

Boone, NC: Local Food Success, One Freezer at a Time

Building Local Food Infrastructure in Unused Public Spaces, with Room to Grow

It was a chance meeting in the local post office that kicked things off.

Carol Coulter, the founder of [Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture \(BRWIA\)](#) and co-owner of Heritage Homestead Dairy with her husband, Lon, ran into her local Cooperative Extension agent while picking up the mail. “Hey, so,” she asked, “what’s going on there in the basement of the Extension building?”¹

Carol discovered that Watauga County was cleaning out the basement storage space with no real plan for its use once the stored items were moved. She had been looking for a place to utilize a \$15,000 grant from [Heifer Foundation International](#) for cold storage space for local producers, and pretty much just like that, the [High Country Food Hub](#) was formed.²



It wasn’t that easy, of course; the space needed to be retrofit, and the lease agreements worked out, and both the Town of Boone and Watauga County, along with Cooperative Extension, received proposals and presentations from nonprofit advocates and community farmers.³

But today, the High Country Food Hub is bursting at the seams of its existing freezer and cooler space, and planning to add more just as soon as they can grab a little more of the basement.

Farmers & Foodmakers of All Kinds

The food hub – located in 1,400 square feet of the Watauga County Agricultural Services Center - has been transformed into freezers, refrigerators and dry food storage space which is available for local farmers and



From left, Dave Walker, Shannon Carroll, and Carol Coulter, the staff of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture’s High Country Food Hub, at the hub’s loading dock.

producers to rent. One freezer is full and a second one has been added as farmers and producers have already begun to utilize this facility.

The farmers who utilize this space are from all walks of life. There’s a cattle farmer who comes in from the outskirts of Watauga County, with a cooler full of frozen beef he’s adding to the freezer for pickup by local customers, and the man whose company makes homemade pasta using North Carolina flour and ingredients.

“We have the older generation of farmers rubbing shoulders in here with these younger hydroponic farmers or value-added food makers,” says Dave Walker, who coordinates

¹ www.brwia.org

² <https://www.heifer.org/join-the-conversation/blog/2017/January/appalachian-farmers-continue-to-find-success-after-heifer.html>

³ <http://foodhub.brwia.org/>

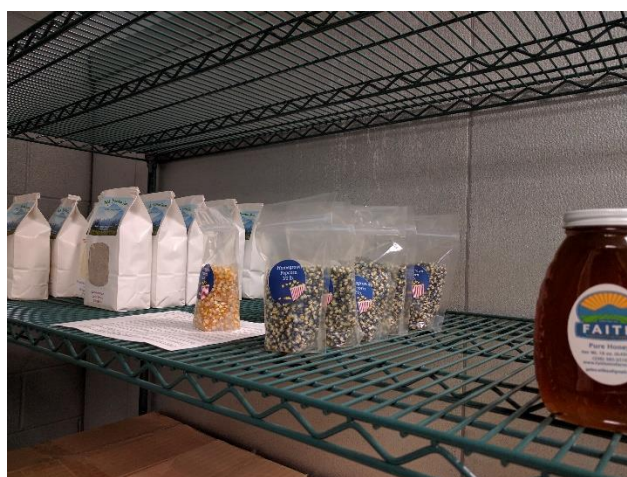
BRWIA's CRAFT program and helps out with the food hub development. "It's a really cool thing to see so many of them meeting one another for the first time and all working towards a common goal." Dave's Master's Thesis at Appalachian State (in Appalachian Studies, with a Graduate Certificate in Geographic Information Sciences), concerned how first-generation farmers become successful in Blue Ridge Appalachia, and he counts himself amongst them as he started Daffodil Spring Farm in the spring of 2017.



Shared purchasing so far includes mostly packaging materials – boxes, bag, twist ties, labels – but plans are in the works to explore other needs. The hub offers dry storage for pre-made items that don't require refrigeration, like pasta, popcorn, and granola, as well as for inputs like large bags of flour. There's a 400-square-foot root cellar area they're working to get properly finished and cooled, with a potato farmer currently storing some of his product to test out the space.

They also provide drop-ship services, which can save some rural farmers up to \$75 a delivery by having items left in town at this central location until they can pick it up. And they're bridging production and processing gaps together, too, by using a shared calendar to coordinate delivery and pickup from the meat processors in the region. They don't yet have a refrigerated truck, but it's on the list of upcoming projects.

Leading all this work are the staff of the nonprofit BRWIA, which claims as its mission "strengthening the High Country's local food system by supporting women and their families with resources, education, and skills related to sustainable food and agriculture." Their work to date, in addition to the food hub, includes providing opportunities for women farmers to share knowledge, hosting a Farm Tour, providing opportunities for consumers to learn about self-sufficiency, and working to connect everyone to the local agricultural heritage and landscape. Their current service area includes Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Mitchell, Wilkes, Watauga, and Yancey Counties in North Carolina and Johnson County, Tennessee.



Dry storage products at High Country Food Hub

Town & Gown Come Together to Increase Economic Opportunity

In addition to supporting the renovation and maintenance of the space, Watauga County and the Town of Boone have both supported the food hub's continued development – beyond physical cold storage space, the hub also launched its first online marketplace this year. Over 25 local producers are already listing products for pickup on the site, which can be used by both individual consumers and local restaurants and retailers to place pre-orders for products and pick them up in a single central location.

"These are the kinds of cool opportunities we're seeing," says Shannon Carroll, the part-time hub manager. "Having a central location that represents both Boone [a college town] and Watauga County [a traditionally conservative county] lets people come together for the good of all."



Packing tables surround the freezers and coolers in the High Country Food Hub's basement space

Because of this partnership, the hub has been able to secure funding and support from agencies as diverse as Carolina Farm Credit, USDA's Local Food Promotion Program, Heifer International, the NC Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, and the NC Department of Agriculture's Marketing Programs Division. They're also incredibly grateful for the support of NC Cooperative Extension – whose agents and director have supported the project from the beginning.

"It's a pretty unique situation," adds Dave. "If you're at all familiar with NC, you'll see that rural places that support universities and colleges often have a 'town-gown' split. Watauga County and Boone used to be the same, but bringing them together on this project to support something everyone is enthusiastic about has been amazing to see."

HCFH relied on an Oregon tech developer, [Local Food Marketplace](#)⁴, to build implement their software for selling directly to consumers via the food hub. Shannon – whom Carol calls "a gem" and whose background is in technology and business development – was tasked with setting up the online market and helping farmers understand how to market themselves and their products. She worked directly with the software company (made up of former food hub managers and farmers, who understand the industry) to create an approach that meets the needs of the diverse farmers and food producers who utilize the food hub. The system allows inventory tracking, automated order emails to farmers, price setting, and dozens of other functions to help both the food hub and its entrepreneurs to manage their businesses.

Shannon's office is a desk pushed up against the wall near the loading bay, covered in papers and laptops. "I work here at this desk," she says, "but I'm also really here to deal with whatever comes through the door." She laughs about this, but it's true: in the time we're chatting, she helps a farmer drop off product and mark off his delivery, and sells some products to unexpected guests – a vacationing family referred to the hub by their B&B owner. They want to take a taste of the High Country home with them, and Shannon obligingly loads them up with all-natural beef from one of Watauga County's cattle producers.

Shannon – who retired from Watauga County Schools and spent her career in instructional technology – doesn't just serve as the High Country Food Hub Coordinator. She also coordinates the [Lettuce Learn](#) garden at Parkway School and helps her husband, Terry, with



Meat products stored in the shared freezer spaces of the High Country Food Hub from Watauga County's poultry & cattle producers

⁴ www.localfoodmarketplace.com

his [SunCatcher Passive Solar Greenhouse](#) business. She also recently earned her Master Gardener certification. “With staff like this,” Carol says, “I don’t know how we won’t succeed. We’re so fortunate to have dedicated people willing to help us make this project happen.”



From left to right: vegetable producers share refrigerated space in one of the coolers at High Country Food Hub; the hub also utilizes the space to store and pack for the High Country Community-Supported Agriculture program (CSA) run by Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture; and shared marketing materials from [ASAP’s Appalachian Grown Program](#) allow for regional branding of food hub projects.

MORE INFORMATION

High Country Food Hub | <http://foodhub.brwia.org>

Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture | www.brwia.org

Watauga County Cooperative Extension | www.ces.ncsu.edu/watauga-county-center

Local Food Marketplace | www.localfoodmarketplace.com

ASAP’s Appalachian Grown Program | www.asapconnections.org

NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

An effective way to revitalize the economy in local communities is through support for smaller-scale agricultural enterprises and food entrepreneurship. 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 Laura Lauffer, Local Food and Farms Coordinator, at ldlauffe@ncat.edu, or visit these websites, www.ncgrowingtogether.org and www.localfoodeconomies.org.