GASTON COUNTY, NC

Needs Addressed:
- Increased partnerships and collaboration between stakeholders to develop a stronger local foods economy.
- Increased consumer outreach and education on local foods.
- Greater understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for components of the local food economy.

Project/Process:
The end goal of this project is to develop a local foods strategic plan that is supported by the community. In April 2010, Cooperative Extension organized a community based foods advisory committee with representation from the chamber, health community, churches, schools, and agriculture. As a first step, this committee agreed to survey various components of the local food economy and conduct educational outreach to determine interest and gather ideas.

The project increased awareness about local foods by running Farm Bureau sponsored ads and getting articles placed about local markets and a new CSA. Also, the Mt. Holly market hosted a county farm festival drawing 500 paying guests to enjoy local foods and music.

Focus groups and interviews were held with Gaston EDC, potential institutional buyers, and farmers. Farmers supported, and the County approved a farmland protection plan. As an outgrowth of the partnerships that were formed, Caromont Hospital provided financial support to help expand Cooperative Extension’s school gardening program.

Partnerships:
- Foothills Fresh
- Gaston Economic Development Commission
- Gaston County Schools
- CaroMont Hospital
- Gaston Together
- Mount Holly Farmers Market
- Gaston Farmers Market
- Gaston Cattlemen’s Association

Lessons Learned:
- High interest in local foods from consumers and community leaders
- Not many existing or new farmers are ready to expand or try new approaches
- We need greater participation from the farming community in order to identify potential success for community plan.

Results:
- Increased consumer demand for local foods as measured by market traffic and new CSA
- County support for farmland protection plan
- Development of local foods partnership leading to expanded gardening program & advisory committee

Next Steps:
- May 14th Home Grown Gaston Celebration
- New and small growers education programs
- Explore cold storage, farm incubator, and community value-added and marketing center