

LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

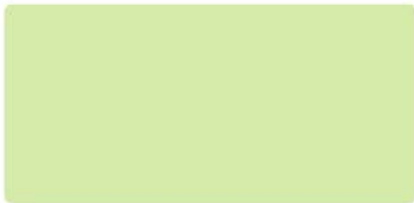
Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening the Local Foods System and Downtown Revitalization:

Actions and Strategies for Wheeling, West Virginia

August 26, 2015



Community Story

Wheeling is a city of nearly 29,000¹ people in the Appalachian region of West Virginia, approximately 55 miles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 120 miles from Columbus, Ohio, and 130 miles from Cleveland, Ohio. It is the seat of Ohio County, located along a confluence of former and current transportation routes, including the B&O Railroad and the National Road—an early link connecting the Potomac and Ohio Rivers. This choice location, and the 1849 construction of a suspension bridge spanning the Ohio River, allowed Wheeling to lay original claim to the nickname “The Gateway to the West.” Though industry would soon come to define the city, Wheeling’s earliest settlers worked the land, rooting a tradition of agriculture deep into the community.



“Gateway to the West”

Like many rust-belt cities, steel and tobacco drove Wheeling’s growth throughout the 19th century, and the city emerged as a major industrial center. Economic restructuring following World War II led to a steady decline in jobs and population over the second half of the 20th century. Wheeling has worked to



Historic buildings line a street in Wheeling

redefine itself as a center for education, health, and high-tech industry. And though their eye is on the future, strong links to the past remain, including the many historic buildings still standing in Wheeling. Now, the city is looking to come full-circle, drawing inspiration from its farming heritage to help create identity and prosperity through place-based agriculture.

Though the city desires to focus on local foods, there are currently very few producers of vegetables, fruits, and meats in Ohio County. Direct-to-consumer sales are a small percentage of overall agricultural sales (Table 1). Large swaths of Wheeling are identified by the USDA as food deserts—places home to low-income individuals with difficulty obtaining access to food at specified distances (one mile and ten miles). A correlation exists between the incidence of food deserts and the rate of obesity for a community. In 2013, West Virginia had the highest obesity rate in the country at 35.1% (up from 27.6% in 2004 and 13.7% in 1990²). And while 15% of spending on household and personal goods goes to food in Wheeling, very little of this money remains in the community.

Table 1 Agricultural Statistics for Ohio County, WV

U.S. Agriculture Census Figure	2012
Total Farms	197
Vegetable Farms	4
Fruit, Tree Nut, and Berry Farms	6
Total Agricultural Sales	\$3.4 million
Agricultural Sales Direct to Consumers	\$27,000

¹ 2010 US Census

² <http://stateofobesity.org/states/wv/>

Ohio County is performing poorly in other health indicators besides obesity. Nearly 30% of adult residents have high blood pressure, 9.6% of adults have diabetes, and 91.3% of adults eat fewer than the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. These health and food-related issues present both opportunities and challenges as partners in Wheeling work to redefine the city as a local foods producer and destination.



Farm 18 managed by Grow Ohio Valley

Although economic indicators such as income and poverty for Wheeling generally trail the state and country as a whole, Wheeling hosts a number of valuable community assets including Oglebay Park, city parks and multiuse trails, Oglebay Resort and Conference Center, four institutions of higher learning (West Virginia Northern Community College, West Liberty State College, Wheeling Jesuit University, and Bethany College), the Wheeling Symphony, the Oglebay Institute for Arts and Culture, and the Wheeling National Heritage Area. The city's largest employer is Wheeling Hospital, Inc. with 2,100 employees.³

In 2014, Grow Ohio Valley, Inc.; Reinvent Wheeling, Inc.; and the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program to develop an action plan for achieving their shared visions. The 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). Through the program, the community developed this action plan. Implementing the plan could 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.

³ Regional Economic Development Partnership, www.redp.org

Engagement

The City of Wheeling hosted a small team of federal agency staff and contractors for a two-day public workshop on March 26-27, 2015. The workshop included a tour of Wheeling and a series of visioning, brainstorming, and action planning discussions among a diverse group of residents and local, state, and federal stakeholders. These discussions helped workshop participants identify community values that underlie the action plan for their local food system initiatives, including a shared commitment to transforming underutilized properties adjacent to downtown into productive and educational landscapes. These sessions also clarified how local foods could help make Wheeling a stronger, healthier, and more economically sound community. Participants identified obstacles to and solutions for expanding access to local foods and created an action plan that is described within this report.



The two-day event kicked off with a tour of Wheeling's local food network

Among those in attendance were representatives from regional and federal agencies including West Virginia Cooperative Extension, EPA, ARC, USDA, West Virginia Department of Transportation/Department of Highways and the Federal Highway Administration. While the two-day workshop is the key event that contributed to this action plan, it was preceded by several conference calls with the community to help lay the foundation for the workshop. Figure 2 lays out all of the steps leading to this action plan.



Grow Ohio Valley recently completed a small scale growing facility in town



Crops in the growing facility include vegetables, plant starts and flowers

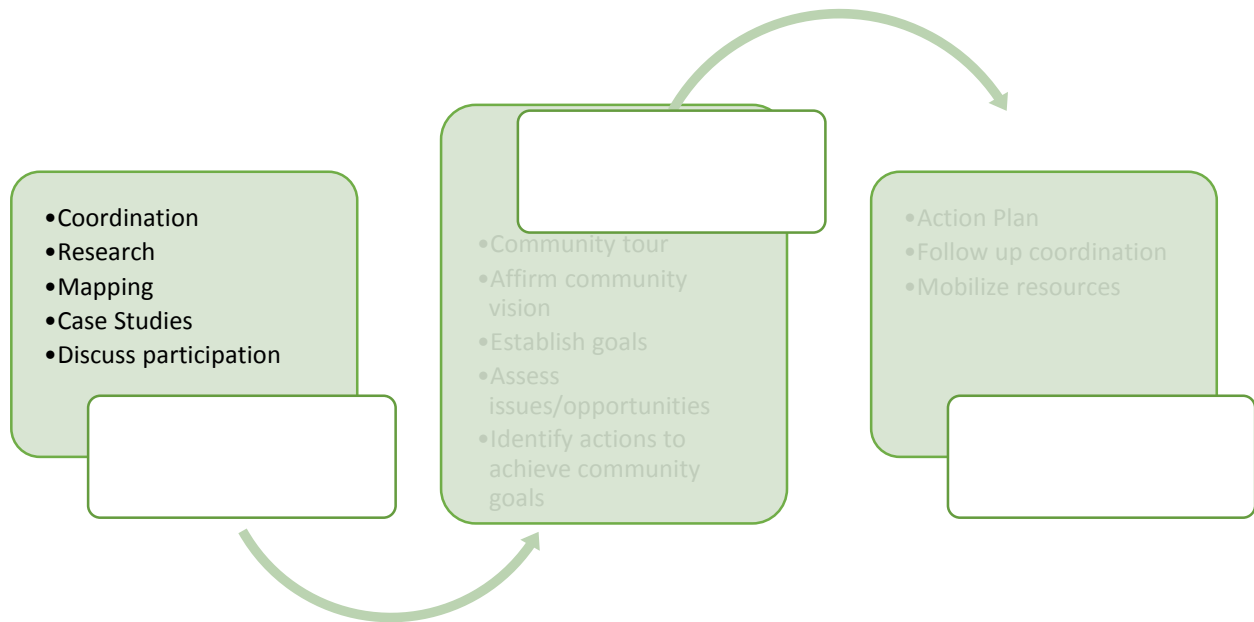


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Objectives

Some of the specific initiatives the community is focused on include:

- Developing a plan for Lincoln Meadow on Vineyard Hill
- Creating a community orchard
- Revitalizing downtown Wheeling
- Connecting healthy, local food and active living.

The workshop facilitators led several exercises and discussions during the two days that helped workshop participants refine these goals and identify specific actions for achieving them.

Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

The community identified clear, achievable objectives, but it has several hurdles to overcome. One activity of the workshop entailed a discussion of the challenges and opportunities Wheeling faces in revitalizing the Lincoln Meadow site, creating a community orchard, and achieving its other local food system goals. The strengths, challenges, and opportunities identified during the workshop are described below.

Strengths

- Central location
- A strong sense of history and many historical assets
- Cultural amenities—local art is “big;” professional symphony, arts footprint is large for this size city
- Walkable downtown well-suited to host events

Local Foods, Local Places Action Plan – Wheeling, West Virginia

- Excellent non-profit partners
- Downtown access to trails
- Access to local chefs
- Many local partners including schools, institutions of higher education, hospitals, and more
- Strong local sense of philanthropy
- “People love this place”
- Wheeling is a safe place
- Scenic city
- Lots of space for recreation and food

Challenges

- Many young people are leaving the community because finding a job is difficult
- Available space is not well-utilized
- Riverfront opportunities are not being fully realized
- Graffiti, untended spaces, and poor landscaping
- Lack of entertainment/recreation for young adults (besides bars)
- Easier for farmers to sell land than to work the land
- Communication issues exist—between restaurants and farmers, among different farmers markets, between SNAP recipients and markets
- Downtown: lack of a physical hub, no thriving area, few residents, litter/maintenance issues, no grocery store
- Little coordination of efforts
- Negative perceptions of community
- Accessibility issues
- Environmental issues
- Cost of healthy food

Opportunities

- Downtown
 - Growing interest in development of urban neighborhoods and residential districts
 - Connect local foods and downtown restaurants/retailers
 - Downtown perception is on an upswing
 - Many vacant buildings can be repurposed, preserving architectural heritage
- Partnerships
 - Ohio County schools and local universities/colleges: supply of volunteers, culinary education programs, improved town-gown relations, educational opportunities for school children
 - Local hospitals
 - Federal partnerships improve communication and decision-making in the community
 - Linking farmers with food banks and restaurants
 - Opportunity for local residents to get involved in their community
- Economic Development
 - Accessible farmers market would fill a need
 - Form a tristate food hub

- Underutilized land may be relatively cheap
- Many young people are coming back with new ideas
- Interest in rural tourism
- Take advantage of already-expanding agricultural production
- City Identity
 - Highlight and leverage the area’s unique, and sometimes unusual, history, including examples such as the “The Place of the Skull”⁴
 - Chance to keep young people in the area by creating sense of place through local food
 - Tie local foods to Wheeling’s culture and history
 - Leverage Wheeling’s history to generate tourism
- Recreation and Entertainment
 - Create more places for kids; revitalize existing spaces like Heritage Park
 - Capitalize on increased bike riding interest (like Grandview Park in Marshal County)
 - Restore Wheeling Creek
 - Walking/nature trail

This discussion helped to further define the goals for Wheeling’s local food system and the specific actions needed to achieve those goals. The goals are shown in Figure 3.

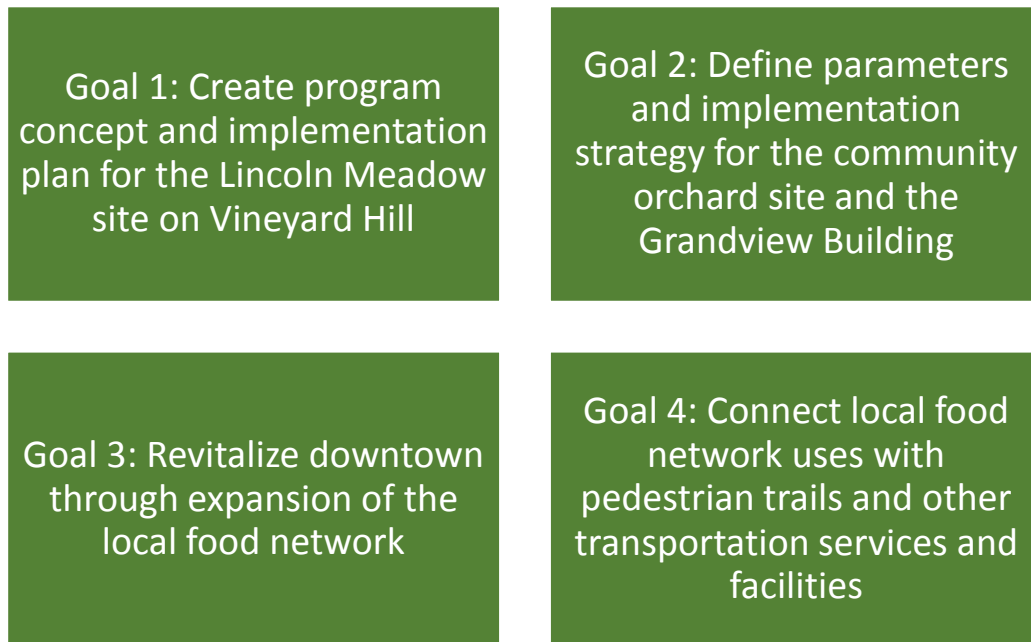


Figure 3: Goals for Advancing the Wheeling Food Network

Workshop participants also identified some action steps for achieving each goal. Additional actions have been added by the workshop facilitators to supplement the actions needed to achieve these goals. The goals and corresponding actions are outlined in the Action Plan section.

⁴ Wheeling’s name is derived from “wih link,” a Native American phrase meaning place of the head. The phrase commemorates an incident where a European settler’s severed head was put on display at the river’s edge.

Action Plan

Workshop participants identified several action steps for achieving each goal. The goals and corresponding actions are outlined in this section. The goals and action items are more fully presented in Appendix A, including a time frame, lead role, supporting cast, cost, funding sources, and near-term steps.

Goal 1: Create program concept and implementation plan for the Lincoln Meadow site on Vineyard Hill

Action 1.1: Obtain a geotechnical assessment regarding slope stability and drainage on meadow property and city property below.

Action 1.2: Engage a permaculture expert and others for an implementable site design for the Meadow

Action 1.3: Clean up refuse on site and clear vegetation in select areas

Action 1.4: Develop organized tours of the area

Action 1.5: Identify institutions and neighbors that need to be part of the discussion then engage them

Action 1.6: Inventory of stairs, utilities, and other site conditions

Action 1.7: Document the history of Vineyard Hill

Goal 2: Define parameters and implementation strategy for the community orchard site and the Grandview Building

Action 2.1: Conduct a site and soil assessment for the orchard

Action 2.2: Prepare orchard site for planting by determining the most appropriate planting method

Action 2.3: Continue the rehabilitation of the Grandview Building into a multi-use facility that has the potential for cold storage, dry storage, office space, and meeting space

Goal 3: Revitalize downtown through expansion of the local food network

Action 3.1: Assess potential for points of access to local foods in downtown

Action 3.2: Locate one or more potential stops for the mobile market

Action 3.3: Determine local interest in setting up a cooperative grocery

Action 3.4: Establish a reliable fleet of vehicles to support the local food network

Goal 4: Connect local food network uses with pedestrian trails and other transportation services and facilities

Action 4.1: Create a multimodal transportation plan for downtown with an emphasis on pedestrian facilities

Action 4.2: Connect downtown to Vineyard Hill with a system of paved pedestrian facilities and/or recreational trails

Action 4.3: Create a virtual interpretive trail for downtown and other areas

Funding

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is providing up to \$20,000 in implementation funding. The local committee is planning to use these funds for site designs for the meadow, soil rehabilitation for the orchard, equipment for the Grandview building, and downtown multi-modal transportation planning.

Livability Principles Advanced by Action Plan

Provide more Transportation Choices

Walkability in Wheeling can be improved through strategic actions that address connectivity from downtown to Vineyard Hill, especially as the Meadow is developed into a park and educational asset. Additionally, attention to streetscape enhancement and the location of mobile or pop-up markets at key locations in the downtown corridor will encourage people to walk more.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

While these efforts do not directly supply more affordable housing, the transportation and food access issues addressed by these projects help to lower the *overall* cost of housing and transportation, including in lower-income areas of Wheeling.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Implementation of these strategies will improve Wheeling's attractiveness as a place to visit and reinforce the current trend toward infill development downtown.

Support Existing Communities

All of these efforts are aimed primarily at the historic core of Wheeling, taking advantage of existing public and private assets and adding commercial and recreational value to existing neighborhoods.

Coordinate and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The work anticipates coordinated and leveraged funding from federal transportation planning funds (PL) and funds already secured for the orchard pilot project. Many of the improvements are planned on land owned by the Housing Authority. The Housing Authority made this land available for non-residential use after removing obsolete public housing developments and building new public housing on a different site.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

Providing educational and recreational amenities on Vineyard Hill through food production demonstration gardens and increased access to affordable and healthy local food via the Grow Ohio Valley Mobile Market will support the surrounding underserved neighborhoods.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Details
- Appendix B – Workshop Feedback
- Appendix C – Workshop Participants
- Appendix E – Workshop Photo Album
- Appendix F – Grandview Meadow Food Park at Vineyard Hill plan
- Appendix G – References
- Appendix H – Presentation Slides