Community Food Hub, Hudson NY

Brief Description of Project & Phases

Hawthorne Valley Farm, Long Table Harvest and the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation have partnered on a five-year effort to bring fresh and healthy food into Columbia County to low-income residents. To date, we have focused the majority of our efforts at the county seat in Hudson, New York. We have formed a Hudson Core Group that includes multifaceted membership of the most underserved parts of our food community. Over the course meeting in the last year and a half, members of the African-American, Latino, Bengali and Caucasian communities have given valuable input and have helped guide us in deeply understanding the food needs in Hudson.

This work recognizes that Columbia County is also home to many smaller, family farms that could provide dairy, eggs, meats, grains, fresh fruits and vegetables to county citizens. Both the farmers and eaters struggle with the “double affordability gap” – farmers who try to make a living by selling to the wealthiest individuals at the highest prices and have a less than sustainable lifestyle and – on the other side of the food value chain – eaters who cannot afford fresh and healthy food.

As part of our efforts, we have started the Seafood Buying Club (SBC) and are working on the development of a Mobile Food Market for Hudson and other towns within the county. The SBC uses a tiered pricing system based on household income to make seafood affordable to everyone. Prices are marked either at wholesale or below wholesale for the lowest income bracket. We believe this tiered pricing system (or some variation) allows shoppers at the higher end to support the diversity and vibrancy of our county by purchasing through this conscious and awareness based pricing model.
Below is a list of potential components of the hub that we believe integrate various important aspects of the foodshed to create a holistic approach towards increasing food access in Hudson, as well as supporting the thriving agricultural community in Columbia County, which immediately surrounds the city. Prioritizing partnerships with existing local businesses, organizations, and community members is key to the success and longevity of this proposed hub in conjunction with a business model that allows for shared ownership. The development of these components would happen over time, with four components (highlighted below) as the foundation and primary focus in the first year.

**Potential Hub Components:**
- Aggregation and Distribution
- Commissary Kitchen
- On-site Retail
- Bakery
- Community Kitchen and Business Incubator
- Bulk Cold Storage
- Food Pantry
- Community / Event Space / Education

**Aggregation and Distribution:**
Aggregation of a variety of foodstuffs from local farms (vegetables, fruits, meats, dairy, eggs, grain). These items would be purchased at scale and broken down in order to be redistributed out to Mobile Markets around the county and used internally within the Commissary Kitchen, Bakery and On-site Retail. Other goods not produced locally would also be purchased and used in the same way described above. Columbia County is home to the second most farms in the Hudson Valley with most of the food produced here leaving to be sold predominantly in New York City and Albany. We envision this aspect of the food hub to provide a much needed local sales outlet for farms, offering competitive prices, and the possibility of shared ownership structure. Increased sales outlets for farmers via the food hub could include local schools and institutions.

**Commissary Kitchen:**
The Commissary Kitchen would be focused on creating simple, affordable, “grab and go” meals for the Mobile Markets operating around the county, as well as for on-site sales. Prioritizing the kitchen is hugely important, as data suggests that 40% of what people in Columbia County spend at the grocery store is considered “convenience food”. We believe that a large opportunity exists here to make high quality, affordable meals for working people (not typically available in chain grocery stores), in addition to hosting a job-training program to train locals into prep and line cook positions. The city of Hudson has over 30 restaurants that are frequently seeking trained help throughout the year. The Commissary would connect trainees into available positions in town by creating a network of restaurants. We are currently in conversation with Hudson Valley Table of Contents to consult and possibly run this program. They are a well-experienced duo of chefs who know how to make delicious, accessible meals using bulk and seconds ingredients.

**On-site Retail:**
The Community Food Hub would include for sale, a range of affordable grocery items, prepared food and baked goods during business hours.

**Bakery:**
The Community Food Hub seeks to establish both a small production bakery, in conjunction with an educational and training component, with a focus on artisan products using local and regionally produced ingredients. We see this as having value in its own right in terms of diversifying the activities taking place at the Food Hub, as well as being able to dovetail with the other enterprises there. We can also imagine other avenues that this enterprise may lead us towards, such as an onsite mill and collaborations with regional grain growers.
The Community Food Hub is in conversation with Sparrowbush Bread & Grain around collaborating on this aspect of the project. Sparrowbush Bread & Grain is a small woodfired bakery and stone mill located outside of Hudson that works specifically with regional growers to source the grains for its products, as well as seeks to provide employment for people with developmental disabilities. This relationship could manifest a number of ways, either in Sparrowbush Bread & Grain moving its operation into the Community Food Hub, providing consultation to the Community Food Hub, or some combination of the two.

**Community Kitchen and Business Incubator:**
The Commercial Kitchen within the Community Food Hub would be made available for a variety of uses. Individuals looking to test a product line or develop a food-based business can rent the kitchen for a nominal fee. Locals would have access to the kitchen for community-centered events, some of which can happen at the hub. Hawthorne Valley Farm recently purchased a building in Hudson with the help of an Empire State CFA grant and private investment to house its expanding lacto-fermented food business (Whitethorne LLC). We see Whitethorne LLC (adjacent to the Bridge District) as hosting aspects of the Food Hub as it develops and becomes ready to have its own building over the next couple years, and would offer jobs in food production, along with the research and development of new products.

**Bulk Cold Storage:**
Bulk Cold Storage will be used primarily for hub operations but also available to Hudson residents with limited space in their homes. This would include freezers, coolers and dry storage. Food storage in rental apartments is a limitation and prevents people from buying in bulk, and would allow individuals to lower the cost of food.

**Food Pantry:**
We believe that a Food Pantry is an important part of the Community Food Hub because most of the food pantries in Hudson are only open during normal business hours. This makes it challenging for people who work during those hours to access food they need. The Food Pantry would be open during evenings and weekends, and focus on distributing surplus food coming into the hub in partnership with Long Table Harvest, an organization that gleans fresh produce, meat and grains from over 40 farms in Columbia and Dutchess Counties.

**Community / Event Space / Education:**
A portion of the Community Food Hub would be used to host events. Depending on the type of event, this could be an important resource for generating revenue, and at the same time, provide an important asset for the community by offering a place to convene. For community-centered events, a nominal fee would be charged. A wide range of educational classes and workshops for children and adults will be offered by Hawthorne Valley’s Place-Based Learning Center, as well as local community members who are interested. Learning the how to stock a pantry, knife skills, basic nutrition and simple meals are a sampling of classes that could be taught.

**Total Cost of Project**
Currently we are in our second year of grant funding from Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation totaling $160,000. We hope to receive another $270,000 over three years to organize this work. In addition, we will need funding for approximately a 10,000 foot site envelope, equipment and operations, and start-up salaries. Our total rough cost estimates are about $1,250,000 total and we are requesting that 50% of this amount be covered by DRI funds.

**Partners (Existing & Future)**
- Hawthorne Valley Farm
- Long Table Harvest
- Hudson Valley Agri-Business Development Corporation
- Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation
- Hudson Core Group
- Whitethorne LLC
- The Doe Fund
Angello’s Distributing
Sparrowbush Bread & Grain
Hudson Valley Table of Contents
Place-Based Learning Center (Hawthorne Valley)
Questar III
Columbia Greene Community College
Foundations, donors and investors known to Hawthorne Valley and not yet contacted.

Possible Job Creation
We are looking to create 20 to 40 full and part time jobs including staff at the hub, jobs in food production, food service, and food distribution positions as a result of the aforementioned training programs.

Data, Research and Findings

Food Insecurity and Poverty:
6,744 people in Columbia County are living in poverty, and another 10,000 people live below 200% poverty. Federal designations and data are an important framework but don’t account for the realities people face day to day, and the range of circumstances that exist.

There are 6,430 food insecure individuals living in Columbia County. The meaning of food insecurity as defined by the federal government is “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” The city of Hudson has a concentration of both poverty and food insecurity relative to the rest of the county.

Food insecurity measures those most at risk, but a much larger number of people have a hard time accessing high quality food at an affordable price. We’ve heard this over and over again from the Hudson Core Group. Many factors contribute to this, including there being no grocery store in the city of Hudson which precipitates the reliance on convenience stores with inflated prices, a lack of convenient transportation to existing grocery stores outside of Hudson, and mobility issues for seniors and disabled.

A new report by United Way (ALICE; Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) gives “an identity and voice to the people who work hard, often at more than one job, yet still struggle to make ends meet, whose wages are not sufficient to sustain them and their families” While on average 14 percent of people live in poverty, another 28% are ALICE. Across New York, 42% of the population is struggling to afford basic necessities including housing, food, childcare, transportation, and healthcare.

Agriculture in Columbia County:
Columbia County has the second most land in agriculture of the 12 counties in the Hudson Valley – a huge asset for a food hub and an opportunity to not only provide county residents with the agricultural abundance of their region, but also support small and medium sized farms that could benefit from having access to increased local sales outlets.
Supplementary Information:

Hudson Core Group (HCG)

The HCG is a community-driven action group focused on developing opportunities to make fresh and healthy food accessible to all in Hudson. A diverse group of ten long-standing Hudson residents with deep and varied ties to the community have met over the last year and a half to better understand challenges people from different communities face and share creative solutions for implementation.

The Seafood Buying Club is the groups’ first project, which sells fish at a sliding-scale pricing system twice monthly on lower Warren St. The second project is a Mobile Market that would offer a full range of grocery items at sliding-scale pricing, making stops in Hudson as well as other towns in Columbia County. This project is still in the development phase, and relies on a food hub to store, break down, pack and distribute food to the Mobile Market.

Last year the HCG and the CCFA the spent some time visioning on the kinds of activities that could take place within a Community Food Hub if it were to exist in Hudson. These ideas have significantly informed this proposal -- you can find a list of them below:

- Rotating meals from different cultures on a monthly basis, shared by the community.
- Incorporate unfamiliar vegetables into cooking demos and have an understanding of how it was grown, etc.
- Home for the Seafood Buying Club - and prepare fish into meals, demos, etc.
- A Community Kitchen / incubator kitchen - La Cocina and Hot Bread Kitchen were cited as examples.
- Cold storage for the town of Hudson - people can store large amounts of produce and access it at anytime and retailers can participate in bulk buying.
• Community meat locker -- allows families to buy larger cuts of meat at lower prices.
• Prepared, “grab and go” meals on sale for working people.
• A food pantry open from 7am to 8pm everyday combined with clothing drop-off and career counseling, possibly other services.
• Bi-monthly networking social hour.
• Get local chefs involved -- Chefs Action Network example.
• Men's cooking club - The Stop Community Food Centre cited for community-run programming.
• Consumer Buying Club
• Meeting / event spaces to rent out to generate income for the project
• Emergency Shelter -- can the building have the ability to feed and/or house lots of people in an emergency
• Opportunities for entrepreneurship / business building / incubation -- Entrepreneurship 360 example

Findings:
1. Food assistance programs (WIC, SNAP) are not eligible to all those who are need in Hudson.
2. Cost of “organic” food is inaccessible to many low-income residents but desired if it can be made affordable.
3. Lack of transportation a barrier to accessing existing grocery stores.
4. More culturally appropriate food options are desired. Examples include: seafood, halal meat, vegetables (specific to Latino and Bengali cooking traditions).
5. Ample refrigerator and freezer space is lacking.
6. Food pantries, school programs, weekly meals, afterschool food programs help at the community level but are mostly self-organizing groups and don’t address opportunities for systemic change.

Columbia County Food Association (CCFA)

The CCFA is an action based working group addressing the structural challenges in our current food landscape, i.e. the “double-affordability gap”. It supports the immediate and short-term efforts of addressing the food needs of underserved communities but also works on long-term solutions to the systemic problems in our food landscape (income disparity, job training and job creation to name the most important ones).

The existence and work of the group is based on the following two premises:
1. “If a living system is suffering from ill health, the remedy is to connect it with more of itself”. (This is a thesis by Francisco Varela, a well known biologist and neuro-scientist.)
2. “All major challenges of our time can only be solved through multi-stakeholder collaboration”. (Otto Scharmer, Presencing Institute @ MIT)

The CCFA membership comprises representatives of every link in the county food value chain – farmers, producers, processors, distributors, retailers, landowners, local non-profits, and consumers. The group meets quarterly and individual members support the work on a volunteer basis in between the regular meetings.

We also conduct so-called “Learning Journeys” on an ad hoc basis. These trips provide the opportunity to dive deeply into the various aspects of the regional food landscape. To date we have visited a local abattoir, a Co-op store, and have shadowed Hudson residents on their shopping trips dealing with the reality of the local “food desert.”

Findings/Learnings:

1. The importance to have the whole food value chain in the room has been recognized and proven. This facilitates the move from Ego-system to Eco-system awareness.
2. The creation of “social capital” and the building of mutual respect and trust are setting the stage for the work on practical solutions to the difficult challenges.
3. Bringing the collective experience and intelligence to bear on the planning and implementation of projects. The current example is the Mobile Market Project and its financial/pricing model and feasibility.
4. Raising awareness and “marketing” the initiative in the county – “getting the word out”.