

FEAST Workshop, Thayer County, Nebraska

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Despite being in one of the most agriculturally productive areas in the country Thayer County, Nebraska, lies in the middle of a rural food desert. Access to high quality fruits and vegetables for residents of this area requires traveling a minimum of 100 miles round trip to the nearest fully stocked grocery store with a more efficient distribution network. With food prices at their highest in more than two decades and long term fuel prices continuing to rise, access, affordability and other barriers to obtaining nutritional food is becoming increasingly difficult to overcome.

Nebraska's 47,700 farms are almost exclusively tied to the culture of large scale agriculture that produces corn and soybeans. Getting Nebraska farmers to plow under even part of their crops to plant fruits and vegetables is a mindset that is next to impossible to change.

In addition, Davenport, Nebraska, population, 279, has lost over 17% of its population since 2000 and sits in the middle of the food desert region. There has been growing interest in access to fresh, healthy and locally grown food over the past four years due primarily to the work of one local food entrepreneur, Harold Stone. Dr. Stone moved to Davenport about five years ago with his wife, a former resident of the town. They wanted to retire in this small town because they wanted to help change the continuing decline they were witnessing. They felt development of a regional food hub and addressing food access issues could turn Davenport and surrounding small towns around.

The Stones have transformed some of the food access issues in their town. They held training classes on various growing practices to include organic growing and helped local gardeners learn how to scale up their operations. They started a farmers market in Davenport where it was successful from the first day with many folks traveling from other communities to participate in purchasing fresh, locally grown fruits, vegetables and more. And they purchased a building on Main Street and transformed it into the Main Street Market – a year-round farmers market that sold a variety of locally grown and raised food to include meat, eggs, cheese, fruits and vegetables. Their certified kitchen – a part of the Main Street Market - was the location where local folks could preserve their food both for sale and personal use.

The Main Street Market was the location for a FEAST (Food-Education-Agriculture-Solutions-Together) workshop because of the heightened local awareness of development of this local food hub. FEAST is a community organizing process that allows participants to engage in an informed and facilitated discussion about food, education and agriculture in their community and begin to work toward solutions together to help build a healthier, more equitable and more resilient local food system.

A diverse group of twelve people participated in the workshop to include the Director of the food bank that serves the area, a representative of Public Health, local concerned community members and local leaders met November 14, 2013. They all came together to look at food security. Information was shared about the status of the number of local folks using the Food Bank, the number of food insecure and more.

Based on this information, the participants broke up into two groups to work on “Distribution System” and “Encouraging Local.” Each group also looked at the following topics around their selected focus: Necessary Steps, Challenges, First Step, and Who/What/When. Below are the results of the discussions.

Distribution System:

Necessary Steps

- Organize local champions
- Identify how to bring food to Food Bank distribution town
- Identify central location (food hub)
- Communications: advertise to churches, schools etc; send notes home with Backpack families

Challenges:

- Identify families in need
- How to distribute and connect food to families in need
- Confidentiality
- Shortage of fresh/local food in winter months

First Step:

- Send marketing information about Food Bank mobile distribution to churches, schools, etc
- Find local champions

Who/What/When: Assignments were made and volunteers offered to carry them out

Encouraging Local:

Necessary Steps:

- Define message and measurement
- Form stakeholders group
- Seek money
- Figure out how to make it sustainable
- *Challenges:*
 - Build economic case
- Seek innovative people
- Community endorsement

First Step:

- Convene the right stakeholders who can complete the necessary steps

Who/What/When: The Center for Rural Affairs agreed to convene the right stakeholders

The community was engaged in the workshop and excited about next steps. However, since the meeting it has been difficult to organize a meeting with key stakeholders.