

Planning for Emergence

By Ken Meter

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While it was written for economic developers, "Planning for Emergence" offers a great review of very creative efforts by food companies to pivot their operations in the early stages of the pandemic, often by serving low-income residents or health care workers. It is written in accessible language.

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Correction [page 42]: It was the Mt. Pulaski Economic Development & Planning Board, not the Logan County Economic Development Partnership, that helped subsidize initial produce costs as a way of acclimating consumers to the price of locally grown produce.

planning for emergence

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You may have walked through the grocery store during the pandemic, only to discover that flour shelves were bare. Perhaps meat supplies were sporadic or expensive. You may wonder how long vegetables or fruits will be available if harvesters in Arizona, California, Washington, or Mexico – or truckers, wholesale or grocery workers – succumb to COVID-19.

Uncertainties like these lead one to ask, how will food systems change as a result of the pandemic? Then, what can economic developers do?

While food systems have been in upheaval for well over a decade, with consumers seeking healthier foods and innovators launching new products, the pandemic created substantial new uncertainty. Grocery stores are important community gathering places, but the respected food research group Hartman reports that household deliveries doubled, from 14.5 percent to 27.8 percent of sales, as the pandemic spread. Although many economic developers view restaurants as “placemaking” venues, prominent chefs are reconsidering whether offering sit-down meals will be a viable business model in the future. Even before the crisis, consumers were opting for fast casual and take-out, while chefs felt stretched by workers’ calls for fair wages. During

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CO-CREATING THE NEW NORMAL

We will probably not go back to the way things were. Recall that we had a global outbreak of SARS in 2003, an outbreak of MERS from 2012-2015, and three years of Ebola outbreaks beginning in 2014. Recall also that health officials warned us in January, 2019, that it was only a matter of time until some new disease outbreak would erupt as a pandemic. Whether COVID comes in one wave or multiple waves over the next few years, we are vulnerable to a different contagion at any time. We have to plan our economies to be as resilient as possible when this occurs.

Even if we are lucky enough to avoid a pandemic, we are also experiencing more violent storms frequent flooding, and crop disruptions as weather changes. Those communities that recognize this

Ken Meter is president of Crossroads Resource Center. He has compiled economic studies and/or developed strategic food plans in 144 regions in 41 states, two provinces, and for four tribes. His book, *Building Community Food Webs*, will be published by Island Press in early 2021. See www.crcworks.org

HOW CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS RESPOND TO FOOD-SYSTEM CHANGE?

A number of potential disruptors threaten our sense of “business as usual” in the food system. The combined forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest forced many firms to pivot quickly in June, offering new services and searching for unconventional sources of income. Weather disruptions also abound. This article offers several examples of quick pivots, and recommends that economic developers help local firms be prepared for the unexpected to emerge. The key is to listen closely to what your constituents need, being prepared to let go of your own preconceptions, to help plan for a more resilient future.

reality and plan for disruption, or become proactive in reducing carbon emissions, will be the most resilient amid this uncertainty. I live in Minneapolis, where \$500 million in damages was done to 1,500 businesses in late May, as people vented their frustrations about racial inequality. This has spawned some remarkable generosity, but also its opposite. The ultimate outcome depends on how we act.

Because we live in a fast-paced, complex world, none of us knows how the pandemic will change our society. Already we see indications that we will be caring for victims who carry internal damage from the disease for years to come. We see great inequities in who is harmed. While some people help each other in extraordinary ways, we also see cynical people make political or economic gain while people are distracted by health concerns.

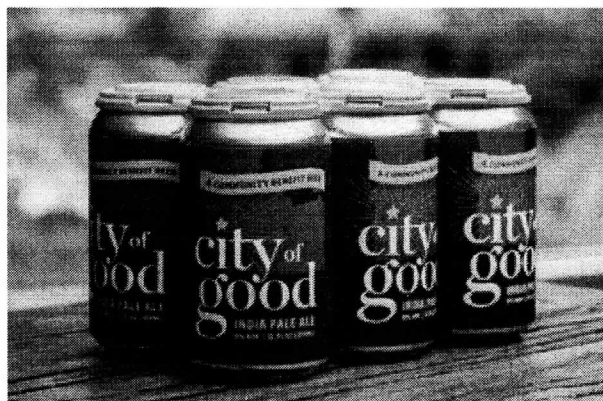
One strategy calls for "planning for emergence:" Drawing up plans now that prepare for economic, health, social or environmental disruption in the future. In many essential industries, including food, this will mean refashioning workplaces so that workers can keep a distance from each other and safely make customer contact when outbreaks occur. We will need to be able to operate in crisis mode by relying more heavily upon electronic communications and financial transactions as required. For some firms, this will require a major physical and strategic retooling.

Following are a few examples of food firms that have pivoted on a dime. In each case, economic developers played (or could have played) key roles.

Fast casual chain commits to local grower

A potato farmer in Maine told me in June that his sales to restaurants plummeted to 10 percent of normal levels. However, one fast-casual restaurant chain he sells to kept open for takeout. The owners thought about his plight, and theirs, and decided to shift all of their purchasing to his farm. They dropped larger commercial suppliers because the chain wanted a secure supply and figured this would send a signal to their customers that they cared about local farmers.

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City of Good IPA was launched by three Boise area brewers during the pandemic. Proceeds from the ale's sales are dedicated to catering meals for medical workers, low-income residents, and health-challenged consumers.

Photo by Guy Hand, 2020.

Three brewers collaborate to provide community meals

Another inspiring pivot created a new collaboration in Boise, Idaho. Dave Krick, an entrepreneur who owns three restaurants in that city, shifted to takeout as soon as the pandemic erupted. After a few days, however, he concluded that his restaurants could not safely offer takeout meals. So he closed all three. Still, he had food in the coolers and staff to employ. He began to prepare free or low-cost meals for medical workers, low-income residents, and health-challenged consumers. To cover costs, he solicited donations.

Krick took this one step further, creating a new source of donations. Banding together with two fellow brewers, a new India pale ale was devised, branded "City of Good: A community benefit beer." Proceeds were dedicated to providing meals to health workers and vulnerable consumers. Even more interesting than the new beer was the fact that three independent brewers decided to do business collaboratively. One firm brews the beer, while the second firm covers distribution, and the third coordinates outreach. A fourth business, the Boise Co-op (a grocery), joined the partnership as a retailer.

Cooperation such as this does not spring up out of a vacuum. In fact, those communities that began to plan for resilience long ago are precisely those that can move most effectively now. Boise benefited from decades of collaboration in strengthening farmers' markets, supporting emerging farmers, cultivating a core of local food restaurants, building a thriving cooperative grocery, and framing supportive policies. When the crisis occurred, relationships of trust were already in place, and strategic instincts were well honed.

Saving a town by launching a grocery store

One small community of 1,500 in Central Illinois was able to open a new grocery store in the middle of the pandemic, even as some markets suffered from empty shelves. The genesis of this store began four years ago, when the last grocery store in Mount Pulaski, Illinois,

shuttered its doors. Local residents were heartbroken, but they got to work. As they reflected on their loss, they concluded that the town itself could flounder if there were no place to buy groceries. A grocery was a critical gathering place. Leaders contacted three national chains, asking each one in turn to open a new store in their town. Three times the answer came back: "There's not enough business in your town to justify our opening a store."

Mount Pulaski residents might have sat on their hands at that point and decided there was nothing they could do. But the group took this discussion to their neighbors. Convening a community meeting in 2019, they asked if people would step forward to support a new grocery owned by residents. Within three months, 126 people had pledged a total of \$120,000 to form a cooperative grocery: the Market on the Hill. The store opened June 22, 2020.

Mount Pulaski could tackle this challenge because the community was already planning for the long haul. Local economic development officials played a key role. One crop farmer, Tom Martin, has been such a champion of community development efforts that he became chair of the town's economic development board. Martin holds a vision that his community could grow 15 percent of the food it eats. As a first installment, he dedicated nine acres of his farm to launching a new produce farm, the Hill-top Community Garden, managed by a younger grower. Martin said he would like to see 10-15 such young farmers emerge in the next few years to raise food for his neighbors.

The dual crisis of the pandemic overlaid with civil disturbance in Minneapolis also sparked some tremendously creative repositioning on the part of community businesses. These pivots followed the same logic that business retention and expansion (BRE) professionals might advance in trying to retain a business in a challenging economic environment: identify your core strengths and build on those. This retooling was all the more profound since it occurred in a context of unrest and unemployment.



Residents of Mount Pulaski, Illinois, opened the Market on the Hill on June 22, 2020. The cooperative grocery store, located on the town square, is a critical community gathering point. More than 120 residents collaborated to invest \$120,000 to launch the store after three national retailers rejected invitations to serve the town of 1,500.

Photo provided by Market on the Hill.

This was not Martin's first visionary venture. Several years ago when a wind farm development was proposed near the town, he, in concert with other local leaders, negotiated firmly with developers. While pleased that the wind farm would inject \$12 million of new property taxes into the Lincoln County budget, they also pressed for more, saying their approval of the wind farm would be contingent on the firm also investing in the community itself. Ultimately, the wind farm agreed to funnel \$115,000 per year to the county economic development budget.

This pool of economic development funds was tapped by Mount Pulaski to foster the opening of the Market on the Hill. The Lincoln County Economic Development Partnership realized that their neighbors, ac-

customized to paying for food imported from places where land and labor are cheaper, might balk at paying the prices that a new local farmer needs to charge to cover costs. So for three months, the partnership will subsidize 20 percent of the purchase price for customers who buy fresh produce raised on local farms. Thus, income from a wind farm will forge new connections between southern Lincoln County consumers and the farmers who want to feed them. Over time, the partnership hopes that residents will realize the value of spending a bit more for their food, knowing that their purchase supports farmers they know, and pay full price.

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Distillery pivots twice after consecutive crises

Du Nord Distillery is the first black-owned distillery in the US. Located in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis, the firm established a solid following among neighborhood residents by distilling high-quality spirits and offering them at their bar, which is nestled into a re-decorated warehouse. Several nonprofits also relied upon Du Nord for hosting fundraising events.

After the bar was closed on March 16 due to the pandemic, the owner, Chris Montana, became inventive. Realizing that hand sanitizer was in short supply on neigh-

This new partnership, called All Hands MN, developed a business model which called for one-third of the product to be sold through retailers. Those sales would cover the costs of giving the rest of the sanitizer away to non-profits. In three months, All Hands MN had distributed more than 105,000 gallons.

borhood grocery shelves, he enlisted two other distillers in a partnership to produce bulk quantities of hand sanitizer to give away to organizations serving low-income residents. At first he paid for this out of his own pocket, but soon a local foundation extended a \$15,000 grant to help cover some of the costs. A law firm offered legal assistance in setting up the partnership, and a chemical formulation firm contributed their expertise in writing recipes. A distributor agreed to carry the sanitizer to stores and nonprofits. An independent grocery chain agreed to carry it on their shelves.

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However, on May 28, someone set a fire inside the building during protests after the death of George Floyd. The fire was contained by a sprinkler system, but the property suffered an estimated \$100,000 of fire and water damage. So Montana pivoted again. Since his warehouse and cocktail room were still intact, he put out word that the firm was collecting food donations to give to low-income residents. Volunteers packed these foods for distribution. Further, he launched a fund to help nearby businesses rebuild. This accumulated \$250,000 in only five days.

Creating market connections inexpensively

While distant from urban turmoil, the gourmet restaurant Herbfarm, situated in the northeastern suburbs of Seattle, made a significant contribution to creating a more resilient food system even during the pandemic. When forced to close in March, owners Carrie Van Dyck and Ron Zimmerman put their heads together with chef Chris Weber to reconfigure the restaurant. They wanted to keep as many employees working as possible, and they had food in the coolers that would go to waste if not used. Farmers and fishers who already supplied them were poised to continue doing so. The trio's solution was to reinvent the kitchen as a catering operation, cooking and packaging three-course meals that could be given away to medical workers at five nearby hospitals. At first they simply carried the costs themselves. Then they launched a GoFundMe site, collecting \$330,000 in donations from 1,700 people by the end of June. At that point, they had

delivered 15,000 free meals and were ready to reopen the dining room.

Since the Herbfarm is a very high-end restaurant, with prices ranging upwards from \$225 per meal, it was better placed to pull this off than many businesses. Not only did they have connections with a stable of producers, but their mailing list includes folks with enough wealth to make substantial contributions. This means their model may not be easy for others to replicate.

However, the restaurant took one simple action with lasting impact that required no additional money: It simply required imagination. Chef Weber made sure that labels for each meal box identified the farm or fisher supplying the food items inside. Including the name added nothing to printing costs but created a fundamentally different set of possibilities. Each medical worker, opening a free meal, learned which producer had supplied the contents. It was free advertising for the farm, but also fostered some sense of connection between the farmer and the eater. The next time the medical staff shopped at the farmers' market or grocery store, they would have reason to seek out that producer once again.

Creating the long-term food system

In Chicago, philanthropists played a key role in fostering a long-term vision. When the pandemic broke, they were inundated with requests for funding emergency relief. They were happy to respond, but one group of key food system funders also sent a clear signal that they hoped this crisis would be used to create a better food system that would not rely so much on emergency relief. These seven funders established the Chicago Region Food System Fund, endowing it with a combined \$4.2 million. While the fund would support immediate relief efforts, it reserved some funds for projects that created longer-term resilience in the region's food system.

Moreover, the funders also recognized that many of the answers to building a resilient food system would be found in the countryside, not in the city itself. Accordingly, their first nine grants were allocated to urban and rural projects alike (See Table 1). Several ethnicities were represented. Some focused on immediate needs to plant more food in urban settings. Others were intended to spark long-term policy shifts.

TABLE 1: FIRST NINE GRANTS GIVEN BY CHICAGO REGION FOOD SYSTEM FUND, 2020

Artisan Grain Collaborative – \$50,000
Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Living – \$120,000
Chicago Food Policy Action Council – \$75,000
Chinese American Service League – \$80,000
Green City Market – \$125,000
Illinois Stewardship Alliance – \$100,000
Plant Chicago – \$25,000
Street Vendors Association of Chicago – \$120,000
Urban Growers Collective – \$200,000
Source: Chicago Region Food System Fund website

TABLE 2: ARTISANAL MILLS IN THE MIDWEST SUPPLYING EXTRA FLOUR DURING THE PANDEMIC

Baker's Field Flour and Bread – Minneapolis, MN
Brian Severson Farms – Dwight, IL
Doubting Thomas Farms – Moorhead, MN
Funks Grove Heritage Fruit & Grains – Funks Grove, IL
Hazzard Free Farm – Pecatonica, IL
Janie's Mill – Ashkum, IL
Lonesome Stone Milling – Lone Rock, WI
Meadowlark Organics – Ridgeway, WI
Meuer Farm – Chilton, WI
NETZRO – Minneapolis, MN
Sunrise Flour Mill – North Branch, MN

Source: Artisan Grain Collaborative website. This is not an exhaustive list.

Looking simply at the first entry in Table 1, funding for the Artisan Grain Collaborative was dedicated to a cause resembling the one Herbfarm had tackled: a Neighbor Loaves project. Artisan grain mills ground flour from grains grown by farmers near Chicago, and bakeries fashioned this into loaves of artisanal bread that were donated to food banks so low-income people would have the best bread possible.

The grain collaborative itself also plays a wider role, one that helps build the long term. When grocery shelves were stripped clean of flour by consumers who switched to baking bread at home, small mills quickly responded. Several began to operate 24/7, filling internet orders. If one mill maxed out, it could call in another to fill the gap. To inform consumers of these new choices, the collaborative published two lists on its web site. The first listed mills that could supply household consumers with artisanal grain (Table 2).

TABLE 3: MIDWESTERN BAKERS USING ARTISANAL GRAINS

Baker Miller – Chicago, IL
Brake Bread – St. Paul, MN
Doughp Creations – Granite Falls, MN
Hewn – Evanston, IL
Madison Sourdough – Madison, WI
Middle Brow Bungalow – Chicago, IL
Muddy Fork Farm and Bakery – Bloomington, IN
ORIGIN Breads – Madison, WI
Perennial Bakers – Oak Park, IL
pHlour Bakery & Cafe – Chicago, IL
Sun Street Breads – Minneapolis, MN
Three Twigs Bakery – Springfield, IL

Source: Artisan Grain Collaborative website. This is not an exhaustive list.

Many of these mills already collaborated with each other, but the list itself facilitated a system of broader connections. This made it possible for smaller mills to supply larger quantities, not by expanding, but by collaborating.

The second list published by the collaborative showed those bakers who relied on flour from nearby farms to bake their bread. That list is shown in Table 3.

Through outreach efforts such as this, consumers who turned to any of these mills or bakeries in time of crisis could easily tap a broader range of alternate suppliers. Once tasting higher quality grains and breads, they might not go back to their previous suppliers. Further, the mills and bakers might view themselves not as isolated businesses, but as firms operating inside a wider context: as one element in a Chicago region food system.

WHAT CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS DO TO RESPOND TO FOOD-SYSTEM CHANGE?

Only one of these examples directly engaged professional economic developers, but each was a solid step forward in economic development. How can economic developers play a helpful role? The first step is to listen closely and learn openly, letting go of preconceived approaches. What elements of business are shifting for your constituents? How are they inventing answers for themselves? What do people need to survive the next two weeks? And then: How do we create more resilient food systems out of this crisis? Opening oneself to new ways of thinking – and investing – will be critical.

One simple step is to get on the phone with all the farmers and fishers you know and find out how they are adapting. Are they boosting online sales? Do they have large surpluses they cannot sell because restaurants are closed? What do they think would be needed to create a more robust food system in your region?

Second, economic developers have the power to convene and connect. You can bring people together, whether by video conference or other means, to compare notes. Who in your community is hurting the most, and what do they say they need? Who is doing the most to pivot their business to adapt to these unpredictable circumstances? How can those with resources share their capacities with those who are less privileged? What ideas do people have for creating a more equitable food system? What steps do we take to get there?

Just conversing will not be enough, however. Once these questions have been asked, and answers formulated, it is important to respond to community members' needs with the resources you can marshal. Sharing information openly across the community will encourage broader, more inclusive solutions.

Now is the time to start planning how everyone in your community will get the food they need in 2021. Hopefully, you can count on local grocers to have enough food stocked this year. But what if supply networks break down? Where will the seeds we need to plant come from? There was a shortage for many commercial growers in

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE

Convene: Remember to be inclusive! After civil unrest erupted in Minneapolis, and 1,500 businesses were damaged or destroyed, neighbors in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood convened a socially distanced meeting in the park to devise strategies for defending homes and businesses. Since this neighborhood holds a long tradition of community work, 1,000 people of diverse ethnicities attended. You can also host meetings by telephone or teleconference.

Connect: One of the key steps for creating a stronger local food system is building bonds of loyalty between farmers and consumers. One economic development group in Lincoln County, Illinois, used its funds to subsidize 20 percent of the value of food purchases residents made from local farms. They hoped this would help, over time, to persuade residents to commit to spending more locally.

Reach Out to the Marginalized: Economic developers can also ensure that the voices of marginalized populations are heard, and affect community decisions. People of color who run businesses, low-income residents, and farmers are also masters at coping with uncertainty. Engage them for the resources they bring! Low-income people face severe health risks if they don't get the healthiest food possible. Partner with local food banks to make sure they are able to purchase high quality food for their constituents, and then leverage that into empowerment initiatives. Work with funders to make sure sufficient funds are allocated.

Assess: Often the first step in constructing a stronger community food system is to hire a researcher to perform a food system assessment that includes a strategic plan. USDA Local Food Promotion Program funds are often used to support these assessments.

Coordinate: Perhaps the most critical gap in most community foods efforts is value chain coordination (also called *value network coordination*, since local food systems are complex and rapidly changing networks): Someone who can talk to both farmers and food buyers frequently to facilitate deals, convene broader stakeholders to make sure public interests are served, and make strategic investments. Many communities run into difficulty because they put up a building (such as a food hub or processing center) before local commercial networks are strong enough to support the new enterprise. Place a priority on coordination.

Plan for Future Access to Food: It is relatively simple to calculate how much food residents of your community would need to eat for a year. Often, however, it is harder to find enough farmers to grow that food, or safe places where harvests can be stored. As the pandemic erupted in 2020, many commercial farmers also faced shortages of seed. Start to plan now for how more of your community's food can be grown and processed locally in 2021. Set a humble goal and build on that in the following years.

2020 as consumers raced to sign up for CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) shares. Which farms will plant these seeds, and who will harvest the crop? If we planted enough potatoes, onions, and carrots (for example) to feed everyone in our region, where would we store them? How might produce be processed if we cannot count on our usual supplies?

As just one example of planning to meet local food needs, I can very quickly generate a list for any given population of how many pounds of the most common foods consumers would need to eat for a year. Most of these grow in your community. An economic developer could take this list and start tracking down people to grow and store each of these food items in 2021. Taking this step would help design and build a community food system for your region: an excellent example of a long-term strategy.

Physical and social infrastructure investments will also be critical. This is perhaps the most significant role a local government or development partnership can play: to build data sets and technical knowledge, physical facilities, commercial networks, and policies that make community food trade as efficient as possible. This may cost more than importing food from Mexico. But if supply networks fail, adding a local option may be critical to survival.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 in giant meat packing operations and massive produce farms also raised questions about economic scale. As we build post-pandemic infrastructure, we will be forced to ask whether "going to scale" is the problem or the solution. Are the larger firms we have invested in during the post-War period really

creating the efficiencies we sought, or have some become breeding grounds for the pandemic? At what point does a firm become too large to care for its workers' health? At what point is it too large to pivot as conditions change?

TAKEAWAYS

1. Several food businesses pivoted rapidly during the pandemic as markets shifted. Each one assessed the unique strengths it had, the new conditions that were emerging, and how to respond using available resources. At times, their entire business model shifted.
2. Experts predicted a potential pandemic as early as January, 2019. Even if COVID-19 winds down, another could be on the horizon. Further civil unrest or weather change could also disrupt business as usual. Economic developers can help local firms position themselves to reconfigure their businesses so workers are safe and local customers get what they need.
3. When leading at a time of great uncertainty, the best approach is to listen carefully to your constituents, subduing any preconceptions you may bring to the discussion. Learn how conditions are changing, ask people what they need, and try new strategies that respond to their concerns. Take small steps forward, reflect on the impacts, and then plan a new strategic cycle. Iterative cycles of action, reflection, and planning will serve you the best when conditions are uncertain.
4. Ask whether going to scale is the solution, or the problem. COVID-19 outbreaks were worst in massive workplaces that did not properly protect workers. Many smaller firms had little difficulty. When is a firm too large to pivot to meet consumer needs? When is it too large to care for its workers?

Economic developers can further take the systems view, starting with food systems and expanding into business more generally. This means, rather than counting success by the profitability of a single firm or project, considering the health of the entire food system, and the local economy as a whole. Careful planning and strategic investment can build more efficient community food trade.

This is not to argue that all large-scale ventures are bad. Currently, I am very happy to know that I have the option of purchasing romaine lettuce raised on a farm in Mexico during the winter months in Minnesota. Yet supply networks may flounder. This year, since I cannot travel for work, I joined a CSA and expanded my garden. This provides me with a spectrum of options, from micro to very large, for conveying fresh produce to my kitchen. This strategy includes redundancy, because the future is so uncertain.

Economic developers can further take the systems view, starting with food systems and expanding into business more generally. This means, rather than counting success by the profitability of a single firm or project, considering the health of the entire food system, and the local economy as a whole. Careful planning and strategic investment can build more efficient community food trade. Keep in mind that what is efficient for an individual firm may not be efficient for the overall community. No single business can be expected to champion a systems view by itself, however, so economic developers may need to serve as advocates. We cannot build a society strictly on individual freedom. Nor can the "new normal" be built simply by cutting costs. This requires personal and financial investment. ☺

RESOURCES

Cooperation Works is a network of organizations and individuals doing cooperative development that covers all 50 states and works across co-op sectors. See <https://cooperationworks.coop/>

Crossroads Resource Center helps you assess your local food system and prepare effective action strategies. See www.crcworks.org

Economic Development Administration can support economic development initiatives, especially those fostering innovation, expanding manufacturing capacity, and building regional economies. <https://www.eda.gov/funding-opportunities/>

HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants support locally-led collaborations to create jobs by working across arenas such as housing, workforce development, and infrastructure. Nontraditional partnerships addressing regional food systems are included. https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/economic_development/sustainable_communities_regional_planning_grants

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service offers several funding streams for local food planning and promotion, as well as COVID-19 relief. See <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants>

USDA Rural Development runs service centers, designed to be a single location where customers can access services provided by the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Rural Development agencies. See <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=us&agency=rd>

USDA hosts a **Rural Cooperative Development Center** in almost every state. These centers offer technical assistance to groups that wish to organize cooperatives as well as to existing cooperative businesses. For a list, see www.rd.usda.gov/files/RD-CoopDevelopmentCenters.pdf



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