



Growing a Robust & Resilient Region

OUR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM AT A GLANCE





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INTRODUCTION



This document draws from a comprehensive local food system assessment of the CONNECT Our Future project region, a 14-county bi-state area around Charlotte, NC. The assessment research includes a thorough inventory of existing food production and consumption data as well as investigations into regional food system assets including infrastructure, markets, accessibility, and the food waste stream. The full assessment identifies significant data indicators for local food systems throughout the CONNECT Our Future project region and can be used as a resource for the region's communities to conduct their own, more detailed assessments based on specific needs.

This report samples and summarizes major findings from the assessment research and discusses key opportunities and actions for the region based on the assessment's findings. It is intended to function as an introduction and overview, and appetizer if you will, for the full meal presented in the CONNECT Our Future Food Systems Assessment Report.



FINDINGS

Regional Demographics

Population	2.5 million	Percent of population in poverty	16%
Average household income	\$27,500	Rate of diagnosed diabetes	10%
Adults with bachelor's degree or higher	29%	Obesity rate	28%
High school graduates	85%	Percent of population living in rural areas	20%
Percent of population under 20	27%		



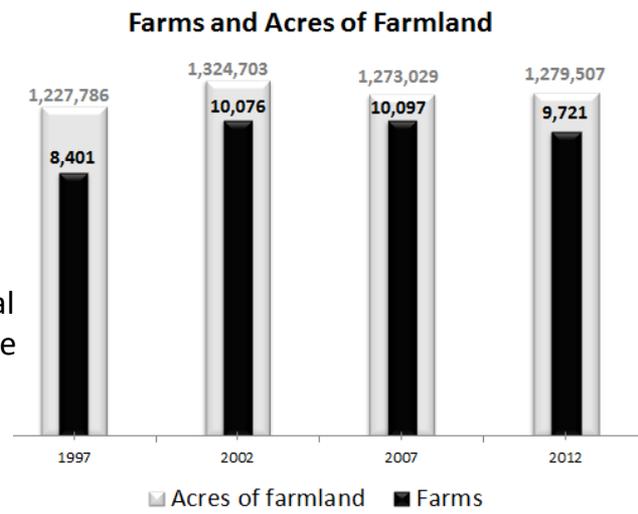
FINDINGS



Food Production

As of the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture, the CONNECT Our Future project region is home to 9,721 farms and 14,396 farmers. This is a 3.7 percent loss in farms and a 2 percent loss of farmers from 2007 Census figures. The loss in farms mirrors a national trend; between 2007 and 2012 the Census of Agriculture reported a 4 percent drop in farm numbers.

Total agricultural receipts reported for the region in 2012 totaled over \$1.5 billion, a 25 percent increase from over \$1.2 billion reported in 2007. However, both the 2007 and 2012 agricultural censuses reported more farms in the region with low sales or losses than high sales. The vast majority of farms in the region had sales of less than \$10,000. In 2012 the total number of farms reporting net cash income gains was 3,572 while the number reporting net cash income losses was nearly twice as high at 6,148.



Currently, 4.8 percent of farms in the region are growing fresh fruits and vegetables (a drop from 5.2 percent in 2007). These farms produce a wide variety of products including the 22 types of fruits and vegetables that account for over 53 percent of those most commonly consumed by the region's residents.

FINDINGS

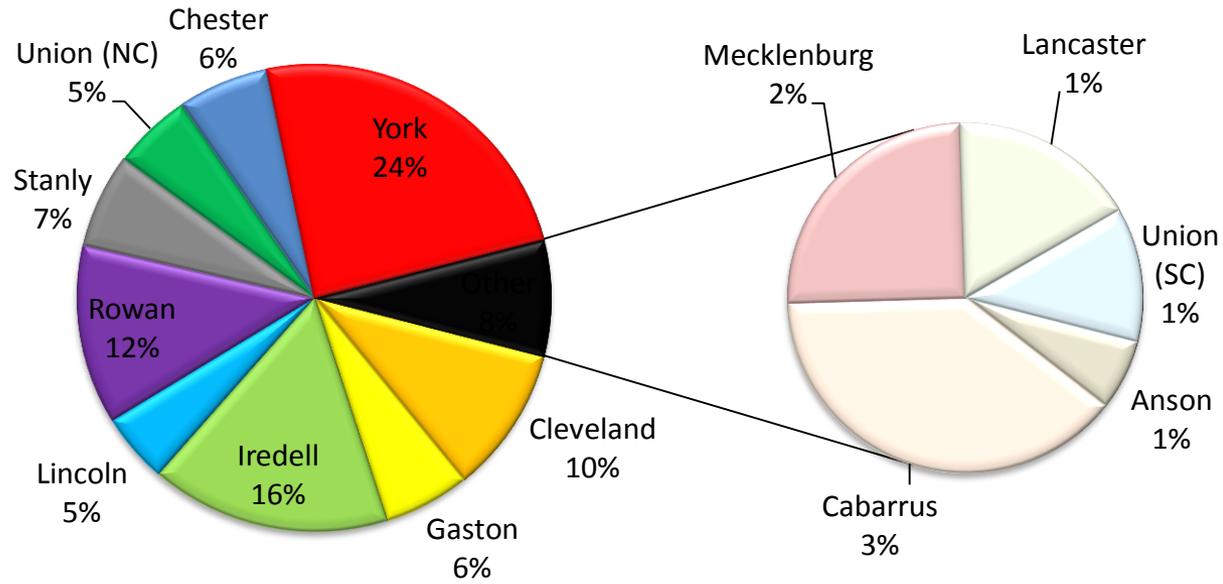
Resident Food Consumption & Spending

Based on 2012 population estimates, the residents of the CONNECT Our Future project region spend \$5.8 billion per year on food: \$3.4 billion on food consumed at home and \$2.4 billion on food consumed away from home.

Annually, the region's residents spend \$763 million on fresh fruits and vegetables that can be grown locally. In comparison, farms in the project region produced only an estimated retail equivalent of around \$100 million of the same fruit and vegetable products.

However, interest in local food products by area residents is on the rise. Evidence of this interest can be seen in the growth of direct sales in the project region. As a whole, the 14 counties experienced a 103 percent increase in direct sales from 2002 to 2007, going from \$1.8 million to nearly \$3.7 million. Direct sales grew again between 2007 and 2012 reaching \$4.7 million, though this increase was not as precipitous as the increase in prior years.

\$4,747,000 in Direct Sales by County (2012)



FINDINGS



Equity in the Food System

In the CONNECT Our Future project region an estimated 16 percent of the population lives in poverty, 16.8 percent are food-insecure, and 16.7 percent participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). An estimated 15 census tracts in the region have been identified as food deserts by the USDA's Food Access Research Atlas.

A variety of food assistance programs in the CONNECT region work to help residents struggling with food insecurity acquire the food they need, including food pantries, crisis centers, community gardens, and soup kitchens.

While there are multiple factors that contribute to food insecurity, the dominant food system is itself a significant source of poverty and therefore food insecurity. In the CONNECT Our Future project region, an estimated 10 percent of employed adults work in the food industry and on average earn less than the average salary of residents in the project region as a whole. The average annual wage for residents in the project region is \$27,500 compared to farmworkers and laborers who earn \$22,590 per year and food service workers who earn \$20,830 per year.

Spotlight on Food Waste Diversion



Cabarrus County Compost Facility

The North Carolina Department of Environmental and Natural Resources estimates that Mecklenburg County, as North Carolina's most populous county, generates more food waste than any other county in the state at approximately 108,781 tons of municipal solid food waste per year. Food waste is estimated to constitute as much as 15 percent of the total municipal solid waste disposed in Mecklenburg County.

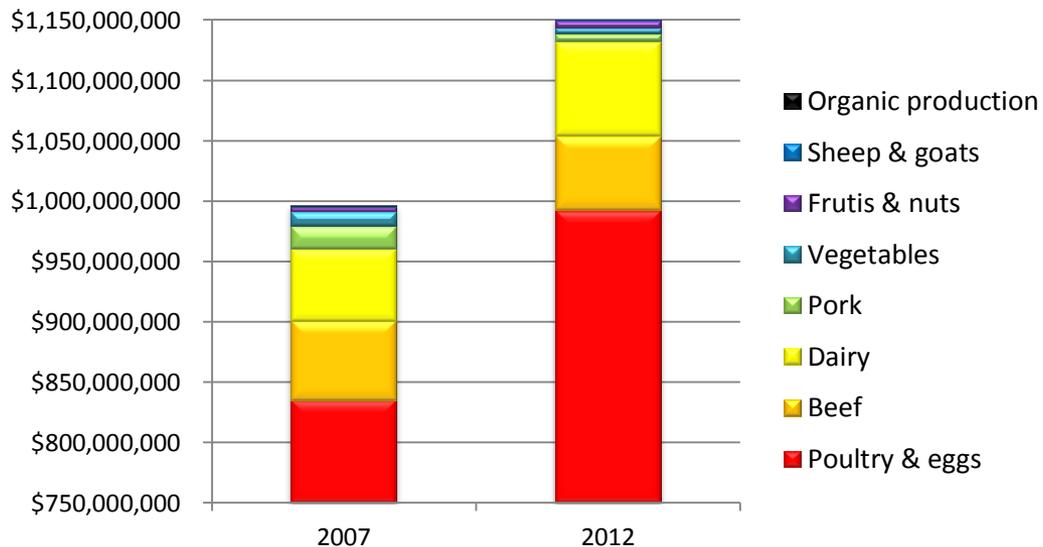
However, Mecklenburg County has demonstrated a continuous commitment to waste reduction within the county and is known for its innovative waste reduction and recycling education programs. According to the county's 2012 Solid Waste Management Plan, Mecklenburg County has already achieved an overall waste reduction rate of 40 percent from its baseline year of FY 1998/1999.

OPPORTUNITIES

Local agriculture is an economic driver

The CONNECT Our Future project region's farm economy is in a period of transition. To some extent, change is being driven by a global trend toward consolidation of the food system. Other shifts are occurring simultaneously. In the decade between 1997 and 2007, the region experienced a 48 percent increase in farms producing fruits and vegetables. Direct sales – the USDA category used to describe transactions directly between farmers and consumers – have almost doubled and are expected to continue growing, bolstered by strong demand for local food. **For the project region, the research finds a \$662 million gap between the amount residents spend on fresh fruits and vegetables and the retail equivalent value of these same fruits and vegetables that can be produced by local farms.** In this context of transition, the potential for expanding local markets for local farm products is significant.

Value of Agricultural Products Sold 2007 and 2012



OPPORTUNITIES

Local food builds community health

Evidence of the correlation between local food and positive health impacts can be seen in recent research studies. A study of shoppers at ten farmers markets in Kentucky found that farmers market shoppers consume more fruits and vegetables per day on average than 76 percent of Kentuckians as a whole.

Another research study looking at national data found that for each additional farmers market present in a county, obesity and diabetes rates decreased by 0.07 and 0.03 percent respectively.

Surveys of the region's local food and farm stakeholders found that community leaders believe outreach and education about local food and local farms is a top priority in the CONNECT Our Future project region. Rich learning environments focused on local food and experiential instruction promote healthy eating and positive associations with healthy food, leading to healthier eating and lifestyle habits.

The CONNECT Our Future region is already home to several annual food and farm events that promote experiential local food activities including the Charlotte area's Know Your Farms Tour, the Statesville Pumpkin Fest, and the York County Ag+Art Tour.



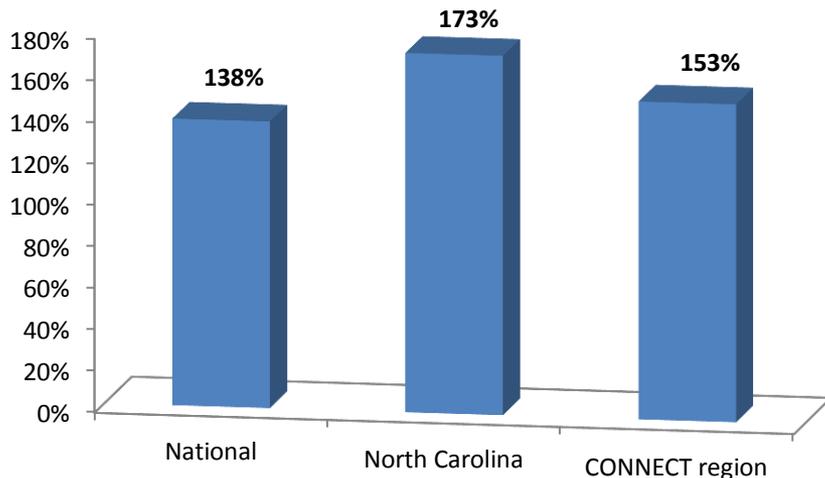
OPPORTUNITIES



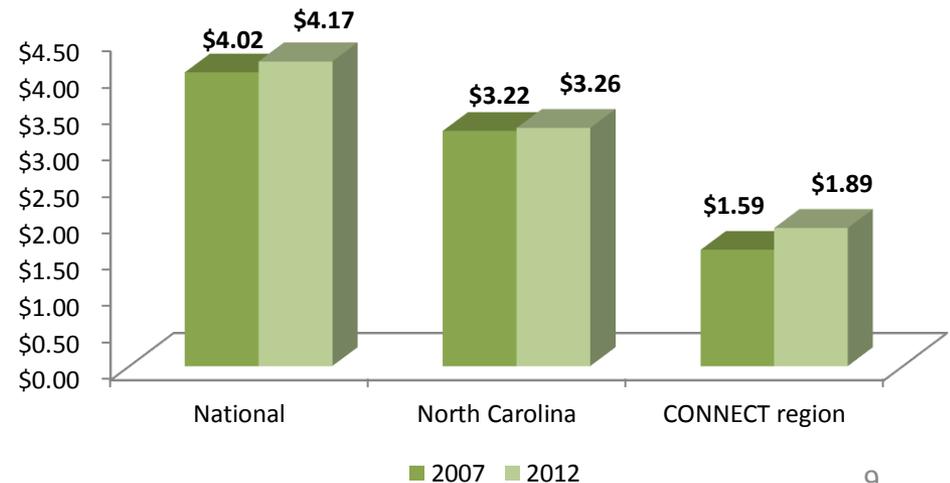
Demand for local is growing

Across all markets – from direct to consumer to the largest regional grocery chains – there is growing demand for food sourced from local farms. With targeted promotion and outreach and improvements in local infrastructure to accommodate more local products, there is ample room to grow markets as well as welcome new farmers.

Growth in Direct Sales 1997-2012



Direct Sales Per-Capita 2007 and 2012

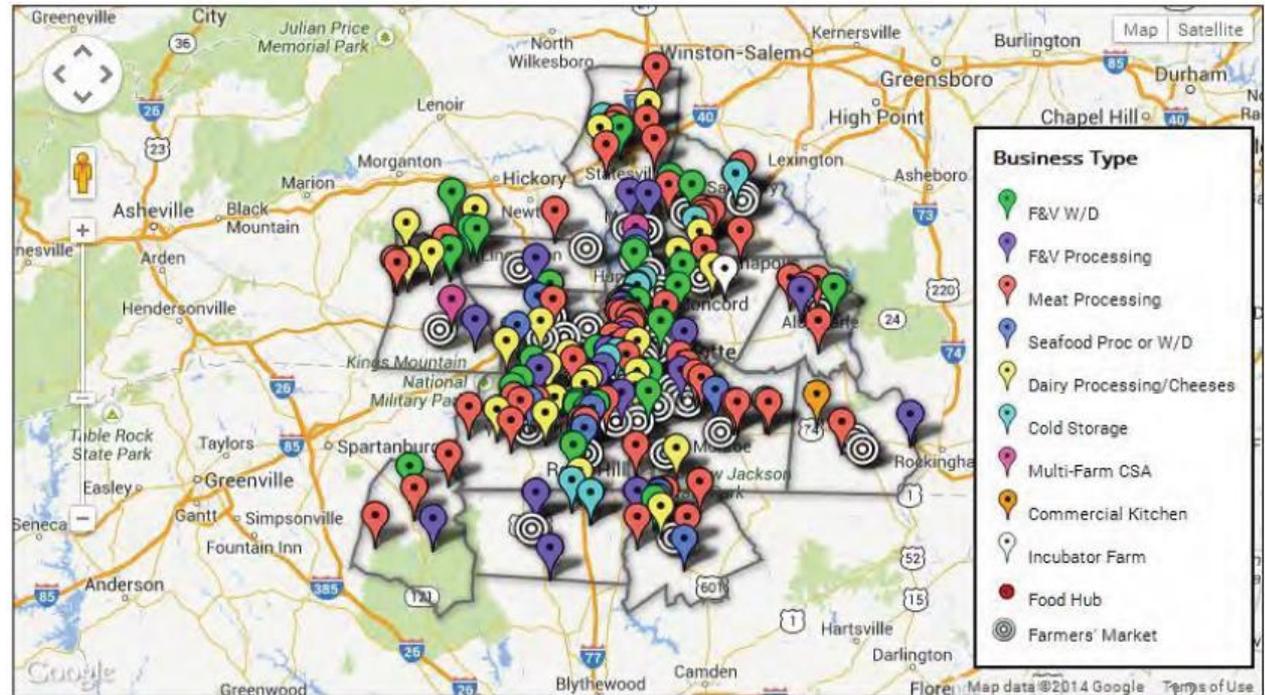


OPPORTUNITIES

Local food programs are already up and running

Several regional food branding programs exist in the CONNECT Our Future region to help producers add value to their farm products, such as the North Carolina Department of Agriculture's, "Got to Be NC" program, the "Piedmont Grown" program of Piedmont Grown NC, the "Buy Fresh Buy Local" program of the SEED Foundation of North Carolina, and South Carolina's "Certified South Carolina" campaign.

The region is also home to a variety of businesses that provide crucial intermediary steps in local food supply chains, including value-added processors, fresh produce wholesaler/distributors, multi-farm CSAs, food hubs, cold storage, and community kitchens.



Spotlight on Direct Markets



Atherton Mill and Market,
Charlotte, NC

Direct markets can provide the highest return to farmers and the lowest barriers to entry in comparison to other types of wholesale and retail markets. They provide an easier starting point for farmers new to marketing (because of the minimal cost required for entry). Furthermore, in providing a direct connection between consumer and farmer, they cultivate customer loyalty and advocacy for local farms and food. People shop at farmers markets not just for food but for the experience of interacting directly with the people that grow their food and for a sense of community.

There are at least 67 farmers markets in the 14 counties (on average one farmers market for every 37,451 residents) providing local food to local community members.

Between 2007 and 2012 the 14 counties experienced a 30 percent increase in direct sales (sales to consumers through farmers markets, roadside stands, CSA's, u-pick operations), going from nearly \$3.7 million to \$4.7 million.

TAKE ACTION



Bring food system issues to the forefront of local government

Build capacity for public speaking and presenting on community food systems across food council and network membership.

Develop a speaker's bureau, and encourage existing social and civic clubs, such as Rotary, Civitan, Optimist, and Kiwanis, to invite speakers who can highlight community food system issues.

Host or attend films focused on local food system issues.

Look for opportunities to educate elected officials and decision makers on food system issues. One example is the Stewardship Tour for Elected Officials, sponsored by the Cabarrus Soil and Water District.

Host viewing sites for webinars pertaining to community food systems and encourage local government staff and elected officials to attend.

TAKE ACTION

Support farmers and local food production

Connect farmers and food producers with opportunities to expand education and business skills through available programs in the community including:

- REAL Agpreneur classes and small business centers at community colleges
- Gaston County Small Acreage Conference
- GAPS training and support through CFSA or SCDA/NCDA
- Piedmont Farm to School
- SC New and Beginning Farmers Program thorough Clemson University

Raise awareness of and support the development of resource directories promoting local food. Examples include the Mecklenburg Community Garden list and the Rocky River Farmer Food Guide.

Explore and create opportunities to connect farmers to institutional buyers and then help foster relationships between these two groups.



TAKE ACTION



Connect residents to their food system

Support and expand existing efforts to connect youth and communities to their food system through food production experience. Examples of these efforts include high school horticulture and agriculture programs, school and daycare gardens, and all types of community gardens.

Raise awareness of public events that offer people opportunities to learn about local food. Examples include the Ag and Art Tour (SC), Can You Dig It? Community Garden tour, Cleveland County Farm tour, Know Your Farms Charlotte regional farm tour, and the Lincoln County Apple Festival.

Strengthen and expand food education programs. Examples include formal programs such as Chefs Move to Schools and Watch us Grow Academy as well as informal efforts at farmers markets, churches, and workplaces.

Strengthen and expand programs that build food preparation skills. Examples include formal efforts such as weekly cooking demonstrations sponsored by the Cabarrus Health Alliance, classes offered by Cooperative Extension and those offered by the American Heart Association, and informal efforts such as cooking demonstrations at farmers markets and stores where local foods are sold.

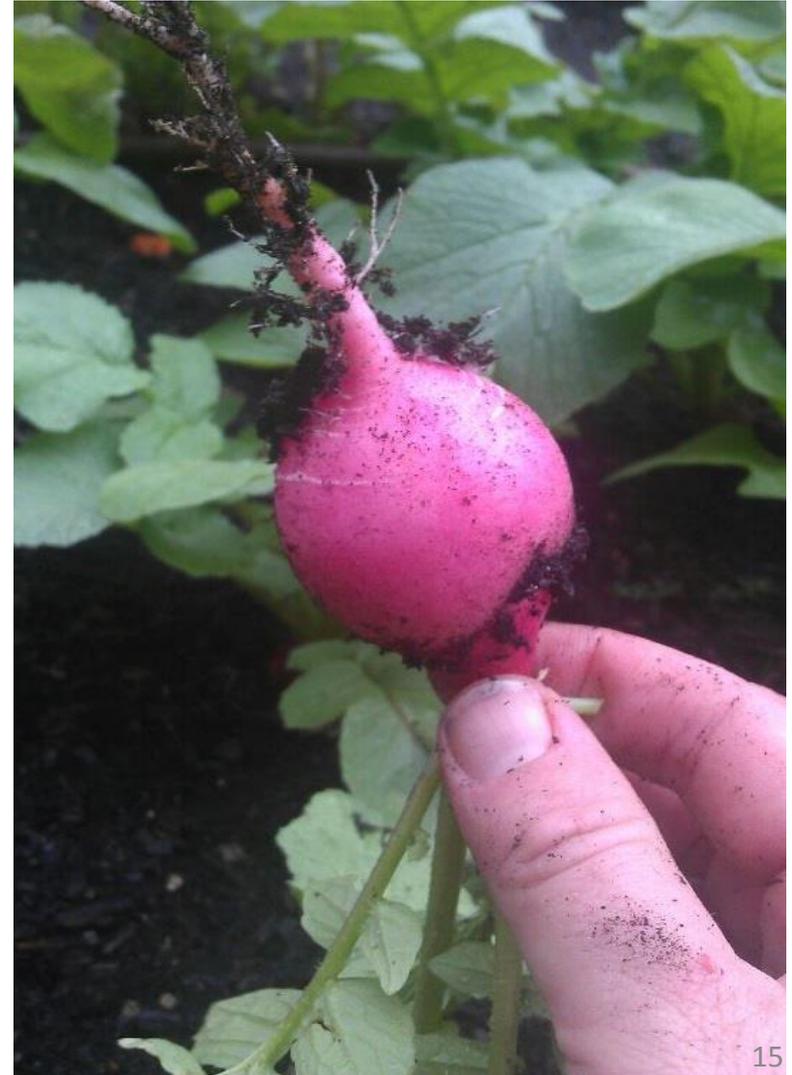
TAKE ACTION

Address equity and access in the food system

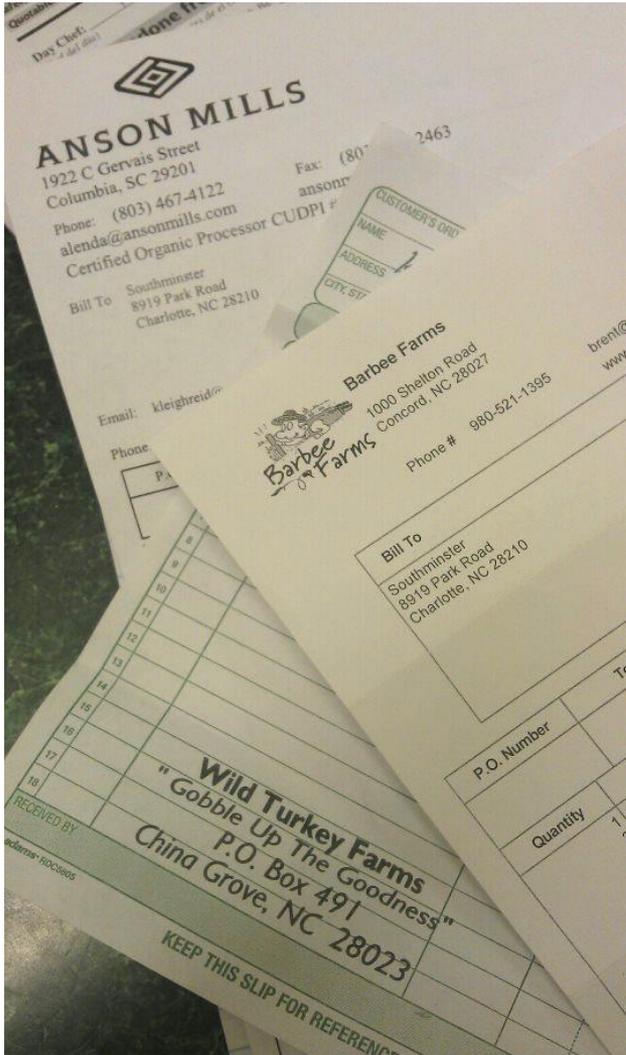
Partner with groups already working or embedded in economically disadvantaged communities to collaborate on increasing consumption of healthy, local food. Examples include the Go Go Fresco partnership with the Queen City Supermoms and the American Heart Association partnership with Congregational Health Program.

Increase the use of SNAP/EBT for healthy, local food by learning from previous efforts: Atherton Market, Queen City Mobile Market, and the work of the Community Transformation Grants.

Strengthen and expand efforts to connect economically disadvantaged communities with food production, such as the Cleveland County Potato Project, the Society of St. Andrew gleaning programs, and Sow Much Good.



TAKE ACTION



Expand knowledge around your community food system

Become familiar with available research related to issues/priority topics, such as food waste, infrastructure capacity building, and food deserts.

Use existing tools to leverage community resources like the County Snapshots developed for the CONNECT Our Future Food System Assessment, which provide a baseline for understanding elements of your community food system.

Create opportunities for individuals and groups to share research or knowledge gleaned through joint reflection on collaborative experience. Ensure communication of such “lessons learned” to others working on community food systems across the community and region.

Adopt as a practice establishing a clear connection between policy or programmatic recommendations of a food council or network and external research, the results of community assessments, and/or joint reflection on collaborative experience.

TAKE ACTION

Intentional network development: Support relationship building

Add formal networking time to all meetings (food councils, food networks, farmers market boards, community health advisory groups, etc.) to encourage interaction and conversation among participants.

Adopt an existing informal network gathering, such as Green Drinks in Concord and Charlotte or potluck dinners in Lake Norman or Cleveland County, as a place where members of the community food system network can meet regularly to build relationships and share information.

Look for creative ways to expand the reach of existing food councils and networks to strengthen connections with a cross section of voices from the food system.



TAKE ACTION

Intentional network development: Support structure development opportunities

Use local food action plan and food policy council listservs to share information about community food system development across communities.

Create a web group or listserv to discuss community food system development within a specific community.

Encourage identification and sharing of resources across the network, such as skills, money, space, and equipment.

Make use of the systems in place for collecting small donations from many people to support network efforts.

Provide training and coaching to help build network development skills. Refer to “Actions for Improving Networks” in the full assessment report for skills that may be needed.



CONNECT Our Future
Vibrant Communities – Robust Region