

DURHAM, NC: CREATING SPACE TO REVITALIZE COMMUNITY & HEALTH

USING LOCAL FOOD AS A COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN DURHAM

Speaking on behalf of the Durham-based non-profit Reinvestment Partners, Executive Director Peter Skillern will assure you that “we don’t do food.” The Bull City Cool Food Hub and the Geer Street Learning Garden – both of which are beneficiaries of Reinvestment Partners’ community development work and close neighbors to the agency’s East Geer Street location – might suggest otherwise.



To be sure, Reinvestment Partners doesn’t do food. The non-profit’s economic justice directive has traditionally focused on financial services and policy work that builds wealth in underserved communities. But Bull City Cool – a food hub boasting warehouse space, coolers, freezers, and dry storage available for lease to Durham food businesses and non-profit agencies – received funding and support from Reinvestment Partners alongside USDA, the City of Durham, United Way of the Triangle, BB&T, and the Triangle Community Fund. The project speaks to the growing narrative of local food as a driver of economic development.

ENVISIONING A HEALTHY, VIBRANT COMMUNITY

It was the view of blight from Skillern’s office window, formative conversations with community leaders, and an innovative vision that led to the development of Bull City Cool as an anchor for what community leaders envision as a local food corridor on Geer Street. The building itself, located on the corner of Geer Street at 902 N. Mangum Street, has known a history of tenant turnover from its beginning as a gas station in the 1950s to its most recent past as a used tire store.



Reinvestment Partners approached both the repurposing of the vacant lot and the building now housing Bull City Cool as neighborhood revitalization projects. Those involved in the early stages recognized a real need for reconnecting and repurposing these spaces in order to activate the properties for economic growth and development. A feasibility study commissioned by Reinvestment Partners and completed in

2013 identified significant gaps in the existing local food system, further motivating the non-profit to develop Bull City Cool as a response to the underperforming property at 902 N. Mangum and the increased awareness of food being a powerful tool for community development efforts.

With Reinvestment Partners as landlord to the project, the tenants occupying the building are committed to aggregating and distributing fresh, local produce. The collaborative approach to food system development allows for Reinvestment Partners to leverage their organizational capacity and real estate expertise while tenants like Farmer Foodshare and Interfaith Food Shuttle can focus on their strengths of food procurement and customer connections. Bull City Cool tenants are committed to the work of identifying both producers and consumers while Reinvestment Partners is devoted to maintaining and enhancing the facility’s offerings.

The beneficial partnership of resources also allows for Reinvestment Partners to reduce barriers often faced by small food enterprises by working to secure additional funding for the systems-level work upon which the organization is founded. The value chain coordination work is powered by the synergy which allows each organization involved to fill the roles they serve best. Working from the middle of the supply chain to better connect local farmers with a local customer base is critical for small and mid-size farms. As Bull City Cool Food Hub Coordinator Neal Curran puts it, “our work at Bull City Cool is that of growing the supply chain.”



Bull City Cool's Building in Durham, NC.

Entering into this middle ground of the supply chain is a challenge unique to small and mid-size farmers. Though smaller farms can access the market by way of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) networks or local farmers markets, smaller farms often lack the capacity to also manage the processing, packaging, transporting, and marketing roles that the agencies at Bull City Cool support.

GROWING A LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

Not only is Bull City Cool positioned to connect the existing assets of local food producers to local consumers, the food hub’s aggregation and distribution complements similar work being done across town at Eastern Carolina Organics (ECO). The two food hubs are both involved in the work of establishing more sustainable connections better the local producer and consumer, though they differ in their business models and market demographic. For Bull City Cool, its work in growing the value chain is specific to addressing food insecurity and issues of malnutrition locally. Despite differences in their business models and partners, Bull City Cool and ECO both respond to the growing demand to source and distribute local produce.

The project’s benefits extend beyond the act of putting fresh, local veggies on the community’s plate. By building the infrastructure for a local food system, Bull City Cool provides increased access to market opportunities for local farmers, creates a space for food entrepreneurs to learn and grow, and advocates for mutually beneficial relationships between local institutions seeking healthy food options and the local small-scale farmers who often are not considered in urban development decisions. These relationships allow for the local economy to reap the benefits of maintaining the food dollar and its multiplier effects.

Moving forward, Bull City Cool has submitted a grant to administer a GroupGAP program in order to further expand market opportunities for farms and food businesses in the Piedmont region. Bull City Cool is also working with the tenants and institutions to craft and adopt local purchasing policies which is a powerful way to invest in and strengthen the economic asset existing in local agricultural production.

Space is available! For leasing information contact Neal Curran and Bull City Cool: neal@bullcitycool.com

MORE INFORMATION

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LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

Building Resilient Communities



NC GROWING TOGETHER

Connecting Local Foods
to Mainstream Markets

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NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: RESILIENT LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

Local economies benefit in a number of ways from revitalizing small agriculture and food entrepreneurship in their communities. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu or 828.399.0297.

This case study was prepared by Taylor Smith, a UNC City & Regional Planning Masters' Candidate, as part of an NC Growing Together Summer Apprenticeship.

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