

## SMALL MOUNTAIN COUNTY IS A MODEL FOR COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP

### POLK COUNTY, NC: BUILDING A LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY WITH PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

Polk County, one of the first in North Carolina to support an agricultural economic development division, boasts one of the state's most successful partnerships between NC Cooperative Extension, local governments and nonprofits. This small mountain county, nestled south of Asheville and north of the South Carolina border, is home to the towns of Columbus, Saluda, and Tryon and around 20,000 year-round residents. A popular second home destination, Polk County is also blessed with abundant rivers and streams, rolling farmland, and the Appalachian Mountains.

The agricultural economic development office grew out of an initiative to preserve and restore an old school as an agricultural center, and was originally advocated for through the Agriculture Advisory Board and Farmland Preservation committees at the county government level. Lynn Sprague, who now works with Southwestern NC Resource Conservation & Development (SWNCRCD), was the first developer in the position; Dawn Jordan, the current agricultural economic developer, took over in 2013. Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) was a critical supporter of the advocacy campaign that resulted in a full-time county position, and remains a strong partner in the agricultural center operation and management and new farming programs.

These partners, with the support of NC Cooperative Extension and nonprofits working in the area, created a unique collaborative model that reflects the place-based approach to developing the local food economy of this small mountain county.

*"We want people to see farming for the vibrant, difficult work that it is, and understand how much respect all our farmers, large and small, deserve. They're smart people doing difficult work."*

– Dawn Jordan, Polk County Agricultural Economic Developer

## CREATING A UNIQUE MODEL THAT REFLECTS COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS



*The annual farm tour raises funds for shared equipment and projects. Photo courtesy of Polk County Farms on Facebook:  
<https://www.facebook.com/polkcountyfarms/>.*

Ms. Jordan, the [Polk County Agricultural Economic Developer](#), works closely with [Polk County Cooperative Extension Director](#) Scott Welborn and with [Growing Rural Opportunities](#) (GRO), a Polk-County based nonprofit run by Patrick McLendon and Sydney Klein. Between the three organizations, Polk County has tackled a significant number of barriers to agricultural expansion, launching successful agricultural projects designed to support both conventional and sustainable farmers of all sizes.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the partners brings distinct expertise to agricultural development. Extension focuses on the production aspects of agriculture, the Ag ED office provides business planning and marketing assistance to farmers, and GRO works directly with outreach to consumers and gardeners.<sup>2</sup> "You'll find that because agriculture is so geographically dependent, each county really has its

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.polknc.org/agricultural\\_economic\\_development.php](http://www.polknc.org/agricultural_economic_development.php).

<sup>2</sup> <http://growrural.org/>; <https://polk.ces.ncsu.edu/>

own unique set of needs,” Dawn notes. “In Polk, what works for us is this model that supports smaller farmers with multiple resources and for a lot of different things.”

“Part of the greatness of working here in Polk is that it’s small enough for all of us to know each other,” Sydney adds. “We can take these things on collaboratively, doing more with less instead of duplicating efforts.”

The model has a strong emphasis on small and even “micro-farmers,” those with less than one acre in production, simply because of the land constraints presented in the mountains and the relatively small population. But for this team, no farmer is too small to help. “Helping these smaller farms or gardens doesn’t bring you 300 jobs, but that extra \$300 can go a long way for a family in the community who needs it,” Ms. Jordan says. In a county with a 13.4% poverty rate, those families would surely agree that every extra revenue source counts – and that making sure they can access fresh food from their own gardens is also important.

*“Lots of county Extension offices have to do it all when it comes to agriculture,” Mr. Welborn points out. “We’re incredibly lucky here because there are so many different resources that we can really focus on our areas of expertise and trust that our farmers will be taken care of in other ways by our partners.”*

Mr. Welborn and Ms. Jordan meet weekly with the county manager and build relationships with other county departments as part of a service group. This group keeps in touch with the whole community of agriculture supporters, too, in a fun way – they host Friends of Ag breakfasts every month from September to May, sponsored by Farm Bureau and managed by Ms. Jordan. They’re a great way for the primary partners, as well as all the agriculture-affiliated community partners in the region, to stay in touch with one another and make sure they’re working together whenever they can.

## AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS & PROGRAMS IN POLK COUNTY

**Polk County’s Farmland Preservation Program** provides the most basic support to agricultural development for the county: making sure farmland remains available. The initial program was adopted in 2000, with an enhanced program adopted in 2006. The preservation of farmland for future generations as well as current use is an important component of the agricultural economic development program. Polk offers two options: Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD) and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts (EVAD), both of which provide incentives for long-term conservation. EVAD includes a cost-share program to help farmers place their farms in preservation, and signage for all farms in the program helps build a sense of pride in the local agricultural community. The Farmland Preservation Board, which consists of seven members appointed by the Polk County Board of Commissioners, at least five of whom are farmers, provides advisory support and guidance for the Agricultural Economic Development office. This advisory board meets on an as-needed basis, once every few months, and consists of members recommended through Cooperative Extension, SWCD, the USDA Farm Service Agency Polk County Committee, and Polk County Farm Bureau. These Polk County residents serve rotating three year terms as appointed by the Board of Commissioners and assist with farmland preservation application review, agricultural district questions, advice to Ms. Jordan and Mr. Welborn about projects and programs, and other matters.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.polknc.org/docs/EnhancedFarmlandOrdinance.pdf>.

**The Mill Spring Agricultural Center (MSAC)** was the first major economic development project that centered on local agriculture in the county. The center, which occupies a 40,000-square foot former elementary school, is owned and operated by the Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and, beyond the management time of SWCD personnel, uses no tax funds for its restoration or programming. Thanks to grants, donations, and fundraisers, the SWCD and their agricultural partners are restoring classrooms as offices in this historic building, which served as the county's elementary and high school from the 1920s to 1998.

MSAC is home to the **Polk Equipment Cooperative**, which provides central storage for equipment that can be used by producers in the region. The tools and equipment are available at little or no cost for rental to farms in Polk County, and include equipment such as tillers, seeders, honey extraction equipment, water pumps, grow lights, soil blockers, sprayers, and other items. GRO is currently managing the tool share and seeking new additions, including tractors; they hope to have a mobile unit with small garden tools that can travel to neighborhood home gardens, too. The equipment is partially grant funded, but primarily funded through equipment donations and the farm tour, which last year raised money for beekeeping and honey harvesting equipment.



Equipment from the tool cooperative. Photo courtesy of Polk County Farms on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/polkcountyfarms/>.

Winter farmers' markets take place indoors at MSAC, and the Mill Spring Farm Store provides a retail outlet for fresh local meats, produce, and value-added items. Other programming includes Chicken Swaps, where different breeds can be exchanged, and the Farm Class Series, which teaches new skills and techniques to farmers in the region.

Recently, MSAC added a commercial and catering kitchen that supports value-added production and offers additional revenue streams for smaller restaurants, food businesses, and farmers. The kitchens also provide training and educational opportunities for community members. A private business operates the kitchen, providing another small business with a creative revenue opportunity.

MSAC is also funded operationally by the rental of commercial office space, meeting and event space; hosting of weddings and other outdoor events; the use of the outdoor kitchen; and community and commercial use of the auditorium. This hybrid model has allowed MSAC to continue developing the historic site without relying on taxpayer funding to support its work.



Plots being prepared for the community garden areas. Photo courtesy of Polk County Farms on Facebook:  
<https://www.facebook.com/polkcountyfarms/>.

**Polk County Farms** is a marketing effort that collectively addresses the needs of the county's farmers' markets, farmers, and food entrepreneurs. Managed by the Polk County Agricultural Economic Development Office and coordinated by Ms. Jordan, PCF connects consumers and buyers with local farms; advertises markets and farm tours; and provides a central information exchange for farmers,

growers, and consumers on all the resources available to support the local food system (including MSAC and other programs).

Initially, the partnership conceptualized an effort called Polk Fresh Foods, which would aggregate, store, and distribute produce from several small farms into larger volume orders for wholesale clients in the Charlotte region. The project encountered significant barriers, however, including the cost and complexity of trucking and distribution systems. Two years ago, the project was sold to an existing farm, Sunny Creek, which already had the infrastructure and systems in place to aggregate and distribute product, and that farmer has continued aggregation and delivery efforts in the private sector.

*"We tried a lot of things," Ms. Jordan acknowledged. "Because we have so many partners, and so much public policy on our side, there's a lot of ideas out there about what we can do to support local agriculture. Some worked, some didn't, but we keep pushing forward, and learning from it."*

**Growing Rural Opportunities (GRO)** was founded in July 2015 as a nonprofit dedicated to supporting agriculture in Polk County and in Landrum, South Carolina. GRO staff work closely with Ms. Jordan and Mr. Welborn to promote farmers' markets, run a Beginning Farmer Program providing education and resources to new farms, and coordinate an initiative called Grow Food Where People Live, which works to increase individual access to fresh food within individual neighborhoods and communities.

*"When we started this project [through Groundswell International], we chose Polk County because of the incredible level of collaboration already in place," said Ms. Klein. "Extension, Social Services, the agricultural economic development office, and local churches were already working together on both aspects of the food system – production and low-income access. Now, we get to focus on the consumer access piece with them, creating gatherings of home gardens, helping communities plant things like fruit trees and berry bushes, and teaching people how to grow, cook, and preserve."*

GRO focuses on helping people ease out of poverty through multiple steps, and they work in many different ways. "Some of our community group gardens have decided to grow staple crops as a way to try it out, rather than growing a variety for their own consumption," she says. "We aren't judgmental – we support that work too, because if they are able to start with their quarter-acre and move up into a five- or ten-acre plot, all of a sudden we've helped someone viably pull themselves up into a new opportunity."

They also work on a larger scale, incubating small farmers and linking them with land and business resources like those at the agricultural economic development office. They know how important business resources are to new farmers, but have also worked to create curriculum that reflects the unique nature of farming in Polk County rather than using standard national or state programs. With the help of Ms. Jordan and Mr. Welborn, GRO is implementing beginning farmer training that supports everything from marketing and small business development to financing and operations.

GRO hopes that what they learn in Polk County will soon be a replicable model across Western North Carolina and in other high-poverty rural areas.



"It works so well because we all cover all these areas," explains Ms. Klein. "We have so much going on that a team effort is necessary – there's plenty of work to go around, and we're all committed to doing what's best for the agricultural community."

**Polk County Cooperative Extension** is an active and dynamic partner in the many agriculture initiatives in the county. "People have depended on Extension for decades here," says Scott. "We are trying to make sure we continue to provide a platform of support in this dynamic, changing food economy. We were able to do that because the county had invested so strongly in the protection of agricultural farmland that we have a lot to work with – and having an agricultural economic developer in place is a huge help when tackling these larger issues."

In addition to supporting other projects and acting as a farmer resource, Scott and his Extension staff have begun work on a research plot where agents can grow and test varieties specific to the mountain climate and geography, helping local farmers understand which crops are best to grow in their region.

"One thing we all focus on is that old viewpoint that farmers are uneducated or low on the totem pole," said Ms. Jordan. "We want people to see farming for the vibrant, difficult work that it is, and understand how much respect all our farmers, large and small, deserve. They're smart people doing difficult work."

*"We're doing our clients a disservice if we don't work together," Scott adds. "This kind of interagency collaboration used to mean that some people would get lost. But we rely on our own specializations – no one can do everything really well, but we all have strengths to bring to this effort, and that is what our clients need from us."*

Agriculture is growing in the county, thanks to the hard work of this team of partners, and associated businesses are also growing – there are now four active vineyards in the county, helping boost agritourism efforts. The trio hopes to continue growing their unique agricultural enterprises in a way that supports citizens with resources from multiple agencies, in a collaborative model that many counties can emulate for their own work.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Mill Spring Farm Store | <http://www.millspringfarmstore.com/>

Polk County Agricultural Economic Development Office

[http://www.polknc.org/agricultural\\_economic\\_development.php#.V3QjrLgrJ\\_M](http://www.polknc.org/agricultural_economic_development.php#.V3QjrLgrJ_M)

Polk County Farms | <http://polkcountyfarms.org/>

Growing Rural Opportunities | <http://growrural.org/>

Polk County Cooperative Extension Service | [www.polk.ces.ncsu.edu](http://www.polk.ces.ncsu.edu)

Polk County Soil & Water Conservation District | [http://www.polknc.org/soil\\_and\\_water\\_ag\\_ec\\_dev.php#.V3bXfbgrJ\\_M](http://www.polknc.org/soil_and_water_ag_ec_dev.php#.V3bXfbgrJ_M)

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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](mailto:Emily_Edmonds@ncsu.edu) or 828.399.0297, or visit our websites, [www.ncgrowingtogether.org](http://www.ncgrowingtogether.org) and [www.localfoodeconomies.org](http://www.localfoodeconomies.org).*