

Local self-organization of value-added processing Jackson County Kentucky

The Jackson county countryside shows a lot more promise for food system development than many of the other counties in Eastern Kentucky. As you drive down from Lee or Owsley county, the roads get less treacherous and steep, the gorges less pronounced, and you find yourself surrounded by rolling hills, ideal in comparison to the meagre plots of flat farming land available in much of the surrounding counties. It is no surprise then, that one would find one of the most well developed food processing centers in the region nestled in this beautiful rolling countryside. The area can be deceiving. Tyner proper is only made up of a few buildings, just enough to signify the presence of a township. Three or so baptist churches, a little pool hall, furniture store, and a little elementary school. On the outskirts of the little whistlestop downtown of Tyner, there's a little county roadway which is home to one of the most well developed value added processing centers in the South.

In 2010, the organizers of the Jackson County Regional Food Center were looking for a place to host their buildings and found a plot of land owned by the local utility cooperative, Eastern Kentucky Power. The coop had purchased ten acres of old farmland to build a one acre energy substation. The remainder of the land was open, unused pasture. The group building the food coop had known of the upcoming construction of the highway 30 corridor, and asked the energy coop to donate some land on the back end of the property which abutts the new four-lane strip of highway.

As with the township and much of the area, the JCRFC is a very unassuming facility. With the all-metal roofed and paneled exterior, it looks like it could just as well be a farm storage outbuilding or an extension of the electric coop substation until you get a bit closer. Then, the story begins to unfold, behind the building is an impressive farmers market pavilion, suited to host a good thirty vendors comfortably. From there, the ground starts to slope down and away, and there are vegetables. The farmer's market pavilion behind the facility and the acre and a half of vegetables, reaching out towards the summer sky. This small plot of vegetables is cultivated by county corrections, and saves the county \$5,000 a year.

A pickup truck pulls up and out steps a man of pretty high stature and frame in sporting sunglasses. This is Jeff Henderson, extension agent and decades-long food system organizer. There is a warmth to his voice that echoes under the farmers market pavilion. It's been six years since the center opened, and this gentleman has walked the community through every step of its inception and construction.

Jackson county had been home to a few contributing farmers with the Kentucky Mountain Farm Coop, a 200-something member farmer cooperative that had a processing and shipping center in Lee County. Jeff was a young organizer then and has since committed his career to building healthy food systems in Eastern Kentucky, an area greatly in need of economic infrastructure.

From the farmers market pavilion, another small building is noticeable. This was originally built to house a mobile chicken processing unit. After there seemed to be a larger demand to do honey processing there, it became home to honey processing equipment. The unit has a drain in the floor and bay doors to make for easy cleanup and movement of livestock and produce. In one end goes live chickens, and out the other end comes state and USDA inspected, package, and vacuum sealed market-ready meat. The unit comes with two storage tanks for production waste outputs. Jeff says that they haven't processed chicken in there since 2011. There was a higher demand for honey processing and for some reason, the local USDA inspector refused to allow them to do both honey and chicken

processing. Recently, however, demand for their help in chicken processing has peaked again. They are planning on building a processing room for the honey under the farmer's market pavilion so they can haul the Kentucky University- owned chicken processing unit into their shed once more. Chicken processing will produce more revenue once people begin to utilize the facility.

The food center launched in 2010, but it has been a much longer road. In 1999 Jeff and a group of organizers formed a committee for alternatives to tobacco. Tobacco was the primary cash crop for a long period of time in Eastern Kentucky. The committee started looking for high value alternatives. The first were medicinal plants and landscaping plants. The research funds came from tobacco settlement money, which was distributed on a county-level basis. Much of it goes to actual farming infrastructure and can be used on anything from bulls, fencing, forages, seed, to buildings. There's education accompanying that. Another portion of the settlement went out to regional projects. This was one of the funding foundations for the food center. Between tobacco and coal settlement monies they were a part of the way to reaching their goal but had a long ways to go yet. The telephone cooperative who had offered their land also offered a bit of money. There were empowerment zone initiatives that went out to farmers at a rate of \$5,000 per farmer. They had some success getting farmers to invest that empowerment money in value added services...but there was still difficulty with that. Jeff remembers the challenges of getting people to consider investing in value added processing- "There's a certain comfort when that calf hits the ground in February, you kinda know where you are gonna take it to. You kinda know what you are gonna go through with the summer; if it's dry or if it's rainy. You kinda know what you are gonna get for the calf. Tobacco is the same way. You put tobacco in the ground you can treat it ever how you want to- mistreat it, and still you could have a crop to sell in November and you knew who you could sell it to. When you start growing vegetables or when you try to value add, there is a lot of uncertainty."

Despite the high hurdle of financing such a expensive project, they were able to bridge the gap with local contributions. As it stands, they only owe \$5000 of patient money (meaning they can pay as their level of income allows). The facility was built by volunteers from the area. Some of the board members were contractors in the construction of this facility, which despite its nondescript appearance from outside, is a pretty sophisticated setup inside. Hundreds of feet of drainpiping were encased in the foundation slab. It's a lot easier to do bulk processing if the floor can be cleaned with a waterhose and a deck brush.

Now that the facility is constructed and staffed, the next hurdle is educating farmers on value added production and marketing. Their goal is to have the food center in operation three days a week. Right now, they have people processing about one day a week. "We have farmers that want to grow two acres of cabbage and dump it at the door." They are working to show farmers the importance and value of being able to process raw produce. The best way to teach sometimes is by showing, so the workers at the food center have been producing and marketing products. One of their better and simpler products is strawberry jam. They have all of the machinery on hand to create full-color labels and a whole array of packaging options. They add champagne to the recipe and instantly have two different types of strawberry jam. The label they designed is reminiscent of grandma's home, and looks like a painting you would find in a cozy den.

A car pulls up, and out steps a kindly looking woman with short curly hair and glasses. She is Cathy Howell, another architect of the dream (or nightmare, as they jokingly refer to the project). She is the SNAP outreach coordinator and is one of the people that have been key to turning the food center into a community hub. With her dedication, Jackson County has been able to cultivate some of the most well attended and diverse farmers markets in the area. There are five days a week where farmers can sell

their produce in three locations with 21 farmers who sell in county markets. She's run the farmers market for about seven years, and loves it. "We probably have the best farmers market in the whole state." She beams. The surrounding community is enthusiastically supportive and she gets onto the radio every market day to let people know where to look and what's being offered. Because it's a small town, local media of every type backs them. Apart from the radio, the local newspapers advertise all of the farmers markets and outreach events.

They use WIC and senior vouchers at their farmers market, but they have many more people in need of food assistance than they have federal voucher money for so they apply for grants as well and print their own vouchers up in their office. They are the highest ranking county for redemption for senior citizens and are third in the state for WIC recipients. They sent cards through the health department. Farmers market organizers wear badges to help people along and do cooking demonstrations to teach people how to prepare fresh produce. Last year, they didn't have the machinery to process food stamps, so there was a slump, but the first year they started accepting food stamps, participation tripled. Chain of Life is the nonprofit entity that they use a lot of the time for grants to help meet this high demand for food assistance. The county extension service has partnered with Chain of Life for a few decades and the organization made it possible to develop so much, so it was with a bit of sadness that Cathy says that Chain of Life is coming to an end.

One of the new programs being developed in Kentucky is the Farmacy program. The Farmacy is a partnership between the state and local health agencies. Doctors issue prescriptions for fresh produce for patients with a variety of ailments, from high blood pressure, to diabetes, to obesity and the like. Patients can take these prescriptions to farmers market and exchange them for fresh fruits and vegetables. This program is in its infancy and after this pilot year, doctors will assess whether or not there were noticeably positive health outcomes.

They've been slowly building more perks and infrastructure in the farmers markets. From the incentive and food aid programs all the way down to providing price signage and shopping bag racks to influence the overall attractiveness of the markets to consumers in the area. They use income for vendor fees to purchase materials for all of the vendors.

It isn't just the farmers, food entrepreneurs, and the poor and elderly who benefit from the work of the Jackson County center. They are also working hard to preserve lost cultural practices. Berea College got a grant for the Promise Neighborhood project. The idea was to keep kids in school. There was a 50 percent dropout rate. The partnership between promise neighborhood and extension has created educational programming with kids and their parents. So far, 500 families have participated in morning and afternoon classes where they teach canning. It is a six week program where parents and their kids, who are aged 9 and under take six weeks worth of canning classes, they each get some \$500 worth of equipment which they can take home to preserve produce. This is invaluable in a region where a vast amount of people have home gardens.

In September they do a garden survey and see how much people have canned produce by then end of the season, and they've seen a much larger number of people canning. In the four years that they have done the program, they have only lost five or so people. Most stay through all of the programming. "They get everything they need to go home, put it on the stove and start working." Jeff says.

The extension service was the group that initiated the canning classes program, promise neighborhood

adopted it. There is also a grilling class with kids and their dads. The dads end up getting a grill at the end of the sessions. They also do art sessions as well where they do quilting and painting.

The processing center is unrivalled in the area for diversity of offerings and equipment and capacity for people to scale operations to be able to do wholesale production. Just about anything that you can think about doing as far as canning and processing can be done at the facility.

There is a dry filler, where pouches and bulk containers can be filled with any granulated product that one can envision. Whether it's spices and dry rubs, teas, drink mixes, seeds, or breading mix. The possibilities only stop when people's imaginations reach their limits. There is also a heat sealer and a series of dehydrators. One thing that is novel is that there isn't a such thing as sun-dried tomatoes. Health inspectors would recoil in shock if they saw tomatoes being dried in open air under the sun...so industrial dehydrators such as these are what are used.

Most of the equipment was bought used, the purchases paid by local donors, including the seeder. The seeder is a chamber with a perforated column in which fruits and vegetables are placed. There is a variety of screen sizes to match the variety of seeds. It is used a lot for jellies and sauces to be able to remove pulp and seeds for a smoother consistency.

Seeder- has a perforated column that you put your fruits or vegetables in. Different screen sizes for different seed sizes. You can use the seeds. They use it a lot for jellies and sauces to be able to separate pulp and seed to make for a smoother consistency. Cathy gestures between the seeder and the dry packer, describing how strawberries for example could be sent through the seeder and then seeds can be dried and packed in the station adjacent.

Their canning capacity is pretty high. A single batch in the hot water bath is 109 jars. There are several kettles to cook nearly anything under the sun. These big 40 and 60 gallon kettles line the wall alongside the hot water bath. There is also a liquid packager that mounts to the kettles. Barbecue sauce bottles are filled with precision in seconds. With the push of a pedal, liquid product is metered through a stainless steel nozzle.

Speaking of stainless steel; the wall opposite the array of kettles, baths, and ovens is lined with stainless steel working surfaces. Cathy was able to secure all of the counters and racks from a school silent auction for \$101.

There is also ample room for dry storage, cooler space, and freezers in the back. Storage spaces are cheap. \$5 per pallet space dry storage, \$100 a month for cooler space. There's little in the coolers, save for some \$10,000 worth of hemp seeds that a local farmer is going to use to do industrial hemp production trials.

The place has no shortage of working areas. In the hallway with the coolers is a cutter that can process mass quantities of vegetables. The most complicated machine is their belt-driven labeller, which can print and affix custom labels to packages. This machine was one of the most expensive things they have in inventory. KSA provided grant funding to secure it and it has been one of the most important additions to the kitchen.

The facility goes through a yearly inspection. New clients have to go through a training by a certified manager. After they opened the doors, Kentucky State University approached them about helping out.

The university food program screens and approves the recipes for every client. This has streamlined the state approval process.

Looking back over their trials and errors, Jeff is quick to admit that there are things that could have been done differently. They had hired a manager from another state who came in and made equipment recommendations that weren't exactly the most appropriate for maximizing a diversity of processing options. This manager only briefly worked with the center. When that manager moved on, they found a great manager who helped to revamp the center and got rid of the relatively useless equipment. That manager worked with them for three years. After he moved on, the center hired one of their best workers as the new manager. Mary Carpenter learned the day to day operations and policies necessary to be a good leader, and she is also from the area and knows many farmers and community members. Jeff wonders if they would have been able to stretch operational funds if they had started with part-time workers. Initially, the staff was full time. Mary was one of the people who stepped in and really helped keep the operation alive when they transitioned to part-time.

Despite small drawbacks, Jeff and the food center workers have done much great work to connect to other organizations to help in development. The board has turned over almost completely. The two people who lead the board are very energetic and excited about what can be done there. The chair is in a very good political position and everybody is confident that the board is in a better place than it has been in a long time. The original board completed construction, and dream accomplished, backed off. Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development stepped in and helped them with setting up better meetings and helped them to identify new boardmembers. They were an outside agency so they were able to come in and make recommendations with more confidence. There was a grant that they had applied for in the past, but the grant agency had said they needed to develop their leadership. Bringing the Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development on board has helped them to build the best leadership that they have seen and this year they are going to go ahead and apply for the implementation grant again. KCARD really pushed to identify new board members. They tried to pick strategically. They recruited church leaders, political leaders, the food coordinator for the school system whose husband is a market farmer. They are still looking to expand the board further. They were also able to bring a marketing developer on board with a grant to pay for her position. She is working on building processing SOPs as well as putting together one pagers that people can use as checklists to get their product processed to the point of marketability.

Another major local partner is JCHIP- Jackson County Health Partners. This group has a monthly meeting where they network and help each other with programming. For sixteen years, the food center organizers have been attending JCHIP meetings. JCHIP is a leadership group comprised of leaders in many local agencies- leaders from the health department, schools, medical professionals, extension agents, the wellness community, and insurance companies.

Through the years, Jeff has served mainly in an advisory and facilitation position. "I did some of their leg work for them. I didn't do much of the grant writing but I would find somebody who would. I lost more sleep than any of them and aged more than anybody else on this project did." He'll be stepping down from organizing in October, 2016. Everybody is confident that this center and the community that it has brought under its roof will continue to grow and flourish for long after he has gone. Cathy knows he'll never be able to be replaced. "He's old school." She says, "...he came from a farm background and new what it would take to do this."

There have been changes in food culture and market possibilities in the county. Cathy mentions how fresh veggies are visible first-off when you go into the local grocery store. Where lard used to take up

a wall, it's been relegated to a single shelf. There are many more farm-to-school and farm-to-institution programs, and there are produce buyers approaching extension services. One such person is looking for 5,000 pounds of cabbage. This is a large order, and there's still a lot of teaching and convincing. Farmers are hesitant to take risks. There are a few people that have offered to grow cabbage, but many of these other farmers are waiting to watch and learn from their mistakes. The early adopters will do an acre or two. They'll likely make mistakes. The farmers waiting in the wings will roll out ten acres and do it right the first time... like the fate of the food center and value added processing in Jackson county, only time will tell.