

Council of Governments to map healthy food system

The Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments has received over \$200,000 from a Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust grant to conduct a large, multi-stakeholder project aimed at better understanding and improving healthy food access and local food economic opportunity across the greater Upper Coastal Plain region.

"There are a lot of organizations and groups in this multi-county area working to grow the local food economy and improve healthy food access," says Ron Townley, director of Planning and Development Services for the UCPCOG Region. "One fundamental challenge stakeholders agree upon is these many efforts and are not all known and connected, resulting in missed opportunities for economic growth, the creation of community wealth and improved health outcomes for residents."

With over 20 partnering organizations identified to work on the effort, the project will result in the development of an information based, online, interactive map of the region's "local and healthy food system." With deep engagement at the community level, the map will show what assets are in place and also allow people to see what support is needed and where and then work to make improvements at the local and regional levels. For example, the map will identify places where it is difficult to get fresh food, like small towns and communities without grocery stores that also don't have good transportation for the elderly or people without cars. It will show the location of healthy food sources like farmers markets, community gardens and community produce farmers that provide food locally. It will also map the links in the food "value-chain" — the network of local businesses and organizations involved in getting food from the farms to the tables. This includes things like the area's cold storage facilities, commercial kitchens, local processors, food pantries and more. Combined with available information on public health, income, transportation access and more, a highly visual and informative tool can pinpoint areas of need and economic opportunity and help prioritize actions by communities, organizations and agencies to build community wealth and health. It also allows farmers, entrepreneurs and existing businesses to support the creation of new local food supply chains.

According to UCPCOG Executive Director Robert Hiett, "UCPCOG is committed to the establishment of a shared analysis and understanding of the existing regional food system, which in turn will create opportunities for larger and more coordinated development initiatives throughout our region," UCPCOG Executive Director Robert Hiett said. "The result will be a living and growing platform, sustained by UCPCOG and partners, to help us all make decisions that will lead to a healthier and more prosperous region."

"Rocky Mount City Council member, the Rev. Richard Joyner, helped create the Conetoe Family Life Center that received national attention on CNN for work with youth and food, said, "The process will address healthy food access for under-resourced, minority, disadvantaged, low-income and other equity challenged communities to improve health outcomes, including obesity reduction, heart disease and more."

This project will improve the collective power of these residents, create new community wealth and allow everyone to better understand racial disparities in the food system.

One of the most important achievements will be the greater engagement and stronger connectivity among the diverse groups involved in this effort."When completed, the online regional food system map will be hosted and maintained by UCPCOG staff and available for public use at no charge. The website will be capable of hosting relevant local videos, stories, social media links, resource provider information, and other content as appropriate.

"This project is consistent with UCPCOG's 2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy," UCPCOG Board Chairman Doug Hughes said. "The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy was developed by public and private stakeholders within the UCPCOG region and Goal 3: 'To Create Revitalized, Healthy & Resilient Communities' includes identifying resources to support the establishment of local foods as a small business opportunity, creating an inventory of farmers, land, product, and market opportunities and developing a greater understanding of existing food value chain gaps and opportunities."The UCPCOG, established in 1971 under N.C. General Statute 160A-47, is the regional council of governments for the local governments in Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton and Wilson Counties.