

Focus Group for Food System Business Entrepreneurs
Following PVGrows Fall Forum
10/27/11, 1:15-3:00 pm

Welcome (Margaret). Welcome, thanks for coming. I'm Margaret Christie, I'm from CISA. I am also a member of the PVGrows Infrastructure Finance Working Group, which started the PVGrows Loan Fund. At CISA, we're interested in how we can improve the support available to local food system businesses. The PVGrows Loan Fund is focused on financing infrastructure for local agriculture, particularly post-harvest infrastructure like processing and distribution. Michael Abbate is here from the Western Massachusetts Enterprise Fund. They are a particularly important part of the PVGrows Loan Fund because they administer and manage the loans. And WMEF is interested in providing more financing for farm and food businesses of all kinds, because they see these businesses have the potential to be a driver of the region's economy.

You are all here because you operate local food businesses. As we discussed this morning, your businesses, and businesses like yours, are really important to strengthening and expanding the local food system. We'd like to support your existing businesses, and we'd like to support new enterprises, and we think you know what kinds of support you need.

Because we'd really like to know what you think, Michael and I aren't really going to participate in the discussion. We're here to listen and to take notes. We're also taping the session so that we can refer back to the tape if we need to. We to be able to refer to your words exactly as they you spoke them. We are asking you to sign a release form that allows us to audiotape this conversation. We'll produce a transcript of the session, and we'll take your names out of it, and we will share it with the members of the PVGrows Infrastructure Finance Working Group and CISA staff, and that's it.

So that we can focus on the listening and taking notes, we've asked John Engel, who facilitated this morning, to facilitate the discussion here, too, so now I'm going to turn this over to John.

Introduction (John)

Explain process, ask participants to introduce themselves, names and businesses.
(Name tags with first name and the name of the business)

Slide 1: Assumptions:

- 1) Food system businesses are key to strengthening and expanding local food system.
- 2) Non-profits and community leaders can help support growth in the local food system.

Refer to powerpoint assumptions slide. Do people agree with these underlying assumptions? Show of hands—strongly agree, agree, etc.

If disagreement, let's take a few minutes to better understand where that's coming from, what we could say in these statements to get to agreement.

Slide 2: Goal of today's focus group: To learn what you think is needed to strengthen and expand the local food system.

- What's working and why
- What additional initiatives or resources are needed?
- What kinds of financing, assistance, and networking are helpful?

Slide 3: The big picture—what is needed to strengthen and expand the local food system?

1. The Pioneer Valley local food system has grown a lot. What factors have been most important to this expansion?

- Can you provide more specific examples?

2. What, specifically, is needed to further strengthen and expand the food system?

- What specific businesses are needed?
- What specific changes in the business environment are needed (like changes in policy or regulation, different kinds of financing, more public support)?
- Do we need more entrepreneurs—people willing to take a risk and start something? If so, how could we encourage that?

3. Infrastructure businesses provide services that help farmers produce food or reach markets—things like processing and distribution. What kinds of infrastructure growth in the Valley would positively impact multiple farms and food businesses in the Valley?

- What kinds of infrastructure need to be developed farm-by-farm, and what kinds could be shared-use or regional facilities?
- What qualities make a shared-use facility work?

[Comment: John will move on here if this discussion seems too broad or not useful]

Slide 7: Financing Needs

John: We recognize that we have a small group of people here, and your needs may be different than those of other businesses. We hope that you will think about what would be useful not only to your own business but to other food system businesses. We will use the information we get today as we think about how to get input from many more sources.

1. Do you think the kinds of financing food system businesses need are available in this region? If yes, what kinds of financing do you mean, and where would you find it? If no, explain what isn't available, and where you have looked for it.
 - Do you have creative financing ideas for local food or farm businesses?

2. What kinds of terms or services could a lender offer that would make a loan more favorable to you?
 - What about support with preparing business plans or loan paperwork?
 - What kinds of changes in payback time, interest rates, collateral requirements, or other terms would make loans work better for businesses like yours?
 - Is any one of these suggested changes in loan terms more important than the others?

3. If you have looked for financing for your business, what kinds of things did you need the money for?

Slide 11: Training and Support

John: We're interested in how we can help business owners gain information and skills. This can happen in lots of ways: on-line, in print, one-on-one, in workshops or classes, through peer mentoring, and through opportunities to network and learn from other business people. Sometimes this is called technical assistance.

1. How did you learn the things you needed to know when you started your business?
How do you learn now?
2. What kinds of technical assistance currently exist that you find to be useful or you think other business owners find useful?
 - When is more general assistance, like workshops or written materials, helpful?
 - When do you think one-on-one assistance is helpful?
3. What additional forms of technical assistance would you find to be useful?
 - What opportunities currently exist for business owners to learn from each other?
 - What additional opportunities for learning from other food businesspeople would you find useful?

Slide 15: We want to make sure that we've heard about the challenges you've experienced as business owners. If you haven't commented on this already, can you tell us what are the barriers to growth in your business? How have you responded to those barriers, and what kinds of support would be helpful?

- What are the greatest barriers in your business to selling more product locally?

Slide 16: Repeat assumptions and goal

What was most insightful or useful for you to take away from this conversation?

What are one or two ideas that you believe are most important for our notetakers to capture and take away?

Many thanks for your help.