

CASE STUDY:

Catawba County, North Carolina



CATAWBA COUNTY AT A GLANCE

Population: 154,810^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 405^b

Median Income: \$44,332^c

Population in Poverty: 15.2 percent^d

Additional Resources: [Catawba County Food and Farm Sustainability Plan](#)

^a U. S. Census Bureau, 2013.

^b Data provided by Catawba County staff.

^c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

^d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

Catawba County, located in the western part of North Carolina, covers approximately 405 square miles of land bordered on the north and east by lakes along the Catawba River. The county includes eight municipalities, with Newton as its county seat. The county’s 154,810 residents are approximately 78 percent Caucasian, 9 percent Hispanic, 9 percent African American, and 4 percent Asian. Prior to the economic downturn of 2008, the county developed its economy into a traditional manufacturing base consisting of furniture, textiles, and telecommunications. Economic development efforts are now directed at new sectors that include manufacturing and a \$52 million agricultural economy.¹

Catawba County has historical cultural roots in agriculture, as evidenced by the depictions of livestock and wheel in the county seal. The county has demonstrated its commitment to support farming as a continually viable way of life by promoting agriculture and development of a local foods system. The success of the county’s Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program that encourages the preservation of farmland throughout the county, including within incorporated areas, has resulted in more than 10,143 acres dedicated to farming for the next 10 years.

“Self-reliance is valued as an ethic,” says Mary Furtado, assistant county manager. “The community supports agriculture as a way of life. It’s part of community identity.” The county does its part to bolster this identity through a number of initiatives taking place across the county and in partnership with neighboring jurisdictions and stakeholders. The Catawba County Farm and Food Sustainability Plan has a central focus on local foods, pulling together these initiatives to prioritize efforts, to track success, and to achieve progress toward local foods and agricultural preservation goals across the county.

Key Projects in Catawba County

Local foods in the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan

The community plan was approved by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners in April 2013. The [plan](#) includes efforts to ensure the sustainability of a local food system by developing a robust “Farm-to-Fork” initiative, linking local food producers with local food distributors and restaurants to ensure the availability of fresh, locally-produced food within Catawba County.

The plan was championed by the county’s Agricultural Advisory Board appointed by the County Board of Commissioners, and it was developed by a working committee of 20 community representatives. It began with a community input meeting in July 2012 that was attended by more than 100



Using the pro-bono designed logo for Eat, Drink, and Be Local has branded the campaign to increase recognition.

Source: Catawba County staff

people. It took seven months for the committee to prioritize feedback from meetings and identify 20 organizations that could lead or serve in a supporting role in implementing individual action items with short (0–2 years), mid (2–5 years), and long-range (5+ years) timeframes.

The plan has served to tie together the various efforts towards promoting a local foods system across the county and includes 66 action items that are organized into five broad categories, including local foods. Action items in this category include programs and activities aimed at developing a reliable supply of locally produced fruits, vegetables, and meats; developing systematic connections between producers and local institutions like schools, hospitals, and restaurants; and helping residents make the connection between local food and nutrition.² Stakeholders with responsibility for action items on the plan check in every few months using an online tracking tool to ensure that they are on track; however, communication between partners remains a challenge.

Partnership with North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension

One outcome from the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan was the creation of a Local Food Extension Agent in October 2013. The position is funded jointly by the North Carolina State Cooperative Extension and the county to implement the plan in coordination with its partners, as well as to provide additional capacity for agricultural producers selling in local markets. One major local food awareness campaign initiated by the Extension Agent is titled “Eat, Drink, and Be Local.”

In its third year, Eat, Drink, and Be Local was a week-long celebration in May 2014 that featured free events, including gardening workshops, film screenings, farm tours, and highlights of local ingredients used in restaurants. The slogan Eat, Drink, and Be Local has become a branded

awareness campaign to increase residents’ knowledge of the benefits and availability of local foods.

Other benefits of the partnership include the connection to traditional agricultural producers who have been critical partners in providing guidance in connecting local food efforts. Working with the Cooperative Extension Service also provides access to research in sustainable agriculture practices in the region and to increased opportunities for partnership and information exchange with neighboring counties. A U.S. Department of Agriculture employee is also housed in the county’s facility adjacent to Cooperative Extension, giving employees and community representatives access to training and information on resources and funding opportunities to support their efforts.

Local Foods’ Tie-In to Public Health

In order to improve community access to fresh healthy local food, the Catawba County Public Health Department organized its first farmers market in its parking lot in 2013. The market began in response to findings of a community health assessment that highlighted an issue of obesity. In 2013, the overall obesity rate was 26.4 percent and more than 38 percent of children were found to be either overweight or obese.

Through partnership with Public Health’s Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program and Catawba County Health Partners’ Eat Smart, Move More coalition, the market hosts local growers certified to accept WIC Farmers Market Nutritional Program (FNMP) vouchers to increase convenient access to fresh produce for people in the area, an area that is designated a USDA-recognized food desert.³

The market is located along a convenient and well-traveled corridor just behind a major medical center, attracting members of the general public, residents, local workers, and visitors to the area. The WIC program is run out of Public Health’s building, so staff strategically schedule appointments with individuals interested in using WIC FNMP



The Public Health Farmer’s Market.

Source: [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

vouchers at the market on the days the market is open.

This integration increased WIC FNMP voucher redemption from 51.29 percent in 2012 to 62.88 percent in 2013. Food assistance benefits (SNAP/EBT) and debit cards can also be used to make purchases. A Bonus Bucks program was also implemented that provided WIC FNMP voucher users with an additional \$4 coupon. These coupons, which were funded by employee fundraisers and private donations, were redeemed at more than \$1,000 in 2014.

Since its first year in 2013, the number of market days per season was reduced from 24 to 17; however, the overall number of participants increased from 4,338 to 4,586. The market is managed by one primary contact and supported by 60 volunteer staff and six additional community volunteers. Public health staff members were careful to schedule the market so that it did not compete with other markets in the community, and farmers were not charged a booth fee to ensure that selling opportunities would be enhanced and farmers' income maximized.

Farmers also receive same-day reimbursement for SNAP/EBT and debit payments through a system set up with the county's accounting department. Despite initial challenges in navigating technical financial systems to ensure same-day repayment and offering payment through SNAP/EBT, WIC vouchers, and debit cards, the process has resulted in benefits for both producers and consumers. Accounting staff's willingness to work with public health staff was critical. Public health staff members now provide technical assistance to the three other farmers markets across the county that would like to establish similar payment systems.

Hmong Agricultural Program

Within the 4 percent of Catawba County's Asian population is a small group of about 1,000 Hmong immigrants, whose growing presence since the 1980s contributes to North Carolina having the fourth largest Hmong population in the United States. These immigrants arrived in the country as refugees after the Vietnam War. Their migration to North Carolina may be attributable to the characteristics of the land and climate that are similar to the mountain region of northern Laos where this nomadic, farming people originated.⁴

In Catawba County, the Hmong Agricultural Program was the result of a 2007–2009 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant through the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program. The program coordination was staffed by personnel from North Carolina A&T Cooperative Extension to teach Hmong farmers modern farming techniques and to move away from their traditional "slash and burn" approach in order to improve production, marketing, and profitability. Once the three-year grant expired, the county and NC A&T partnered to continue funding the program and hired a full-time immigrant agriculture program coordinator to organize it.

Farmer training is primarily conducted at the three-acre Hmong demonstration site at the Catawba County Eco-



The Hmong demonstration site at the Eco-Complex Facility in Catawba County.

Source: North Carolina State and A&T State University Cooperative Extension website, <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/>

Complex Facility, which was started in 2009 and consists of six farm plots with water access. Each plot is farmed by a Hmong family, with an average of six family members per plot. The site serves to showcase different sustainable techniques to help farmers increase production and extend their growing season.

More than 128 farmers were trained throughout the duration of the program from 2009 to 2014, and 17 participants are selling in local markets, including the Hickory Flea Market that takes place every Thursday on the fairgrounds. One farmer currently sells at the Hickory Farmers Market, and program staff is engaged in efforts to get farmers to transition from selling in the flea market to the farmers markets. To date, three families working at the demonstration site have begun to diversify their markets and have begun selling to the local Asian grocery stores in addition to selling at the flea market and farmers markets.

Opportunities for Local Government Managers

Link disparate initiatives to maximize resources

"The role of local government [in these efforts] is to pull together disparate parts to build a broader base of support," explains Furtado, "The local food movement works to further several community objectives beyond that of ensuring the next generation of farmers is in place. It's our job to help people understand those larger connections."

"Access to fresh local foods helps our environment by using sustainable agricultural practices, our economy by keeping our local dollars here in the community, and our community health by working to address food access issues," she says. "There are citizen, community, and local government groups working on their own issues in each of

those narrow areas. Imagine the power we gain when we succeed in demonstrating the interconnectedness of the local food movement across those areas?”

The planning process brought together stakeholders involved in local foods and related initiatives to identify collaborative opportunities, and it was found that there were more resources than initially anticipated to address this shared issue.

Consider low-/no-cost opportunities

County-level initiatives have been successful using these lower-cost strategies to promote local food:

- **“Eat, Drink, and Be Local” branding initiative.** The “Eat, Drink, and Be Local” awareness week itself was based on a successful, similar event in 2011, where a county employee asked restaurants to feature local foods for a week. The event kicked off an ongoing branding campaign. The logo that was used was designed pro-bono by a local graphic designer. Since the event, the logo has been used on marketing materials for other local food events, including training events for farmers and Agri-Tourism Day, an event that offered self-guided tours of Catawba County farms.
- **Engaging kids in healthy eating and local food.** In order to inspire excitement in kids about local foods and engage them in farmers market shopping, organizers of the Public Health Farmers Market created “Buddy Broccoli”—a broccoli cartoon character that was hidden among a different farmer’s produce each week. Kids who found Buddy would receive a small prize like a water bottle or a jump rope. This also brought more traffic to farmers’ booths.

Lessons Learned

- **Increase convenience of purchasing and procuring local foods for consumers, restaurants, and businesses to reduce barriers to access.** GIS data has enabled local government to find food deserts and place farmers markets accordingly.
- **Frame issues based on a multitude of factors to increase the base of support.** For example, promoting local foods as a way to combat a widespread health issue of obesity. “Currently, there is a focus on local foods, but it started out as an agricultural production initiative for

economic development,” explains Local Foods Extension Agent Kellyn Montgomery, “Local foods became a strategy for that. Other folks may see local foods as a strategy for nutrition as well.”

- **Consider that building robust and viable systems take time.** Setting short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals in the Farm and Food Sustainability Plan has helped to alleviate this and provide opportunities for continual visible progress towards a long-term initiative. “Be patient about seeing results,” Assistant Manager Furtado advises, “Act with urgency to make things happen today, but recognize that realistically it’s a long-term change.”
- **Focus on the broader, traditional agriculture community in addition to those interested in organic production.** This has helped Catawba County to be successful, and its grain and commodity market sellers who have not historically produced food for sale locally have been supportive. Having local food initiatives housed with Cooperative Extension provides an advantage for maintaining this relationship because of the Extension’s established relationship with this community. “Be inclusive,” Furtado recommends, “There’s room for both.”
- **Strengthen local food systems to increase capacity to address issues of equity for a minority community that might otherwise be marginalized.** The Hmong community has been integrating into the community through access to the more mainstream markets that the local foods system is beginning to provide.

Endnotes

- 1 Catawba County Farm & Food Sustainability Plan. Catawba County: April 2013. <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/planning/Sustainability/FFSPlan.pdf>
- 2 Catawba County Farm & Food Sustainability Plan. Catawba County: April 2013. <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/planning/Sustainability/FFSPlan.pdf>
- 3 According to USDA.gov, a food desert is an urban neighborhood or rural town with limited access to fresh, health, and affordable food, particularly in an area composed of predominantly lower-income residents.
- 4 Xiong, Der. Immigrant Agriculture Program. Catawba County Extension Center: 2013. http://als.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/MN_Attachments-5_SACSPC_Ju.y2013.pdf

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International City/County Management Association

March 2015

Acknowledgments

This case study appears in:

Goddeeris, L., Rybnicek, A. and Takai, K. 2015. Growing Local Food Systems: A case study series on the role of local governments. International City/County Management Association.

The authors wish to thank Rick Morse, Associate Professor of Public Administration and Government at the University of North Carolina School of Government at Chapel Hill, and Andrea Fox, Director of the ICMA Center for Sustainable Communities, for their review and comments, as well as ICMA's Beth Payne for her editing support and Kirie Samuels for design and layout.

Funding for this project was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Food & Community program.



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