

## WARREN COUNTY, NC: ACTIVATING THE WEALTH OF THE LAND

### BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT A RESILIENT RURAL ECONOMY

Carla Norwood and Gabe Cumming are up to something good. Sixty miles north of Durham in the unassuming rural landscape of Warren County, one of North Carolina's most innovative food hubs is reconnecting the community and its residents to the value found in its rich landscape.

Founded in 2010, the non-profit agency Working Landscapes is driven "to expand the realm of possibilities," as Cumming says, for considering the purpose and economic function of small towns in a rural setting. North Carolina as a state is 90.5% rural in terms of land area<sup>1</sup> and the North Carolina Rural Center designates 85 of 100 counties as rural counties.<sup>2</sup> Reconnecting and re-engaging those rural landscapes as natural and cultural assets to the state's economy is in the interest of rural and urban communities alike.



Warren County, NC

Foundational to the efforts of Working Landscapes is an asset-based approach to community and economic development. Traditional economic development often evaluates an economy based on what it lacks, which has led to a history of business recruitment and incentive granting meant to attract companies to relocate to an area. The asset-based approach, however, first identifies the value and strengths already present, even if under-utilized, within the land and existing workforce.



The non-profit's seminal projects, Warren FoodWorks and the Warren County Produce Center, leverage the social and economic advantage Warren County has in its agricultural resources. These resources are both historically entrenched and presently valued by its citizens and business leadership.

One hundred years ago, Warrenton's Main Street was home to 13 food-related businesses. Prior to Warren Foodworks' opening in 2011 as a farm-to-table café that also functions as a shared-use kitchen for food entrepreneurs and a retail space for a local meats and produce program, there were only two food-related businesses existing in Warrenton's business center.

It was through community engagement that Norwood and Cumming found Warren County residents of

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010 Census of Population.  
<http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html>

<sup>2</sup> North Carolina Rural Center. [www.ncruralcenter.org](http://www.ncruralcenter.org)

# LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

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varying economic and social backgrounds to be united by a shared value of local farming as a tradition and livelihood in need of investment and protection. The community engagement effort was conducted using the Community Voice Method, a participatory research method developed and implemented by Norwood and Cumming during their postdoctoral research at Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment.

This process involved conversations and interviews with 170 Warren County residents. Through this research, the need to develop the infrastructure for a local food system was readily apparent to Norwood and Cumming. The team was additionally motivated by the fact that Norwood is from Warrenton and is personally committed to it as the place she and Cumming now live with their family.

The farm-to-table café and the agricultural processing center are two avenues by which local farmers are being given increased access to markets. Additionally, Working Landscapes is operating in the middle linkages of the local food systems which are often the links that are most difficult for small and mid-size farmers to manage on their own.

Warren County Produce Center increases the local farmers' ability to engage with county and regional schools by chopping and bagging produce, and helping negotiate purchases by institutions like schools and restaurants of those products. These institutions are often also limited in their capacity to function in the middle linkages of the supply chain.



Restructuring the economic framework and building the infrastructure for a local food system in Warren County is an effort that strengthens the region's resiliency and responsiveness to its community's needs. For both the produce processing center and the farm-to-table café to be successful, regional linkages need to be strengthened and support for local food systems needs to be prioritized in the region.

Ultimately, small and mid-sized farms in North Carolina need to be better leveraged as vibrant assets to healthy local economies. Understanding the agricultural landscape as a strength to our state's economy – especially in rural areas – allows for revitalization of small agriculture and food entrepreneurship. Local food markets represent a yet untapped resource for improved quality of life and public health measures as well as working, productive lands.

## MORE INFORMATION

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## NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: 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](mailto:Emily_Edmonds@ncsu.edu) or 828.399.0297.*

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