Planning for a Food Hub in Portage County, OH

Introduction
Recognizing the need for a stronger system of aggregating, processing, and distributing locally and regionally produced food products, the Portage County Regional Planning Commission (PCRPC) initiated a plan for a Food Hub in 2012. The planning process stemmed from needs identified in the 2010 Northeast Ohio Local Food Assessment & Plan. The PCRPC received a project grant from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at Ohio State University to address this goal. The Center’s mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy and food and agricultural economic development priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming.

The process included six steps:

1. Forming a steering committee of relevant stakeholders
2. Distributing surveys to gauge the needs of local producers and consumers
3. Characterizing current agricultural conditions pertinent to a food hub
4. Identifying potential food hub characteristics and services
5. Crafting goals, objectives and strategies
6. Developing recommendations

The final result was a report prepared by the Portage County Regional Planning Commission, titled Planning for a Food Hub in Portage County. The report outlines the steps involved in the planning process along with knowledge gleaned and recommendations for establishing a food hub in Portage County.

Step 1: Forming a Steering Committee
The Portage County Regional Planning Commission drew on the knowledge of numerous stakeholders in forming its food hub steering committee. Members of the steering committee included producers, retailers, educators, institutional buyers, and advocates, as
well representatives from the agricultural and economic development sectors. The role of the steering committee was to provide input and make recommendations toward the development of the food hub plan. The steering committee also crafted the following mission statement for the operation: “The Portage County Food Hub will be established to foster collaboration between agricultural producers and consumers in order to enhance the distribution of local foods and local value-added food products, to mutually benefit all parties and to promote healthy, sustainable food systems.”

Step 2: Distributing Surveys to gauge the needs of local producers and consumers
Two surveys were crafted to gauge interest in a food hub—one that was geared toward producers and one that was geared toward consumers. Paper versions of the producer surveys were distributed at the Haymaker and Ravenna farmers’ markets, as well as at two sessions on “Cooperatives in the Local Food Economy” held at the Kent University Cooperative Development Center. A SurveyMonkey version was also distributed online via the Portage Local Food Project Facebook page. The consumer surveys were distributed digitally via email to a group of local restaurants, assisted living facilities, a private school, and several other potential food hub users.

Though the survey response rates were low, the PCRPC found that producers were most interested in marketing produce, meats, cut flowers, dried beans, grains, herbs, and value-added products such as honey, maple syrup, apple butter and soap. The primary means by which producers were distributing their products included farmers’ markets, wholesalers/distributors, farm stands, and co-ops. The greatest barriers identified to the producers augmenting their operations included marketing their products to buyers, labor issues, and the lack of management to run a larger operation. The three major services producers desired from a food hub included coordination of products with buyers’ needs, assistance with delivery, and assistance with processing and packaging.

On the consumer side, barriers identified to procuring more local food included the need for traceability, the need for product cleaning and packaging to fit buyer requirements, lack of knowledge of farms that grew products in the quantities needed, and constraints around delivery and pick-up of products.

Step 3: Characterizing Current Agricultural Conditions Pertinent to a Food Hub
In characterizing current agricultural conditions, the PCRPC drew mainly on agricultural data and economic opportunities. Agricultural data sources included the USDA Census of Agriculture, data collected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and data from the county’s Current Agricultural Use Value (CAUV) program. At the county level, the PCRP assessed the number, type, and size of farms, as well as farm sales, with an emphasis on small and value-added operations that would most likely benefit from a food hub.

Economic opportunities examined included the extent of consumer-driven urban areas in Portage County, the number and types of buyers of food hub products (primarily institutions), existing processing and distributing infrastructure, and ongoing local/regional food initiatives that support consumption of local products.
Step 4: Identifying potential food hub characteristics and services
The PCRPC recognized that the concept of a “food hub” can take many different forms. While some food hubs serve as major processing centers, others serve as business incubators or simply as aggregation and distribution centers. In order to determine what function the Portage County food hub would serve, the PCRPC researched various definitions, functions, operational models, and features of food hubs. Using USDA resources, the PCRPC identified four core components of a food hub, including 1) aggregation and distribution, 2) active coordination, 3) permanent facilities, and 4) other services. The PCRPC used these same resources to identify common features and operational best practices for food hubs. In addition, the PCRPC researched existing food hubs to identify best practices and identified potential funding streams based on various organizational models.

Step 5: Crafting Goals, Objectives, and Strategies
Ultimately, the PCRPC and the food hub steering committee established a set of objectives, strategies, actions, and key partners that would be necessary to, according to their mission, “foster collaboration between agricultural producers and consumers in order to enhance the distribution of local foods and local value-added food products, to mutually benefit all parties and to promote healthy, sustainable food systems.” Table 1 contains the objectives, strategies, and actions that accompany the food hub planning process.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives of Creating a Food Hub</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Implementation Groups/Agencies</th>
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</table>
| 1. Educate consumers, buyers, businesses about the benefits of local foods | Demonstrate the importance of the agricultural economy to the vitality of Portage County | 1. Use the food hub to build community by offering classes and demonstrations that emphasize the advantages of buying and using local products | • Food hub manager  
• OSU Extension  
• Local restaurants/chefs  
• Commercial kitchens  
• Farm market managers  
• Farm Bureau  
• Local farmers  
• Portage County Regional Planning Commission |
| Demonstrate the health advantages of local foods | 2. Work with existing local commercial kitchens or farmers markets to coordinate buyer needs, marketing efforts, etc.  
3. Present the benefits of agriculture production on local economy to business leaders  
4. Work with local schools to educate students about local food benefits (Ohio Farm to School) | 1. Establish ties with local chambers, visitors bureaus, farmers market managers, etc. to coordinate and promote local products and farms  
2. Coordinate with farmers markets and commercial | |
| 2. Increase the use and marketing of local foods | Enhance availability of and access to local foods | 1. Establish ties with local chambers, visitors bureaus, farmers market managers, etc. to coordinate and promote local products and farms  
2. Coordinate with farmers markets and commercial | • Business plan creator;  
• Food hub manager;  
• Chambers of Commerce;  
• Visitors Bureaus;  
• Local economic |
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<td>2. Increase the use and marketing of local foods, cont.</td>
<td>Encourage entrepreneurship through interaction of businesses associated with marketing local foods and developing value-added products</td>
<td>kitchens to market products 3. Work with Farm Bureau and other agencies that serve the agricultural community to establish connections and involvement</td>
<td>development leaders, Portage Development Board, Farm Bureau, Local farmers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Work to establish a &quot;brand&quot; for a food hub</td>
<td>1. Characterize Portage County's agricultural community; 2. Establish a strong local identity for the food hub with respect to its products and producers, which may include labeling, signs, other marketing materials 3. Develop slogan/marketing campaign 4. Use &quot;Buy Ohio&quot; or other regional/local promotional materials</td>
<td>Visioning in Portage; Higher education marketing, design and business faculty and students; Regional economic development agencies Local farmers and producers Local produce and product buyers Portage Development Board</td>
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<td>3. Support smaller agricultural producers</td>
<td>Provide coordination among small scale producers – between each other and to the larger community Establish links between producers and consumers Provide pre-season planning as part of food hub services Determine need for GAP certification and other food safety issues, including traceability</td>
<td>1. Hire a food hub manager to establish links between producers and buyers and to provide for planning between seasons 2. Consider a cooperative business organization for the food hub that provides the incentive to work together, make decisions that benefit all members 3. Establish the methodology to trace food hub products as needed 4. Train local producers in accepted best practices for food handling to assure food safety</td>
<td>Business plan creator; Food hub manager KSU Cooperative Development Center; OSU Extension Service; Farm Bureau Local farmers Local produce and product buyers</td>
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<td>4. Spur economic revitalization by strengthening ties between the &quot;urban&quot; economy and the agricultural economy by establishing the food hub as a viable business venture</td>
<td>Determine which product(s) should form the basis of the food hub effort Examine ways to aggregate and distribute goods to fill needs</td>
<td>1. Interviews, surveys with producers and buyers/consumers 2. Identify other potential</td>
<td>Business plan creator Local farmers Local produce consumers and buyers Portage Industries</td>
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### Objectives of Creating a Food Hub

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<td>4. Spur economic revitalization by strengthening ties between the &quot;urban&quot; economy and the agricultural economy by establishing the food hub as a viable business venture, cont.</td>
<td>partners, such as freezer or storage facilities 3. Work with Portage Industries regarding employment opportunities for the disabled</td>
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<td>Gauge need for processing or packaging at a central facility</td>
<td>1. Determine the need for GAP certification, traceability 2. Examine possibilities for other services at food hub such as kitchen, dryers, packaging equipment and/or coordinate with existing processing facilities</td>
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<td>Develop a viable business plan for the food hub</td>
<td>1. Create a business plan</td>
<td>• To be determined</td>
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### Step 6: Developing Recommendations

Recognizing the constraints of limited resources and data, the food hub steering committee made the following recommendations to advance the Portage County food hub project:

1. Apply for a grant to hire a person who can go into the field and collect information about the needs of producers and buyers with regards to a local food hub. This would in essence become a feasibility study and would begin the process of identifying a champion for the food hub.
2. Work with other agencies that have connections to the farming community such as the Lake to River Food Cooperative or the Farm Bureau to get the word out about the food hub effort and to explore partnership opportunities.
3. Identify a place to house the food hub concept while the feasibility and business plans progress:
   a. Suggested entities: TransPortage (www.transportage.org), KSU Cooperative Development Center, Portage Development Board, Hiram College, Portage Industries, other Kent State University departments
4. Present the food hub idea and plan to the Portage Development Board to spread the word and encourage support.
5. Develop a constituency around the food hub concept by creating a website to promote it.
6. Work with Visioning in Portage and the Portage Development Board to create a county-wide “brand.”
7. Work with local businesses such as restaurants, caterers or institutions to develop and promote a “locally grown” brand or seal.
8. Create a business plan for a food hub.
   a. Apply for a grant to do a business plan.
b. Work with local universities/colleges on startup plans for a food hub, perhaps as a class assignment.

c. Work with Portage Industries to consider employment of disabled workers.

Find Out More
To learn more about how the Portage County Regional Planning Commission applied its Community-Based Agricultural Economic Development planning grant from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation to plan for a food hub in Portage County, contact:

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