



LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for
Strengthening Forest
County through Local
Foods and Local Places

Forest County, PA

July 23, 2015



Community Story

Forest County has a fitting name. It is a beautiful place covered by dense forests and rolling hills and cut by unspoiled rivers and streams. People have long come to the county in northwest Pennsylvania for recreation, tourism, and to extract the timber, oil, and gas. The county also once had many thriving farms producing dairy products, meat, feed and bedding crops, and maple syrup.

Figure 1 - Forest County is known for its beautiful forests, hills, rivers, and streams. Credit: Renaissance Planning



These timber and gas industries remain important in 2015. Much of this activity happens within the Allegheny National Forest, which covers about half the county. But farming has seen a precipitous decline as many farms became small “camps” of about one half acre. The county has about 6,000 of these camps where people come to hunt, fish, disconnect, recharge, and enjoy nature and family time. Throughout the county there is strong interest in heritage - whether historical, cultural or arts related.

The county is also home to about 7,600 permanent residents, although more than 2,000 of these are inmates at the Forest County State Correctional Institute. The remaining 5,000 or so residents are

spread widely across the county with only about 500 each in the two largest towns - Tionesta and Marienville. Tionesta is on the county’s western border along the Allegheny River while Marienville is on the eastern side of the county near popular ATV and snowmobile trails. Both communities serve and are largely dependent on the seasonal tourism industry.

Marienville and Tionesta both have compact downtowns with many attractive and historic storefronts. However, both are also grappling with weak economic conditions and vacant buildings. Both towns have suffered multiple fires that destroyed historic buildings, and neither has fully recovered. The most recent fire, in 2003, destroyed two blocks of Tionesta’s downtown.

Figure 2 - Tionesta’s Market Village is home to 11 small shops. Credit: Renaissance Planning



Today Tionesta and Marienville are looking at new ways to boost their local economies breathe new vitality into their downtowns. Tionesta transformed the fire-damaged block into a small retail business incubator known as the Tionesta Market Village. The Market Village provides affordable space for small retail startups with the hope that they will eventually move into permanent space in vacant storefronts. The Market Village consists of 11 small sheds that resemble historic storefronts organized around a central green. The shops are open on the weekends during the spring, summer, and fall tourist season. The Market Village has been such a success that all sheds are occupied and the town had a waiting list of four potential vendors in April 2015.

Marienville is looking to reinvigorate its downtown and local economy by capitalizing on its access to popular trails and proximity to the Allegheny National Forest. The town is close to trailheads that connect to more than 100 miles of ATV trails and 300 miles of snowmobile trails. Also running through town is the old Knox and Kane Railroad right-of-way. The railroad ceased service many years ago, but the entire right-of-way is owned by a family trust that is negotiating with communities along the old tracks to turn them into a trail for pedestrians, bicyclists, and cross-country skiers. The right-of-way

*Figure 3 - Marienville is planning to renovate its historic depot as a hub for trail users and visitors from out of town.
Credit: Renaissance Planning*



comes with a historic depot downtown that Marienville plans to transform into a hub for trail users. The trail with its tourism benefits and boost to the town's quality of life will be a major source of economic growth.

Marienville's and Tionesta's efforts to restore their downtowns will help Forest County achieve its goal of attracting new visitors. While the county still has thousands of camps, camps, there are perennial maintenance issues, a camp owner population that is likewise aging, and little influx of a younger demographic with energy to invest in the area. Yet Forest County is still within easy driving distance of millions of people living in the Pittsburgh, Cleveland,

and Buffalo metropolitan areas. Therefore, the county is looking to increase options for tourists and market the area's existing assets better. Part of this effort entails developing more effective ways to communicate online about what Forest County has to offer, increasing the flow of shoppers in downtown areas, and more effectively marketing existing attractions/events and food resources including eateries, farmers' markets, farm stands, and agritourism sites (e.g. sugar houses, u-pick farm locations, etc.). The county also has many artisans, hunting and fishing clubs, and emerging events such as the PA Firefly Festival. Tying these all together through a unified Forest County brand and marketing strategy is a key step that Forest County is looking to take.

The county and towns recognize that several challenges stand in the way of accomplishing these goals. First, businesses find it challenging to survive given the seasonal nature of tourist flow. Second, the local food scene is very limited. The county's topography keeps it from being a major farming area. Third, upgrades to Tionesta's and Marienville's downtown will be costly and the county has few economic development resources to provide support for new initiatives. And the counties and communities along the railroad right of way still must find money to purchase the right of way and agree for a plan for the rail trail.

Yet the people of Forest County are resourceful and optimistic that these challenges can be overcome. So in 2014, Forest County requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to develop an action plan. Forest County was one of just 26 communities across the United States to participate in the program and this action plan is the outcome of their work. The actions outlined in this plan support the goals of the Local Foods, Local Places program, which are:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and business.
- Better access to healthy local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.

- A revitalized downtown that is the economic anchor of the community.

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). These agencies worked with Forest County to develop this action plan.

Engagement

The main event of the Local Foods, Local Places program in Forest County was a workshop on April 28 and 29, 2015. The workshop brought together local residents, and local, state, and federal agency representatives to envision how a stronger local food economy could improve quality of life, connect communities, create jobs, and revitalize main streets. This action plan, which lays out several critical next steps, is the primary outcome of the workshop.

Among the attendees were local and regional officials from Forest County, Tionesta, Marienville, the Northwest Commission (local development district), local business owners, regional non-profit organizations, farmers, gardeners, high school students, and school district staff. Several state and federal officials also participated including representatives from the Penn State Cooperative Extension, USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA-Rural Development, EPA, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Allegheny National Forest. Contractors from Renaissance Planning facilitated the workshop. Workshop attendance and contact information is provided in the appendix.

The workshop included three sessions. The first encouraged discussion about the county's vision for its future. The second and third explored challenges and opportunities for transforming local economies before arriving at a set of goals and actions to achieve them. The goals this action plan supports are:

1. The Marienville Depot is the regional Trail Hub and the town has many places that entice people to stay and spend time and dollars, including a successful Market Village.
2. Tionesta is the regional hub for heritage arts and culture; it has an expanded and thriving Farmers' Market; the Market Village has spun off new businesses that occupy downtown storefronts that are popular with both locals and tourists.
3. The natural wonders, communities, and culture of Forest County attract more visitors year round thanks to enhanced marketing.

During the final work session, attendees identified specific actions that the community can take to achieve these goals. Figure 4 is a summary of the workshop process.

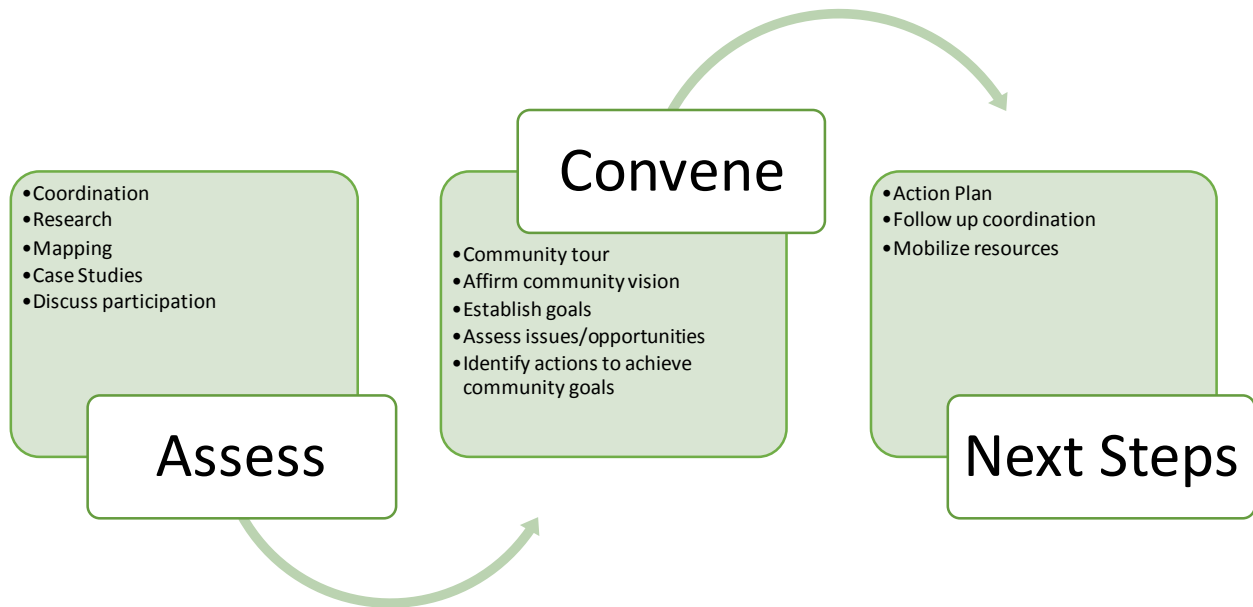


Figure 4 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

Through the workshop, Forest County residents and officials articulated a vision for their community in which natural resources and local entrepreneurship fuel a stronger local economy and higher quality of life. The county has many assets with limitless potential including its rivers and forests; ATV, snowmobile, hiking, biking, and skiing trails; artisans and farmers; and unique local places and businesses. These things all exist; the key is to nurture these assets, market the county, and create clear identities for Marienville and Tionesta that distinguish and complement each other. The vision expressed here recognizes each town’s strengths and the fact that they depend on each other to elevate the fortunes of the entire county.

- **Tionesta: Forest County’s Hub of Heritage Arts and Culture** – Tionesta is proud of its ties to heritage arts and culture, reflected in local workshops and events, and in stores selling local products unique to the region. Local food is available in local markets and eateries. People visiting nearby state and national parks and forests go out of their way to spend time in Tionesta. The Market Village nurtured several small businesses that successfully transitioned into permanent storefronts downtown.
- **Marienville: Forest County’s Trail Hub** – Marienville is thriving at the crossroads of popular recreational trails including the 4,600 mile long North Country Trail for hikers and more than 100 miles of ATV trails and 300 miles of snowmobile trails in the Allegheny National Forest. The Knox Kane Rail Trail added a non-motorized component that draws bicyclists and hikers from across the state and region. The Marienville Area Public Library is a WiFi hot spot along the trail, with

an inviting patio. The renovated Marienville Depot connects all of these trails and provides shelter, food, and information to visitors. People feel comfortable walking between the depot and downtown businesses thanks to traffic calming on Route 66. The Depot area also has a small business incubator similar to the Market Village in Tionesta, but using small rail cars.

These visions for the future of Tionesta and Marienville became clear through discussions during the workshop. Participants spent time sharing their thoughts on three key questions:

- Why are local foods important?
- What is next for retail in downtown Tionesta?
- How could the rail trail and renovated train depot transform downtown Marienville?

Their responses, which informed these visions, are summarized in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 - Thoughts on the Importance of Local Foods and their Hopes for the Future of Tionesta and Marienville



Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

The vision paints a picture of a bright future for people living and growing up in Tionesta and Marienville, but workshop attendees realized the towns must make changes and work to overcome an old local governance rift in order to realize their visions. Outside visitors are not concerned about disagreements between the communities; they simply want to have a good time while visiting the county and see unique places and have enjoyable experiences.

The workshop attendees spent time exploring both community's strengths, challenges, and opportunities. The strengths and opportunities are things that the towns can build upon in order to

achieve their respective visions for their development and their future economies. The challenges are things that may hold them back if they are not addressed.

Strengths

- **Natural Environment** – About half of Forest County is within the Allegheny National Forest. It has many hiking, biking, and other recreational trails. Forest County is also home to the Allegheny and Clarion rivers, which are both designated as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. These beautiful places have drawn many tourists and residents to Forest County.
- **Proximity to Major Metropolitan Centers** – The Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo metropolitan areas are all within about a three hour drive, making Forest County an easy weekend destination for residents of those areas.
- **Friendly and Authentic** – The people of Forest County are friendly and inviting. The natural landscape and towns are authentic; they are unique to the area and not replicated elsewhere. People are attracted to such places.

Challenges

- **Building the Knox & Kane Rail Trail** – The Knox and Kane Railroad right-of-way traverses several communities and counties. These communities, as of April 2015, had yet to coalesce on a single vision for the trail. Some would prefer that it accommodate motorized ATVs and snowmobiles, while other communities – including Marienville – would prefer that it be open to non-motorized users only. Coming up with money to buy the right-of-way is another challenge.
- **Traffic Speed on Route 66** – Route 66 is a key state highway connecting Marienville and the National Forest to Kane and Interstate 80. The highway supports the timber, oil, and gas industries and carries many heavy trucks. But the highway is also Marienville’s main commercial street. Fast traffic and large trucks create an inhospitable environment for pedestrians and trail users. The town is interested in slowing traffic in the main commercial area and providing more visual cues to truck drivers and other motorists that downtown Marienville is a pedestrian zone.
- **Lack of Awareness** – Many people in northwest Pennsylvania and metropolitan areas such as Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Cleveland are unaware of this hidden gem. Forest County is only about three hours from each of these major metropolitan areas, but many workshop participants felt that tourism has been on the decline. Workshop participants also thought that better marketing and cohesive wayfinding signs could generate more interest in visiting the county.
- **Human Capacity** – Forest County has a small population that is spread out across a large area. Many people lack strong cell phone and internet service. As a result, finding people that have spare time to dedicate to new ventures and connecting the people with time and willingness are both challenges. Rural communities across the United State share these challenges.
- **Resistance to Change** – Some people moved to Forest County for the beautiful and quiet environment. Other people would like to see new jobs so they can remain in the county and support their families. While these desires could be at odds, many workshop participants felt as though the county can strike a balance between economic development and maintaining Forest County’s rural atmosphere.

- **Seasonality of Businesses** – Tourism peaks during the summer months in Forest County. Winter can also bring a fair amount of tourists, but only when Forest County receives enough snowfall for people to ride snowmobiles. In April/May, Opening Days for trout/bass fishing, and spring gobbler weekends are big for fish/game hunters, as are key dates for small game and deer hunting in Fall/Winter. The seasonality of tourism makes it difficult for businesses to stay open year round. Their success also depends on support from local residents. The same can be said about the local food economy and farmers market.
- **Stronger Presence for Farmers Market** – The farmers market occupies a brownfield site in downtown Tionesta. The soil on this site cannot be disturbed. The farmers market has used this site for several years, but cannot expand, nor can it install any permanent structure until a site assessment is completed. This is a challenge because the county and town lack funds to complete the assessment.

Opportunities

- **Economic Development** – Many people come to Forest County to retire and/or to enjoy the peace and quiet of the forest. Other people, especially young adults and teenagers, would like to stay in the region, but do not see many economic opportunities. Fortunately these two visions for Forest County are compatible. The area can develop some while maintaining the characteristics that drew many people in the first place. Trail-related tourism in Marienville and development of heritage arts and culture coupled with downtown revitalization in Tionesta can bring new jobs to these communities while preserving the rural character of the countryside.
- **Regional Identity** – Forest County already has an abundance of natural assets and talented people. Several workshop attendees thought the county can do more to distinguish itself and market these assets in order to increase visitors. Tourism is and will continue to be the foundation of the county's economy. Marketing is a way to grow this industry.
- **Collaboration** – Forest County is home to many people, organizations, and companies that care deeply about their community. While there are no easy ways to improve the physical connections between Marienville and Tionesta (for example, with a faster highway), drawing the communities closer together culturally and politically could bring many benefits to the county's economy. Collaboration in marketing and promoting the county are an opportunity for economic growth. Another avenue of collaboration would be to focus on intergenerational activities that bring younger generations in contact with retirees and experts in heritage culture, as has been successful in the Forest Folk School workshops. Events that are family oriented such as the PA Firefly Festival can lead to collaboration with local hotels, lodges and motels. And events that draw on the rich cultural heritage of the county (such as historical reenactments) can be a participatory draw for locals as well as a tourist attraction.
- **Available Retail Space** – Both Marienville and Tionesta have room to grow. Both towns have available retail space. However, these spaces will require some renovation and potentially reconfiguration to accommodate new retail businesses. Getting property owners to work with potential retail businesses to accommodate their needs could also be identified as a challenge.

Action Plan

This section introduces the three major goals that emerged through the workshop. Each goal is supported by a set of actions that will help Forest County overcome the challenges, or take advantage of opportunities, described in the previous section. The actions are steps that Forest County can take in the near term to move towards its vision of a stronger downtowns that generate new jobs, support healthier people, and enhance quality of life.

The three goals are described below along with the supportive actions. The goals and action items are presented in Appendix A in their complete form, which includes a time frame, lead role, supporting cast, cost, funding sources, and near-term steps.

Goal 1 – The Marienville Depot is the regional Trail Hub and the town has many places that entice people to stay and spend time and dollars, including a successful Market Village.

- **Action 1.1** – Prepare conceptual-level drawings of the renovated Marienville Depot, which will serve as the Trail Hub.
- **Action 1.2** – Purchase the Knox-Kane Railroad right-of-way for use as a rail trail.
- **Action 1.3** – Purchase the Marienville Train Depot for use as the Trail Hub.
- **Action 1.4** – Develop and formalize a plan for how to use the Marienville Depot and property that includes uses for the Depot building and a micro-retail business incubator similar to the Market Village in Tionesta.
- **Action 1.5** – Expand the Marienville Area Library and physically and operationally connect it to the Rail Trail.
- **Action 1.6** – Develop more shopping options and install wayfinding signage and traffic calming features so that visitors can easily cross Main Street near the Marienville Depot.

Goal 2 – Tionesta is the regional hub for heritage arts and culture; it has an expanded and thriving Farmers' Market; the Market Village has spun off new businesses that occupy downtown storefronts that are popular with both locals and tourists.

- **Action 2.1** – Complete the characterization of the brownfield site on which the Tionesta Farmers Market stands and remediate if necessary.
- **Action 2.2** – Develop a façade improvement grant program for downtown Tionesta that offers matching grants to building owners for façade improvements.
- **Action 2.3** – Organize an education program to promote stewardship of the land and its resources, for those who hike, hunt and/or fish, and especially among youth from Forest County and throughout the region.
- **Action 2.4** – Explore development of storytelling programs on heritage themes (such as the Johnny Appleseed project, which portrays an historical figure with ties to the local area, and includes a lesson on grafting/pomology, and a cider pressing demonstration, all in a moveable theatrical piece).

Goal 3 – The natural wonders, recreational opportunities, communities, and heritage culture of Forest County attract more visitors year round thanks to enhanced marketing.

- **Action 3.1** – Define how Forest County would like to market itself to the outside. Gather ideas from residents and businesses through a survey and/or small focus group discussion.

- **Action 3.2** – Design a distinct logo for Forest County that is easy to identify and communicates the unique attributes of the county and its communities, and use the logo in welcome and wayfinding signs throughout the county.
- **Action 3.3** – Explore creating a unified website for Forest County.
- **Action 3.4** – Identify new events that would help bridge both geographical and intergenerational gaps in Forest County, such as trail walks, storytelling and history/heritage events, excursions for birding, foliage walks, horseback riding, canoeing/kayaking, and fishing, hunting or bicycle festivals.

Implementation

Forest County officials and workshop participants started to prioritize the actions described in the previous section soon after the Local Foods, Local Places workshop. The community came to a consensus that transforming the Marienville Depot into a hub for trail users is a top priority. Another top priority is developing a marketing program for the county with a logo, signage, and unified website with continued maintenance. The county also intends to apply a small amount of implementation funding to site improvements for the farmers market in downtown Tionesta.

As a community in the Appalachian Regional Commission’s territory, Forest County is eligible for \$20,000 to implement elements of this action plan. The state of Pennsylvania also contributed a portion of its ARC funding allocation towards this project, bringing total support to \$40,000.

The county plans to apply the \$40,000 award to the following specific actions.

- Purchase of the Marienville Depot to support the Trail Hub concept (Action 1.3) – \$25,000
- Design a Forest County logo to use in promotion and wayfinding (Action 3.2) – \$1,500
- Gateway signs (6) for Forest County (Action 3.2) – \$3,000
- Wayfinding signs (30) at key locations and attractions throughout the county (Action 3.2) – \$4,500
- Installation of gateway and wayfinding signs (Action 3.2) – \$2,700
- Electrical service to the farmers market lot in downtown Tionesta (Supports Goal 2) – \$1,000

The cost figures are estimates. Should funds remain after these priorities are implemented, the county is interested in applying the remaining funds towards its effort to develop a unified website (Action 3.3).

Livability Principles Advanced by Action Plan

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the Federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The Partnership includes EPA, DOT, and HUD. These agencies have been working since 2009 to incorporate livability considerations into their policies and funding programs. This section describes how Forest County’s Action Plan supports each of the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

Marienville is planning to build a rail trail through the heart of town. The town also would like to slow traffic on State Route 66 through downtown. Both of these steps support walking and biking and may attract more tourists to visit the town and county.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

Affordable housing was not a major emphasis area for Forest County. However, Tionesta would like to return some vacant downtown storefronts into new shops. This could result in new apartments above the shops.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Economic competitiveness is a major emphasis of this plan. Forest County's economy has revolved around tourism and resource management and extraction (timber, gas, and oil). Tourism continues to be a key driver of the regional economy. This plan aims to increase tourism through new assets and better marketing of what is already there. New developments, such as the rail trail and renovated train depot and new shops in downtown Tionesta will also benefit existing residents by creating new job opportunities and adding to the area's already high quality of life.

Support Existing Communities

Tionesta and Marienville have infrastructure, such as streets and water/sewer lines, to support a once larger population. This plan calls for making investments in places such as these, which are already developed, for economic development and housing. Both towns have untapped potential and this plan outlines some steps for realizing it.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The Local Foods, Local Places workshop brought together people from many state and federal agencies. The new relationships formed both within the county and with people outside of the county can attract new resources to support implementation of this action plan. It is important to nurture these new relationships by finding ways to stay engaged with each other.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

This action plan demonstrates a strong value for Forest County's communities and neighborhoods. It lays out a path for how Tionesta and Marienville may use local foods and underutilized assets to improve public health and the local economy. It recognizes and values the potential that already exists in Forest County because of its people and natural resources.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Details
- Appendix B – Local and Regional Maps
- Appendix C – Key Health and Agriculture Data
- Appendix D – Workshop Participants
- Appendix E – Funding Resources
- Appendix F – References
- Appendix G – Presentation Slides