

Local Food Connection
for
The Thomas Jefferson Planning District

Background

Across the country, momentum is building around the creation of local food systems. The benefits of producing and consuming regionally-grown food are widely recognized – for health, for the economy, for the environment, and for the resilience and vitality of communities. Virginia is no exception, and many good efforts are underway, from support for small farmers to increased institutional buying to public education.

Many of these efforts are just beginning, however, and significant gaps exist in ensuring our local food system is robust, efficient, and accessible to all. Several active local food and farm organizations have agreed that it would be beneficial to form a network to support existing programs and help identify and fill gaps where they exist.

Tentative agreement has been reached on the following principles:

- The objective of this network should be “to support a profitable local farming system and promote the year-round availability and equal accessibility of local food.”
- In its initial stages, the focus should be on supporting small farmers and on education. Without these, other issues of supply, demand, and access cannot be addressed.
- At the center of the network should be a coordinating mechanism that helps strengthen the individual components and serves the whole; acts as an information source and connector; and helps people navigate through the many layers of local food issues.
- The geographic area covered by the network is the Thomas Jefferson Planning District.
- The working title for the network is “Local Food Connection.”

A very preliminary gap/needs analysis identified the following as first-tier issues: certification, workforce development and coordination, land lease, training for new farmers, seasonal extension, finance, and availability of information. In addition, the group is tackling a project promoting the use of electronic bank transfers and food stamps at a local farmers market.

The organizations involved in these initial discussions are the Jefferson Area Board on Aging, Feast!/Local Food Hub, Piedmont Environmental Council, Darden School/Batten Institute at the University of Virginia, Twin Springs Farm, and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Several of these organizations have agreed, pending approval from their management, to form the initial board of the organization. Blue Moon Fund has provided facilitation and coordinating support. The group is closely aligned with the Virginia Food Systems Council, a new statewide initiative, and is conducting outreach to many other groups and individuals involved in local food.

Next Steps

Organizational documents are being drawn up and the group is seeking a host for its initial stages.