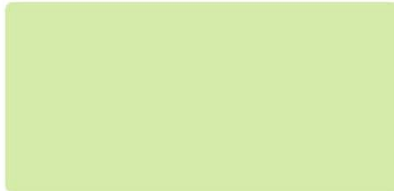
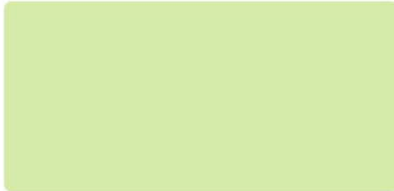




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

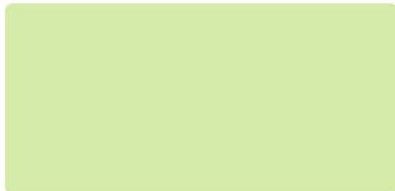
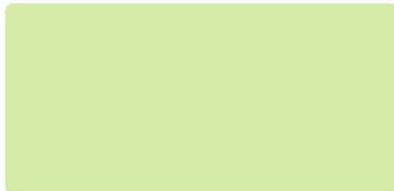
Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for
Strengthening the Local
Food Economy and
Downtown

Osceola, Arkansas

May 19, 2015



Community Story

Osceola is a city of about 7,700 people nestled on the west side of the Mississippi River in northeast Arkansas. While recent decades have brought economic and population decline, Osceola has many assets upon which it can build a stronger community, including its rich history of agriculture and music, several industrial employers, a historic downtown, and access to the Mississippi River.

Like many small towns and rural areas, the county has experienced episodes of economic growth and decline. The area's fertile soils made it Arkansas' leading cotton producer and a major producer of rice and soybeans. Agriculture was a mainstay of the local economy for several decades. But starting in the 1950s, the move towards mechanization in farming initiated a long period of population and economic decline.¹ The county's economy took another hit when the Eaker Air Force base closed in 1992.

In recent years the steel industry has emerged and is poised to play an important role in the region's economic development. Big River Steel broke ground in 2014 on a \$1.3 billion steel plant in Osceola. Upon completion, the plant will employ about 500 people with an average annual compensation of \$75,000.² Big River Steel joins

Nucor-Yamato, Nucor Hickman, Tenaris Manufacturers to form a growing steel cluster. However, the county's unemployment and poverty rates still remain well above the state and national averages. Many of the people working in the industry live in Missouri or Tennessee and commute long distances to the plants.³ This is a missed opportunity to attract more people to live in Osceola and contribute t.



Figure 1 - Osceola's historical courthouse sits at the center of downtown.



Figure 2 – Mississippi County continues to be a major producer of commodities such as cotton

Health is another major concern in Osceola. Mississippi County's rates for diabetes, heart disease deaths, high blood pressure, and obesity all easily exceed rates for Arkansas as a whole. Local diets are an important factor. Survey data indicate that less than 20 percent of the county's residents eat five servings or more of fruit and vegetables each day.⁴

Osceola views a stronger local food economy as a key strategy for improving both the economy and improving health and quality of life for existing residents. A focus on local foods can also give the city's downtown revitalization efforts a boost, which could attract some of the new steel workers to lay down roots in the city

¹ Delta Bridge Project. *Strategic Community Plan, Mississippi County Arkansas (2013-2023)*. 2014.

² Big River Steel. About. <http://bigriversteel.com/about/>. Accessed January 20, 2015.

³ Delta Bridge Project. *Strategic Community Plan, Mississippi County Arkansas (2013-2023)*. 2014.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Health Indicators Warehouse. <http://www.healthindicators.gov/>.

rather than commuting from distance places, such as Memphis. As such, it could also be a strategy for encouraging a smart growth pattern as the region continues to build up the steel cluster.

One challenge Osceola faces in building its local food economy is that the agricultural sector has traditionally revolved around commodity crops such as cotton. There simply have not been many farmers growing food for the region’s population. Figure 1 shows that Mississippi County had nearly 350 farms in 2012, yet only eight were producing either vegetables or fruits. While the county generated more than \$300 million in agricultural sales in 2012, only \$51,000 came through direct to consumer channels such as farmers markets and roadside stands. This figure has significant room to grow considering that Osceola’s residents spend about \$14 million on food each year.⁵

Figure 3 - Agricultural Statistics for Mississippi County, Arkansas

U.S. Agriculture Census Figure	2007	2012
Total Farms	369	347
Vegetable Farms	6	6
Fruit, Tree Nut, and Berry Farms	7	2
Livestock, Poultry, and their Products Farms	40	25
Total Agricultural Sales	\$196 million	\$315 million
Agricultural Sales Direct to Consumers	\$28,000	\$51,000

The good news is that Mississippi County and the surrounding counties have some of the most fertile soils in the world and plenty of land dedicated to agriculture. There is substantial room to grow the local food economy and use it to leverage economic development and a greater quality of life, which in turn can attract new development in existing communities. In 2014, Osceola requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to develop an action plan for achieving those outcomes by investing in a new downtown farmers market, neighborhood community gardens, and new food-related businesses. Implementing these actions, which are described later in this plan in greater detail, can bring several benefits to the community including:

- 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.

Local Foods, Local Places 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 the community to develop the following action plan.

⁵ ESRI. Retail Goods and Services Expenditures – Osceola, AR.

Engagement

Osceola hosted a two-day workshop on March 17 and 18, 2015. The workshop brought together key local, state, and federal agency representatives to envision a better future for Osceola and to identify the steps for getting there. Among the attendees were local elected officials, the Main Street Program, church officials, local business owners, and concerned citizens; representatives of the Arkansas Health Department, Arkansas Cooperative Extension, and Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention; and federal representatives from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Agriculture-Rural Development. Contractors from Renaissance Planning facilitated the workshop.



Figure 4 - Workshop attendees are seen here identifying farms in the region that grow food and could supply the Osceola farmers market

The first workshop session focused on learning about local values and citizens' vision for the future. The second workshop session dug into opportunities for improving the local food economy and revitalizing downtown and goal setting. The third and final session focused on actions that the community could take to achieve their goals. Workshop attendance is provided in Appendix D. Figure 2 is a summary of the workshop process.

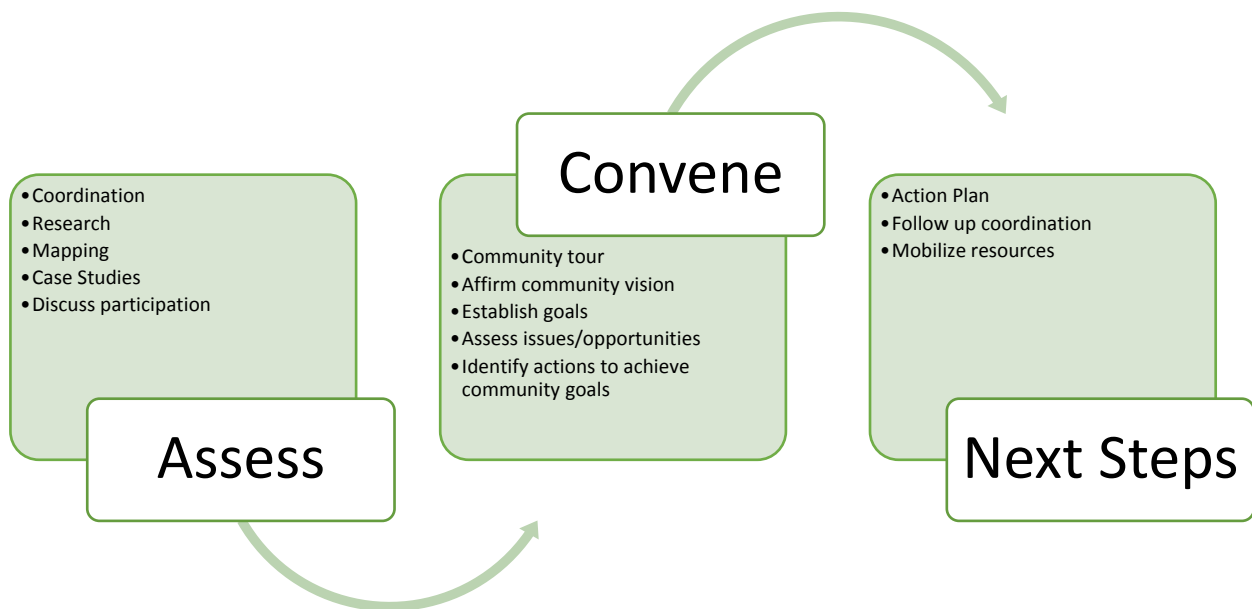


Figure 5 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

Osceola's vision for the future has a short-term and a long-term focus. In the short-term, the community envisions more people growing and buying local foods. This vision may be realized through a downtown farmers market, new community gardens, new restaurants serving local foods, and a shared kitchen space where people can prepare their recipes and possibly sell them to other people in the community.

The long-term vision is an expression of where the community sees itself 20 years in the future. People who attended the Local Foods, Local Places workshop shared the latter through a storytelling exercise. Each person crafted a future news story about something big that happened in Osceola. They then shared these ideas with each other in small groups and worked to synthesize pieces of their stories into a single story with a headline. These headlines reveal a lot about what matters to people and Osceola.

- *Osceola Named to Forbes Best Small Town with under 15,000 people*
 - Osceola decreases its obesity rate by 75%
 - 50% of its high school graduates come back to work
 - Its farmers market is number 1 in the south
 - Osceola has a popular 100-mile long bike trail
- *Osceola Receives National Recognition for Farm-to-Table Dining*
 - A local restaurant won the Beard Award
- *Osceola Celebrate its 20th annual Crawfish, Beers, Bikes, and Blues Festival*
 - The event each year contributes \$250,000 to the local economy

These headlines and the stories people shared paint a picture of Osceola in 2035 that is known as one of the country's best small towns, where its people are healthier than they were in 2015, with a thriving farmers market, a 100-mile bike trail, award winning restaurants serving foods from the Arkansas Delta, and festivals that draw in people from throughout the region and state. The short-term vision of a much stronger local foods economy clearly supports these longer-term desires that people expressed.

Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

While the vision paints a picture of a bright future for people living and growing up in Osceola, the workshop attendees realized that the community is not on a trajectory to realize the vision. So the attendees spent time exploring Osceola's strengths, challenges, and opportunities. This section presents the strengths and opportunities that can support the vision of a healthier and thriving Osceola, and some of the challenges that may hold the city back if they are not addressed.

Strengths

- **People** - Osceola's residents care about the community, are willing to get involved to improve it, and have creativity. The strong attendance and participation at the Local Foods, Local Places workshops demonstrates this commitment.
- **Historical Buildings and Community Layout** – Osceola has a charming downtown with historical buildings, a beautiful courthouse, and a walkable street pattern.
- **Jobs** - The region has a good supply of manufacturing jobs. The new Big River Steel plant will add to the number of manufacturing jobs and could bring new residents.
- **Access to Nature** – The city is located on the Mississippi River and has public access to it.

Challenges

- **Poverty and Unemployment** – While Osceola has a growing number of manufacturing jobs, portions of the workforce are not well prepared for those jobs for a variety of reasons. Poverty and high rates of unemployment are a result.
- **Health** – The city and surrounding county have high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diseases related to diet and exercise.
- **Property Disrepair** – Many downtown buildings and housing in the immediate vicinity of downtown are in a state of disrepair. The market values of these properties are insufficient to attract investment to fix them up. The city also has many buildings that are owned by people who do not live in the area. Getting them to fix their properties or support the vision of downtown revitalization is a major challenge.
- **Human Resources in Short Supply** – Osceola is a fairly small city and many of the people that are involved in civic affairs are stretched thin. The community needs to prioritize the actions that it would like to take, and request support from outside the city to achieve its goals. This is a common problem in many small cities and towns.

Opportunities

- **Delta Soil** – The region has some of the richest soils in the world. Today there is growing concern in Arkansas and throughout the country about the sources of food and the resiliency of the food supply. These concerns have been heightened by the drought in California, which accounts for more than half of the vegetables grown in the United States.⁶
- **Big River Steel** – The new steel plant going in just south of Osceola will bring in hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars in new income to the area. The plant is an opportunity to attract new residents to Osceola who could rehabilitate older housing and support new shops downtown.
- **New Partnerships** – The Local Foods, Local Places workshop brought together local residents, elected officials, and representatives of state and federal agencies that can support Osceola's vision. These new partnerships, if they are maintained over time, can help the city overcome its challenge of having a short supply of people with available time and desire to work on the initiatives describe in this plan.
- **Proximity to Major Markets** – Osceola and the broader Delta region are close to Memphis and Little Rock, and they can play a bigger role in meeting the food needs of these regions. Osceola can also attract people from these regions to visit and explore Osceola and its festivals, and consider putting down roots in the area as new jobs come in with the arrival of Big River Steel.



Figure 6 - Osceola's proximity to the Mississippi River helped attract new investment in steel mills

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture – National Agriculture Statistics Service. *Vegetables Annual Summary*. http://www.nass.usda.gov/Surveys/Guide_to_NASS_Surveys/Vegetables/index.asp. Accessed April 21, 2015.

Action Plan

Osceola's strengths, challenges, and opportunities underlie the goals and actions presented below. Each action either aims to address a challenge, or take advantage of a strength or opportunity. The actions are steps that Osceola can take in the near term to move towards its vision of a strong local food economy supporting jobs and health and a more vibrant downtown. Many of the actions will help the community continue to form partnerships and take action together. As in any community, there are many competing ideas about the best ways to move forward. But the workshop participants reached a workable consensus around these goals and 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 - Coordinate and enhance healthy foods education with an emphasis on outreach to youth.

- **Action 1.1** - Meet with the school district staff that develop curriculum to pitch the idea of a new healthy foods and cooking instruction program, modeled after Cooking Matters.⁷
- **Action 1.2** - Reach an agreement between the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service and the Osceola School District to use SNAP-Ed resources to initiate the healthy foods and cooking initiative throughout the school district.
- **Action 1.3** - Use communication tools (social media, newsletters, and surveys) to engage and educate parents on nutrition and the influence of food on their children's health.
- **Action 1.4** – Participate in the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention's Growing Healthy Communities and Mayors Mentoring Mayors programs.

Goal 2 - Study the feasibility of a farmers market in downtown Osceola and determine how to operate, manage, and fund it.

- **Action 2.1** - Establish the Farmers Market Working Group with a lead person that will coordinate their work to open a farmers market for the 2016 season.
- **Action 2.2** - Study the feasibility of a farmers market and develop a plan for operating it. Start by inviting Bev Dunaway from the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service to present about starting a new market to the Main Street Osceola Board.
- **Action 2.3** - Establish farmers market guidelines that address key questions, such as what can be sold, from where it must be grown, and the split between food vendors and arts/crafts vendors. Create a vendor application to collect this information.
- **Action 2.4** - Pursue a grant to launch the permanent downtown farmers market in 2016. The grant can cover marketing materials and equipment.

Goal 3 - Select a location and design for a downtown farmers market.

- **Action 3.1** - Evaluate sites based on criteria selected by the Local Foods, Local Places Steering Committee, which include visibility for customers, convenience for vendors and customers, access (walkable and available parking), water and electric hookups, perception of safety, ease of maintenance, fun, and shade.

⁷ To learn more about the Cooking Matters program, visit this site: <http://cookingmatters.org/>

- **Action 3.2** - Update local zoning codes or other ordinances to address any potential obstacles to setting up a farmers market or community gardens, particularly in areas zoned for commercial uses where there may be obstacles.
- **Action 3.3** - Conduct a citizen survey at the Osceola Heritage Music Fest and survey downtown businesses to collect information that would help Main Street Osceola set up a successful farmers market.

Goal 4 - Increase the amount of food grown in our community.

- **Action 4.1** - Develop a directory and map of local farms, markets, roadside stands, and other local food outlets and publish it online for customers and other people interested in local foods.
- **Action 4.2** - Conduct a survey of the region's producers to find out what they grow and to which markets they sell (such as wholesale and/or existing farmers markets).
- **Action 4.3** - Develop a guide for individuals or groups that would like to start a community garden in their neighborhood.

Goal 5 - Identify focus areas downtown where the City can target infrastructure improvements and cleanup efforts, and establish policies to attract investment.

- **Action 5.1** - Create a vision and strategic plan for downtown Osceola.
- **Action 5.2** - Organize and host a workshop on tax credit financing for property owners interested in improving their downtown properties.
- **Action 5.3** - Create an online resource of all grants, incentives (such as tax credits), and resources (such as a property inventory) for downtown development.
- **Action 5.4** - Target the downtown area and potential farmers market sites during the 2015 Great American Clean Up event in Osceola starting May 9.

Implementation

In the immediate future, Osceola plans to focus its energy on testing some of the big ideas generated or discussed during the workshop. The city is in the beginning stages of fostering a stronger local food economy and it is important to make sure an idea has broad support and is feasible before allocating resources to it.

High Priority Actions

The community's initial steps will involve studying the feasibility of a downtown farmers market by talking with potential customers and vendors (Actions 3.3 and 4.2) and forming a Farmers Market Working Group (Action 2.1). Main Street Osceola will play a leading role in these actions, which require little in terms of financial resources to get started. Main Street Osceola also plans to introduce its board to the Action Plan and gauge their interest in the actions contained herein.

The Local Foods, Local Places Steering Committee identified a few other actions that could move forward quickly and possibly with support from the Delta Regional Authority, which is giving Osceola and four other Delta communities priority access to funding in its Rural Community Advancement Program (RCAP). Anything eligible for USDA's Rural Business Development Grants program is eligible for RCAP. These high priority actions include a Downtown Vision and Strategic Plan that takes a long-term look at downtown's needs and priorities (Action 5.1) and a guide and potentially materials necessary to support a citywide community gardens program (Action 4.3). The idea behind this program is not for the city to

directly manage community gardens, but provide the information and potentially some of the tools and supplies necessary to support individuals or groups that would like to start gardens on vacant properties in their neighborhoods.

Main Street Osceola also identified a downtown building that it would like to acquire and use to support many of the actions listed in this plan. Main Street Osceola named a number of potential uses for this building including continuing education programs (supports Goal 1), community events, storage for community events and the farmers market (supports Goals 2 and 3), meeting space for downtown businesses that don't have sufficient space, a kitchen that existing downtown businesses and new businesses could use, a place to support pop-up businesses (essentially a small incubator), and space for an indoor crafts festival.

Livability Principles Advanced by Action Plan

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the Federal Partnerships for Sustainable Communities. The Partnerships includes EPA, DOT, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. These agencies have been working since 2009 to incorporate livability considerations into their policies and funding programs. This section describes how Osceola's Action Plan supports the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

While this livability principle was not a primary focus of the workshop, Osceola's walkable downtown street grid is a strength. However, many of the businesses have closed and moved from the downtown area. So while it is walkable, there are not many things to which a person would walk. This action plan calls for a downtown farmers market, which will give people living near downtown better access to healthy foods and a destination that will encourage more people to walk and interact.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

Fixing the housing and commercial building stock in downtown Osceola is a high priority of the community. Many of downtown Osceola's buildings have space that could be affordable housing. This housing would also be close to shops and restaurants downtown, allowing new residents to depend less on a car to meet their daily needs.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Osceola's Action Plan is most closely linked to this livability principle. The community hopes to stimulate new jobs and help people acquire new skills that they can use to support themselves and potentially launch new businesses or products. The Action Plan lays out the first steps in moving the community and region towards a more diverse economy and farming scene in which the Delta's rich soils also support jobs in growing fruits, vegetables, and other local food products.

Support Existing Communities

Osceola is an existing community with large sunk investments in transportation, water, sewer, communications, and energy infrastructure. This plan lays out some initial steps that Osceola can use to make existing neighborhoods more livable and attractive to investment. That way as new jobs come into the community and people are considering where to live, they may find these communities to be attractive places to settle. This approach to development takes full use of existing local infrastructure, which is good for stressed local budgets.

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 city and with people outside of the community 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 Osceola's communities and neighborhoods. It lays out a path for investing resources in these places and building social capital by connecting people through local foods, community gardening, and more vibrant public spaces, such as the downtown and future farmers market.

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