



Local Farming

Working Landscapes

Working Landscapes is a nonprofit organization that focuses on innovative practices to sustain and revitalize the local food/agricultural economy in Warren County. Working Landscapes is located in Warrenton, North Carolina and was founded by Drs. Carla Norwood and Gabriel Cumming in 2010. In an effort to promote a healthy economy and citizenry, the organization aims to connect local farmers to consumers through initiatives such as the Working Landscapes Food Hub. Through this approach, Working Landscapes has been influential in revitalization efforts of downtown Warrenton by transforming underutilized buildings into investment opportunities that add sustainable value to the community. Working Landscapes assists local farmers to achieve Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification, supports local farmers, delivers fresh, local produce to several school districts within the county and around the state, employs local residents, and educates students about agricultural awareness by establishing community gardens at Warren and Halifax County Schools. For more information, go to workinglandscapesnc.org.

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NCACC / Dominique Walker: What are your short- and long-term goals for your organization?

Dr. Gabriel Cumming: In the long term, Working Landscapes wants to contribute to the economic and environmental resilience of our region—we want to see a vibrant region that can thrive in good times and bad. We want the people of our region to be healthy and prosperous, able to recognize and build upon local natural and cultural assets. We want to play a leading role in developing northeastern North Carolina's food system—the infrastructure, processes, and relationships that connect local farms to local consumers. We also want people in our region to have easy access to nature and outdoor recreational opportunities.



In the short term, we want to continue and build upon our role as our region's leading farm-to-school provider. We want to grow our fresh-cut produce operations, through which we buy vegetables from local farmers, then chop and bag them for schools. Our goal is to supply schools and other institutions across northeastern North Carolina with top-quality fresh-cut produce. We also want to increase awareness of healthy, local farm products among school children and their families. Finally, we want to facilitate connections among businesses who could work together to build a stronger regional food system.

DW: What role did the county play in the establishment of Working Landscapes and how does the county contribute to the ongoing operations?

GC: Warren County government was not involved in the establishment of Working Landscapes; however, it has been instrumental to the development of our food hub. Warren County government officials participated in Growing Local/Buying Local, a stakeholder engagement and research project that Working Landscapes founders Carla Norwood and Gabriel Cumming conducted in 2010-11. Through that project, we collected county leaders' and citizens' ideas for how to grow Warren County's food/agricultural economy. Using ideas generated through that project, Warren County secured two grants over the following two years, which were used to convert a vacant building into the Working Landscapes Produce Center. The Produce Center houses the fresh-cut produce operation that supplies our region's schools. To this day, the equipment at the Produce Center is owned by the county. The county also provides annual operating support.

DW: What economic development impact does Working Landscapes have in your county?

GC: Working Landscapes has directly created approximately twenty jobs over the course of its operations, while also generating income—and supporting job creation—on the farms that supply our hub and at the distributors that deliver our products. Our hub also houses a shared use kitchen where we incubate food businesses; through that side of our operations, we have helped eight female entrepreneurs launch or expand their businesses. We and our staff patronize



numerous other local businesses and contractors, thereby further extending our economic impact in the community.

However, we do not think that direct economic impact is our primary role. Instead, we see ourselves as pioneering the development of alternative supply chains that, if successful, will create significant economic benefits to many across our region. In other words, our job is to take risks, testing innovative approaches so that others do not have to. We hope that the results of our work will extend far beyond our own organization.

DW: How can other communities and counties with similar needs replicate this initiative? Who should they involve in the process and what first steps would you recommend?

GC: Every county in North Carolina should be able to increase the economic impact of agriculture by helping farmers grow food for regional markets. Many are already doing so, but there is still a lot of potential for growth—there is plenty of unmet demand for locally-grown food. However, I would not urge other communities to replicate what we have done—they need to find an approach that is suited to their assets and needs.

So, a good first step is to conduct an in-depth assessment of their local food economy and the opportunities to grow it. To do this, it is valuable to involve all the potential stakeholders in the local food system, e.g. farmers, distributors, processors, institutional buyers (e.g. schools, hospitals), retailers, and consumers. Include those who are currently buying or selling food locally, but also those who are not yet involved but could be: you want to assess not the food economy you have now, but the one you could have. Speak to these people, get them together, understand what they want to achieve and what is holding them back. Working Landscapes is currently doing this on a regional scale in northeastern North Carolina, and we would be interested in working with other communities that want to do it. We use a film-based engagement method called the Community Voice Method (communityvoicemethod.org).

It is also important for a community to assess what other communities nearby are doing. If people do not do that, they risk duplicating existing efforts. For example, we have the capacity to



supply fresh-cut greens for an entire region from our facility, so we do not think it would be beneficial for someone to set up a fresh-cut greens venture in a nearby county, because then we would end up competing and both businesses could suffer. The key is to find a strategy that complements what nearby communities are doing, rather than competing with it.

DW: Sustaining agricultural vitality and establishing innovative strategies to achieve this initiative in Warren County is a major topic of discussion. How can county commissioners and other elected officials contribute to raising awareness about this issue affecting similar communities across the state?

GC: First of all, county commissioners and other elected officials need to recognize that working farms and forests are a really important part of their local economies. Too often, economic development conversations revolve solely around manufacturing and commercial investment, ignoring the central role of agriculture. Especially in rural counties, agricultural economic development is one of the most viable ways forward. Once they believe this, elected leaders can make sure that their constituents also understand. Then, together, they can craft a strategy for growing the agricultural economy.