Upper Valley Farmers’ Market Collaboration for Success
Project Overview, December 8, 2017

Vital Communities received USDA funding to increase Upper Valley Farmers’ Market income over three years, through a collaboration among the markets. This project overview details the scope of the project, the goals as conveyed in our funding proposal, and the activities envisioned.

From the USDA Farmers’ Market Promotion Program grant proposal which funds this project:
Vital Communities engages citizens, communities, and organizations in creating solutions to our region’s challenges, especially where an independent voice and regional approach are essential. Since 2001, the Valley Food & Farm (VFF) program has fostered relationships that make agriculture a vital part of daily community life, through local food promotion, farm to school, development of direct-market opportunities, technical assistance to new and experienced farmers, and regional representation in statewide/New England networks.

The Upper Valley Farmers’ Market Collaboration (Sept 2017-Sept 2020) will increase vendor/market income and customer base through collaborative outreach, assessment, peer-to-peer learning, technical assistance, and marketing. Representatives from the region’s 17 farmers’ markets will attend an annual Roundtable, select a steering committee, prioritize capacity-building projects, and participate in project implementation and evaluation. Vital Communities staff will provide a platform for sharing, problem-solving, and partnership by facilitating steering committee meetings and supporting collaborative projects chosen by the membership. Planning conversations indicate interest in peer mentorship, consumer incentive tools/events, market assessments, a shared advertising campaign, and more. We’ll intersect with NOFA-VT’s FMPP market capacity program, sharing tools and lessons learned with Upper Valley markets in New Hampshire.

Background
A comprehensive market assessment commissioned by Vital Communities in 2014 provided significant consumer feedback on the desire for and barriers against local food purchase. More than one quarter (26%) of Upper Valley residents would prefer to shop more frequently at farmers’ markets. Paradoxically, although 56% of farmers are most interested in expanding direct sales, in many markets there are simply too few customers. Thus, these markets, a valued community and economic resource, struggle to attract both customers and vendors.

Project Goals:

• To Increase Customers and Sales of Local and regional Agricultural products:
  o Sales increase 23% as a result of marketing and/or promotion activities during the project performance period (from $1,366,177 baseline)
  o Customer counts increase 35% (from 2315 baseline)

• Of the local and regional farmers and ranchers reached:
  o the number that reported an increase in revenue expressed in dollars: 52
  o number that gained knowledge about new market opportunities through technical assistance and education programs: 65

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Percentage of Collaboration participants who report that markets have improved, expanded, and/or are better serving agricultural vendors as a result of project participation: 75%

**Budget:** Vital Communities has funds for staff to work half time-equivalent on the project to facilitate Collaborative and to provide back bone support to the group. We also have the following funds:

- For passport design and printing $5,800
- For steering committee stipends
- Roundtable event (food, space, speaker fee) $3,200
- Collaborative marketing printed piece $1000
- For shared advertising: $4,500 per year
- Mentor stipends $3,600
- For cooking supplies and display: $975
- For printing recipe cards: $2700
- To supply food for cooking demonstrations: approx.$2500

**Proposed Collaborative Activities:**

Up to 15 individuals will serve on a steering committee that will meet regularly during the off-season to set goals; prioritize projects; advise on a variety of concerns, from selection of trainers and to advertising needs; issue project requests for participation; and assist with ongoing evaluation. Steering committee members may include vendors, consumers, and market personnel, and will receive stipends for their time. Steering committee terms and procedures will be determined by its membership.

**A Collaboration for Success Roundtable,** taking place annually in February will be modeled on our long-standing Energy Committee Roundtable, approximately 90 representatives from our region’s town energy committees who meet for three hours of facilitated discussion and dinner. A typical agenda includes a half-hour of socializing, two-minute updates or comments from each participant, and a facilitated panel or discussion.

Markets have indicated need for specific technical assistance, delivered to vendors, board, and/or managers. Suggestions will be determined by Collaboration members via a discussion listserv and then delivered via Roundtable panels, 15-minute presentations at pre-season vendor meetings, mini-tutorials/webinars online, etc. Interest has already been expressed in social media and website development training.

Market operations stability and success will be improved in a variety of ways: Peer-to-peer learning, Roundtable presentations, and market manager mentorships, market assessments, technical support, and other projects proposed by the Steering Committee.
Proposed Collaborative Projects

- **Regional Consumer Passport Program:** In 2016, using FMPP and other funds, Vital Communities’ facilitated a pilot regional farmers’ market Scavenger Hunt during Vermont Open Farm Week and New Hampshire Eat Local Month as a promotional tool focused on bringing families to markets. Vital Communities provided materials and promotion for markets to staff the Hunt. It was well received and market collaborators are deeply interested in growing the program toward a traditional ‘passport’ model where are incentivized participants visit multiple locations.

- **Joint Advertising Campaign:** Budget limitations for advertising are a common concern across the region’s markets. For this reason, markets have prioritized a shared campaign that would include social and print media, press kits, posters, and other components as advised by the project steering committee as well as promotional items such as a map, passport tie-ins, take-home magnet calendars, etc. Our prior FMPP grant focused on regional marketing, positioning Vital Communities well in assisting the Collaboration.

- **Mentoring, Assessment, Technical Support:**
  - Markets are interested in mentorship from peers with proven success in increasing agricultural vendor presence and income. To this end, we will facilitate three mentor relationships per project year, modeled on the successful farmers’ market mentor program used by NOFA-VT;
  - Market assessment tools to gauge customer counts, economic impact, market traffic flow, and other concerns vital to vendor income are now an established component of market improvement projects. Market collaborators recommend assessment of 12 area markets using an established tool such as Rapid Market Assessments (RMA) or MarketShare’s SEED tool (included in project budget). These assessments involve peer travel to each other’s markets for the purpose of qualitative and quantitative data collection, assisted by volunteers. We will select an assessment tool in consultation with NOFA-VT, whose current FMPP project includes best practice recommendations for our regional markets;
  - Markets have indicated need for specific technical assistance, delivered to vendors, board, and/or managers. Suggestions will be determined by Collaboration members via a discussion listserv and then delivered via Roundtable panels, 15-minute presentations at pre-season vendor meetings, mini-tutorials/webinars online, etc. Interest has already been expressed in social media and website development training, and University of New Hampshire Extension agent Nada Haddad has expertise on market success.

- **Traveling Food Prep Demonstrations:** Market activities such as cooking demos and tastings are a proven market favorite that could also tie in with the passport program. However, markets find it difficult to pay for and coordinate such activities on a regular basis. Therefore, our project budget includes a traveling demonstration, to present simple recipes based on and using vendor products at markets.

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