



TRANSFORMATIVE FEDERAL INVESTMENTS IN OUR REGION'S FOOD SYSTEM?

EXPLORING WHAT'S KNOWN ABOUT USDA'S REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESS CENTERS

MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)

Tuesday, August 23, 2022

A meeting presentation and video of the meeting, can be found at:

<https://www.mwcog.org/events/2022/8/23/transformative-federal-investments-in-our-region-s-food-system/>

Thank you to speaker Will Gray for providing the notes from this meeting.

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS, AND OBJECTIVES FOR TODAY'S CALL

Lindsay Smith, Regional Food Systems Planner at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) welcomed meeting participants.

She provided a short background on the [new FARM Policy Committee at COG](#). Hosting today's conversation aligns with FARM's purpose and mission.

Lindsay reviewed the meeting objectives and thanked the speakers on the agenda for their participation, assistance in planning and conducting outreach for the meeting. Objectives:

- Share what we know about the Regional Food Business Centers and see if anybody knows anything additional to what will be shared today.
- Learn from an experienced technical assistance provider in another region about how they are thinking about the RFBCs opportunity.
- Connect or reconnect with one another and make new connections to those who could be part of a developing a proposal, or otherwise have a direct stake in its success.
- Keep the social imperative to transform our food system at top of mind. How can a proposal from our region center underserved communities in ways that are transformational?

2. OBSERVATIONS ON PROCESSES, PROJECTS, AND PARTNERSHIPS TO ENSURE THAT UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES ARE RESOURCED TO TRANSFORM LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Chris Bradshaw, Executive Director at Dreaming Out Loud, Inc (DOL) talked about DOL's programming and work as a farm, food hub, and incubator. DOL farms on Parks & Recreation land in Washington, DC, runs a Black Farmer Community CSA, and offers wholesale. The organizations also

runs an incubator focused on supporting historically marginalized community members to develop their food businesses. Link: <https://dreamingoutloud.org/>

- Chris and DOL have been working for more than 10 years. DOL is urban based, but connected to rural communities
- Chris is speaking from Lawrenceville, VA today and meeting with 4P Foods to connect their farmers to institutional procurement.
- Rural and Urban: **“Our situations are bound up together.”**
- Food in community can look like it’s behind thick, bullet-proof glass.
- Need access and engagement to bring people in.
- Institutions need purchasing power to procure at living-wage rates.
- Communities are the first respondents in a time of crisis.
- We need systems that channel profit not only to landlords and corporate stakeholders, **a new food system revolution.**

Dr. Marcus Comer, Extension Specialist and Associate Professor with Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia State University College of Agriculture, discussed working with farmers and packing company out of a new center; the goal is to expand into a larger food hub and incubator offering **across the food system including the recovery of waste.** Link: <https://www.ext.vsu.edu/marcus-comer>

- There is need for more community-driven solutions investing in the community and addressing inequitable policies. There are policies in locales presenting local procurement – **big conglomerates with contracts**
- It’s like any other investment, but with **intentionality**. Investing in community and the people who live in it.
- Projects that connect the smallest farmers to retail spaces are part of what’s missing: COVID brought to light the role of smaller supply chains

3. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESS CENTERS?

Will Gray, Managing Director at the Eastern Food Hub Collaborative and a local food business owner of Back Pocket Provisions, highlighted some key issues for consideration from the public record about the USDA Regional Food Business Centers (RFBC).

Link: <https://www.easternfoodhubcollaborative.org/>

March 10th: Federal Register Announcement – AMS requests a new information collection

Callouts:

- Administration: Authorized under American Rescue Plan; AMS using cooperative agreements
- Purpose: backbone for local and regional supply chain development to create more resilient, diverse, and connected supply chains.
- Roles: 1) support coordination, 2) fund technical assistance providers, 3) provide small grants to food businesses
- Flexibility: Geographic regions tailor development and investment to fit their needs

- Networking: Built on strong relationships between individuals, communities, regions, sectors, and institutions

June 1st: Framework to Transform the Food System Announcement

Press release is published; at Georgetown University, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack delivers a speech about transforming the food system and a new framework for diversified agriculture (with a great panel, check it out).

Callouts:

- Competition, not consolidation: “combats market dominance...” “creating new, more and better local market options” > **Regionalism**
- Accessibility, affordability, and equity: “speed the transition to more equitable growth”
- \$400M investment: coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building support
- Stakeholders: processing, distribution and aggregation, and market access challenges; support underserved communities

... Amid a list of priorities for change throughout the food system. What we DON'T have is a Request for Proposals, a timeline for implementation, or any of the details that we expect to find within.

4. A REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE ON A TRANSFORMATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Todd Erling, Executive Director, [Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation \(HVADC\)](#)
Founding Executive Committee Member, [Agricultural Viability Alliance](#)

Highlights from Todd's remarks on the history of work in the Hudson Valley, including what led to the creation of HVADC

American Farmland Trust – economic development in the Hudson Valley; lots of exiting of manufacturing and moving into service economies; “traditional” economic development. Support for value-add growers; need to “**individual responses**” – smaller scale; meat or value-add; to small grains. This was successful, but nontraditional in a traditional lens.

- “Not only how do you save the land; but how do you save the family on land?”

Built HVADC around transitioning from dairy and food-crop commodity base to specialty and often direct-to-retail markets. County-by-county approaches doesn't have appropriate critical mass to support TA, grantmaking, and staffing. Three takeaways:

1. Developing a **regional entity** that focuses on Ag and Food System as Economic Development
2. **Having a regional strategy** and following a roadmap to implementation that includes food systems at the table (just like hospitality or manufacturing)
3. **Technical assistance** akin to SBDCs offer to main street redevelopment; and **dedicated capital** continuing into grant, debt, and traditional/nontraditional funding structures
 - a. Traditional: SBA, Commerce, Farm Bureau/Credit
 - b. Nontraditional: EDA, CDFI
 - c. Use your entrepreneurs to provide feedback and improve the systems and offerings. HVADC doesn't bill or get paid until the counties hear feedback from the entrepreneurs.

Piloted with 2 counties on a 3-year project. **Working at glacial paces; 3-5 years is what it takes.** “Horizon, not the finish line.” Then 2 more counties joined, then up to 8 counties. > **timeline was critical.**

Fee for service relationship with the Economic Development Office (or county planners) > this allowed them to play leadership roles

Political positioning: leverage representation on the House Agricultural Committee
Todd ultimately starting a CDFI and their own funding programs to support historically underserved and under-represented communities

Hosted first National Farm Viability Conference to put together the Blueprint for Farm Viability and the **Agricultural Viability Alliance.**

1. Needing human expertise to bring knowledge, relationships, and creative solutions to entrepreneurs and communities (Direct TA)
2. Advocating for capital to pay for TA and support multi-year relationships, professional development, and increasing responsiveness (the “petri dish” to move with the food system)
 - a. This is where they are now, advocating to make sure that TA support is being included in federal programming – “funding the human beings” – and investment in VCC

Challenges of the hub-of-spoke model: how do you get funding and support out to the spokes, and not all sitting at the hub? It’s been wrong in the past. Making sure TA is built in, making sure underserved communities and ambassadors to those communities are coming out of the hub in positions of power.

Keep it small. Focus on nimble, agile small and regional specialties that aren’t covered under traditional support products (like farm insurance). Fibers, grains, culturally-relevant crops. This is often who needs the technical assistance the most.

Must be multi-year. You need time for metrics and infrastructure.

Matchmaking appropriate capital to appropriate programming. Finding creative ways to bring interdisciplinary capital to support new programming. Get outside of the “alphabet soup” of traditional funding.

HVADC will not be an applicant to RFBC because they don’t have the capacity. They’re advocating for themselves as partners to larger institutions. Talking about how they work on the “spokes” to make a broad-base project successful.

Responses to this RFA are going to overlap because regions are big. We have to communicate and coordinate because we all rely on each other.

Respondents shared a few high-level takeaways:

Nancy Nunn, Assistant Director, Harry R Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology: Observed that we have built collaboration and partnership around the Chesapeake Bay to improve environmental outcomes, we need something that can operate at a regional scale to invest in our region’s food system.

Link: <https://agmr.umd.edu/research/research-and-education-centers-locations/harry-r-hughes-center-agro-ecology>

Chris Bradshaw, Executive Director, Dreaming Out Loud, Inc. “Trust.” That’s the foundation of all the relationships that span the food system. That trust is damaged when things don’t materialize or they come-and-go. How do we build a 3-5 year commitment and deliver on that commitment? White wealth is 81x higher than Black wealth in the DMV – how are we going to serve that community at a market rate before addressing that?

Tom McDougall, Founder/CEO, 4P Foods. We are operating 3 facilities in the Mid-Atlantic, looking at a 4th one. Lots of convening and relationship building about economic development authorities. But WHO DOES have the capacity to stand up and lead a coalition like this, that can also bring the trust and the relationship building? How do we start to use this to advocate for a new economic paradigm, rather than clawing for better position inside of a system that’s designed to disadvantage our work? “Assigning value to our values” – social justice, inclusive development.

Link: <https://4pfoods.com/>

Fritz Boettner, Food System Development Director, Center for Resilient Communities, West Virginia University. Exploring applied, practitioner-level interventions to improve justice, equity, and sustainability in the food system. Land grants need to continue to center around their mission: making research accessible and getting it into the field. Shouldn’t be proscriptive (no TA “program”) but work responsively to the needs on the ground. Thinking over the next 20-30 years of how Extension can be serve in these changing times; the proscriptive approach isn’t working anymore.

Link: <https://resilientcommunities.wvu.edu/>

5. TAKEAWAYS, NEXT STEPS, AND ADJOURN

Participants were asked to share a key takeaway from today’s meeting. Additional information from the chat is copied below.

Stacey Snelling, American University: Introduced by Tom. AU was gifted Airlie in Warrenton, VA (and the home of Earth Day). AU does want to partner and vision, and can bring Airlie as a space for convening, and bring policy and process experience. Putting their name in the hat as an interested partner as this comes together.

Linda Thompson, Howard University: Howard is committed to working towards health outcomes in community, specifically around nutrition and how it intersects food security. Available to help make community links in the region.

Debbie Tropp: Might you shed some additional light on how you were able to develop the necessary relationships in neighboring counties to forge ahead with a strong and effective regional alliance. What type of meetings/planning was involved, and how did you go about recruiting participants. I think better understanding the human side of this equation is going to be an essential part of successful implementation.

Todd on “**the long game**” – and what are we actually DOING? “If you’re working on a problem you can solve in your lifetime, you’re thinking too small.” Trust is foundational and human

relationships are the driver: “give me time.” In economic development, you’re competing against your neighbor and against other states. Business **attraction, retention, and expansion** might not be the right model for this kind of work. It’s fraught, but it’s the reality of the system today. Don’t follow the same path to failures but look for successes within the traditional system to understand what we can best take away.

Lindsay Smith asked participants to indicate if they were interested in staying in touch and potentially contributing resources to proposal development by [completing this survey](#). The survey will remain open until September 2nd. After that time, please reach out to any of the meeting speakers via email.

WebEx Chat

Welcome, All: Here's a link to today's agenda.

<https://www.mwcog.org/events/2022/8/23/transformative-federal-investments-in-our-region-s-food-system/>

85 plus participants joined the call. Here are the introductions that were provided in the chat.

- Nancy Nunn, Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology
- Della McGuire, Appalachian Sustainable Development, asdevelop.org
- Becca Hentges, Capital Area Food Bank
- Caroline Selle, Chesapeake Bay Funders Network
- Fritz Boettner, West Virginia University: Center for Resilient Communities, <https://resilientcommunities.wvu.edu/>
- Good morning! Mardell Moffett, The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation
- Tom McDougall, 4P Foods
- Will Gray, Eastern Food Hub Collaborative / Back Pocket Provisions
- Molly Harris, Lulus Local Food
- Jeffrey Geisel/Owner/Henrys Seafood, Inc. www.henrys-seafood.com
- Sara Beckwith, DC Department of Health
- Alice Chalmers, Sun Bird Farm, Advisor to 4P Foods
- Good morning! Kathy Johnson, Director of Agriculture Business Development for Howard County Economic Development
- Kai Abelkis - Sustainability Manager - University Maryland Medical Center - Baltimore Grows Food Processing Facility
- Stephanie Hopkins, Arlington County Food Security Coordinator, <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Departments/DHS/Food-Assistance>
- Darren Jarboe, Assistant Director and Program Leader
- Agriculture and Food Systems Program
- University of Maryland Extension
- Kelly Dudeck, Grow & Fortify www.growandfortify.com
- Maureen O'Shea Fitzgerald, Cecil County Office of Economic Development, Agricultural Business Coordinator
- Todd Erling, Exec Drctr HVADC
- Jo-Ann Jolly, DC Department of Health
- Michelle Caruso (she/her), Montgomery County Food Council mocofoodcouncil.org
- Sydney Pryor, Redstone Center at GW

- Chris Blosser, Rural Business Development Manager, Loudoun County, Virginia Economic Development
- A. Cesante Alrey Business Development Manager Dorchester County Economic Development
Dorchester Regional Technology Park The Eastern Shore Innovation Center
- Kirsten from PATH Foundation here.
- Laura Brown, Food Works Group
- Hello, Elizabeth Borst, Virginia Fresh Match
- Becca Tucker- Senior Business Development Manager of Agriculture with Frederick County
Office of Economic Development <https://www.homegrownfrederick.com/>
- Ayanna Wells, American University
- Eric Bendfeldt, Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation &
Virginia Cooperative Extension
- Al Goldberg, Mess Hall- <https://messhalldc.com/>
- Good Morning All - Lynn Rubin Traversa - Maryland SNAP-Ed Statewide Healthy Food Systems
Coordinator
- Bryan Sobel, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
- Ellie Bomstein from the Wallace Center here
- Gerardo Martinez with wild kid acres
- Hello everyone. Lawrence Schaefer, Professor Bowie State and CEO of Schaefer Global
Managment LLC, commercial scale aquaponics. www.schaeferglobal.com,
larry@schaeferglobal.com, 202-315-8029
- Debbie Tropp, retired USDA/AMS deputy director, currently p/t USDA grant consultant +
committee chair with the North American Food System Network, non-farmer delegate to the
Montgomery County ag advisory committee. Based in Kensington, MD
- Steve McHenry, Executive Director, MARBIDCO.
- Bridget Warren, Program Manager, Office of Food Security, Prince George's County
- Danielle Castellano, Tri-county Coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Food and Resilience Access
Coalition (MAFRAC), Danielle@mafrac.com
- Michelle Edwards, Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission
- Morning! Julia Raymond, DC Area Director for Cureate: <https://www.cureate.co/>
- Ruth Welch M.S., R.D., Rappahannock County, VA

from Debra Tropp to everyone: 9:53 AM

Thank you so much, Todd, for your excellent insights and generous sharing of your organizational experiences. My request to you: might you shed some additional light on how you were able to develop the necessary relationships in neighboring counties to forge ahead with a strong and effective regional alliance. What type of meetings/planning was involved, and how did you go about recruiting participants. I think better understanding the human side of this equation is going to be an essential part of successful implementation.

from Della McGuire to everyone: 10:07 AM

I realize the rfa hasn't been released, but do we have an idea of the turn around time once it is opened?

from MWCOG Department of Environmental Programs - Water to everyone: 10:13 AM

Speaking of the long game, \$400 million is a very significant investment in regional food systems but is actually not that much spread across the country. If HVADC isn't an applicant, could you envision

them being on an application in some way to bring in the additional capital that will be needed to transform the NE food system?

from Gerardo Martinez to everyone: 10:22 AM

I have to go out. My farm is hosting this event www.mdintag.com I would love to highlight all of our joint efforts in this endeavor as these issues are now reaching our international partners

from Stacey Snelling to everyone:

<https://wastedfood.american.edu/>

from Bryan Sobel he/him JHU-CLF to everyone:

So much to talk about. This is an enormously complex task. Thank you to the Lindsay MWCOG for convening! This sounds like just the start of the conversation.

from Lynn Rubin Traversa to everyone:

So glad you mentioned nutrition and education Linda! Maryland SNAP-Ed facilitates training, technical support, and training for farmers and farmers' market managers, in addition to education for program participants about accessing healthy food and making the best use of limited food resources. We would be happy to offer a letter of support and to lend training and educational resources to support this effort. Community connections are paramount to strengthening the food system. Lrubin@umd.edu

from Alice Chalmers to everyone:

Happy to provide any support and lessons learned from experience running farming educational and research orgs in the Mid-Atlantic and founding and running food hubs and be a small cog in helping strengthen this regional food system.

from MWCOG Department of Environmental Programs - Water to everyone:

Hi, All: Please let us know if you would like to stay connected to this conversation in this short survey before you leave: <https://forms.office.com/r/cy7UTFuczQ>