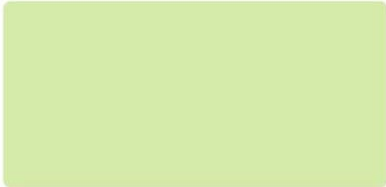
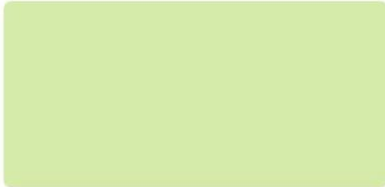


Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening Local
Foods and Local Places:
Actions and Strategies for
the Village of Vinton, TX

August 12, 2015



Community Story

Vinton is a small village of about 2,000 residents, covers a land area of about 2.5 square miles and is located on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas just a few miles from the Mexico and New Mexico borders. The village is situated between Rio Grande River to the west and Interstate 10 and the Franklin Mountains to the east. There are approximately 561 local jobs¹ within the one-mile radius of Vinton and the community is home to Bill Childress Elementary School, which is part of the Canutillo Independent School District and also a major property owner in the community.

The community and surrounding Rio Grande valley has a rich cultural history. It is located along the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro Trail – the historic indigenous trade route that later connected Mexico City to Sante Fe during the Spanish Colonial era. With the arrival of the railroad in the late 1800's, the town grew and began to attract industrial jobs, including a steel mill. Around the time of the Mexican Revolution, local legend refers to Vinton's Mambo Club as a regular stopping point for Pancho Villa, the notable Mexican Revolutionary general. In more recent times, the community's agricultural and industrial base continued to grow, and Vinton also became a bedroom community to residents who worked in nearby El Paso and Las Cruces. One such resident, Dr. Howard Applegate, was a locally revered engineering professor teaching at the University of Texas El Paso. His now vacant historic home and orchard hold cultural significance to the community.

Vinton is located in the Rio Grande river valley, a thin ribbon of green in the dry Chihuahuan desert climate. A brief summer "monsoon" rainy season occurs June through August. The village's drinking water sources are primarily from private wells. A section of the village receives water from the Rio Grande, as well as the Messilla and Hueco underground aquifers via El Paso County's water supply system. Most residents rely on private septic systems for sewer service. During irrigation season, starting in May, the Rio Grande is flowing and used heavily for agriculture. Off season, and exacerbated by recent droughts, the riverbed is often dry. When the river is flowing, residents informally gather along the river, near where the Vinton Road Bridge crosses the river, to enjoy the outdoor setting. There also exists a multi-use trail along the River connecting Vinton to destinations near El Paso further south.

During the rainy season, Vinton experiences flooding, not from the river, but rather from when heavy rains that overflow the natural arroyos which carry water down from the adjacent Franklin Mountains through the village to the Rio Grande. Local residents refer to this phenomenon as "Anthony's nose is running," which is a local saying referring to heavy rain flowing over the prominent nose-like geological feature near the



Community tour of Dr. Applegate's homestead.



The Rio Grande is dry for most of the year except during the rainy season between June and August.

¹ ESRI Business Analyst, 2015

Anthony Gap on the Franklin Mountains that results in arroyo flooding in Vinton. In 2006, a severe flash flood inundated the village and severely damaged many homes. The combination of flooding issues and limited access to El Paso County water and sewer infrastructure is seen by many as a major obstacle to growth and development for the Village. The Village is in the process of completing the application materials to seek funding and obtain City Council support to build this infrastructure.

The Village of Vinton has a long term vision for growth focused on creating a new main street and mixed use development along Vinton Road. The Village also seeks to improve the quality of life for its residents by improving public health, supporting local job growth and improving the quality of housing. Building on these aspirations, the Village of Vinton has embarked on a number of new initiatives to expand the local food system including starting a farmers market, forming a community garden, initiating a small business incubator program, and developing an educational campaign to inform residents on the benefits of local foods, methods for improving home garden yields, and other entrepreneurial opportunities.



Most residents of Vinton live on large plots of land where many grow their own fruits or vegetables they trade with neighbors.

Relying heavily on the Elephant Butte Irrigation District’s system of canals and ditches, agriculture plays an important role in and around Vinton. Local crops include onions, chilies, cotton, and alfalfa. Pecan tree groves are the most prominent feature in the valley. Many local residents live on full acre lots or larger, and keep backyard gardens. They often participate in informal food bartering with neighbors. Border Community Development Corporation (CDC), the local consultant for Vinton, conducted a study of 100 residents who run informal businesses out of their homes. Survey results indicate that many residents would be interested in participating in a farmers market.

There is capacity to expand Vinton’s local food system and the regional food system of the greater El Paso region. Only 50 of the 657 farms² in El Paso County harvest crops that are sold directly to local consumers. In El Paso County, direct to consumer sales, such as farmers markets comprised only \$151,000 in 2012. In Vinton alone, a total of \$2.8 million is spent each year on food³. This suggests that there may be untapped opportunities for the expansion of locally grown and sold foods.

² USDA Census of Agriculture, 2012

³ ESRI Business Analyst, 2015

Figure 1 - Agricultural Statistics for El Paso County, Texas

U.S. Agriculture Census Figure	2007	2012
Total Farms	590	657
Vegetable Farms	10	4
Fruit, Tree Nut, and Berry Farms	185	199
Livestock, Poultry, and their Products Farms	148	141
Total Agricultural Sales	\$47.5 million	\$45.5 million
Agricultural Sales Direct to Consumers	\$145,000	\$151,000

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture (2012)

In 2014, the Village of Vinton requested assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) program to develop an action plan for expanding its local food system and supporting other place-making goals. 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, and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). The primary purpose of this program is to help communities develop action plans aimed at achieving the following:

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

Engagement

The Village of Vinton hosted a small team of federal agency staff and consultants for a two-day LFLP workshop on May 7-8, 2015. The workshop included a tour of Vinton and a series of visioning, brainstorming, and action planning discussions among a diverse group of stakeholders including: local residents, elected officials, local farmers, local educators, non-profits and local, state, and federal agency representatives. These discussions helped workshop participants identify community values that underlie the goals and action steps for their local food, local places initiatives. These sessions also clarified how a stronger local food and local placemaking initiatives can help make Vinton a stronger, healthier, and more economically sound community. Participants identified obstacles to and solutions for expanding access to local foods and supporting other place-based initiatives, much of which is described herein and throughout the appendices.



The two-day event kicked off with a tour of the village by Vinton Administrator Jessica Garza.

While the two-day workshop is the key event that contributed to this action plan, it was preceded by several conference calls, background research, and identification of best practice materials relevant to Vinton’s key issues. Figure 2 lays out the steps leading to the action plan.

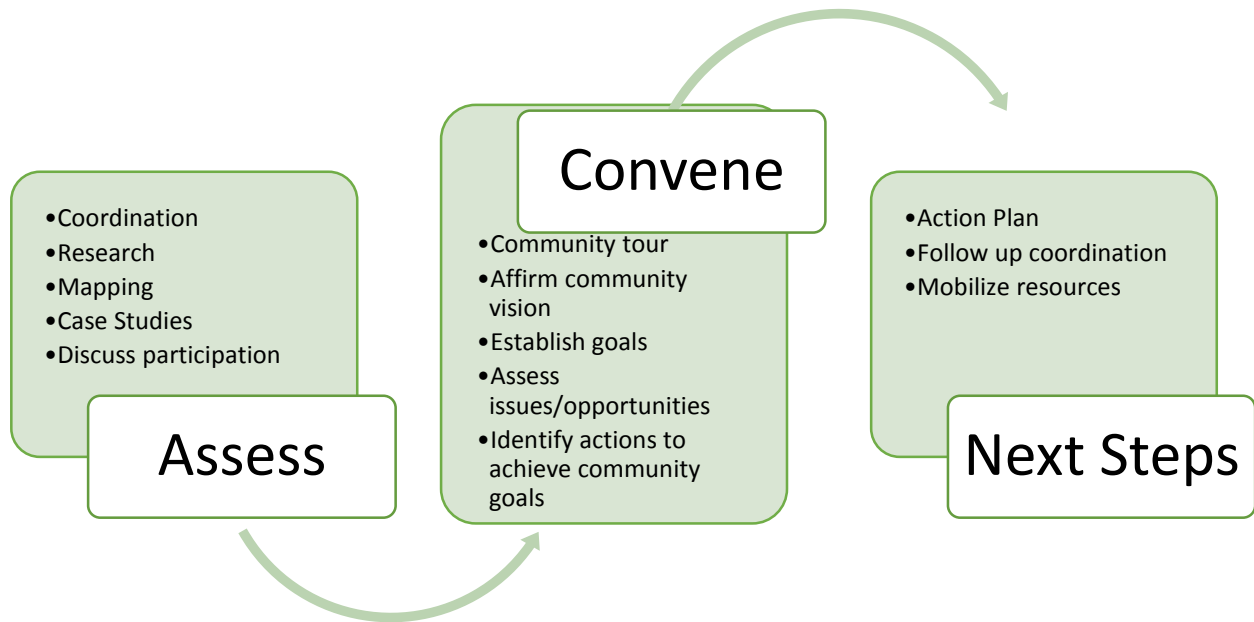


Figure 2 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

Vinton’s placemaking and local foods vision centers on: formalizing existing informal local foods initiatives to create greater access to fresh local foods; providing added income and strengthening the business opportunities for small local farmers and business owners; educating residents; and sparking additional entrepreneurial food-based business opportunities. They envision a main street with thriving businesses, a regular farmers market, and a community garden that is used by many residents. The new farmers market will be coordinated with local events that attract more people and foster community in the Village center. The future community garden will provide a space for existing home-based gardeners to expand their gardens and for individuals seeking to learn how to grow their own food and meet other gardeners and farmers. There will be a support system for small business owners and startups through the small business incubator program that will provide resources and guidance to ensure local businesses are self-sustaining and continue to grow. Through the educational campaign, residents will have a better understanding of the impact local foods have on their personal health and the health of the local economy. They will also have opportunities to learn how to become a part of the local foods network by either growing in the community garden or on their own land.

The workshop facilitators led several exercises and discussions during the two days to refine the vision, the goals, and identify steps to take to achieve those goals.

Challenges, Opportunities, Community Goals, and Resources

The Vinton community stakeholders have a clear, achievable vision, but they also identified some related challenges and opportunities in need of further discussion before the community can realize its local food system, Main Street place-making and economic development goals. The following challenges, opportunities, and community goals were identified by participants during the first evening work session:

Challenges

- Water/sewer infrastructure is needed
- Funding for water/sewer infrastructure and other public projects are needed
- Time limits and competing priorities make it difficult to advance goals
- The community sometimes lacks the follow through to keep initiatives going
- A lack of leadership beyond Village staff and elected officials is an additional challenge – there is a need for more grassroots community leaders.
- Generally there is very little knowledge in the community about the benefits of, and how to grow and prepare locally grown, healthy food
- There often lacks community involvement and many cited resident apathy towards getting involved
- The Village sees a challenge in getting farmers to work with them
- The dry climate and lack of abundant water could be a barrier to growing locally
- Starting a new small business is difficult and many lack the knowledge and resources to know how to begin and keep going
- There are very few local stores, and getting them to buy local will be challenging
- Local food production isn't easy – it requires funding for fertilizer, birds and insect management, and time to tend to the land
- The Village is currently a food and recreation desert – not many options locally for active living

Opportunities

- The Village is located between tourist destinations (it is on the route from El Paso to Santé Fe) and if there was a reason for people to stop – there would likely be a strong customer base
- There already exist some experienced farmers in town, master gardeners and other local growers who could help to “Train the Trainers” in growing locally
- The Dr. Applegate home and orchard could provide a prominent central location for a community garden and community center.
- The local school district is interested in local agriculture and could be partners in the future
- There is plenty of land to farm on
- The community is seeing some new development on Vinton Road which can help to foster a new main street
- There is an abundance of potential funding resources for the community (discussed in the following pages)
- There is an opportunity for engaging elderly farmers in teaching youth how to farm
- Local restaurants could be purchasers of locally grown food
- The federal La Tuna Prison facility could be a future partner. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) has a nationwide program for agriculture and value-added products, called UNICOR.

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- The town can continue to grow with annexation, but water/sewer is needed
- There is an opportunity to develop local leadership by engaging interested parties into a new local foods coalition. This could include:
 - Local farmers
 - El Paso Community College
 - Women’s Intercultural Center
 - Master Gardeners
 - Local food bank
 - AmeriCorps and VISTA
 - Local non-profits

Community Goals

- Educate the public about the nutritional benefits of fresh local food
- Incorporate local food into schools – both in terms of buying food to serve in schools and incorporating local food growing into the curriculum
- Start a food recovery program for local food bank
- Start my own garden/sell my own produce
- Create a community garden
- Create a small business incubator
- Find grant money to fund goals
- Establish a farmers market and find a location
- Communicate with youth about local foods, healthy eating and entrepreneurship opportunities
- Coordinate with surrounding communities
- Diversify existing crops
- Have wider variety of local food
- Get all community involved

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



Figure 3: Goals for Advancing Vinton

Resources

On the second day of the workshop, attendees were asked to describe what their organization does, how they can help Vinton's local food efforts, and what potential resources may be available to help them achieve their goals. This discussion is summarized below:

La Semilla Food Center

Based in Anthony, New Mexico. Their goal is to have a food hub for the region. The organization offers summer farm programs for students. They have four overarching programs:

- Community farm
- Food policy/planning
 - Can help with getting planning/policy documents in place that support local food initiatives
 - Policies to incentivize local foods
 - Tax rebates for cultivation of vacant lots
 - Codes/zoning – making sure there are no barriers to implementation
 - Healthy food access
- Edible Education
- Farm Fresh – a program that help layout the stages of community garden and how to keep people engaged

Farmer to Farmer Training Program American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

- Comprehensive, hands-on farmer-to-farmer training

Border CDC

- Local community development consultants
- Will provide grant writing help

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- Small business assistance
- Economic development

Anthony Chamber of Commerce

- Will help promote businesses and network

USDA Rural Development

- There is grant money through the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food program
- 5 programs for farmers market and community gardens that can help with
 - Purchase of land and building facilities (require 25% match)
 - Training
 - Adults and youth

Anthony Youth Farm

Located in Anthony, New Mexico on a 14 acre farm. It is housed under the City's water and sewer district. They focus on:

- Teaching youth about agriculture
- Providing something for kids to do – keep them busy and out of trouble
- Working with Future Farmers of America
- Working with at-risk kids
- Currently working on a proposed farmers market that would have classrooms, store, and community center

Small Business Administration

- Has an agricultural local program with a Memorandum of Understanding at USDA
- Work through banks
- Have a 504 loan program for infrastructure development, which could include a farmers market
- Community advantage program
- Collaborate with People's Fund and other organizations with non-traditional funding sources (crowdfunding)
- Crop production loans for drought conditions
- Technical assistance for young entrepreneurs
- Encore Entrepreneurs for 50+
- Geo (private corporation) – prison contracting/foods

Workforce Solutions Borderplex

A non-profit similar to Small Business Administration that represents the six-county border region.

- Focus on career pathways and partnerships with communities
- Provide opportunities for SNAP recipients
- Subsidize wages to help new businesses hire staff (up to 50% subsidy for labor)
- Summer youth program
- Have a grant with HUD in Presidio to build a business education center

Department of Housing and Urban Development

- Farmworker and Colonia specialists
- Can help with housing resources and repairs
- Can also help with infrastructure issues
- CDBG funds
- Do not provide direct federal funding but can go through other foundations as a conduit for funds, such as ACCION/LiftFund

Center for Hispanic Entrepreneurship

- Can provide research for Hispanic-owned businesses
- Educate students and business owners
- Have programs for high school students on entrepreneurship
- Hold workshops
- Knowledge-sharing resources
- Networking and incubators

Texas Department of Agriculture

- Farming and agriculture education
- Rural Development farmer market marketing (Go Texan)
- Water Development Board
- Young Farmers Grant – 18-46 years old
- Specialty crop grants – nuts, olives, etc
- Economic development – Main Street revitalization (infrastructure, streets, sidewalks)
- Part of Rio Grande Council of Governments – easier to get grants through them
- Marcelina Nursery – farmer-to-farmer program for water resistant crops
- Texas Capital Fund – Money for land
- School to Farm grants – Bowie High School selling in downtown El Paso farmers market

USDA Farm Service Agency

- Can provide direct help to farmers
- Offer micro-loans with a simplified application to receive a maximum of \$50,000 with a seven year repayment for gardens, farms, initial startup funds, lease, marketing, hoop houses, irrigation
- Youth Loans - Future Farmers of America and 4H for \$5,000

EPA Border Office

- Border 2020 program
- Food waste and food recovery program
- Environmental education grants – children’s health and composting
- Integrated pest management information

EPA Headquarters

- Smart growth tools and technical assistance
- Brownfields guidance and clean up assistance
- Drinking Water State Revolving (SRF) fund
- Water Infrastructure and Resiliency Finance Center

- Rural development
- Food Waste Reduction/Food Recovery
- Green Building practices

During the final session of the workshop, participants identified specific 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.

Action Plan

Though the workshop largely focused in on starting the farmers market and community garden and determining needed actions to move those forward, actions related to the broader local foods, placemaking and community health goals were also discussed and are documented in this 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 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: Start a farmers market/community market to provide a venue for local farmers to sell their produce and for residents to have access to healthy foods.

- **Action 1.1** Define the mission and values for the market
- **Action 1.2** Identify parameters or requirements for vendors at the market
- **Action 1.3** Develop event calendar that the market will coordinate with
- **Action 1.4** Identify strong partner to help sustain market – maybe La Fe clinic
- **Action 1.5** Identify potential vendors willing to sell at the market

Goal 2: Start a community garden for the residents of Vinton that is a place where people can learn, socialize, and grow their own food.

- **Action 2.1** Generate and determine interest of community in having a community garden by holding a meeting or having an information table at a local event
- **Action 2.2** Form a community garden committee and use volunteer time to help move it forward and serve as a sounding board for identifying sites for the garden, securing the site, and how to use the site
- **Action 2.3** Identify site (or sites) for community garden (consider Dr. Applegate's property)
- **Action 2.4** Find other partners for use of site and buildings
- **Action 2.5** Secure use of the community garden site or sites
- **Action 2.6** Develop Master Plan and site prep for the garden
- **Action 2.7** Identify and recruit growers and people interested in having plots at community garden

Goal 3: Create a Small Business Incubator to support residents wishing to start their own business by providing them resources and tools necessary for success.

- **Action 3.1** Begin communications and outreach to let local residents know about existing small business resources; start small business start-up classes or workshops in Vinton
- **Action 3.2** Outreach and recruitment of small businesses or potential new businesses

- **Action 3.3** Hire an intake person
- **Action 3.4** Conduct longer term needs assessment for space

Goal 4: Start a local foods education program to educate residents on the benefits of eating healthy, locally grown food, and to teach them how to grow their own food.

- **Action 4.1** Establish a farmer-to-farmer training program
- **Action 4.2** Conduct local healthy eating and active living events
- **Action 4.3** Create a backyard gardening program
- **Action 4.4** Create a “hands on” green club
- **Action 4.5** Develop an internship/apprenticeship program where students are paired with a farmer and work with them over summer break

Implementation

During the workshop, there were discussions of prioritizing goals and which action steps to take first. Some thought the community garden needed to be started first before beginning the farmers market. At the end of these discussions there was not consistent agreement on which to focus on first. There is no definitive order that these initiatives are typically implemented in other places; it depends on the unique, individual communities. Vinton should continue discussion on where to begin, depending on resources and people power available to achieve the goals.

Selected Livability Principles Advanced by 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 Vinton’s Action Plan supports some of the livability principles.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Creating a farmers market that attracts people from all over the region and out of state will positively affect the local economy. Strengthening the local demand for local foods can help foster growth of small farmers and food entrepreneurs. Developing a small business incubator program will support existing small businesses and those starting up.

Support Existing Communities

The actions in this plan will help to support a community that has been in existence for hundreds of years. The actions focus on supporting local entrepreneurs, and teaching residents how to grow their own food to create a local food system so they can rely less on resources outside of the village. They also help to foster continued mixed use growth along the Village’s future main street area on Vinton Road.

Coordinate and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The Local Foods, Local Places workshop brought together people from many state and federal agencies. The new relationships formed both within Vinton and with people outside of the village can attract new resources to support implementation of this action plan. It is important to nurture these new relationships by finding ways to stay engaged with each other. Additionally, the workshop efforts identified several opportunities and resources to tap into and leverage different local, state and federal

funding sources to support the community garden, farmers market, education programs, and business assistance.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

This plan recognizes and values the potential that already exists in Vinton because of its people and natural resources. The community garden and farmers market will serve as community gathering places that will help strengthen the connections among residents and neighbors.

Provide Transportation Choices

The Village of Vinton has several ideas about how to support more walking and biking in the community. As a relatively small town, locating the farmers market and community garden on Vinton Road or on property within the adjacent neighborhoods will mean that access to fresh foods will be within walking distance for several existing residents. Additional efforts by the Village to implement the larger trails master plan would also further these goals.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Details
- Appendix B – Food System Diagram
- Appendix C – Key Health and Agriculture Data
- Appendix D – Workshop Participants
- Appendix E – Funding Resources
- Appendix F – References
- Appendix G – Presentation Slides
- Appendix H – Best Practices