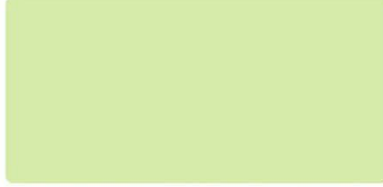
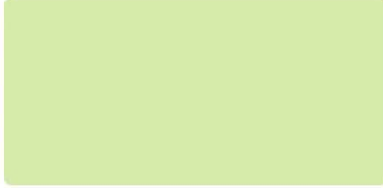




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for Local Foods, Local Place Initiatives



Unity, Maine
December 31, 2015



Community Story

Unity, Maine is a small rural town of approximately 2,100¹ people located in Northwestern Waldo County, about twenty miles east of the City of Waterville and I-95. Originally settled by the Quakers and incorporated as the Town of Unity in June of 1804, the town encompasses just over 41 square miles. The town was originally known as Twenty-Five Mile Pond Plantation, based on its location on Unity Pond (a.k.a. Lake Winnecook) which is a large inland lake of 3.9 square miles. Demographically, the town has a notably low median age at 30.7 years old, compared to a state average of 43.2 years old². It also has higher than average individual poverty rates at 21.7% compared to the Waldo County average of 16.7% and state of Maine averages at 13.6%.³

Well known as the home of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association and its annual Common Ground Fair, Unity has maintained its stance as a strong agricultural center for the region. The town is home to Unity College, a private, liberal arts college located just a mile east of downtown. The college was founded in 1965, with just 15 faculty members and 39 students, as part of an initiative to offset the economic effects of the then-declining chicken farming industry. In the last few years, the school has seen an increase in its endowment and attendance is up due in part because of recent efforts to strengthen existing academic programs



Corner of Main and Depot Street in Unity, Maine. (Photo Credit: Renaissance Planning)

and address needed capital improvements and expansion. The college is not only Unity's largest employer, but has one of the broadest environmental and natural resources programs in the United States. While the town's population has remained small and stable, the demographics continue to change and evolve. Locals cite the fact that many recent graduates of Unity College are staying in the community well after graduation. Most recently (2008-2009), Amish settlers also joined the ranks of Unity residents, numbering around 200 according to Amish community leaders⁴.

¹ United States Census Bureau / American FactFinder. "Total Population." *2010 Demographic Profile*. U.S. Census Bureau. Web. Accessed November 1, 2015.

² United States Census Bureau / American FactFinder. "Age." *2009-2013 American Community Survey*. U.S. Census Bureau. Web. Accessed November 1, 2015

³ United States Census Bureau / American FactFinder. "Poverty." *2009-2013 American Community Survey*. U.S. Census Bureau. Web. Accessed November 1, 2015

⁴ Schweitzer, Sarah. "Living in Unity." *Boston Globe*. Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC. November 29, 2009. Accessed November 1, 2015.

http://www.boston.com/news/local/maine/articles/2009/11/29/maine_town_quickly_embraces_new_amish_neighbors/?page=full

Like most historic towns in the United States, Unity was built around a traditional main street and rail line. The construction of interstate I-95 to the west of town drew many businesses and activity away from its historic center. Over the years, growth continued to respond to auto-centric patterns which allowed development to spread further out. Today, the larger downtown mixed use district stretches along Main Street, Depot Street and School Street. The commercial businesses, civic uses and retail areas are not contiguous and the boundaries of the district edges are located about a mile away from each other making it difficult to walk between them. This is further complicated by breaks in the sidewalk networks, making it difficult to safely or comfortably walk or bike to key destinations throughout town, especially in the snowy winter months. The lack of a single continuous main street between the districts also precludes Unity from qualifying for different state and federal Main Street funding programs.



*Local retail located at the corner of Main Street and School Street..
(Photo Credit: Renaissance Planning)*

Despite the lack of connectivity, Unity's downtown is a regional draw for residents of adjacent small towns like Thorndike, Troy, and Freedom that rely on Unity's services. Unity's grocery store is the only full service grocery store for nearly twenty miles. In fact, the USDA designates Western Waldo County a food desert. Unity, also known as the "Garden of Waldo County," has a long history as a strong agricultural community and regional center, and has an abundance of resources that, in many ways, simply need redirection to target local Unity consumers and support future business growth. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), founded in 1971 tasks itself with helping farmers and gardeners grow healthy organic food and is the nation's oldest and largest statewide organic organization. The group's "Common Ground County Fair," attracts around 60,000 people to the town every year. Additionally, the Unity Food hub recently became active in the Historic Unity Grammar School building, aggregating and selling local produce both within and outside of the state also has a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

The abundance of local farms near Unity is a strong asset. According to the 2012 United States Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture, there were 633 farms in Waldo County which accounted for 130,608 acres of farmland. Compared to other nearby counties, this reflects a high percentage of total county acreage in farmland at 28%. However many local growers don't sell locally in Unity. Instead, they go to more financially rewarding places such as the Waterville farmers market, or to larger urban centers like Portland or Boston. While the town of Unity has tried to strengthen the existing small farmers market that currently has between two and eight vendors, newer, younger farmers have been less interested in selling their products because of Unity's small population size and the limited local buying power of residents.

	Nearby Counties			
	Waldo	Kennebec	Penobscot	Somerset
Acres of Farmland	130,608	78,050	112,949	140,045
Total County Acreage	467,200	555,520	2,173,440	2,513,280
Percent of County Land in Farms	28%	14%	5%	6%
Total Number Farms	633	604	677	579

Data compiled from county level information published by the state of Maine local government online portal (<http://www.maine.gov/local/index.html>) and USDA's 2012 Agricultural Census county level information (http://www.nrcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_2_County_Level/Maine/st23_2_001_001.pdf)

In recent years, residents have become more engaged in efforts to revitalize the town. Twenty members of the Unity Comprehensive Plan Committee developed a planning framework in 2014⁵ focused on natural resources, the town’s relationship with Unity College, community spirit, governance, farming and agriculture, and economic opportunities and business. During the comprehensive planning process which is still underway, over 100 participating residents envisioned showcasing Unity’s agricultural wealth while strengthening the town’s brand as an important regional center. There is a strong desire for a community that is both pro-business and people-oriented. Specifically, the town’s vision is for a retail growth district along School Street which promotes development and more walkable downtown spaces. Some of the most active components of the existing food system are also located in the downtown district including a small farmers market at Unity Barn Raisers; the Maine Organic Farmers’ Association; Veggies for All, which is part of the Maine Farmland Trust; and the new Unity Food Hub.

Despite the progress the community is making with its downtown revitalization efforts and local food system initiatives, implementation remains a challenge. Unity has no town manager; the three selectmen are paid only small stipends for their time; and residents are dedicated, but are busy working or caring for families. Given this dynamic, the Kennebec Valley Council of Governments applied for EPA technical assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program. 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). The desired outcomes of the Local Foods, Local Places program are:

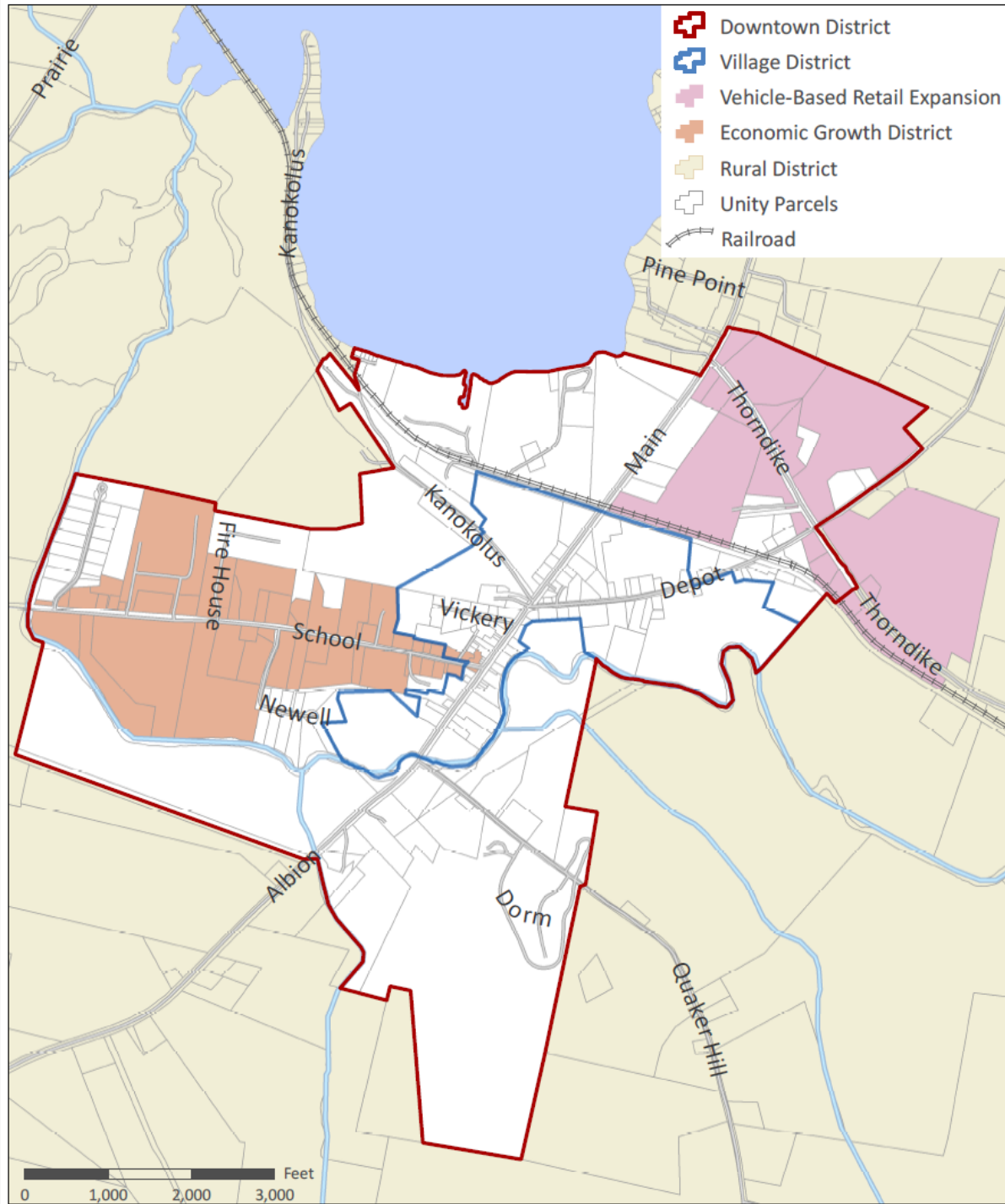
- More economic opportunities for local farmers and business.
- Better access to healthy local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- A revitalized downtown that is the economic anchor of the community.

These outcomes align well with existing Unity goals to support the local food system as a place-making device and create a more economically-productive and active downtown. This action plan summarizes some of the key outcomes of the Local Foods, Local Places project in Unity. It captures the highlights of a two-day workshop and includes a targeted set of goals and actions for moving forward.

⁵ Town of Unity, Maine. Draft Comprehensive Plan. February 2, 2015. Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://www.unityme.org/gov/compplan/>

UNITY DOWNTOWN DISTRICT & OVERLAY ZONES

Date: 2/2/2015



Unity's Downtown District and Overlay Zones from the draft Comprehensive Plan. (Map Credit: Planning Decisions)

Technical Assistance

The key phases of the Local Foods, Local Places technical assistance program are illustrated in Figure 1. The primary convening event in Unity was a stakeholder community tour and an evening workshop on October 15, 2015 and an all day workshop on October 16, 2015. The workshop brought local stakeholders together with state and federal agency representatives to identify next steps for building a more cohesive local food system and a more walkable, economically prosperous downtown. This action plan, which lays out several critical next steps, is a product of the workshop.

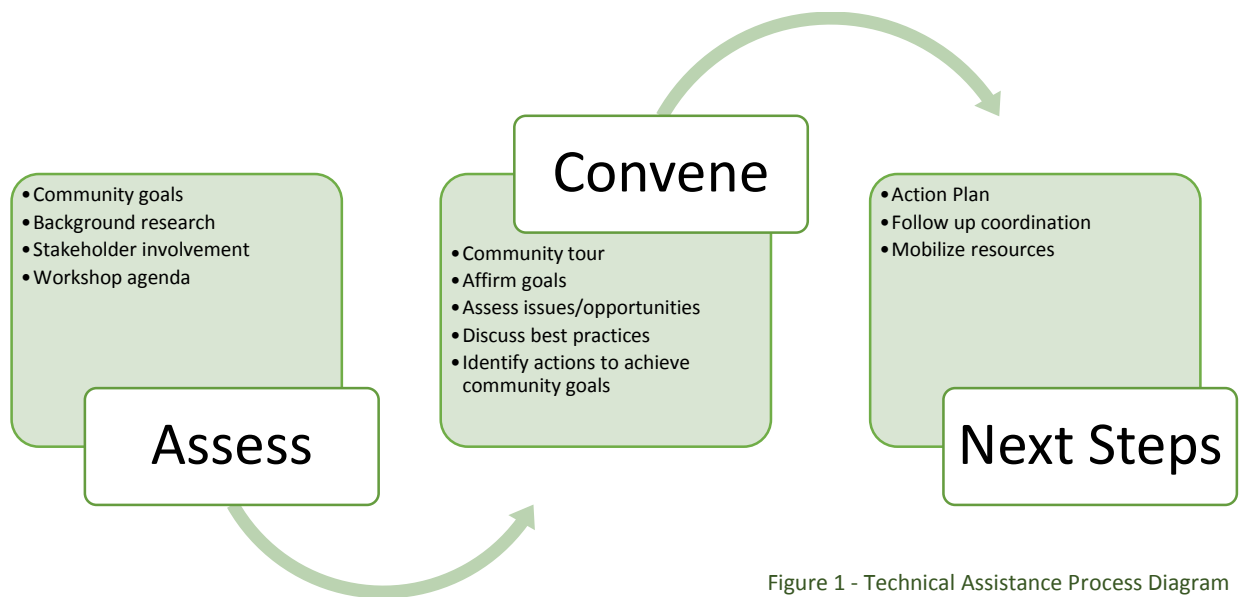


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

The workshop featured three sessions. The first session included presentations on the economic, health, social, and placemaking benefits of local food initiatives and place-based community improvements, while also encouraging discussion about local challenges and opportunities for the greater Unity community. The second and third sessions further explored opportunities for strengthening retail, commercial and civic assets of downtown and better connecting the area’s agricultural assets to its economic future. The facilitated exercises and discussions helped refine the community goals (listed below) and helped identify actions for achieving them.

Goals for the Local Foods, Local Places Initiative in Unity, Maine

1. Improve walkability, bikability and vitality of downtown district
2. Strengthen the local food system and align with local economic development and diversification efforts
3. Broaden local participation in advancing goals and actions described herein

Vision

The vision for advancing the Local Food, Local Place initiatives in Unity centers on creating a stronger local economy where businesses can prosper; young people can find jobs; more members of the community are engaged and collaborating on key initiatives; more people have access to affordable, healthy local food; downtown is a place where things happen; and the community continues to benefit and define itself by its unique agricultural, local business and educational assets.

Challenges and Opportunities

In order to achieve this vision, workshop participants identified several key challenges and opportunities as described below:

Challenges

Dispersed commercial and retail development – Development in town is spread out along the major roadways making it difficult to support a concentration of pedestrian activity that can benefit local retail and support community events. Creating a walkable town center where people can safely and easily walk or bike to multiple destinations is a national best practice for small town revitalization.

Higher than average rates of poverty and lack of higher wage jobs – Community members cited concerns about the inability of the town to support growth of the local food system in terms of direct to consumer sales through the farmers market or CSAs due to lower levels of income in the town compared to surrounding areas. If residents in town can buy produce at the local grocery store at a lower price point than local food, it will be difficult to build support for paying a higher price at the farmers market for locally grown food. Additionally, this dynamic is also seen as a barrier for growing the local retail and restaurant businesses.

Ongoing debates about town growth and development – Over the last few years, the development of the Comprehensive Plan created some robust dialogue in the community regarding how best to support the town's vision for its development future. Some of these issues remain divisive within the community which gets in the way of stakeholder collaboration on key community development initiatives.

Lack of awareness and convenience for buying local – The existing farmers market at the Unity Barn raises has a limited number of vendors and limited hours of operation. This makes it a less convenient option compared to the hours and offerings of the local grocery store. Additionally, there is a general lack of awareness in the community about the benefits of buying local and the different opportunities to do so.

Lack of coordination among local stakeholders – There are many individuals and organizations who are interested in improving quality of life and promoting local business growth in Unity. However there currently lacks a single venue or coordinating committee to foster this type of collaboration. This leads to missed opportunities for leveraging different resources and also contributes to fragmented communication networks, which can leave some in the community uninformed and unengaged.

Lack of consensus on town's economic development strategy – the town is home to several non-profits and Unity College – all of which provide local jobs and create economic activity. However there remains some debate within the community about the degree to which the non-profits and the college positively impact the local economy and contribute to the local tax base. This has led to a lack of consensus about the kind of job and business growth that the town should focus their limited energy and economic development resources on.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges listed above, the community has several key assets and opportunities to advance their goals and overcome some of these challenges as described below.

Unity College is a local asset and is growing – As of 2014, Unity College had 589 students and is in the midst of a capital building program that will result in new residence halls, a new conference center and a new dining and student common center. Unity College draws its student body from across the US and abroad and its focus on environmental sustainability is part of the town of Unity’s brand. Higher education institutions have shown to create positive economic impacts on communities through on campus and off campus spending by faculty and staff, campus construction, arts and cultural events, food and other supplies purchasing. Therefore the presence of Unity College presents an opportunity as a driver of local food demand and local service-based business growth.

Unity brand already exists – The town of Unity already has state and national recognition as the home of Unity College, MOFGA, and the Common Ground Fair. Reinforcing the name brand of the community can be a powerful tool in helping attract additional outside visitors to enjoy the community’s local restaurants, arts, history and other unique place-based assets. Utilizing the Unity brand can also help to position locally grown and value added food products and locally made arts and crafts for sale locally, regionally or nationwide.

Strong community character – Despite the fact that the town lacks a traditional main street, there are several historic buildings, homes, public art and clusters of development activity within the downtown district that creates a strong sense of place and distinctive community character. Strategies to enhance the walking and biking connectivity between these areas and reinforce the sense of place through additional streetscape improvements, signage, public art and other unifying physical features can help visually strengthen the connections as well and further enhance the attractiveness of downtown for visitors and new businesses.

Significant local food supply – The number of farmers and the amount of land dedicated to farming in the region creates an opportunity to considerably increase the purchase and consumption of local foods by Unity residents, businesses and institutions. The growth in demand for local foods within a 100-200 mile radius also presents economic opportunities for local growers targeting sales not only in Unity but in other nearby markets. Some efforts are already underway to close the infrastructure gaps in the local food system and make it easier for local farmers to sell locally and for smaller farmers to reach additional markets. The Unity Food Hub is an example of a key local strategy, and more efforts are underway by the Maine Farmland Trust and MOFGA to further strengthen the local food system. Additional opportunities exist to expand the existing farmers market and better align the local food system strategies with local economic development efforts by the Town of Unity and the Unity Business Exchange, an organization representing local business owners.

Capacity of local stakeholders – For a small rural community, the Town of Unity has a notable number of local residents, local farmers, for-profit businesses, non-profits, foundations and other stakeholders with considerable financial and human capacity that can be leveraged into action to support many of the Local Foods, Local Places-based goals.

Action Steps

This section introduces the three major goals that emerged from the workshop process. The goals address some of the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities described in the previous section. Each goal is supported by specific actions, which are steps different stakeholders can take in the near term and longer term to move closer to each goal. 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: Improve walkability, bikability and vitality of village center.

- **Action 1.1: Work with Maine DOT to make improvements to Depot Street.** Creating additional on-road or off-road paths for walkers and bicyclists will help complete the bike/walk network in the town and better connect the town's key retail districts.
- **Action 1.2: Establish Unity Market Day.** Joint efforts between different community stakeholders can help to leverage limited dollars needed to help organize and advertise local business, spur community demand and participation.
- **Action 1.3: Establish a community calendar.** Print opportunities could include placing calendars to be displayed on bulletin boards at UBR, Town Hall or other venues.
- **Action 1.4: Establish a monthly program of events in the town center of Unity.** This would be especially helpful in the winter months as a strategy to draw people out and reduce isolation/cabin fever and year round these events can help spark intergenerational and new vs. old time residents getting to know each other.
- **Action 1.5: Establish winter maintenance program for walking and biking routes in town.** A combination of volunteer and town-based efforts are needed to create a winter maintenance program that results in safe paths. Additionally there is a need to create a system that reduces any personal liability to private property owners for clearing paths.

GOAL 2: Strengthen local food system and align with local economic development and diversification efforts.

- **Action 2.1: Create a reliable source of information on who is growing/producing locally and how those products can be purchased.** Establishing a multi-media resource guide can help put a spotlight on local production and foster increased awareness, demand and sales locally. Increased awareness can also help to make local purchasing more convenient to the public.
- **Action 2.2: Identify gaps in local food system infrastructure (soft and hard infrastructure) needs aimed at increasing local production and local sales; target resources to fill those gaps.** Building on the outreach efforts conducted in Action 2.1 and other information gathered during the feasibility study for the local Unity Food Hub, a 2016-2017 needs assessment is needed to identify specific efforts that the Town of Unity and other partners can take on to help close those gaps and/or identify new entrepreneurial opportunities to fill those gaps.
- **Action 2.3: Conduct an economic and fiscal impact study to identify local benefits associated with agricultural, educational and non-profit related organizations in town.** The study can be insightful in helping to identify current and potential benefits from each of these sectors and can serve to align local interests and resources for a larger economic development strategy.
- **Action 2.4: In conjunction with Action 1.2, conduct a farmer's market feasibility study to identify expansion options for the Unity Farmer's Market.** In order to justify additional investments and efforts to support the diversification and expansion of the local market, there is a need to better understand local supply and demand (buying power).
- **Action 2.5: In conjunction with Action 2.3 and 2.6, build upon and leverage the already established local identity associated with Common Ground Fair to strengthen Unity brand and economic development potential.**

- **Action 2.6: In conjunction with Action 2.3 and 2.5, establish a new Unity Action (or other duly named) Steering Committee aimed at coordinating economic development, placemaking and local food system efforts.** This working group would help to shepherd many of the actions under Goal 2. This working group should include membership from Unity Barn Raisers, Board of Selectmen, Comprehensive Planning Committee, Unity Business Exchange, Unity Economic Development Committee and Maine Farmland Trust.

GOAL 3: Broaden local participation in and financial resources for advancing goals and actions described herein.

- **Action 3.1: Build on stakeholders mapping exercise from workshop to identify next tier of potential volunteers and local stakeholders who could help to lead and/or support implementation actions.**
- **Action 3.2: Rename initiative (Unity Action), finalize action plan and distribute to all workshop participants and newly identified stakeholders.**
- **Action 3.3: Expand awareness of and access to state and federal funding sources to further support local economic development and placemaking efforts.**

Implementation

Most of the goals and actions described herein require dedicated staff time from different organizations and entities to further coordinate, organize, and facilitate work moving forward. Goal 3, Action 3.1 calls for the formalization of a new steering committee to help prioritize actions and identify specific implementation resources. From this ongoing work, local stakeholders can begin to identify specific projects and initiatives that may be well suited for outside funding or additional technical assistance. Information on relevant resources and funding opportunities can be found in the Appendix.

Livability Principles Advanced by the 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 this action plan supports each of the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

The downtown district of Unity already has some elements of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure that make it comfortable to bike and walk to key destinations, however there is a need to do more. The goals and actions contained herein call for additional improvements to fill in gaps in the pedestrian walkways and encourage year round attention (e.g. ensuring snow removal) of these same pathways. Efforts are also needed to further calm the streets in town and mitigate truck traffic in order to make the area even more safe and attractive for biking and walking thereby creating more options for people to reach daily destinations by means other than the car.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

While not directly related to the specific goals and actions contained herein, the town of Unity already contains a mix of affordable housing options for a range of income levels. As revitalization efforts continue in the downtown district, additional opportunities for more housing within walking distance of

key retail and civic uses can make it possible for people to live in downtown and reduce their overall transportation costs which in turn can make limited incomes go farther and housing more attainable.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Strengthening the downtown district of Unity and strengthening the local food system can help to diversify and strengthen the local economic base. Additional attention to place-based improvements and community building activities can help further position the town as a desirable place to live and work, giving it a competitive advantage economically within the region.

Support Existing Communities and Value Communities and Neighborhoods

The Local Foods, Local Places initiative for Unity is entirely focused on improving the quality of life for existing residents, promoting reinvestment in the existing town center and supporting the agricultural based heritage of the region.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The goals and actions described herein can further leverage previous and ongoing federal investments by EPA and USDA in the Unity Food Hub, and other local infrastructure projects. These efforts also position the community for continued support from USDA on a range of rural development programs.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Details
- Appendix B – Funding Resources
- Appendix C – Additional References
- Appendix D – Local Stakeholder and Food System Elements
- Appendix E – Workshop Participants
- Appendix F – Presentation Slides