

AFID Planning Grant **Fresh Food Project Brief**



Overview

The Page County Economic Development Office was awarded \$12,000 for the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) Fund Planning Grant program to support local agriculture initiatives. They recognized there was an opportunity to foster the potential of mid-sized producers and promote local food to consumers. The AFID grant is designed around the common challenge faced by roadside stands, farmer's markets, farm-to-table and other fresh food initiatives in Page County - few producers are growing for that market. Amanda Presgraves, Dustyn Vallies, and Taylor Alger, and Sara Levinson from SVSBDC were identified as the consultants to undertake a Gap Analysis and Planning Grant Assessment. The team began work on this project in February 2022 in order to explore options to connect producers and consumers in ways that creates a locally-grown food supply chain that benefits the farmers and community.

Project Goal

The goal of the project was to conduct a pre-development gap analysis to research viability of the locally-grown food supply chain, identify strengths and opportunities for value chain integrations for local farms and identify strengths and opportunities for consumers, tourist and regional partners.

Project Objectives

The project objectives included: 1) Research viability and identify opportunities for farmers to grow for local market (residents/tourists); and 2) Research viability and identify ways for residents, tourists and regional partners to engage proactively in meaningful, economically viable and healthy community activities that include a focus on buying, growing and using local fresh and value-added food.

Page County Vision

Throughout the research, 100+ community members were interviewed to create a future state vision, which guided the Gap Analysis and direction of recommendations outlined in the report. The core vision is to enhance and preserve the rooted farming culture of Page County and establish a local food ecosystem that promotes a vibrant next generation of successful producers.

Qualitative Data

Over the three-month timespan of the AFID grant, 40 in-depth, qualitative community stakeholder interviews were conducted through the methods of in-person, phone, or video call meeting with community members engaging in the Page County food system producer or market relations. Included roles were Agricultural Producer, Community Partner, Retail Outlet, Restaurant, Logistics Partner, Regional Ecosystem Builder, Financial Institution, Local Government, Industry Support, and School Institution.

Outreach methods for interview conducting began with internal relationships within the producer, market, policy, nonprofit, local organizations, and key stakeholder groups, which developed a comprehensive list of involved individuals throughout a broad community with multiple perspectives and experiences relevant to the area of study. In addition to the list of markets and producers, the team identified a list of key local and regional organizations that could be involved with various initiatives.

In addition to individual interviews, the team organized a local event which attracted more than 100 people including producers, local government, community members, nonprofit organizations and local buyers (restaurants, retail, etc.).

As part of the community research and coordination of efforts, the assessment team identified and coordinated collaboration across businesses and local initiatives in an effort to identify collaborations between value-aligned organizations. As a result of this work, a range of projects were identified that are now already underway or starting up. Many of these initiatives involve collaborations amongst a number of different local organizations including nonprofits, businesses and government.

Quantitative Data

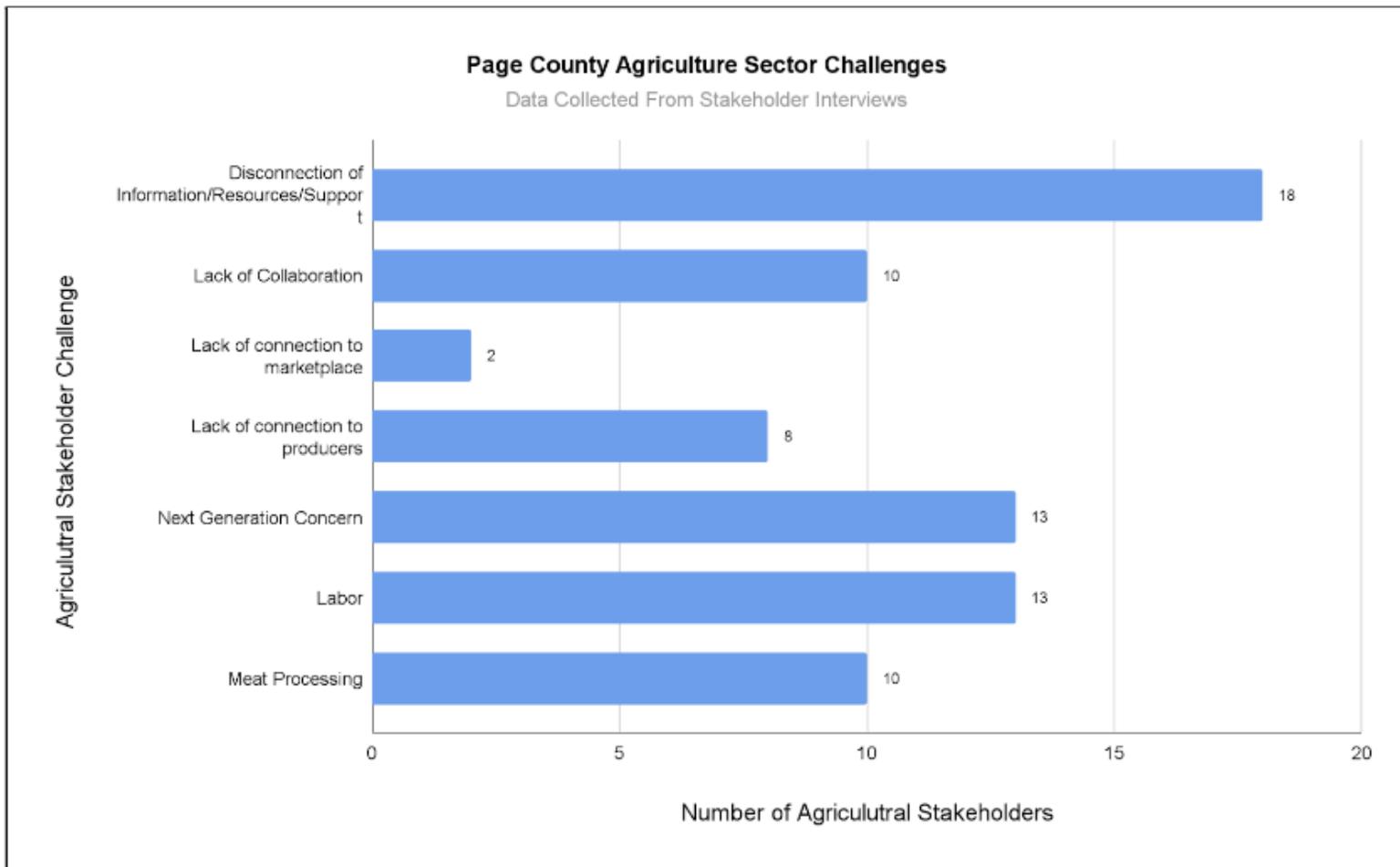
The five-year limit of time between censuses (2017) made it difficult to track emerging developments in production. There are considerable data gaps at the local level of these studies due to confidentiality. This issue is especially troublesome when it comes to data on fruit and vegetable production in the Census of Agriculture. Many farmers do not report specialty crop production as reliably as commodity production, and the USDA has also placed higher priority reporting on the larger cash crops, so there are often gaps in this data. Moreover, since the Census of Agriculture uses sampling methods, the survey may only reach commodity farms in any given locale, thus overlooking or undercounting the actual number of vegetable growers. Since the last census studies the economic impact of COVID-19, among other measurable changes, are not considered in the quantitative data. Due to these challenges, our team focused efforts on individual and focus group qualitative methods of data.

Local Food Network (LFN) used geospatial tools to identify high-priority areas for logistic partners, collaborations, programs and initiatives. Infrastructure and logistic partnership data was retrieved from the LOCAL-I GO Virginia Region 8 project. Land use maps were collected from the Page County Comprehensive Plan ([Source](#) Page County, 2020). Energy asset mapping was created using Esri mapping tools.

AFID Planning Grant Analysis and Results



The assessment resulted in the identification of immediate and short term, and long-term recommendations based on the opportunities and barriers identified.



GAP: Local Food Ecosystem Coordination: leading community collaboration, + communication

Current State: Many of the educational and business resources are unknown in a time of skyrocketing input costs, reduced reliable labor, and increased pressure on farms/business owners; 63% of farmers said that they did not feel connected to resources/support.

Recommendations: Hire Local Food Ecosystem Coordinator; Expand the Ag Subcommittee

Addresses Sector Challenges:: Disconnection of Information/Resources/Support; Lack of Marketplace/Producer Connection, Labor, Next Generation Concern, Lack of Collaboration

Immediate

- Apply for grants to fund a paid, dedicated local food ecosystem coordinator position;
 - Due to Page County's unique, community driven culture, the individual in this position would need to be local, trusted by farmers, market owners, and organization directors with the capacity to build relationships with and among these entities and connect them to necessary resources. It is imperative that they dedicated to supporting Page County's agriculture and food ecosystem, while holding an understanding of how these systems can benefit Page County and its community as a whole
 - Ex: local food promotion grant funding to support the facilitation of collaboration and connecting farmers to local and regional market and support upward economic mobility; enhance collaboration among producers and the marketplace, leverage resources to support community needs, and coordinate local/tourism levevable initiatives
- ED Office hold a community meeting to continue facilitating the low-hanging fruit projects activities created during the grant period (ie: producer/market relations, resource support, RFP, Farmers Markets in Page County, Farm to School support, community programming collaboration) until there is a paid position created
- Once established, the paid Coordinator will collaborate closely with the Economic Development office; reporting findings, identifying additional resources, and partnering to facilitate efforts to hold events and gatherings focused around Page County's food ecosystem

Short Term

- Develop Agriculture Subcommittee of the Economic Development Authority (Owner: ED/SVSBDC)
- Expand the Agriculture Subcommittee to support coordination of Page County's food ecosystem by leveraging partnerships, stakeholders, and collaborative networks (e.g. roles across nonprofits, economic development, conversation, food access, business owners, VCE extension officers, institutions, farmers, producers, etc.).

GAP: Communication and Transparency between Local Supply and Demand

Current State: The limited access to market connections leaves business owners feeling that the market doesn't exist; 83% of farmers/market owners expressed that they did not feel connected

Recommendations: Producer and market connection and collaboration to allow for a successful, vibrant local food system for the local community and regional outlets. Connecting the demand and communication from local markets (ie Mass. Country Corner, emerging Farmers Markets, Farm to School sourcing, local restaurants), with the supply from local producers

Addresses Sector Challenges:: Lack of Connection to Marketplace/Producers, Disconnection of Information/Resources/Support, Lack of Collaboration

Immediate

- Use Market Maker (existing platform) to increase coordination and transparency of availability/demand in order to connect producers to the marketplace. Owner: Coordinating position)

Short Term

- Applying for local food promotion grant funding would support the facilitation of connecting farmers to local and regional market

Leveraging other existing programs and strategically collaborating with Food Works Group on the Eastern Food Hub Collaborative (EFC) geospatial tool initiative

- Enabling Page County producers to be embedded in a regional network that intends to increase agricultural economic impact across the Mid-Atlantic region

GAP: Emphasis on Cultural Preservation and Farming in Page County

Current State: Next generation of farmers are not taking on the farms - 48% of farmers shared concern over the lack of food system education for upcoming generation

Recommendations: Establish community education partnerships, (e.g. Fauquier Education Farm, local colleges/universities), Gardening/Preservation/Culinary Education, Involvement of farmers in educational opportunities (e.g. organic farming, regenerative ag education, program example)

Addresses Sector Challenges:: Next Generation Support, Labor

Immediate

- Expansion of community programming (See: Community Action in Report)
- Farm to School Support
 - Support local growers and producers with RFP to develop farm to school institutional sourcing partnerships
 - Grant fund after-school gardens & garden programming
 - Pilot curriculum with identified school partners (See: Community Action in Report)
 - Example Model of Farm to School Hub

Short Term

- Successful partnerships, market viability and quality of life will enhance farmer retention,
- Agritourism business development support (example model)
- Establish Fields of Gold partnerships

GAP: Local Food Facility Infrastructure to Support Increased Production, Processing, and Logistical Expansion

Current State: 44% of farmers shared struggles with accessing, maintaining, and/or supporting labor

Recommendation: Develop Localized Livestock Processing Facility; Design of a Multi-Purpose Community Center (Food Hub)

Addresses Sector Challenges:: Next Generation Support, Labor, Lack of Connection to Marketplace/Producers, Disconnection of Information/Resources/Support, Lack of Collaboration

Short Term

- Apply for grant funding to support livestock marketing feasibility study; and development of infrastructure for community marketplace and programming

Long Term

- Feasibility study for livestock processing
- Grant funding support to develop physical infrastructure that will serve as a connected marketplace with a consolidated one-stop-shop of resources and support for the community and tourism opportunities (ie classes, workshops, store front, preservation/canning, farmers market pavilion, commercial kitchen, community garden, educational and recreational activities, etc)

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AFID Planning Grant Implementation Timeline for Recommendation



Local Food Ecosystem Coordination

- Ag Council
 - June – Sept 2022: Develop network collaboration, resource development, grant project continuation through local relationship building (ie Farm to Fork Event, wholesale networking, roundtable)
 - Jan 2023: Expand Agriculture Subcommittee to include diverse food system perspectives
 - March 2023: Resources on website; Increase the coordination of local existing partnerships to leverage
- Coordinator Position
 - June – Sept 2022: Apply for grant funding that would enable leadership and value-chain coordination of Page County’s food ecosystem by leveraging partnerships, stakeholders, and collaborative networks (e.g. EDA, Ag Council Committee, facilitation of networking)
 - December 2022: Hand off responsibility of low-hanging fruit from ED Office to Coordinator; Develop Market Maker development in order to connect producers to the market; leverage available resources to support community needs
 - May 2023: Establish local/tourism leverage initiatives

Create Communication and Transparency between Local Supply and Demand

- Marketplace Connecting
 - June – Sept 2022: ED Office support with Farm to School RFP
 - December 2022: Increase coordination of local sourcing in order to connect producers to the marketplace through coordinator position → collaboration between local businesses and producers; Market Maker Campaign database development
 - Jan 2023–2024: Leveraging other existing programs and strategically collaborating with Local Food Network and Food Works Group on the Eastern Food Hub Collaborative (EFC) geospatial tool initiative - enabling Page County producers to be embedded in a regional network that intends to increase agricultural economic impact across the Mid-Atlantic region
 - Jan 2023–204 Increased local product options in the current marketplace; increase production direction with market demand

AFID Planning Grant Implementation Timeline for Recommendation



Emphasis on Cultural Preservation and Farming in Page County

- Increase Farm to School Supporting Activities
 - June - Sept 2022: Grant fund after-school gardens & garden programming
 - March 2023: Pilot curriculum with identified school partners (See: Community Action of report for list of organizations and partners to elevate)

Local Food Facility Infrastructure to Support Increased Production, Processing, and Logistical Expansion

- Meat Processing
 - June - Sept 2022: Meat processing marketing feasibility study
- Local Food Facility
 - December 2022: Grant funding to support to develop physical infrastructure
 - April 2023: Approval by food school system to pilot test local food distribution; Pilot and measure community distribution capacity through a Farm to School Hub



AFID Planning Grant

SOAR Analysis



STRENGTHS: What can we build on?

- Rich culture of farming in Page County
- County support for agriculture
- Wholesale market connection
- Ag Council development
- Community event success

ASPIRATIONS: What do we care deeply about?

- Cultural preservation and continued education
- Knowledgeable labor
- Developing the next generation of farmers
- Community advocacy around farming

OPPORTUNITIES: What are our stakeholders asking for?

- Coordination and support for producer/buyer marketplace; Local networking and collaboration efforts;
- Business support (resources, RFP submitting, marketing, labor, regulations, grants) Local meat processing facility
- Community programming to develop local and next generation workforce as well as consumer engagement and increased local food tourism opportunities Increased access to local, healthy food

RESULTS: How do we know we are succeeding?

- Seeing an increase in new and upcoming farmers
- Increase in mid-sized producer growth
- Increase in Farm to Fork initiatives and increased local spend from restaurants, businesses, and institutions
- Marketing and identity around local food Programming and education within the school system and local organizations
- Local farmers markets
- Producer/market communication
- Diversity in product options on the market (e.g. canning, fruit, vegetables)
- Utilization of community resources (further education, training programs, even attendance, website visits)



AFID Planning Grant Conclusion



Page County is abundant with agricultural heritage, recognized today for its pristine farmland beauty, nationally ranked poultry and livestock performance, and attracting tourists from around the world. The AFID Planning Grant confirmed the promising potential to support small and mid-sized farms in the County by developing their ability to connect to local and regional markets, provide access to resources and foster the next generation of farmers with emphasis on community and institutional programming. The result of these short and immediate term actions will provide access to new market opportunities and strengthen the local food, farming and tourism economy. The implementation of local food system specific leadership, in addition to physical and digital infrastructure uniquely designed for the challenges of Page County, will be essential for sustainable and supportive change. Page County has the passion, geography, history, and community necessary for a thriving, vibrant local food economy; the AFID Planning Grant exemplifies what happens when the community is united under one common vision. What is needed next is the coordination of initiatives involving the community and many local and regional organizations.