

## Regional food hub making progress

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BELLOWS FALLS — The warm-weather bounty of local produce has long since vanished from store shelves and farmers markets.

Baskets of plump berries, cartons of shiny peppers, rows of sweet corn — some may dream of such a harvest throughout the cold, dark winter. A group of Bellows Falls-based organizers is taking it one step further.

Since March 2008, they have been working to bring an innovative idea — a regional food center — to reality.

The facility would be open year-round and include a kitchen, food storage facility and retail outlet.

The group is far from opening the center, titled the Greater Falls Food Hub. But in the past 10 months, the initial nebulous idea has evolved into a concrete proposal, complete with grant funding, survey data and a preliminary strategic plan.

The goal of the project is to “make local and regional food both affordable and accessible to all people of all incomes, while providing a fair return to farmers,” said Tim Stevenson, founder and executive director of Post Oil Solutions, a Brattleboro-based community organizing initiative that is the lead organizer and sponsor of the project.

Another major partner is Southeastern Vermont Community Action, a Westminster-based agency that works to reduce the causes and hardships of poverty.

Since June, food hub organizers have broken into committees, each working on a different aspect of the project.

Some are developing a business plan, with help from a group of students in Antioch University New England’s Green MBA program. Some are planning upcoming focus groups, designed to solicit comments from farmers and other food producers in each county the food hub will serve: Windham and Windsor in Vermont and Cheshire and Sullivan in New Hampshire.

The project has received a \$15,000 grant to help pay for a full-time project coordinator, Stevenson said. Organizers are also in the early stages of writing a strategic plan, which will determine things like a tentative opening date and whether the hub should be located in Bellows Falls — initially chosen because of its border location and proximity to Interstate 91.

They've also contacted nearby local food outlets, such as farmers markets and co-ops, to notify them about the project, "and hopefully get their endorsement and involvement," Stevenson said.

So far, the project has garnered positive response, he said.

"I think a lot of the farmers are happy to learn about the Greater Falls Food Hub," said Amanda J. Costello, district manager for the Cheshire County Conservation District.

The district's mission is "to promote the conservation and sustainable use of our natural resources for the people of Cheshire County by bringing individuals and groups with common environmental interests together to share ideas, resources and information," according to its Web site.

Costello has met with Stevenson about the project, and says it has a "wonderful goal," one that meshes with the food cooperative her organization is working to construct in Keene (see box).

To ensure local food — and, in turn, local agriculture — can thrive, there needs to be a network of services available to producers: not only places to sell their food, but also processing and storage facilities, Costello said.

The food hub will supply that infrastructure on a regional level; the proposed Keene cooperative will do so on a local level, she said.

Translating any support for the food hub into a feasible project, however, is no easy task.

The varied pieces of the hub must fit together and be financially successful, so "after three years of funding we don't have to go around and knock on doors and ask for donations," said Meg A. Lucas, a Vermont resident and co-publisher of the magazine Vermont's Local Banquet. She has worked on the food hub proposal since its infancy.

Success depends equally on the food hub's physical infrastructure and what Stevenson calls its social infrastructure: robust support for local agriculture, and a desire to eat local, throughout the Connecticut River Valley.

Essentially, this infrastructure is a customer base for the food hub.

To build this base, organizers are spreading the gospel of "eat local."

They've held screenings of "Fresh," a documentary about re-inventing America's food systems. Eventually, they intend to film a cooking series for a public access television station in Bellows Falls, each show demonstrating how to prepare local food "easily and inexpensively," Stevenson said.

To broaden the pool of people interested in eating local, food hub organizers plan to host events at churches and community groups.

The goal isn't to march in and tell people the right way to eat, Lucas said.

Instead, they want to explain why eating local is a good idea, and show how local products can blend with what people already eat.

Costello said some social infrastructure already exists.

"The locally produced food demand is growing on such a rapid basis ... it's only going to continue into the future."

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Sidebar:

***A new local food outlet could be coming to Keene as well.***

Monadnock Farm and Community Connection, a program of the Cheshire County Conservation District, is working to bring a food cooperative to the city.

The cooperative, now called the Monadnock Community Market, first appeared on city officials' radar in March, when organizers asked for a \$5,000 grant from the city to help pay for a feasibility study.

The money was awarded, and the first phase of that study — testing whether the local market would support a cooperative — is now complete, said Bonnie E. Hudspeth, a member of Monadnock Farm and Community Connection who is chairwoman of the group's co-op committee.

"The results came back very positive," she said. Now the co-op committee is writing bylaws, drafting membership materials and creating a 10-year financial plan for the business.

The group hopes to open the cooperative in January 2012.

— Jessica Arriens