

Cultivate, Catalyze, and Connect: A Gathering of Food System Councils & Networks

October 6, 2016

Lynchburg, VA

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Summary of Action Items and Take-Aways

General reflections

- General agreement that a state council is needed and charging of VFSC with the task.
- People are interested in having the VFSC be a membership based organization.
 - Need way for local groups to be updated on VFSC activities and for local efforts to update VFSC on their efforts
- A food plan would help guide strategic direction and funding development.
- Need a better understanding of what the food system looks like in the state (see MD Grown, EFSNE).
- Need a way to integrate other statewide and local food system planning (e.g. VNIN, VA Farmers Market Association, VA Farm to School)

Feedback from the Center for a Livable Future

- Clear role of VFSC in driving a state food and farm policy agenda and we also heard a call for VFSC to play this role at the meeting.

- Place for VFSC to spearhead a state assessment and revision of the state farm to plate plan from 2012.
 - You could focus on an assessment and then modify the plan from 2012 to reflect the assessment and the other plans being created by the VA Nutrition Incentive Network and the VA Farmers Market Association.
- If you decide to go the route of creating a new state food systems plan, this would provide an opportunity for the council to further engage local organizations and build its presence across the state, and to further pull together the work of all of these state groups (VA Federation of Food Banks, VA Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Coalitions, Cooperative Extension: Community, Local and Regional Food Systems, VA Nutrition Incentive Network and the VA Farmers Market Association) working on different aspects of the food system.

General Meeting Notes

Welcome and Introductions

This meeting aimed to raise awareness and build relationships among networks, share resources, ideas, and needs, and to identify ways to build on momentum gained from the day together.

State of the Virginia Food System

Comprised of 24 participating organizations, the Virginia Food System Council emerged from a Virginia Food Security Work Group and was founded in 2009. It's focus areas include a food systems education approach, incubating and catalyzing projects, educating and informing on policy, and acting as a research and information clearing house. The greatest issues faced in the current Virginia Food System are farmer loss, farmland loss, diet related diseases, food insecurity, and opportunities for economic growth.

Food and Farm Policy in the Commonwealth of Virginia

Panelist Overview

Leslie VanHorn, Federation of VA Food Banks: In 2016 Virginia lawmakers passed the Food Crop Donation Tax Credit Bill. There is currently a delay in guidelines being passed down from the state tax office. There are currently concerns that the cap may be too low and some late-season crop farmers may miss out. The Federation of VA Food Banks will need help spreading information about the tax guidelines once they are released, collecting information after their first year, and petitioning for more funding.

James Wallace, VA Community Capital: Virginia Community Capital is a community development financial institution with a new line of small business lending focusing on grocery

stores and prioritizing stores that source Virginia products. Virginia has a great need in urban areas for new and renovated grocery stores, while rural areas have small grocery stores struggling against low-cost chains. Many other organizations have formed cross-sector partnerships to institute “Double Bucks” programs to incentivize SNAP at farmers markets, but work needs to be done to battle “SNAP customer stereotypes.”

Spencer Neale, Virginia Farm Bureau: Representative Spencer Neale urged that the biggest points to consider with local food system councils are understanding the complexity of the national food system and taking advantage of opportunities to engage at different levels and entry points. VAFB’s biggest impacts include funding, zoning issues, and support of federal initiatives (they have several full time lobbyists).

Bette Brand, Farm Credit: Farm Credit’s core mission is to fund agriculture and is evolving to encompass more diverse farmers and farms through their Knowledge Center (provides benchmarking, collaboration, and education resources and is available to all, regardless of membership), Farm Launch Program, (which provides financing and mentoring to young and beginning farmers), Farm Fresh Program (which sets a price floor for produce at auction, which if bought goes to the VA Food Bank), and is expanding into advocacy by partnering with other groups. Farm Credit desires collaboration to help amplify local voices.

Other needs expressed by attendees included increased support for young farmers that aren’t necessary beginning farmers, support to create financially sustainable farming ventures, more incentives to make use of dormant land, increased educational programming for school aged children around the food system, accord and tenure understanding between farmers and solar farms, and bringing more “big ag” organizations to the table.

From the Ground Up

What should be done in to support food and farm efforts in VA?

- **Secure Funding**

- For outreach and collaboration work
- Safety net for produce farmers: crop insurance and target prices

- **Make strides toward increased food access**

- Local procurement policy to reduce barriers for farm to school/institution
- Increase knowledge of opportunities for local procurement
- Simplify administration/distribution for programs like double bucks

- **Education**

- Consumers, youth, policymakers, county/regional planning commissions
- Shared policy priorities for statewide advocacy
- New farmer training on business planning and sustainability
- Include agriculture in local government comprehensive plans and economic strategies

- **Statewide food plan**

- **Asset inventory**

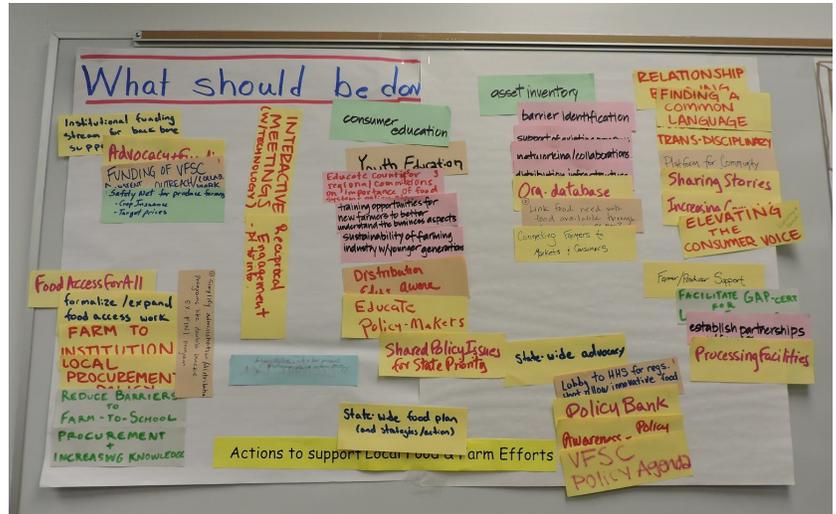
- Identify barriers and food needs, existing resources and markets for farmers and consumers
- Develop an organization/data database

- **Statewide advocacy**

- Develop a shared statewide policy agenda
- Create a policy bank
- Lobby HHS and other state agencies to reduce barriers/change regulations to allow for innovations in local food

- **Relationship building**

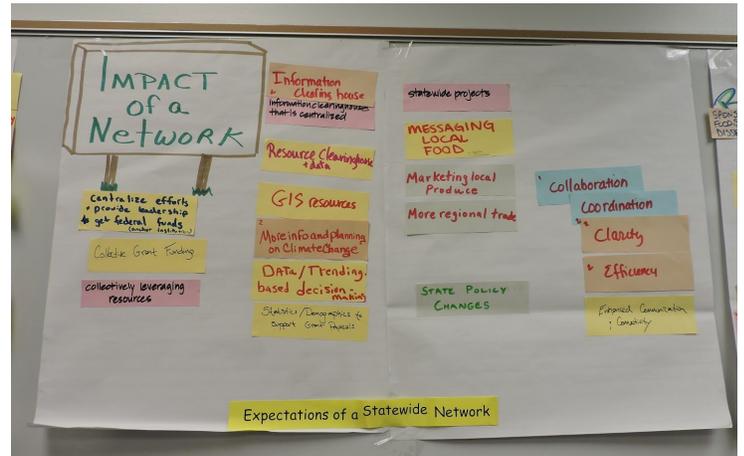
- Find a common/trans-disciplinary language to talk about the VA food system
- Share stories and elevate the voice of constituents
- Host interactive meetings using technology
- Develop opportunities for reciprocal engagement between local and state efforts across the state



- Farmer/producer support
 - Facilitate GAP certification
 - Establish partnerships with farmers
 - Break down barriers to processing facilities

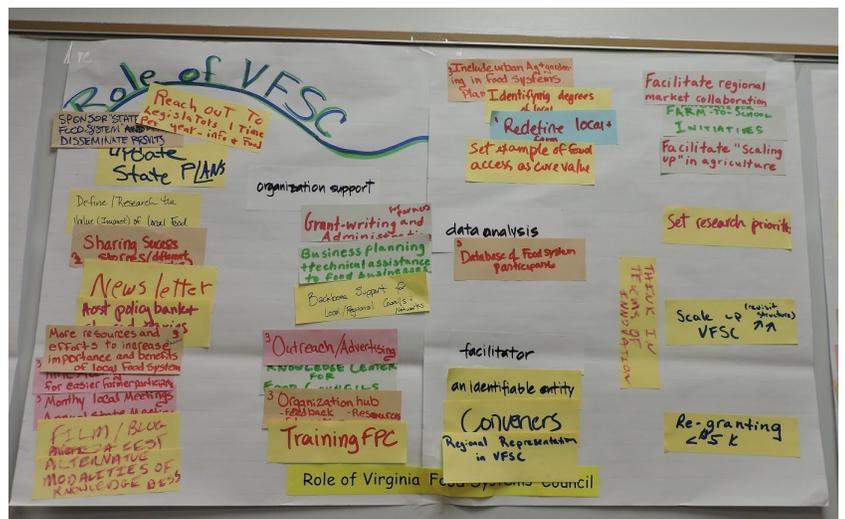
What would the impact of a statewide network be?

- Centralize efforts to leverage resources (funding), i.e. collective grant writing for federal funds
- Act as a resource and data clearinghouse
 - Spatial GIS data
 - Planning for climate change
 - Statistics and demographics for grant proposals
- Create unified statewide projects
 - Grow Local campaign to promote local foods
 - Opportunities for more regional trade
- Affect state policy changes
- Collaboration for clarity, efficiency and coordination of efforts



What is the role of the VFSC?

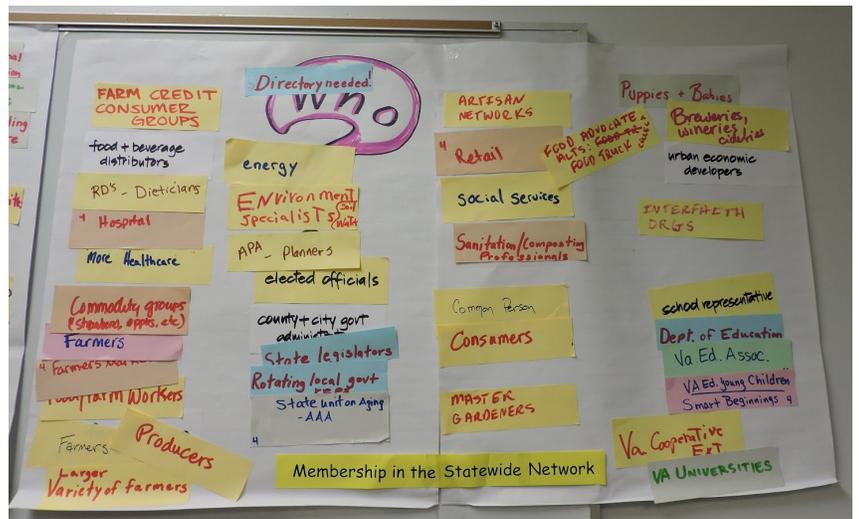
- Communication about state of local food systems
 - Outreach to state legislators
 - Education about value / benefits / importance of local food and farm efforts - storytelling and promotion of local knowledge
 - Coordination of state plans and policies
- Organization support
 - For local and regional councils and networks
 - Collaborative grant writing and administration
 - Technical assistance for local food businesses
 - Data clearinghouse and analysis
- Coverer - identifiable entity that represents local and state food and farm efforts, including local FPCs



- Include regional representation on VFSC
- Time meetings for easy collaboration
- Act as a knowledge center
 - Set research priorities
 - Redefine local
 - Ensure urban ag is included in food systems planning and elevate value of food access
 - Innovate
- Facilitate regional market collaboration and scaling up of local agriculture

Who should be involved?

- Everyone (see full notes)
 - Farmer or farmers markets
 - Regional planning commissions
 - COGs
 - Local food business/entrepreneur
 - State agencies (DOE, VDH, etc.)
 - Health care/Hospitals



Prioritized of Support for food and farm efforts and Role of VFSC (number of votes):

Support

- Develop a food plan (13)
- Complete an asset inventory (9)
- Work to ensure food access for all (5)
- Find funding to support VFSC (4)
- Build connectivity between producers, markets, and consumers (4)

Role of VFSC:

- Sharing success stories (9)
- Organization hub (5)
- Training food policy councils (3)
- Defining research (3)

Action Items and Take-Aways

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Evaluation feedback:

- People appreciated the brainstorming activities and the opportunity to learn more about what was happening. Appreciation was expressed for the bios and contact info that was compiled.
- Some would have liked more time to hear what others are doing around the state and more time for networking.
- Would like for these events to happen more frequently