

INFRASTRUCTURE

Project Summary

Tompkins Food Future is a community food system planning initiative to craft the first-ever comprehensive food system plan for Tompkins County. The goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable, affordable, and healthy food system for all members of our community. What follows is an overview of the state of our local food system gleaned from community conversations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, neighborhood canvassing, and data collection. This section covers **Infrastructure**.

Introduction

The process of how our food gets to our plates is complex, obscure, and poorly understood by food consumers. It depends on a huge multinational production and distribution system which has evolved over the last 100 years. This consolidated system of food production and distribution is highly dependent on fossil fuels, foreign labor, narrow production margins, and high costs associated with processing, packaging, and moving food. Expedience often trumps quality. This has raised questions about the sustainability of our food system.

Our system includes some local packing, processing, and distribution, and these players are more integrated with community conversations and supportive of efforts to grow our local capacity. Processors operating in Tompkins County include beverage makers, added value processors, bakers, and herbalists. The local beverage industry thrives on agritourism revenue as well as sales, incentivizing owners to protect surrounding farmland and other natural landscapes.

Distant actors who do business in Tompkins County, on the other hand, show very little interest in working with community-led efforts towards reform. This is our greatest challenge because there is no transparency about their operations and little accountability to update their operations to meet local community expectations. Our small market scale gives us little power to regulate reform without pushing some businesses away.

The following section explains how food makes it to Tompkins County. There are gaps as well as opportunities for information gathering.

Challenges

Supplying seasonal items from local farms at wholesale levels requires a great deal of flexibility based on local weather conditions and the variable quality of small batch items from multiple farms. This lessens their competitiveness with larger, diversified distributors.

TOMPKINS COUNTY INFRASTRUCTURE AT-A-GLANCE

The process of how our food gets to our plates is complex, obscure and poorly understood by food consumers. It requires transportation, cold storage facilities, computer systems that track orders and inventory, and relationships and shared expectations between farmers, value added producers, distributors, retailers, and end users.



Large food businesses that operate in Tompkins will not share their data or provide transparency about their operations here.



LOCAL DISTRIBUTORS SPECIALIZE IN BUYING FROM LOCAL FARMS AND ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SMALL FARMS HAVE TROUBLE FINDING PROCESSORS TO FREEZE, CAN, OR FERMENT THEIR PRODUCE



ENTREPRENEURS NEED ACCESS TO COMMERCIAL KITCHENS, REFRIGERATED TRUCKS AND OTHER EXPENSIVE CAPITAL EQUIPMENT

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS IN TOMPKINS IS HIGH, MAKING LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTS MORE EXPENSIVE THAN COMPETITORS



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Hiring enough workers is an ongoing challenge. There is currently a national shortage of drivers. Other packers and low-skilled workers are also hard to come by and the cost of that labor is higher here than in other states, making our products expensive to produce.

Scaling up operations at farms and value added processing requires access to capital, facilities, technical expertise, understanding the regulatory environment, sourcing supplies, and sufficient business support.

Access to USDA-approved slaughterhouses is limited due to regulatory requirements and a shortage of trained butchers, causing backlogs that can last multiple years. Farmers need to cull herds in the fall when livestock has finished the grazing season and the meat is the appropriate age and weight. However, they compete with area hunters for access to the small meat processing facilities and with large operations for appointments at USDA facilities.

The cost of doing business in New York is higher than in other states, making it difficult to compete on a local as well as regional scale.

Opportunities

Farm cooperatives have helped many industries achieve a sufficient scale to invest in equipment, share staff, and find access to wholesale markets. A shared brand would also help farmers sell to New York City and other larger markets. However, many small farmers want to maintain

control of their operations and are hesitant to enter into shared management agreements. Grant funds would be needed to supplement available loans and support an initial 4-5 year growth period.

Local distributors such as Regional Access, Finger Lakes Farms, and Headwater Foods are growing and currently maintain an emphasis on purchasing local products. Their success will support area farmers who wish to grow beyond direct-to-consumer sales.

Cold storage, frozen food facilities, and canning operations are business services that would help farmers add profitability. Incentives to operate these food processing services could spur new businesses. These services would also extend consumer access to local foods beyond the growing season.

Shared use and community kitchen facilities would help food entrepreneurs develop and expand their businesses, as well as provide an outlet where surplus farm and retail food can be processed for sale or donation to local buyers.

Buy New York initiatives like the NY State Farm to School program subsidize the institutional purchase of local products, making these enterprises more competitive. Additional support for local entrepreneurs tailoring goods for this market would position them here in Tompkins, where they can build a local network of expertise and share business services.

Food business incubation needs were assessed in 2013 by Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD, now IAED) and initial recommendations for business guidance and networking support were carried out through the Food Business Incubation Program, housed at Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins from 2018-2020. Funding would re-ignite this successful program.