in general. The Agriculture Commission has coordinated the successful re-establishment of the River Valleys Farmers Market, created stronger links between local schools and local farmers, and helped the towns identify the gaps in their current comprehensive plans as it relates to agriculture. The Agriculture Commission has also helped the River Valley Growth Council investigate the establishment of a Commercial Incubator Kitchen in Rumford with a number of meetings held with potential users and partners.

The largest impact has been the development of the River Valley Economic Development Plan for Agriculture. The document lays out the future of agriculture in the River Valley region and how the Agriculture Commission and area town's change achieve that future. In it's final draft, the plan should be endorsed by the 10 towns by January. Once endorsed the plan will be implemented by the Agriculture Commission with support from the towns, River Valley Chamber of Commerce, River Valley Growth Council, and Threshold To Maine RC&D Area.

The Economic Development Plan has been completed and endorsed by the River Valley Growth Council and the Towns of Rumford, Mexico, Bryon, and Roxebury. Endorsements from the other six towns are expected. The Agriculture Commission has been formally aligned with the River Valley Growth Council as a body and will now begin implementation of the plan.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

For the last several months, the Commission began to build the plan. Research and data collection became intense. An inventory of available resources is included along with the River Valley land usage and future outlook. Statistics of the surrounding area are included to identify community issues with nutrition, poverty levels and unhealthy life styles. Strategies for agriculture and community support were identified. The plan also discusses farming and consumer issues as well as goals the Commission would like to reach. The Commission is working through realistic and viable priorities. The plan is in the final stages and ultimately will be adopted by the Town of Rumford.

The Commission has organized a breakfast for town officials of all the ten towns held on October 10th. Invitations were sent to all Selectmen, Town Managers, River Valley Chamber, Healthy Communities, area representatives, local newspapers, school superintendents and nutrition directors, etc. Mark Hews made a presentation on the economic outlook for agriculture and the work of the Commission. Handouts of the draft of the economic development plan were provided to all the towns present. The River Valley Growth Council also received a copy of the plan. Other handouts and information included the Agriculture Commission fact sheet and information from the farmers market.

The final plan was presented by Agriculture Commission members and staff to each of the ten towns and to the River Valley Growth Council at their business

meeting on December 5, 2007. After reviewing the plan and hearing from members of the Commission, the River Valley Growth Council endorsed the plan and agreed to allow staff to continue administrative support of the Commission in 2008. The town of Rumford also unanimously endorsed the plan.

The final version of the Economic Development plan will be mailed to SARE. Outreach is covered in accomplishments.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

At the end of 2006, the project had lost two key people responsible for implementation. Steve Eldridge, Town Manager, resigned from his position. Rosie Bradley, Executive Director of the River Valley Growth Council, resigned and move to another community. The loses resulted in delays that were unforeseeable at the beginning of the project. Due to this not much progress was made in the interim between Steve and Rosie leaving and the appointment of Mark Hews to the position of Project Leader. The following summary captures the progress to date for the project. As of April, the Agriculture Commission is meeting full time, twice a month, and is beginning to draft the economic development plan that is the major deliverable as part of this project.

Progress from Project Beginning to December 2006

Farmer Surveys:

total of 50 sent

only 6 returned (follow up phone calls, not much response or don't apply)

obtained list from Mark Hews

advertised in GC Quarterly Newsletter

advertised through Chamber

advertised through email contacts

promotion throughout 10 towns of River Valley

partner from River Valley Farmer's Market (Annette Marin project)

The next step from the farmer surveys is for the Commission analyze the data.

Customer Surveys:

250 to general public (towns, libraries, TC, OFCU, Hospital, etc.)

Received 72 back

Advertised through Chamber, GC quarterly newsletter

Fairly good response & feedback from community

The next step for customers of the farmers market is to analyze the data (hours, places, better advertising of market, quality of goods, variety of goods, local products)

Commission formed:

Appointment from the Town of Rumford to 5 people to Agriculture Commission

Set Agenda for meeting

Collaborate with Mark Hews

Milestones for the project included:

October 2006 - Formation of Agriculture Commission by Town

February 2007 - Orientation and charge provided to Commission, staffing assigned

April 2007 - Inventory of Agriculture and Demographic/economic analysis complete

May 2007 - Infrastructure Inventory and Assessment complete

August 2007 – Draft goals, objectives, and strategies completed

October 2007 – Public outreach and comment completed

December 2007 – Final draft of economic development plan completed and available for public comment.

January 2008 – Endorsement of plan by towns. This has been completed and the final version of the Economic Development plan has been made public.

The River Valley Agriculture Commission meets the second and fourth Wednesday's of each month. The following accomplishments occurred in 2007.

- Re-established the River Valley Farmers Market (RVFM)
 - o Held public meetings to recruit new vendors to the Market to improve selection, availability and sustainability (mailed invite to all area farmers in a 40-mile radius)
 - o Commission worked on updating RVFM bylaws and guidelines
 - o new location for better exposure and easy in/out access, Rt. 2, Mexico
 - o new day & time to accommodate recommendations of the general public
 - o promotion of RVFM – press releases to all area newspapers, radio and TV, displayed on Growth Council website, better signage, banners, posters, local message boards around towns, educational/informational handouts available at Market, distributed through River Valley Chamber membership, brochures placed around town (businesses and email distribution) – opening day (May 25th) Ribbon Cutting which got some really good press with front page article, well attended
 - o Market has been going very well and will run until Oct. 12th
- Public Awareness/Educational Component
 - o Commission began to bring in other partners (River Valley Healthy Communities Coalition, River Valley Chamber of Commerce, School Nutrition Directors, Mexico Town Manager and newly hired Rumford and Dixfield Town Managers
 - o Discussions on collaborating with the schools for youth education, community gardens, coop farming, networking groups, etc
 - o Outreach in the community by utilizing fact sheets, Ag related materials and constant display of the work of the Commission by publicizing locally
 - o Push for local farms, local foods
 - o Integrate farming with schools and Healthy Communities for nutrition goals
 - o 10-town Selectmen support
 - o Incorporate into Growth Council's strategic plan
 - o Mark made a presentation to the Growth Council Board of Directors regarding the work of the Commission and the agricultural outlook for Maine and the possible economic impact
 - o Vendors participating in other area events (Mexico Community Fundraising Day's, Oktoberfest, etc.)
 - o Farming internships
 - o Maine Harvest Day schools on Sept. 26th
 - o Women, Work & Community held business planning workshops geared for farmers
 - o An Entrepreneur workshop was held in August for the general public
- Infrastructure
 - o Shared Use Kitchen Concept – This is a spring-off for the Commission in which they will support; however the acting Director of the Growth Council will spearhead the idea that surfaced before the Commission was formed. Mark will lend his expertise since he has worked with groups doing this in Maine already. In June, two public meetings were held to determine the interest in a shared commercial kitchen in the community. We were very pleased with the turn out (25 people attended). There is enough interest to at least explore the concept. This could also mean more sales for the local farmers. The general consensus from the public was confusion over licensing requirements and guidelines for commercially producing their product. A

follow up public meeting was held with representatives from the Dept. of Agriculture and Dept. of Health & Human Services to provide a walk-thru process of licensing requirements and guidelines accustomed to specific goods. Discussions are taking place with the school departments and Region 9 School of Applied Technology to perhaps offer a Culinary Arts program in conjunction with the shared use kitchen. Next steps considered are offering a Serve Safe Food Handling Course and preliminary design of the kitchen. The Growth Council would then pursue funding for a feasibility study.

- o Value added-niche markets & Cooperatives
- o Equipment/custom harvesting/sharing
- o Warehousing/cold storage & distribution
- o Bringing supply/demand together
- o Slaughter facility

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

The Economic Development plan has already made a tremendous contribution to the River Valley region by helping communities and citizens realize the potential of agriculture development. Also the process of forming the Agriculture Commission and meeting on a regular basis has helped community leaders and regional representatives gain a better appreciation of agriculture issues in the region.

Future Recommendations

Keep the Sustainable Communities program going.

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