Movement in Cabarrus leading the way in establishing local food economy, By Emily Ford
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CONCORD — In a bold attempt to reconnect people who eat food with people who grow it, Cabarrus County has launched several agriculture programs, including plans to build the state's first publicly owned slaughter facility. Cabarrus leads the state in establishing a local food economy, officials say.

"They are certainly a role model for North Carolina," said Dr. Nancy Creamer, N.C. State University horticulture professor and director of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems. Three years ago, Cabarrus began implementing a strategy to build a local food system. That's an economy that includes all the processes involved in feeding people — growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, distributing, marketing, consuming, disposing and recycling. County Manager John Day and County Extension Director Debbie Bost are spearheading the effort, with support from county commissioners. "We want to build an economy here that doesn't go away on the whim of a CEO," said Aaron Newton, recently hired as the county's first local food program coordinator.

Ag initiatives include a training facility for rookie farmers, a 21-member council to guide food policy, a countywide food assessment and plans for a $1 million, 4,000-square-foot slaughterhouse. "Their unique approach is comprehensive in scope and detailed in putting the critical pieces into action," Creamer said in an e-mail to the Post. She said Cabarrus leaders understand the economic development potential of a local food system. Advocates claim such a system can create jobs, save energy and even cut health care costs associated with diet-related diseases like diabetes and obesity when people eat fresh, nutritious food.

A $625,000 state grant and money set aside in the county's reserve account for sustainability efforts will pay for most of the initiatives. A local food economy aims to create new income opportunities for farmers and promote sustainable agriculture practices that can be used year after year, generation after generation. "It's hard to get people to realize they need to know where their food comes from," said Brent Barbee, manager of a family farm and a member of the county's new Food Policy Council. "To get the countywide push will help tremendously."

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A 6-year-old recently told Newton that people don't need farmers because food comes from grocery stores. Newton laughs when he recounts the story, but the child's misconception demonstrates a real problem that the part-time farmer wants to help solve.

People are too far removed from their food, said Newton, co-author of "A Nation of Farmers." "A local food economy is about keeping Cabarrus County dollars in Cabarrus County," he said. "It's paying your neighbor to grow food for you, not paying someone around the world to grow food for you." The local food movement in the Charlotte region is about a decade behind western North Carolina and the Triangle area, Newton said. But demand is growing, and Cabarrus has positioned itself as a leader to develop a meaningful local food network, he said.

If the financial, environmental and health arguments don't convince people to support the endeavor, Newton appeals to their tastebuds. "At the end of the day, that's how you get people hooked," he said. "This isn't food that was picked before it was ripe, shipped halfway around the world and then sat on a store shelf for a week before it was eaten."

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Consumers are becoming more aware of where their food comes from and whether it's safe and nutritious. National sales of organic foods have almost reached the $25 billion mark, and local food sales are expected to hit $7 billion by 2011. In North Carolina, 3,712 farmers sell directly to consumers, generating more than $29 million in sales, according to the Center for Environmental Farming Systems. Cabarrus County has six official farmers markets, plus dozens of roadside stands and parking lot vendors. Barbee said businesses call him every week to set up a market.
Nearly 80 people are on the waiting list to train at the Elma C. Lomax Incubator Farm near Concord, where 16 beginning farmers learn to grow crops organically. More than 40 Cabarrus residents applied for the county’s new Food Policy Council. And demand continues to grow for Community-Supported Agriculture programs, where a farmer provides a consumer with a basket of food each week for a set price.

"It’s through the roof," said Newton, whose Phoenix Farms CSA has 15 customers and 30 people on a waiting list. More consumers want fresh, local food grown in a sustainable way. "We can build on that," said Day, the county manager. A local food economy generates wealth that stays in rural communities, he said. "The overall goal is to develop a more resilient, self-reliant economy in the county," Day said, "one that is not subject to the sorts of global disruptions that we've seen recently."

At the foundation of a local food economy is the simple fact that all people must eat. "You and I both participate in agriculture three times a day," Newton said. "People need to think about agriculture, even if they're not farmers."

Day and Bost mapped out the county's local food strategy in 2007 after Day heard an official touting the local food system in Madison, Wisc. "It made a big impression on me," Day said. "It rekindled my interest in environmental and farming issues." The county hosted a town hall meeting for farmers and food producers. More than 200 people came, including all five county commissioners, to discuss preserving agriculture.

Day became active at the state level and was instrumental in developing an exhaustive how-to guide called "From Farm to Fork: A Guide to Building the Local Food Economy," which lays out ways to promote a local food economy. Bost wrote a concept paper and submitted it to county commissioners, who embraced her five-pronged strategy: - The top recommendation from farmers to the county: build a local slaughterhouse, or "harvesting facility," as Bost calls it.

Cattle is the No. 1 agricultural commodity in Cabarrus County, where farmers raise 8,000 head of beef and dairy cattle. But farmers must drive to the mountains or coast to slaughter their cows. Cruse Meats has a 3,800-square-foot processing and retail facility in Cabarrus County, Bost said. The county will build an additional 4,000-square-foot harvest floor, which Cruse will operate. Construction has not begun.

- The Food Policy Council will identify and develop ways to bolster the local food economy, pulling together technical and financial resources. The council will deal with issues as broad as hunger, public health and the environment. "This group has the potential to do things that will have a hugely important impact on the county for years to come," Day said. Newton is the council’s paid staff person.

- The county food assessment, a yearlong effort costing about $30,000, will determine what local food people eat and where they buy it. The county will survey institutions and households. The assessment will establish a baseline for the economic impact of local food and help identify potential markets.
- At the incubator farm, participants pay a small fee to lease one acre of land and learn everything from planting to business planning.
- Once the businesses are viable, they spin off from the incubator farm and find their own land.
- A marketing strategy will promote local foods and products. Restaurants that use local ingredients will have a special designation. The county will approach schools, hospitals, even jails about using local foods.

These five initiatives are funded through several sources, primarily a $625,000 grant from the N.C. Agriculture Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. The county is pursuing an additional $300,000 grant. The county also will use revenue from a reserve account established for sustainability efforts, which last year totaled about $250,000. The funds come from deferred taxes paid on Cabarrus County farm land that leaves the present-use value program. And the county will use money that had been allocated for tax incentives for Philip Morris before the company closed its cigarette manufacturing plant, Day said. The momentum to build a local food economy comes from the county’s agriculture community itself, Bost said. "It really has been a grassroots effort," she said.