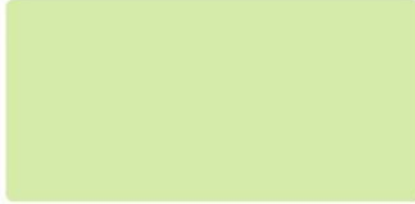
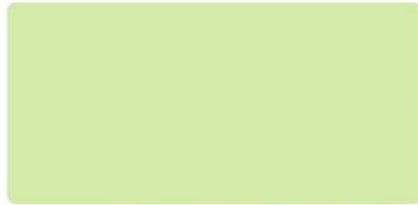
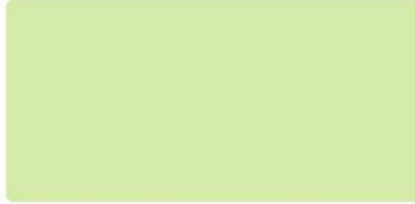




LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening the
Local Foods System
and Downtown
Revitalization:

Actions and Strategies
for the Village of Canton
and St. Lawrence County

August 17, 2015



Community Story

The Village of Canton is the county seat of St. Lawrence County, New York—the largest county in New York state, yet also one of the lowest in per capita income according to the 2010 U.S. Census. St. Lawrence County is one of seven counties in the North Country region¹, which is bordered by Canada, Lake Ontario, and the St. Lawrence River. Half a million people reside in the North Country, making it one of the most sparsely populated regions in New York. St. Lawrence County is home to approximately 112,097 people, with around 6,551 residing in the Village of Canton ².



Figure 1 - Downtown Main Street, Canton, NY

The natural beauty and rural agricultural landscape of the region are primary assets. Approximately 25% of all land in St. Lawrence County is cropland, pasture, or inactive farmland, and much more is forested, contributing to the rural character. The agricultural sector employs more residents than any other sector, with dairy production as the main agricultural industry. Other agricultural outputs from St. Lawrence County include timber, cattle and calves, hay, grains, dry beans, and potatoes. Non-agricultural industry includes the



Figure 2 - LittleGrasse Community Supported Farm

production of zinc and aluminum, the generation of hydroelectric power, electronics manufacturing, and service industries, with United Helpers being the largest. Among the biggest employers in the county are the four institutions of higher education, which include Clarkson University, St. Lawrence University, SUNY Canton, and SUNY Potsdam, as well as the County, NYSARC, BOCES, United Helpers, ALCOA, and the Claxton Hepburn and Canton-Potsdam hospitals)..³

¹ North Country Regional Economic Development Council has a seven county region <http://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/content/north-country>

² Source: 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

³ <http://www.slcida.com/assets/files/County%20Profile.pdf>

The health of residents in the region is a major concern for many in the community: high rates of heart disease and obesity are present, and food insecurity—especially among children—is prevalent. However, the community is bountiful in interested and involved residents willing to invest time and resources to improve economic and health outcomes in the Village of Canton and St. Lawrence County. There is a solid base of resources, organizations, programs, initiatives, and stakeholders interested in diversifying and developing the local food system and increasing access to healthy food choices through a variety of means.

In 2011, Canton created a Canton Community Action Plan (CCAP)⁴, a comprehensive multi-year plan for economic and community development. One of the four goals was to “strengthen Canton’s future through sustainable development.” To oversee implementation of this goal, Canton created a Sustainability Committee, including a local food and agriculture sub-committee, which took the initiative to submit an application for technical assistance from the federal Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) program.⁵ The application for LFLP assistance centered around the recognition that food, health, and economy are interconnected, and sought to build upon the CCAP’s priorities of sustainability, food and health, and creating local economic opportunity.

The stated objective of the LFLP application was to ensure that Canton is an attractive, convenient, healthy place to live and that businesses are recruited, supported, and retained to create a vibrant downtown economy. Specifically, Canton requested technical assistance to better tie together the community’s resources, identify the major missing pieces, and build a plan to bridge the gap between the two. The application for assistance did not target any one specific element or project but rather recognized that there are a lot of moving parts of the local food economy, with a number of actors and players. The application for the LFLP assistance was framed as an excellent opportunity to make connections, tie loose ends together, and make a cohesive plan going forward.

⁴ http://www.cantonnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/CCAP_2011_Approved.pdf

⁵ http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/announcement_-_local_foods_local_places_2014_final.pdf
<http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/sp-local-foods-local-places.html>

WORKSHOP STEERING COMMITTEE

- Patrick Ames, Executive Director, Cooperative Extension
- Todd Amo, Director of Operations, United Helpers
- Cindy Atkins, Director of Conference and Dining Services, St. Lawrence University
- Zoe Baker, Market Manager, Canton Farmers Market
- Rainbow Crabtree, Coordinator, Canton Merchants Association
- John Dewar, President, North Country Grown Cooperative
- Gloria McAdam, Executive Director, GardenShare
- Jason Pfothenauer, Deputy Director, St. Lawrence County Planning Office
- Carol Pynchon, LFLP Steering Committee Convener, Village Trustee
- Leigh Rodriguez, Economic Development Director, Village of Canton
- Lenore VanderZee, Executive Director for University Relations, SUNY Canton
- Bob Washo, Chair, Canton Sustainability Committee

Figure 3 - Steering Committee. A more complete list of stakeholders is available in Appendix C.

Canton was awarded the LFLP technical assistance in the fall of 2014, and the technical assistance process began thereafter. The remainder of this report and its appendices document the engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps. An LFLP Steering Committee (see figure 1) was created to help plan the workshop and guide the community’s initial steps to implement the resulting action plan. Over the course of the three planning calls and workshop discussions, the community’s goals evolved from those in the initial request for technical assistance to the four shown later in this report and in Appendix A. The opening speech given by Carol Pynchon, Village of Canton Trustee, frames the overall context of where the LFLP assistance fits, why the community applied, and what it hopes to achieve. Her speech is available in Appendix H.

Engagement Process

The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP has three phases, illustrated in Figure 4 below. The assessment phase consists of three preparation conference calls with the LFLP Steering Committee to establish the workshop goals, agenda, logistics, and stakeholder invitation lists. The convening phase includes the effort’s keystone event—a two-day workshop in the community. The next step’s process includes three follow up conference calls as well as process reporting and documentation.

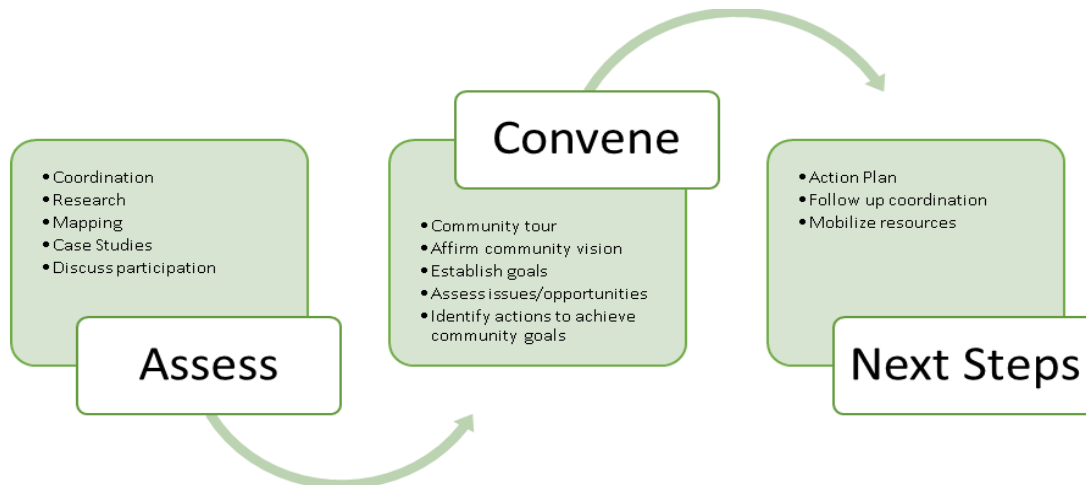


Figure 4 - Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Process Diagram

The workshop was held June 16th and 17th at the Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY) Center. The workshop was well attended by many key stakeholder groups, and the sign-in sheets are scanned and included in Appendix C.



Figure 5 - Day Two of the Workshop, upstairs at the TAUNY Center.

The Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a walking tour of the farmers market and downtown area, an introductory luncheon with key stakeholders at the TAUNY Center, and a driving tour of the community. The tour included visits to several community assets including St. Lawrence University and its Sustainability Semester farm, the SUNY Canton campus, Cornell University’s Extension Office and Farm, the United Helpers senior living campus, and LittleGrasse Foodworks (a community supported agriculture farm). A number of the locations visited are shown in pictures here and in Appendix E.



Figure 6 - Collage of images from the tour.

The second exercise involved participants individually responding to three queries, then sharing in small groups, identifying the shared themes, and summarizing the key points for the larger group. The three queries were:

1. Define what success means. What does success look like to you, say 15-20 years from now? If it helps, imagine an event 20 years from now and describe what has happened, what has happened, and why it matters.
2. Opportunities/Assets. Discuss the potential and opportunity for local food, economic growth, health, and vitality in Canton and St. Lawrence County.
3. Constraints/Barriers. What challenges and possible barriers to success exist? What has caused “backstepping” so far?

The themes are shared in Figure 9 and reveal many of the group’s aspirations for economic revitalization, improved health, more robust local food system components, local food in schools and restaurants, community pride, increased activity and events, and more sustainable agricultural practices. It is on this positive, forward-thinking foundation of values and visions of the future that the remainder of the workshop built upon. Day one concluded with a review of the workshop goals and discussion about the direction for action planning to follow the next day. These goals would be further refined and evolve into the action plan implementation tables that are summarized further below and are shown in detail in Appendix A. In addition to producing the action plan, day two included presentations of case studies by the consultant team covering food hubs, farmers markets, farm incubator programs, and other food system-related technical information. The presentation slides are in Appendix D. The group also spent some time on day two doing a mapping exercise of the local food system’s key

SUCCESS, CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES EXERCISES

Define Success

- Viable, thriving producers and healthier families and communities
- A diverse village that is safe, efficient, and beautiful, free of congestion and pollution, surrounded by farms and forests with ribbons of open space and walking and passive spaces along the river, and a vibrant economic downtown
- People commit to spending locally and are able to understand why it is important
- Canton is a destination known for its strong local food economy
- Food producers grow in number and economic viability, creating jobs for youth and others who are interested

Constraints/Barriers

- Misconceptions/misinformation
- Inadequate infrastructure, capacity, transportation, economic climate
- Lack of awareness, understanding or imagination.
- Perceptions of high cost of local food
- Lack of consistent food production (short growing season)
- Farmland owners don't have a way of making property available to potential new farmers
- The cost to buy and prepare fresh food

Opportunities

- Large SNAP population, but not much current usage at market
- 51% of kids are eligible for free school lunch, yet only 14% of them get a summer meal (opportunity for expansion of the summer feeding program)
- Land, soil, people, knowledge abundant natural and human resources
- Local, state, and federal involvement
- Support of schools, universities, and cooperative extension
- Current farmland owners who are not farming the land may want to find someone to farm it.
- Ag teachers in schools
- Close proximity to cooperative extension learning farm

Figure 9 - Success, Constraints, Opportunities Exercise Results

assets and features including farms; existing and emergent farmers markets; institutional markets; and regional initiatives, partners, and programs. The results of the asset mapping are shown in Appendix B.

The Community Action Plan

The primary product of the workshop is a strategic action plan to guide implementation. The plan is composed of four goals, with actions the participants brainstormed at the meeting and during follow up calls, that are designed to achieve progress toward those goals. Another purpose of the workshop was to further clarify, prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for moving forward on these actions. The goals and actions that are part of this plan are summarized below and are contained in their full detail in **Appendix A**.



Figure 10 - Workshop report outs, day two.

GOAL 1: Keep Momentum and Strengthen Communications.

In the near- and long-term Canton must continue cooperation and communication in the pursuit of local foods goals. This momentum needs to be expanded through the region, including Potsdam at a minimum, with Canton as a leader. The established farmers market makes the village a natural center, and Canton has the momentum. The relationships created through this workshop process have expanded the vision, and it is key to get everyone working together in the same room on a regular basis. Canton needs to keep building momentum at the municipal and county levels as well as through small group action.

- Action 1.1: Identify all key stakeholders and sectors of the local food system
- Action 1.2: Establish a formal communication network
- Action 1.3: Formalize a steering committee through cooperative extension

GOAL 2: Develop New, and Strengthen Existing Farmers

Through training and education programs, (land access, young farmer engagement, incubator programs, etc.):

- Action 2.1: Inventory existing programs and opportunities for young or new farmers interested in gaining knowledge and experience
- Action 2.2: Address knowledge gaps in farmer training and information sharing to coordinate programs and opportunities for learning
- Action 2.3: Explore a farmer incubator program to increase the number of production farmers in the area and to teach new farming technologies
- Action 2.4: Create a Facebook page linking farms with interns

GOAL 3: Implement a Marketing and Awareness-Raising Strategy

Highlight the beneficial aspects of local and healthy food to a broader local and regional audience, engaging in a wider community conversation. Work toward communicating the “story” of local foods—how local foods contribute to economic, social, and cultural development and place making, while also preserving and enhancing individual, public, and environmental health. Ensure that the marketing and awareness-raising strategy reaches residents from all socio-economic levels: food security and access issues are as important to the development of a robust local food economy as developing new food entrepreneurs and a regional brand.



Figure 11 - Working on the action planning posters, day two.

- Action 3.1: Generate broader community awareness of points of access for people experiencing food insecurity, as well as opportunities for nutrition education, economic assistance, and other resources.
- Action 3.2: Conduct a community research program to identify the specific barriers to healthy eating in low-resource populations
- Action 3.3: Develop a local “Fruit and Vegetable Prescription” program for Canton.
- Action 3.4: Reach out to community leaders individually to cultivate participation in local foods activities.
- Action 3.5: Create a regional identity around food that celebrates the local cuisine and variety of items grown and produced in the Canton region.

GOAL 4: Explore Aggregation, Distribution Systems, and Value-added Capabilities to Build and Connect Supply and Demand

A number of promising initiatives are already underway for improving or adding food processing and/or aggregation potential in the community. First was the application of the Cornell Cooperative Extension for a USDA Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) to build a commercial kitchen at their farm. Though their primary purpose for this commercial kitchen would be for research, education, and training, the facility could also be made available to entrepreneurs in the community who are in need of commercial value-added kitchen and processing facilities. The second major initiative underway is that Sparx, a local corporation and for-profit arm of United Helpers, is looking to put in a new meat processing facility in the Canton industrial park. This for-profit facility would have distribution networks and space that potentially could also be used for a non-meat aggregation center in the longer term, making local foods more accessible locally as well as to regional markets. Both these developments were enthusiastically supported by the LFLP working group at the session, noting that they should be supported and encouraged as much as possible by the wider community and the Canton Sustainability

Committee. It was also noted that both these initiatives are being championed already in the community, and therefore action planning for them at this session was not the highest need. Instead workshop participants felt that the LFLP action plan should focus attention on the North Country Grown Cooperative (NCGC) and how to best re-evaluate its mission, operations, and functions for the future given that it recently encountered some setbacks with the loss of some institutional partners.



Figure 12 - Presenting the results of action planning, day two.

The working group drafted some potential actions to strengthen the NCGC, which are presented below. NCGC members and staff from SUNY Canton and St. Lawrence University participated in the discussion, so there were opportunities for candid and open dialog. They key issues/challenges/opportunities identified can be summarized as follows:

- The NCGC needs to become a more viable business.
- NCGC has been in operation for 10 years but has hit some recent setbacks in losing some customers.
- There are some inherent difficulties that have exacerbated the supply to demand disconnection. The growing season and the academic seasons don't match up well, e.g., when production is highest during summer the demand at local institutions is lowest.
- Pricing, quality, and consistency are difficult hurdles. Price point is a concern to some of the institutions but not all. The institutional partners recognized there will be higher prices for local food, and for the most part would be willing and able to meet those prices within reason. There needs to be some give and take, some balance so both growers and suppliers can make it work.
- Improved or on-going communication of needs between growers and customers is clearly needed to better coordinate supply and demand.
- The NCGC farmers need to make money, and like to grow what they want.
- It may be time for NCGC to re-think its business model and update or re-do its business plan.
- The NCGC could explore how to attract more customers, such as targeting large institutions and employers through health plans to develop more stable, year-round demand.
- Perhaps the Office of the Aging and/or hospitals would be willing partners.
- The current mission of the NCGC is to increase the income of its members in an environmentally friendly manner. Currently there are no paid staff and no capacity to move it forward. NCGC needs a shot of energy, a new champion, or dedicated staff.
- The NCGC could explore the CSA model for existing or new customers.

Towards the end of the discussion, another idea was proposed that builds on the long-standing desire in the community to see something positive happen at the Jubilee Plaza such as transforming it into a community food center, green space with walking corridors between Main Street and the river, and/or

senior housing. Participants discussed the need to assess supply and demand, producers, and markets for a “Canton Community Market” at the site. Ensuring that such a market is visible and open year round would encourage place making and generate economic development downtown. Although this is a longer-term vision for the plaza, and it is now privately owned, a next step could be to create a visual “map” showing potential new uses for this site to better illustrate the community’s vision and help advocate for this vision in the future.

- Action 4.1: NCGC Needs a Champion
- Action 4.2: Create a New customer Base for NCGC
- Action 4.3: Refresh and Update NCGC Plan
- Action 4.4: Explore concept for the creation of a community owned market to foster community revitalization in downtown Canton. Revisit previous plans and re-assess feasibility.

Implementation and Next Steps

Three post-workshop conference calls were held in the June through August period following the workshop. The calls were held with the same LFLP Steering Committee as the pre-workshop calls, with a couple of additional stakeholders whose interest was cultivated during the workshop. They worked to refine the action plan and add clarifying language. Below are some specific follow up activities or actions taken following the workshop and before finalization of this report.

- As a result of LFLP workshop, the Village of Canton (Leigh Rodriguez, Economic Development) and the Local Living Venture (Chelle Lindahl) were invited to Common Ground Alliance. There will be regional follow-up from that event, and Canton will be involved.
- Cornell Cooperative Extension received verbal acknowledgment that they have received a USDA Rural Business Development Grant for \$105,000 to equip a commercial kitchen. They hope to start working on that this winter and it will eventually be available to local producers and entrepreneurs.
- Leigh Rodriguez and Patrick Ames presented a recap of this LFLP project to the Cornell Cooperative Extension board who then authorized Patrick to create a Local Foods Advisory Committee. They hope to have this committee mobilized by January 1st, and will be in touch with this LFLP group about involvement and membership options.
- The new SUNY Canton Agriculture Program proposal has gone through SUNY’s 30-day comment period. No significant opposition from other campuses that offer agriculture degrees, which is a good sign. The next steps are to go through the SUNY approval process and the State’s Education Department.
- Chelle Lindahl is pleased that the Local Living Festival in September will have a “Shared Use Kitchen” workshop on food processing, where people can learn how to develop and use facilities such as the one going it at Cornell Extension. The workshop is being given by the New York Small Scale Food Processors Association.



Figure 13 - Group picture, end of day two at the TAUNY Center.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Implementation Action Plan Tables
- Appendix B – Workshop Maps
- Appendix C – Workshop Participants and Post Workshop Planning Group
- Appendix D– Presentation Slides
- Appendix E– Workshop Photo Album
- Appendix F – Funding Resources
- Appendix G – References
- Appendix H – Workshop Opening Speech, Carol Pynchon, June 16, 2015