

AGRICULTURE

What is needed to grow a local and regional Green Economy (GE) that brings good jobs with good wages, benefits, and secure careers?

- A greater public awareness is needed of the connections between: food and health, sustainable agriculture and a clean environment, and green businesses and a healthy economy.
- Knoxville and surrounding areas need to expand access to healthy and sustainably-produced food. Knox County has 20 or so “food deserts,” many of which are located in low-income areas where residents have difficulties obtaining the transportation needed to shop at healthy markets and groceries.
- Farm-retail relationships need to be strengthened. Because local produce is often seasonal and subjected to weather changes, farmers have difficulty consistently supplying products, which complicates retailers’ ability to plan.

What current strategies address these needs?

- Knoxville’s Market Square Farmers’ Market and many periphery markets are connecting local farms to the public. For several years now, markets have been growing along with consumer shifts towards local and sustainable agriculture. Consumers are increasingly interested in the sources of their food and understanding the long-term impacts of agricultural practices. During the season, at least one market is open every day.
- Overall, there is a supportive political and business climate fostered in large part by the City administration. Rezoning efforts have supported urban agriculture initiatives like backyard chickens and community gardens. Residents in all income brackets are gaining easier access to healthy, fresh foods.

Assets- what other current activity can be leveraged to support specific strategies in place?

- The UT Extension, an outreach unit of the Institute of Agriculture, provides research-based information to local farmers and community members looking to learn more about farming and organizational management. The Extension has become a pipeline for skilled and talented farmers and a great community resource.
- As the first of its kind, the Knoxville-Knox County Food Policy Council has served as a model for nearly 200 subsequent food policy councils across the nation. The Council is instrumental in maintaining a network active in food sustainability, and, along with UT Extension, Plan ET, and others, has conducted numerous local studies, examining important issues, such as land use, economic impacts, and food costs.
- There is increasing entrepreneurial activity that aligns profit-seeking small farming operations with GE principles. The Farm-to-Table and Slow Food movements, for

example, are impacting the local restaurant and food truck industry. Also, younger generations are increasingly interested in becoming farmers, which is helping meeting growing consumer demands.

Obstacles- what keeps these assets from being more successfully pursued at this time?

- Several popular sentiments among residents present challenges to industry growth: the expectation that food should be cheap; lack of knowledge about connections between human/environmental health and agricultural practices; and, the notion that sustainable agriculture is elitist.
- Sustainable farmers do not always have the time or skills for managing and marketing a business. While this work could be outsourced, it often too expensive. Although business support is available through organizations like the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce and the Knoxville Entrepreneur Center, there is a lack of awareness about these services or how to access them.
- Once sustainable agriculture businesses are established, it is often difficult to maintain them. Reasons include difficulties in: getting products into local retailers; gaining a loyal customer base; gaining profit with higher priced goods; and, providing training sufficient for the next generations of farmers.

What are some suggested strategies?

- Knoxville has a growing eco-tourism industry, which if leveraged, could help grow agro-tourism in the area. Resident's simultaneous interest in urban revitalization and local farming also provides opportunities to connect people to outdoor recreation and sustainable agriculture.
- Farming operations could boost revenue and alleviate food deserts by partnering with food trucks to provide low-income populations (where transportation is often an obstacle) access to healthy and fresh foods. SNAP benefits could be aligned with such an effort.
- There are several important services, which if institutionalized, would benefit the area. Three of perhaps the most important include: (1) building a USDA inspected slaughterhouse, which could substantively contribute to the area's economy by enabling animals to be slaughtered locally; (2) implementing a citywide composting program (only limited services are currently available to industry and residents); and, (3) start a food hub to improve efficiency and create market opportunities.
- To help food access, urban revitalization, and small business growth, the City could lease vacant lots to community groups to grow both food and ornamental gardens for either sale or personal use. Such a program would also allow prospective farmers (who can't yet afford their own land) to grow on empty city-owned lots for a contract period, thereby "greening" the space until the City has other plans for it.

Action priorities- what to do and in what order? Stay tuned for the breakout session.