**Prices Fork Food Project**

Radford developer Joe Fortier of Taylor Hollow Construction is planning to redevelop an abandoned elementary school in Prices Fork, VA . This rural structure is located approximately 4 miles from the Virginia Tech campus, on the road that connects Blacksburg to Radford. He plans to create low-income housing units aimed at the senior population in the former classrooms, and to convert the gym, kitchen and open-concept kindergarten area into commercial space. He has encouraged community members to consider possible uses of this space for local food endeavors, and has participated in several meetings with Town of Blacksburg staff and community members to discuss the possibilities.

Two local efforts are currently informing this process of exploration:

* The Montgomery County Farm to Community Planning Project is a local food system assessment that has recently been conducted by Friends of the Farmers Market (the non-profit that manages the Blacksburg Farmers Market), with funding from the USDA Community Food Projects program and Southern SARE. The report, which will be published in early 2015, has provided valuable information regarding the needs of consumers, producers and retailers in Montgomery County, much of which is relevant to the proposed Prices Fork initiative.
* A grant from the Appalachian Foodshed Project, administered by the New River Valley Planning District Commision, is funding an initial needs assessment to determine local support for the project and explore possible directions that it might take.

The following brief reports provide some details on these two initiatives:

**The Montgomery County Farm to Community Planning Project**

The Prices Fork Food Project has the potential to serve several documented needs within Montgomery County and the region. From November 2013 through November 2014, the Friends of the Farmers Market completed the Montgomery County Farm to Community Planning Project, a food system assessment that specifically sought to identify opportunities to foster growth in local agriculture in ways that are inclusive to the low-income population. The results were simultaneously predictable and surprising.

From the consumer end, an in-person survey of fifty low-income consumers indicated that the vast majority buy fresh produce through mainstream food venues, such as chain grocery stores. Although convenience was listed as the number one reason why they shopped there, quality came in second. They care about the condition of their produce. Additionally, nearly three-quarters of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I know how to grow my own food,” reflecting the agricultural heritage of the sample and of the region. However, focus groups revealed that the reason why so few survey participants gardened at home was because of rental situations and prohibitions from landlords. The vast majority of those surveyed believed having a community garden and/or farmers market in their neighborhood would result in them eating healthier. Finally, while only sixteen percent were interested in starting their own food-based businesses, most people believed that a food business incubator and community kitchen would be beneficial to their community.

From the producer side of the food system, expansion is on the minds of area producers. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed desired to expand their operations, focusing on direct, restaurant, and then institutional buyers. Those producers cited land and labor access, transport cost or type, and marketing as top barriers to doing so. Training programs regarding business planning, lending and grants, and marketing were listed as needs. During focus groups and interviews, an aggregation and distribution hub was commonly suggested, as producers were also keenly aware of the major barrier cited by local food stores and restaurants in selling local produce: communication between buyers and producers. Independent grocery stores were found to be the current option for producers, though large chain groceries were not opposed to selling local, but extremely concerned with keeping up with demand and organizing logistics between individual producers.

We can conclude from this assessment that the primary means of linking low-income consumers and local-producers is currently through mainstream food venues. However, the producers in the area are finding barriers to scaling up and to communicating with buyers. A food hub or farmer cooperative may ameliorate these issues of scale and marketing. Community gardens would be welcomed by residents and may help to increase the amount of produce consumed and foster entrepreneurship around agriculture that is already a part of the region's heritage. A food business incubator may help to channel this in ways that will encourage creativity and collaboration between producers, entrepreneurs, and food venues.

**Price’s Fork Food Project: Appalachian Foodshed Community Enhancement Grant**

The Price’s Fork Food Project was awarded a Community Enhancement Grant from the Appalachian Foodshed Project, which was made possible by a 2011 USDA NIFA-AFRI Grant (Award No. 2011-68004-30079). With these funds the Initiative’s advisory group is exploring viable options for a local/regional food-oriented initiative that would be restricted to a particular area of the former Price’s Fork Elementary School site. The potential initiative needs to have a sustainable business model and enough momentum and resources to be ready in 18 months – 2 years. As the group works to identify feasible ideas, it is looking for input from regional food experts/producers/entrepreneurs/etc. as well as those individuals who might frequent/be served by the site, to include those living in and around Price’s Fork, Montgomery County and the NRV region as a whole.

After working with our small initial Food Advisory Group for a few months to build the foundation for this project, we hosted a focus group meeting at the end of October and invited individuals who had been identified as potential contributors to the development of this project based on their area of expertise, knowledge about regional food systems, and/or connection to the community (Price's Fork, Montgomery County, and/or NRV-wide). The purpose of the focus group meeting was to gather information about food-based initiatives that could be feasible for the site, to provide direction for continued research and site visits, and to engage more stakeholders in the project. This meeting generated several ideas, the most popular of which were:

* Community commercial kitchen
* Café/music venue
* Community event/gathering space
* Farmers market
* Single point local food distribution center/hub for low-income food distribution programs

During the focus group meeting and again in December during our Advisory Group meeting, participants discussed the likelihood that the potential initiative might need to be a combination of the above ideas.

With an expanded Advisory Group, we are continuing to develop the initiative ideas generated thus far, research funding opportunities, identify additional stakeholders, and plan for a broader community forum that will take place in January/February. The goal of the community forum is to introduce the project to a broader audience, to share and build upon the ideas, and to gauge community support and excitement around each idea. We plan to conduct site visits during the March-May timeframe and will be compiling a best practice document that will contain the Advisory Group’s recommendation(s) for the site. The final progress report for the grant is due November 30, 2015.