

KEEP FARMING IN THE HILLTOWNS



1/1/2016

Action Plan

The following is a summary of the Keep Farming in the Hilltowns history, process, and findings that were used to inform the development of an action plan. These findings are the result of the past year of work by the local community who gathered and analyzed data through community forums, work group meetings, interviews, and surveys. It is our hope that these findings will lead the way for our region to implement this action plan to address the needs expressed by our neighbors, community leaders and farmers.

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Last but not least, a sincere thank you to the Hilltown farmers who dedicate their careers and lives to providing our communities with healthy food.

BACKGROUND

Hilltown Region

The Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts are a unique cluster of small rural towns located between the Pioneer Valley and the Berkshires. The Hilltowns enjoy a higher elevation than the surrounding area and have remained sparsely populated with little to no commercial or industrial development. The Hilltowns span parts of Hampden and Berkshire counties but this study focuses on 8 towns in western Hampshire County and one in southern Franklin County: Ashfield, Chesterfield, Cummington, Goshen, Plainfield, Williamsburg, Westhampton, and Worthington. There is a diverse regional culture and economy in the Hilltowns where farmers, small business owners and artists and musicians all call the region home. The Hilltowns support commercial land based businesses focused on agriculture and forestry as well as outdoor recreational pursuits from hunting and fishing to camping and hiking, The Hilltowns contribute to the larger regional community of western Massachusetts.

Hilltown CDC was founded in 1981 to serve the community development needs of a rural Hilltown region originally comprising nine towns in western Hampshire County. Its service area for some programs has expanded over time into Berkshire, Franklin and Hampden County towns. It remains the only community development organization based in the Hilltowns. Over 30 years Hilltown CDC has evolved into a multi-service organization, providing affordable housing, small business assistance, social services, planning and grant management assistance to the region. Hilltown CDC engages local residents in community development activities and engages the local governing select boards in municipal planning and support services. Finally, Hilltown CDC advocates for rural policy and resources at the state and federal level on behalf of the region.

Hilltown CDC's mission is to "improve the quality of life of Hilltown residents by addressing economic, housing, educational, social and community needs while preserving the rural character of the area."

Of the 8 Hilltowns included in Keep Farming (Ashfield, Chesterfield, Cummington, Goshen, Plainfield, Williamsburg, Westhampton, and Worthington) there are:

- A population of 10,926, or 50.8 people per square mile
- A total acreage of 140,032
- 9,936.484 total acres of active farmland
- 4,604.396+ acres permanently protected through a state Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR)¹ (located in 6 of the 8 towns)
- 118,555.34 forest/forested wetland ²

¹ Total APR acres from MassGIS Protected and Recreational Open Space data layer updated May 2015

Project Need

The Hilltowns have strong agricultural roots, with established farms as well as new farmers continuing to contribute to the regional economy, with land here more affordable than the surrounding Pioneer Valley. Hilltown farmers currently have to take much of what they produce outside of the hilltown region in order to sell it. This adds fuel and labor costs to farm businesses already facing high production costs. In order to maintain and expand farm businesses, farmers need secure, local markets. A main grocery store in the Hilltowns is the Old Creamery Coop in Cummington, which has been in operation for 27 years. In 2012, The Creamery transitioned to a Cooperative model and is now owned by over 700 members. For residents of the Hilltowns this is one of the only stores in the region where they can purchase local farm products. The closest supermarkets are 35-45 minutes away in either Northampton to the east or Pittsfield to the west. One of the purposes of this study was to explore options to increase access for Hilltown residents to healthy, local food.

Family farms critical to the regional economy in the Hilltowns are geographically isolated and limited in the amount they can sell locally. In order for farms to expand sales there may be opportunities for them to identify new markets in the region, or work together to get products to markets outside the immediate region. There is also an opportunity to strengthen relationships with area farmers, as there may be issues unique to the Hilltowns that limit farms from continuing to be viable that the HCDC and the community could assist with.

The Old Creamery Cooperative wants to increase the amount purchased from local farms in response to customer demand. But with minimal refrigeration and storage capacity, the volume that they can purchase at a time is limited to what they can keep fresh. It is important to understand whether there is demand from residents for more available local farm products and whether other area stores and restaurants are interested in increasing purchases of locally produced food.

In response to these needs and existing conditions in the Hilltowns, as well as identified community interest in engaging in a food and farm project (see p.5 Methodology) Glynwood's Keep Farming process, was selected for use. This methodology offers a structured approach to engage community residents to gather information to better understand and address the unique challenges of agriculture and access to food in this region through the development of an action plan.

Intended Outcomes

Through this community led planning process, community leaders and volunteers will engage with farmers to better understand and support current agricultural operations and identify infrastructure needed to increase sales of farm products locally. Farmer forums will provide networking opportunities

² Total Active Farmland and Forest/Forested Wetland Land Use data provided by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission from Mass Geographic Information Systems: Active Farmland from 2005 Sandborn Land Use Data (updated June 2009).

among farmers to explore opportunities for collaboration, and farmer surveys will clarify what local farm products are available, at what volumes. Community forums and surveys of stores, schools and residents will identify the level of market demand for local farm products. This regional supply and market data will inform an action plan with strategies to build the regional infrastructure needed to sustain a strong agricultural economy in the Hilltowns.

Hilltown CDC intends to play a leadership role in this community driven process. Part of this process will begin to create a common language for our community to use when discussing agriculture and its role in the community and local economy. We also believe we will build human capital as a part of this process where local residents will commit to working together through a sustained effort to take a serious look at how we can maximize the social and economic benefits of strengthening the local food system in the Hilltowns. This can only be achieved if we can successfully work closely with local farmers to best understand what their needs are and what they see as their strengths and challenges in operating a profitable farm business.

In the end, we will produce an action plan that we will use to continue to engage the community around agriculture. This action plan will help us prioritize how and where we focus our efforts when investing in our region. This is part of a larger community and economic development approach to building community. Additionally, our plan will be used to engage local government select boards, legislators and state and federal agencies promoting a regional approach to strengthening rural life in Massachusetts.



PROCESS

Keep Farming Methodology

Keep Farming in the Hilltowns is based on Keep Farming, a community planning process that was developed by Glynwood in Cold Springs NY. The methodology was initially conducted in towns in the Hudson Valley that were faced with increasing development pressure that threatened farms from continuing. It was recently adapted for use in Massachusetts, in the town of Northampton as well as on a regional basis in Berkshire County, in order to strengthen agriculture and the food systems within these regions.

Hilltown CDC has provided community development services to the hilltown region since 1981. In 2012, Hilltown CDC partnered with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and the United Way of Hampshire County to conduct a series of community engagement sessions focused specifically on the hilltowns. Working closely with UMASS professor Joseph Krupczynski, Hilltown CDC Executive Director Dave Christopolis facilitated a series of focus groups designed to solicit feedback from local residents to help better understand what people think will make the hilltown region more sustainable as we move into the future.

In addition to affordable housing, transportation and clean safe renewable energy, *Access to Local and Healthy Food* was identified as a top priority in the hilltowns. Recommendations that came out of this process included but were not limited to: improve local Agricultural Commission's capacity, expand local food distribution, promote food aggregation and explore infrastructure development for local farming, processing and packaging.

During this time Hilltown CDC became aware of the Keep Framing methodology conceived and practiced by Glynwood. A relationship with Glynwood and Hilltown CDC was forged and Keep farming was introduced in the Hilltowns and has been embraced by the community as a way for us to address many of the issues the community has identified related to agriculture.

How is it different?

Keep Farming is based on Glynwood's philosophy that "*The best solutions to a communities' problems come from the community itself.*" This methodology provides a structure for developing relationships necessary to develop and implement solutions appropriate to address the specific needs of a particular place. The process is conducted by teams of volunteers, given guidance and resources. This methodology is unique and effective in that it engages all stakeholders within a community - including farmers – throughout the process to ensure diverse input and buy-in for implementation. The process is also different than most planning processes in that it collects local supply and demand data within the food and agricultural sector, that is not otherwise available, for informed decision-making.

Keep Farming communities succeed in strengthening their farm sectors because their plans are the product of consensus, through a facilitated process of public input, and supported by a motivated and well-informed constituency.

Goals of Keep Farming:

1. For communities to understand the importance of local agriculture, and the threats and challenges that local farmers face.
2. For diverse stakeholders within a community to develop relationships to work together to identify appropriate strategies to address those challenges.
3. To identify and guide leadership within the community to implement and sustain strategies for farms to Keep Farming.

Keep Farming in the Hilltowns Process

The Keep Farming process guides the community through three phases:

Phase I – Engage and Organize the Community

Phase II – Collect Data

Phase II – Develop Action Plan

Phase I – Engage and Organize the Community

The Hilltown CDC held 4 community meetings in 2012 and 2013 that were facilitated by UMASS professor Joseph Krupczynski and Hilltown CDC Executive Director Dave Christopolis to identify topics of community interest. As stated earlier, feedback from residents that attended these meetings indicated strong interest in participating in a food and farming project to strengthen agriculture in the region. Conversations with farmers in the region confirmed support for Keep Farming as an appropriate method of engaging the community, with a successful Keep Farming process having recently taken place in nearby Berkshire County. Hilltown CDC then applied to the USDA Local Food Promotion Grant to undergo a Keep Farming community planning process in an 8-town region of the Hilltowns.

The Hilltown CDC’s proposal was accepted to receive a grant award from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Services’ Local Food Promotion Program to implement Keep Farming for one-year from September 2014 through Sept 2015. Hilltown CDC is the sponsoring organization, partnering with consultant Melissa Adams, the Old Creamery Cooperative, and Agricultural Commissions and Select Boards in participating towns³.

Farmers and others that provided letters of support for the grant proposal were contacted to thank them and inform them that project funding had been secured to begin the project.

³ 7 of the 8 participating towns have an Agricultural Commission or similar town committee; Goshen is the only town that does not, so approval was provided through the Select Board.

Keep Farming in the Hilltowns

Project partners continued outreach in Fall of 2014 to notify stakeholders about the project. This included meetings with the Cooperative Creamery Board, Agricultural Commissions and Select Boards of participating towns to inform members about the project, how it will benefit the community, and confirm interest in participating. Additional outreach was conducted to key individuals and organizations in the community through emails, phone calls, and meetings. Descriptions of the project were sent out to the broader community through Hilltown CDC and Old Creamery Cooperative e-newsletters (200 members and 1,200 members, respectively) and a press release was provided to local newspapers announcing the project and the date of the community kickoff meeting.

A community kickoff forum for Keep Farming in the Hilltowns took place on November 17 at the Cummington Community House. 60 people attended the event, including 30 farmers. The purpose of the meeting was to inform stakeholders about the project, provide them with the opportunity to provide some initial feedback, and explain how to get actively involved as a volunteer. After a presentation and discussion, attendees divided up into smaller, guided break-out groups to form 2 teams based on interest: Local Food and Local Farms. The role of each group throughout the upcoming process was described in more detail by project partners in each group and attendees were given more time to provide feedback about the project. Contact information was collected from interested attendees to inform them of project updates through for quarterly emails.

Phase II – Collect Data

The Local Food team and Local Farm teams met monthly from December 2014 through May of 2015 to collect regional data about current demand for and supply of local food and farm products to help inform the process. The volunteer teams were provided guidance and sample surveys to adapt to the needs of the community.

Local Food Team: The purpose of this team was to help the community better understand the demand for locally produced food in the region. The team conducted the following surveys:

RESIDENT SURVEY: To determine where residents are purchasing their food, how much is local, and interest in increasing the amount of local foods they purchase and consume.

STORES, RESTAURANTS & DISTRIBUTORS: To determine how much local food is being purchased by local stores and restaurants and to identify interest and/or barriers to purchasing more local food from area farmers.

SCHOOLS & MEALS PROGRAMS: To understand where schools and meals programs currently get their food, identify any barriers to serving more local food, and any assistance needed.

Local Farms Team: The purpose of this team was to help the community better understand existing agriculture in the region. Team members developed a list of farms in the region and invited farmers to a farmer's forum lunch on March 22, 2015. The purpose of this event was to get feedback from farmers about challenges and opportunities for farming in the region as well as to introduce the farmer's survey, explain its importance and assure confidentiality of results by individual farm. A meal highlighting

available locally produced food was shared by attendees and the event offered an opportunity to further develop relationships.

Farm team members developed and conducted the following survey:

FARMERS SURVEY: To obtain information about existing commercial farms, what they are producing, and what is needed to support viable farms in the Hilltowns.

Surveys were distributed through multiple methods. Online google surveys were sent out through e-newsletters and hard copies were made available in public places including libraries, post offices, and town halls in the participating towns. Personal interviews were conducted with willing store and restaurant owners and school district dining services staff.

Survey results were compiled into spreadsheets, summarized, and reviewed by members of the volunteer teams. Findings of food and farm surveys were reviewed by both teams to identify needs and opportunities for resulting actions in the Hilltowns.

Phase III – Develop Action Plan

Farm and Food teams were combined and members met together in June and July 2015, along with additional leaders within the community that had been provided with information throughout the process and were invited to participate. The purpose of these meetings was to develop a list of preliminary actions based on survey findings and feedback gathered at the community launch forum and the farmers forum. A list of potential actions was developed that was divided into general categories based on identified goals. This list was then reviewed and revised based on the feasibility of implementation for the Hilltown CDC or other project partners to achieve project goals, with the assumption that implementation funding would need to be secured for some activities. Findings and draft actions were presented at the Keep Farming in the Hilltowns Community Forum on August 24, 2015 to 25 attendees in order to obtain input from the broader community about the feasibility of proposed activities. After presenting a summary of findings and proposed actions, a discussion period offered the opportunity for questions and comments. Attendees were then encouraged to prioritize potential actions that were listed in the front of the room by putting a sticker on their top 5 favorites. Feedback from this community meeting was compiled and incorporated into the final list of actions in this plan. (See Actions section on page 17)



FINDINGS

The following information is a summary of findings that were used to inform the development of an action plan. These findings are the result of the past year of work by the local community who gathered and analyzed data through community forums, work group meetings, interviews, and surveys. It is our hope that these findings will lead the way for our region to implement this action plan to address the needs expressed by our neighbors, community leaders and farmers.

Profile of Agriculture in the Hilltowns

A list of 74 active commercial farms was developed by Keep Farming staff and volunteers based on information available online and personal knowledge of agricultural activity within the towns. 26 out of 74 farms completed the farmer's survey resulting in a **35% response rate**. Responses were relatively evenly distributed between the towns, with most responses from Cummington and Ashfield and no responses from Goshen as no farms had been identified in that town at the time surveys were distributed.



Responses by Town

Worthington – 2
Williamsburg – 4
Westhampton – 2
Plainfield – 1
Cummington – 7
Chesterfield – 3
Ashfield – 7

Agricultural Production

The 26 responding farmers reported approximately 3,200 total acres of farmland currently in active use. 2,068 of those acres are devoted to forestry. Recent land use data gathered by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission from MassGIS for the 8-town region indicates a total of 9,936 acres being actively farmed within these 8 towns and 118,555 acres in forestry (including forested wetlands).⁴ Based on this data sample, roughly 1/3 of the total farms in the region supports almost 1/3 of the agricultural activity in the region, but only includes about 2% of the forested land. While foresters were included on

⁴ *Farmland and Forested/Forested Wetland Land Use data provided by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission from Mass Geographic Information Systems: Active Farmland from 2005 Sandborn Land Use Data (updated June 2009).*

the list, surveys were not returned by the larger landholders focused primarily on forestry. The land reported devoted to forestry included within this survey sample is owned by farmers that also use their land for other agricultural purposes.

Findings from the surveys indicate that the soils and climate of the Hilltowns primarily supporting forestry based businesses, including logging, firewood, maple and Christmas tree farms, as well pasture based livestock enterprises and hay production. The top uses of farmland reported by number of farms in order were forestry, hay, pasture, maple, orchards/small fruit, and nursery.

Top Uses for land reported

Forest – 2,068 acres

Maple – 427 acres

Hay – 418 acres

Pasture – 229 acres

Livestock operations are prevalent in the Hilltowns, with beef cattle as the most common reported livestock, followed by poultry, swine and sheep, dairy cows and goats. There are also a few llama and alpaca farms and boarding horse operations.

There are many small, diversified farms as well that produce a variety of products including vegetables, eggs, and meat. Most commonly reported processed products reported are firewood, meat, maple products, eggs, and wool/fiber.

Farm Labor and Continuity

Farmers reported an average of 25 years farming with an average of 53 years that the farm has been in their family. As shown in the table below, most farmers are between the age of 40 and 60 (37%) with 33% over 60 years. These results indicate that most farmers in the Hilltowns are slightly younger than the average age of farmers in Massachusetts, which is 58 years.

Of the farms surveyed, 14 classified themselves as full-time and 11 part-time, employing a total of 33 full time employees and 66 part time employees. The availability of both full-time and part-time labor was a top concern by survey respondents.

23 farms indicated that they have land in the Chapter 61 program for tax rebates and 4 farms reported that their farmland is permanently protected under the state Agricultural Preservation Restriction program. According to MassGIS data there are 4,604 acres in APR in the 8-town region as of May 2015.

"I can see that the relationships built through this process will be the most important part. We have lost the Granges and the Future Farmers of America which used to fill this networking role for many farmers." - Ann Irvine, Cooperative Creamery Board

Age of family farm workers		
Age Range	# of family workers	% of total
< 20 years	2	4%
20-40 years	13	26%
40 – 60 years	19	37%
60+ years	17	33%

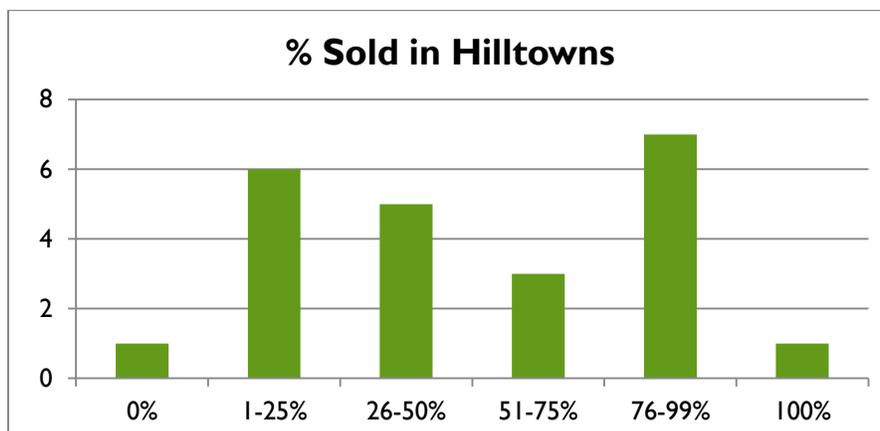
Sales and Marketing

When asked how farmers sell their products, the most common sales/distribution methods reported were:

Common Forms of Distribution
 Farmstead – 15 farms
 Retail stores – 13 farms
 Direct sales to other farmers – 8 farms
 Internet – 7 farms
 Wholesale – 6 farms

A few farms reported pick-your-own and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) methods of direct retail sale and some farms noted selling their animals at cooperative auction. A very small percentage of Hilltown products were reported as being sold to restaurants and at fairs. It is notable that 47% of farms surveyed donate farm products to the Food Bank, church or senior’s meals programs, accept EBT, or offers a discount CSA share to low income residents.

Farm respondents were asked what percentage of their farm products are sold in the Hilltowns, with the following results:



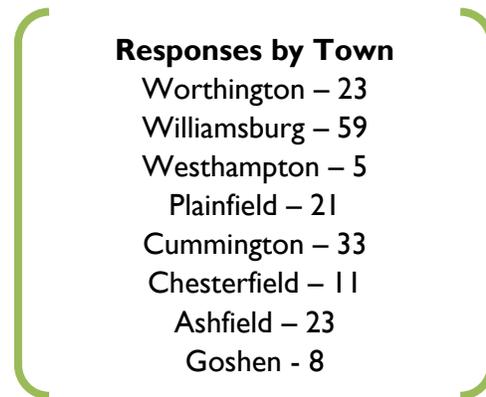
65% responded that they would like to sell more farm products within the Hilltowns. The most common response to what would make that easier is marketing and/or advertising.

Demand for Local Food

Residents

A resident's survey was distributed in public places, such as libraries, town halls, and post offices, as well as online through participating partners' newsletters. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about how residents shop for food and the level of demand for locally produced food for potential market expansion opportunities for area farms.

182 households within the 8-town region responded by completing a Resident survey. As shown in the chart below, the towns in the region with the most responses were Williamsburg and Cummington, followed by Plainfield and Ashfield, with relatively few residents from Goshen and Westhampton that participated in the survey.



General Shopping Habits

The survey asked about general food shopping habits. Respondents stated they shop at a variety of stores to meet their economic and dietary needs and preferences. Given the distance between most residences in participating towns and food markets, this appears to suggest significant travel and time expenses related to purchasing food. Respondents indicated they balance cost with convenience when doing their shopping.

Preference for Locally Produced Food

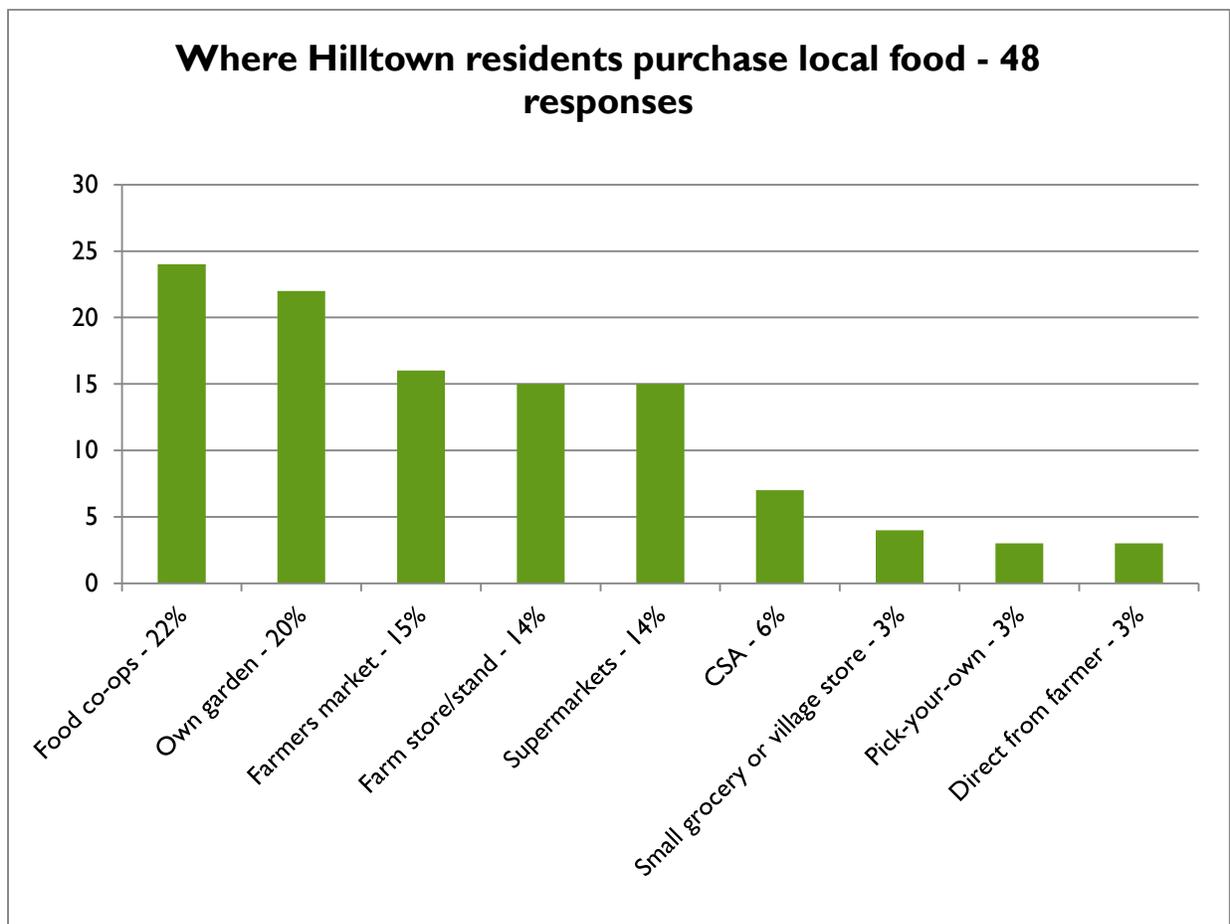
The survey then asked more specifically about buying preferences related to locally produced food. For the purposes of this survey, "local food" was defined as products that have been grown in the Hilltowns or surrounding communities such as fruit, vegetables, meat, eggs, dairy, jams, honey, bread, herbs, microbrews, hard cider, maple syrup, etc. (These items may or may not be certified organic).

Keep Farming in the Hilltowns

96% of respondents reported eating local food, with an overwhelming majority reporting that they'd like to increase their consumption of local goods. The highest rated reasons that respondents stated for choosing to purchase locally produced food were:

- Support of local farmers (55%)
- Where it was grown (43%)
- Freshness (40%)
- Health benefits of eating locally (35%)

Residents' indicated their favorite local foods were vegetables (corn, tomatoes, greens and squash), fruits (apples and berries), eggs, beef, maple syrup, milk, bread and yogurt. Of the 186 who took the survey 56 said there is food that they would like more access to locally, including grains, affordable meats, winter storage/root crops, and canned/preserved/fermented foods.



Of the major barriers to buying more local foods 27 households said it was difficult to get to places that sold local foods, 22 said it was cost prohibitive to buy more local food, and 20 residents indicated that lack of variety kept them from buying more local foods.

Stores and Restaurants

Owners and managers of 12 stores and restaurants were interviewed in the 8-town region, including 3 convenience stores, 6 restaurants/caterers, 2 small general stores, and 1 retail store. Surveys were conducted through personal interviews by volunteers and HCDC staff.

When respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of all food items sold or distributed that were raised or produced within the Hilltowns, one business stated that they do not source anything locally, two said that they purchase between 1-10% from local farms, three said between 10-25%, three said between 25-50%, and two said between 50-75% of their goods are sourced locally.

All 12 indicated they would be interested in selling more local goods and 10 said there was at least a moderate amount of demand for local products. The following products were identified as the highest in demand:

Highest Products in Demand

Vegetables – 5
 Meat (beef) – 4
 Baked goods – 3
 Fruit – 2
 Maple – 2
 In season produce – 2
 Eggs – 2

5 restaurants and stores said that there were locally produced products that were in demand by their customers but that they were unable to provide, mainly meat (chicken) and out of season produce. Store and restaurant owners were asked what primary barriers kept them from buying locally grown and raised produce and the most frequent responses fell into the category of quantity/availability and price/minimum purchase requirements. Inconveniences with deliveries or pickups and limited business capacity were also noted by respondents.

When asked what would make it possible for these stores and restaurants to buy more locally grown and raised products, the top answers were more consistent availability and lower costs/more competitive prices. Other responses included better distribution or delivery system, better business skills (having pricing ready, using wholesale pricing) and more storage.

“As a farmer, I see the value of these surveys to provide input about what support is needed for the agricultural community; As the General Manager of the Old Creamery Cooperative, this process will build relationships that will help us increase the amount of local food we can buy and sell from local farms to increase access of local fresh food for our community”
- Michael Kalagher, General Manager Old Creamery Cooperative and co-owner, Manda Farm, Plainfield

Identified Needs and Opportunities

Based on data, and discussions with and feedback from the community the following needs and opportunities were identified and were used to inform and prioritize the action plan.

Needs

- Strong demand for locally produced food among residents, stores, and restaurants.
- Greater awareness among residents of nearby farms and where to buy food grown in the Hilltowns.
- Increased farm sales (expanded markets or increased volume through existing markets) for existing farms to increase profitability and long-term viability.
- Increased production of farm products to meet regional demand.
- Increased access to fresh, locally produced food for all residents, including low income and elderly populations, to contribute to good nutrition and health.
- Research into the feasibility of collaborative infrastructure, to meet the needs of some farms, including shared equipment, cold storage, root storage and small-scale processing.

Opportunities

- Marketing campaign to brand the region with focus on natural resources that support farms and food production with regional marketing efforts, such as a farm trail, brochure or collaborative events to attract customers to visit farms and buy farm products.
- Increased agricultural production by existing and new farms to increase revenue and help meet demand for local food in region. More land could potentially be utilized for farms and forestry, presenting opportunities for landowners and farmland seekers to connect.
- Land base in the Hilltowns currently supports pasture based livestock operations, maple production, forestry and wood based enterprises, and orchards, demonstrating the suitability of land and climate to support more of these types of agricultural enterprises.
- Collaboration among farms for aggregation to reduce time and costs associated with marketing, delivery and distribution to increase options for convenient access of local farm products for area customers.
- Explore opportunities to reuse existing barns and buildings for shared infrastructure – storage space and/or commercial kitchens for value-added processing.
- Build relationships between producers and existing stores and restaurants to increase the volume of locally produced food purchased by existing businesses.
- Deliver locally produced food to elderly and low-income populations that HCDC or partners are already working with to provide community services.

Action Plan

GOAL 1: MARKETING TO BRAND THE REGION TO INCREASE GENERAL AWARENESS OF FARMS IN HILLTOWNS

- Develop marketing campaign to promote the region – farms, local food & health (i.e. Hilltown Grown or Hilltown Heros). This could include:
- Farm and food related events (i.e. farm tours, food related movie series, etc.)
- Hilltown Farm Trail – brochure with map to identify farms open to public in Hilltowns – to include: location, products, hours. Would be available in print and online. (develop and promote with Agricultural Commissions and other community partners)
- Promote value of local farms and buying of local products to Hilltown residents on Keep Farming page of Hilltown CDC website. Information on: costs of production, percentage of price that farmers keep, seasonality chart, upcoming farm events, etc.
- List Hilltown farms in existing directories: CDC business directory, CISA Local Guide
- Work with Agricultural Commissions and town webmasters to promote on town websites

GOAL 2: INCREASE SALES OF LOCAL FARM PRODUCTS TO AREA STORES & RESIDENTS

- Buyer/Producer meeting – to strengthen relationships, describe expectations on both sides, explore contract growing, producer memberships etc. with goal of increasing volume & variety of local food available through local markets (Partner: Creamery Coop)
- Explore opportunity for existing local food aggregation business to expand into the Hilltowns – to buy from Hilltown farms and to deliver farm shares/baskets to Hilltown residences
- Explore feasibility of delivery of local farm products to isolated elderly and low-income populations in the Hilltowns (delivery of shares, mobile market, etc.)

GOAL 3: INCREASE FARMERS' AWARENESS OF EXISTING PROGRAMS & RESOURCES TO KEEP AREA FARMS IN BUSINESS

- Use Keep Farming page of Hilltown CDC website as clearinghouse for agricultural resources:
- Audience: Hilltown Farmers: part-time labor, shared equipment and tools, links to farm programs and assistance, encourage listings on MDAR's Massachusetts Grown & Fresher online map
- Farmer potlucks for information sharing, networking (HCDC initial facilitation with Agricultural Commissions)
- Facilitate or promote informational workshops for farmers on existing programs: grants, business development, energy, succession planning, land protection, (USDA, MDAR, CISA, LFG, HLT, etc.)
- Conduct business assistance tailored to small farms (HCDC, MDAR, CISA) – websites, business planning, etc.

GOAL 4: RESEARCH EXISTING AND NEEDED INFRASTRUCTURE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF AREA FARMS

- Assessment of buildings/barns existing in Hilltowns that could be reused for shared use facility to rent to farmers (root storage, cold storage, freezers, etc.)
- Identify existing certified commercial kitchen that could be available to farmers for value-added processing
- Research into regulations/feasibility of small scale processing facility for meat (Hilltown farmers should connect with Berkshire County livestock committee)
- Explore availability of land in Hilltowns that could be used for agriculture for new and existing farmers to expand agricultural and forestry production

