

Winter 2-11-2014

Planning Sustainable Food Hubs: Thinking Beyond Economic Viability to Democratize Local Food Access

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Recommended Citation

Bahlkow, Ashley, "Planning Sustainable Food Hubs: Thinking Beyond Economic Viability to Democratize Local Food Access" (2014). *Capstone Collection*. 2648.
<https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2648>

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Abstract

In light of an increasing awareness of the detrimental public health impacts of conventional food systems, the New Hampshire Endowment for Health (NHEH) funded a food hub feasibility study to develop a local food hub in the southeastern region of New Hampshire. The study centered on conceptualizing a food hub that would be both viable from a small business standpoint as well one that would increase access to local food, especially for marginalized communities in the city of Manchester--the major population center in the region.

The project work plan contained several activities for determining feasibility, which were completed over the seven-month duration of the project. The subsequent data generated is presented and analyzed herein. This paper evaluates this data based on criteria for food hub feasibility by Slama & Nyquist (2010), leaders in food hub development. From this business development lens, feasibility seems likely. However, due to lagging project momentum, some data needed for determination of feasibility to this point has not been generated.

Because the NHEH-funded study encompassed more than an investigation of economic viability--including a focus on democratization of local food-- Slama & Nyquist's criteria fell short as a comprehensive feasibility study evaluation tool in this case. While project designers and stakeholders acknowledged the possible social, environmental and economic benefits of a regional food hub, plans for capitalizing on these benefits--particularly the social and environmental--were not comprehensive.

Numerous academics and food systems designers suggest that food hubs can be powerful mechanisms for social change, and act as a catalyst for sustainable community development. Accomplishing this means redefining success in terms of sustainability rather than feasibility and finding new ways of measuring success. Furthermore, in envisioning transformative food systems that challenge conventional structures, projects (such as this one) must include and engage a more diverse spectrum of community actors.