



# FAIRFIELD GROWING

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AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT PLAN







# 2022 FAIRFIELD COUNTY, OHIO

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## OUR PURPOSE

The impacts of the COVID pandemic are in their third year and have added uncertainty to the farmers of Fairfield County with market fluctuations, meat shortages, and supply-chain disruptions. But as the pandemic also disrupted the economy in general, the federal American Rescue Plan Act – through its Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Funds – has brought an opportunity to the county. A portion of the fiscal recovery funds has made possible a needed update of Fairfield Growing, the 2011 plan for local food and agricultural economic development.

Sales of agriculture and horticulture products add \$125 million to the county's economy, but producing that bounty is complex and has a great cost in time and money. Agriculture has always been a key part of Fairfield County's economy, evolving as the county and the country went through changes. In addition to the challenges of COVID, other changes in agriculture are rampant now, with the loss of most dairies and parts of the corn and soybean marketing infrastructure, with new development on old farmland, and a new generation of farmers looking to improve upon, or shift in a new direction from, the work of their forebears.

**This plan will recommend ways to advance – and raise the profile of – agriculture's vital role in the Fairfield County economy by: ensuring options and opportunities that keep farms profitable, keep farm families on the land, and keep land in agriculture; developing local businesses that add value to agricultural products, create new jobs, and keep food dollars recirculating in the economy; and making healthful local food readily available to families, businesses, and institutions in a way that improves the health of people who live here.**

# GUIDING THEMES

In updating the 2011 Fairfield Growing plan for local food and agricultural economic development – and keeping in mind the Workforce Development and Economic Development pillars of the county's 2022 three-year strategic plan – it will do this through a range of recommendations that advance these guiding themes:

## Organization

Ensure a long-term strategy to advocate for and monitor the progress of the recommendations in this plan. Maintain data and information to share with farmers, consumers, local government, food-related businesses, farm-related businesses, health officials, and others. Establish an ongoing outreach and education campaign to showcase the economic impact of local agriculture, local food, and added value of local products. Organize and/or support local special events that celebrate local food and agriculture. Highlight businesses, institutions, and organizations that purchase and support local food and agriculture.

## Farm Viability

Keeping farms profitable, and ensuring the county's fair fields are conservation-driven and productive, requires strong markets for agricultural products. Viability also means long-term stability through business planning, succession planning, and strategies to enrich soils and adapt to weather extremes. This plan expands the definition of farm "products" to include local produce, protein; commodities; nursery, flowers; and forestry products – but also agritourism (pick-your-own sales, seasonal events, wineries, farm tours, dinners, weddings, and bed & breakfast service). Another key component of farm viability is business planning – including annual budgets, incorporation, succession planning – and dedicated funding for agricultural easements.

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# FAIRFIELD GROWING PLAN





# GUIDING THEMES (CONT.)

## Value Added

For purposes of this report, “value added” refers to the supply chain and every step between the local farm and local consumer. The ideal economic impact of local food is when products are produced, washed, graded, processed, marketed, and distributed locally – when every dollar of value is added locally and recirculated in the local economy. But this requires investment in the local-food “infrastructure” – the facilities needed for all the steps. Having a steady institutional buyer such as a hospital, university, or school district, can make the investment a better bet. This plan will identify various financial tools. The value-added processes offer the greatest potential for new job creation and – but also the greatest challenge in developing a workforce for good-paying jobs.

## Health

Public Health touches most aspects of this plan, but is presented as a separate theme because of its two distinct roles: nutrition and food safety. On nutrition, health departments are critical in helping to ensure that nutritious local food finds access to those segments of the population in greatest need. They also can help ensure that institutions serving local foods are addressing those with special dietary needs, and in leading campaigns to raise awareness of nutritious meals. While state and federal agencies ultimately are responsible for food safety, local health departments oversee those rules at local farmers markets and on-farm markets.

Local refers primarily to Fairfield County. Because economies do not conform to political lines on a map, however, this plan also considers the contiguous counties – Pickaway, Hocking, Perry, Licking, and Franklin – to be local. The agricultural economy in this report meshes with the economy of those counties, and in some cases much of Central Ohio and/or Southeast Ohio. Columbus and Franklin County are significant potential markets for Fairfield County farmers. Facilities in Hocking and Athens counties offer potential partnerships for adding value to Fairfield County products.

One goal of the federal recovery dollars made available to this plan is to address supply-chain challenges. A wide-ranging group of farmers, advocacy groups, local government officials, business leaders, academics, farm-organization representatives, health professionals, educators, and others, met in teams over several months to delve into data and seek solutions to the challenge of strengthening the region’s agricultural economy.

The recommendations that follow are a mixture of policy ideas for county and state government, local public and private institutions, the local and regional business communities, health officials, and, of course, farmers. In most cases, the recommendations are goal-oriented – that is, setting a target and letting those most affected determine the best ways to reach it.



# INTRODUCTION

The completion of Fairfield Growing in 2011 led to creation of the Fairfield County Local Food Council, and to the Keller Market House – which was intended as a hub for, and showcase of, increased availability of locally produced food and other agricultural goods of the sort available at five farmers markets in the county.

The plan initially resulted in more purchase of local goods by Fairfield Medical Center and many area restaurants, and civic celebration of local food through Taste of Fairfield County and 250 Plates, and other initiatives. Local breweries and other food and agriculture businesses emerged with help from the Fairfield County Revolving Loan Fund. Another result was the [Fairfield County Local Foods Guide](#), which is updated regularly on the Fairfield County OSU Extension website.



photo (Credit: SWCD)

Meanwhile, on the regional, state, and national levels, there was growing awareness of local food and the need for improved access to better nutrition. Accessibility of local foods has been increased with wider acceptance of SNAP (the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for eligible low-income families) and Produce Perks, a non-profit Ohio nutrition incentive program that doubles SNAP benefits at farmers markets. Locally, SNAP-Education Program assistants regularly visit classrooms to promote awareness of healthy eating.

Looking very broadly at available figures, farming in Fairfield County has been stable since the original Fairfield Growing plan. The U.S. Census of Agriculture shows a 6 percent drop in the total number of farms from 2012 to 2017, and a 6 percent drop in the market value of products sold in the same period – but market value reflects both commodity prices and yields, which can vary from year to year. The drop from \$105.8 million to \$99.8 million may not be significant unless it continues as a trend in the 2022 Census.

Likewise, a decline from 1,189 farms to 1,117 in 2017 can be interpreted in many ways. Three-quarters of that decline in the number of farms (50 of 67 fewer farms) is attributed to the tiniest of farms – those with less than \$2,500 in annual sales. Meanwhile, the per-farm average for market value of products was virtually unchanged from 2012 to 2017 – dropping \$92 per farm, a 0.001 percent decrease.

# INTRODUCTION (CONT.)

But broad data do not tell the whole story. The number of dairy cows in the county was nearly halved, from 1,325 in 2012 to 700 in 2017 – a decline that has continued since then. But in adding beef cattle, the total number of cattle and calves has stayed virtually the same.



Just over half of Fairfield County's land mass is in farms and 17 percent is in forestland. Production is wide-ranging – including traditional crops of soybeans, wheat, hay, and corn; traditional livestock, including beef cattle, swine, sheep, and goats; and many specialties, such as horses, bees, Christmas trees, fruits, vegetables, flowers, and landscaping plants. The mix is poised to become even more diverse. Already, one local farm raises prawns, and that number could grow as opportunities for aquaculture increase. "Vertical" farming of greens and other produce can be added to traditional farms, or done in commercial and industrial zones. Some commodity farmers are experimenting with small grains for milling and brewing. And solar panels could become yet another "crop" in the county.

But not all the news was good. In the same period, the Fairfield County Local Food Council lost members and momentum. The produce auction at Bremen was discontinued, and commodity farmers lost some market options when the Interstate Commodities Inc. grain elevator in Thurston shut down. A lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed some weaknesses in the nation's food supply chain. Those weaknesses, for a time, were a boon to one Lancaster market, and kept meat in the coolers of many Fairfield County households.

This update continues the focus on local-food production, processing, and distribution, but it also extends to all types of agriculture in the county. The goal is to help every farm remain productive and profitable, and to add value – through processing and distribution, but also through tourism and special events – and keep agriculture dollars recirculating in the local economy. Farmers know the best way to keep the county's "fair fields" in agricultural production is to ensure the viability and economic benefits of farming.



# COMPLEXITIES OF COMMODITY FARMING



**“Farm to Table”** isn’t really a thing. It’s a great marketing slogan for a restaurant, but even with very fresh, hyper-local operations, the slogan falls far short of the real day-to-day, year-to-year challenges of farming. Local produce has a much shorter supply chain than, say, commodity grains or mass-market meat and poultry, but in either case, the process begins long before the seeds are in the ground. These are some of the challenges farmers face every year:

## **Land.**

Farmers commonly own only a portion of the land they work. They have sole discretion on planting and managing the land they own – seeking long-term effectiveness of conservation practices (cover cropping, carbon farming, organic certification). But much – if not most – of the land is leased, and several factors can inhibit long-term planning on leased land: uncertainty of leases year to year; urbanization and development of surrounding farmland; the possible need for drainage tiles; and land costs. Cash rent for cropland in Fairfield County has nearly doubled from \$80 per acre to \$156 since 2008, with fluctuations from year to year. Cash rent per acre of pasture has climbed from \$42 in 2010 to \$58.50 today. A variety of factors determine the sale price of farmland in different settings, but in all cases, prices are rising.

## **Infrastructure.**

Supply chains lead both to farms and away from them. Farmers need to buy seeds, fertilizers, chemicals, feed and other goods from cooperatives or other suppliers – which have been consolidating into larger and more-distant locations for decades. Fairfield County has lost two in the past decade. The cost of these “inputs” tends to follow the fluctuation of commodity prices – which means farmers have trouble getting ahead even when market value for their goods is high.

Once the crop is grown, they may try to get creative with marketing – for example, storing grain on the farm and selling it when prices are right, but that requires the expense of grain drying, storage, and shipping. It also requires dependable internet access – too often a challenge in rural areas. While the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture suggests that 83 percent of Fairfield County farms had internet access, local data show that the vast majority have access only to a very modest, and unreliable, service of less than 10 megabits per second.

Many farmers around the country and in Fairfield County are experimenting with “climate-smart” or “regenerative” practices – cover crops, relay cropping, or intercropping (growing multiple crops at the same time) to diversify their operation. Local wholesale dealers have not yet embraced this – focusing instead on standard corn, soybeans and wheat, rather than adding rye, barley, oats, or other small grains for which local brewers, distillers, and millers are developing markets. These regenerative practices can lead to lower equipment and input costs but require more management – a challenge, given the volatile weather patterns in recent years.

## **Equipment.**

Tractors, planters, drills, tillage equipment, roller-crimpers, and combines are necessary on many farms – and they all are getting more technological and expensive. A large, state-of-the-art combine may cost \$1 million, and repairs can be made only by licensed dealers.

While Fairfield County growers may sell up to \$125 million of agriculture and horticulture products in a year, producing that bounty is complex and expensive, and it requires countywide planning and policies as well as tough on-farm decisions.

# CHALLENGES

Sixty years ago, Lancaster had three dairy processors and two fruit wholesalers. That's in addition to eight dairies, 10 meat packers, and 25 produce distributors in Franklin County. Except for several produce distributors, nearly all of that regional infrastructure is gone. The interest in rebuilding some of that local capacity goes against a decades-long trend away from it – but communities across the country are having some success. And when new meatpacking plants open, for example, communities have found significant increases in local beef and pork production. In Fairfield County, some farmers are limiting their herds because there is not enough local processing capacity.



The county has lost much of its capacity to add value to what's grown on local farms. The Bremen Farmers' Auction closed in 2020, as did Rienschild Finer Meats more than a decade ago. The COVID pandemic underscored, and supply-chain problems revealed, fragility in our food systems. Bay Food Market, with locally raised beef and pork from Bay Packing in Pleasantville, saw its sales more than double early in the pandemic when large grocery chains were unable to stock enough meat. But once chain stores were restocked, Bay's sales returned to pre-pandemic levels.

A related challenge is maintaining the agriculture-support infrastructure – the companies that sell feed, seed, and equipment, and that purchase and ship the bounty.

More broadly, economics, climate, and development pressure are affecting agriculture in Central Ohio. Fluctuating commodity prices are always a factor, but low milk prices have led to a national shakeout in dairy farming, including Fairfield County. The county's farmers also lost a marketing option with the closure of the grain elevator at Thurston, and a source of inputs and other services when Sunrise Cooperative closed its Lancaster location.



# BAY FOOD MARKET

## CASE STUDY



photo (Credit: Bay)

**Bay Food Market and Bay Packing were vertically integrated long before that term became a trend and catchphrase in business.**

Garl Bay bought a grocery store on the edge of downtown Lancaster in 1932, and 17 years later his son, Hugh, bought a farm north of town and added a slaughterhouse on the site. That meant the family could raise steers and hogs, slaughter them for market, and sell the meat at their own store. The Bays were their own middleman.

### Bay Food Market still sells locally raised beef and pork, processed at its own facility

In the early 1980s, Charles ("Chum") and Kathleen Kraft bought the market, farm, and meatpacking businesses from the Bay family. Chum Kraft had worked for Hugh Bay for years before the purchase. The Krafts decided not to continue raising livestock, but their son, Daniel, helped run the packing plant while another son, David, managed the store. The businesses are now run by the remaining children: David Kraft and Karen Kraft Crutcher. The pork and beef now is purchased from farms mostly in Fairfield, Perry, Hocking, and Pickaway counties.



Small, independent grocery stores are rare these days. Those that survive tend to have a specialty – usually a high-service meat counter. Having its own packing plant gives Bay Foods a boost. With its own supply chain, it is protected from national interruptions – as when the COVID pandemic led to a meat shortage in supermarkets across the country.

But the market and packing plant never missed a beat. They ramped up processing and aggressively kept the store stocked to the point that revenues tripled in the time of national meat scarcity. The market continued selling what the national chains couldn't keep in stock. But the new customers were only temporary as most went back to the chain stores when the crisis faded.

Still, the experience illustrates the critical value of local food production and processing. Not only can a community keep eating during a supply-chain disruption, but residents can keep their food dollars recirculating in the local economy and create local jobs in packing and distribution.

In addition to supplying the store, Bay Packing does custom butchering of beef, pork, lamb, goat, and old fashioned, skin-on roasting hogs. It also processes livestock from the Fairfield County Fair (and other area fairs) – which allows kids to see the finished quality of the meat animal they raised. In the wake of COVID, the business has raised wages for its nine employees at the plant and 10 at the store.

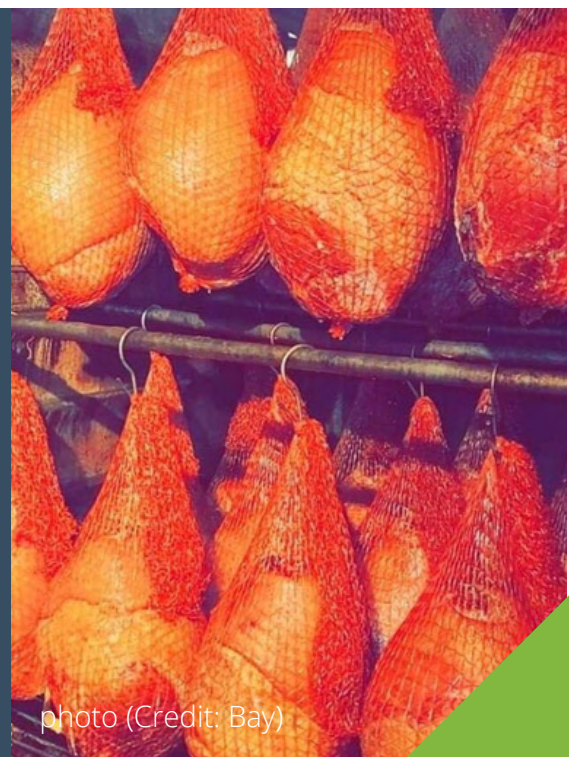


photo (Credit: Bay)

# CHALLENGES (CONT.)

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Technology is another challenge – from highly technical precision-farming machinery to the internet. While the U.S. Census of Agriculture shows that 83 percent of Fairfield County farms have internet access, the Fairfield County Community Technology Action Plan in 2017 showed a wide range of demand for and usage of internet services among farmers. And the trend is clear: Access is steadily becoming more important – whether for studying market trends, linking with equipment for precision farming, or other needs. Yet 61.6 percent of farms in the county survey had access only to a very modest service of less than 10 megabits per second. The types of service they subscribe to, and the monthly rates, vary widely.

Local rural internet access is not something Fairfield County can address alone. It is a statewide challenge, and the State of Ohio and the federal government have increased support for more-widespread coverage. Yet Fairfield County and other local governments can, and should, take an active advocacy role.

Powerful rain and hail storms, often interspersed with long periods of drought, have wreaked havoc on crops and pastures, with erosion and nutrient runoff affecting waterways in many places. (Parts of Fairfield and Perry counties were declared disaster areas by USDA's Farm Services Agency in 2012, 2015, 2019, and 2020.) In response, more farms are experimenting with and adopting practices to mitigate the challenges by holding soil in place and retaining moisture in dry periods.

Planting off-season cover crops serves this purpose and also may create opportunities to develop markets for these cover crops. Already in Central Ohio, some producers are growing wheat, rye, barley and other crops that can be malted for use by local brewers and distillers. There may be opportunity for local milling as well.

Business and residential development, especially in the northern parts of the county, is another trend that affects agriculture. Likewise with alternative energy, particularly solar-power arrays proposed on farmland at a number of Central Ohio sites. It's also a concern of the Ohio Department of Agriculture's Office of Farmland Preservation. The challenge is how to make agriculture competitive with other uses of rural land – and whether alternative power sources can be made compatible with agriculture.



# CHALLENGES (CONT.)

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A look at the current conditions of Fairfield County agriculture also requires a post-mortem on why the Local Food Council faded away and why Taste of Fairfield County (sponsored by Lancaster Fairfield Chamber of Commerce) is on hiatus. The fate of the food council is not rare. Other Ohio communities have faced similar challenges after initial success. Taste of Fairfield was in many ways a victim of its own success. It got too big and too popular too quickly, and the demise was a matter of logistics, expense, and volunteer time rather than lack of interest. Fairfield Growing planners believe events such as Taste of Fairfield and 250 Plates (a charity event organized by Destination Downtown Lancaster and the Fairfield County Foundation) can still be successful – and reach more people – through some civic sponsorship and events that are smaller and more targeted to specific audiences.

Many of these challenges require funding. How can we finance the improvements and infrastructure needed to expand the local-food and agricultural economy in Fairfield County? The county's revolving loan fund has been, among other things, important in the success of several local breweries. But, as gap financing, it may not be sufficient to develop the sorts of processing necessary to take locally raised livestock and produce to the next level.

Another challenge is institutional. Fairfield County's local food council faded after a strong start with release of the 2011 plan. Fairfield Medical Center had local sources for all of its apples and ground beef. Changes in staffing and management among institutions also can mean changes in local-purchasing policies. Local orchardists have noticed that colleges and universities in the region may go back and forth over a decade or two – buying local apples for a few years, changing the policy, and then buying locally again. Lack of consistent markets makes it tough for growers to plan.

It's best to work closely with local institutions – getting them engaged in the community aspect of local agriculture, and buying locally as a matter of institutional policy rather than administrative policy.

# OPPORTUNITIES

All challenges pose opportunities, and it is good news that interest in local food and agriculture is growing in Fairfield County – as evidenced by the existence of five farmers markets and growing sales among farmers focused on local produce and meat. That, combined with local breweries and wineries in and around the county, underscores a greater public awareness of local businesses and local economies. The same trend is evident around the state and across the country.



Through the efforts of federal and Ohio governments, The Ohio State University, and school districts across the state, public schools have steadily increased purchases of local food for student meals over the past decade. OSU holds quarterly Ohio Farm to School State Network meetings that attract dozens of food-service officials from Ohio schools and provide helpful strategies for districts. OSU Extension's Farm to School initiative also promotes serving early child-care facilities as a way for producers to work their way up to larger districts.

More Fairfield County farmers have established CSAs – five Community Supported Agriculture farms are listed in the Local Foods Guide – with delivery or drop-off points for consumers. Farmers are experimenting with other distribution and sales models, such as Market Wagon, an online farmer's market with a Columbus presence, that delivers directly to customers' homes. Community gardens have sprung up in Pickerington and through the Southend Block Watch in Lancaster. And a Fairfield Growing Facebook page is updated daily by volunteers, featuring posts from individual farms and markets across the county and region.



# ROCKSIDE WINERY

## CASE STUDY



photo (Credit: Rockside)

**Robin Coolidge didn't set out to become a farmer, but when he bought a small winery in Columbus 16 years ago, his path from computer science to viticulture began to emerge. Within 10 years, he owned a tractor and had become familiar with the three-point hitch.**

He and his wife, Valerie, planted two rows of grapes at their Wyandotte Winery in Columbus – partly for appearances and marketing, but also to learn about growing grapes. In 2014, they bought Rockside Winery, which opened several years earlier on 17 acres north of Lancaster on Ohio Rt. 37.

**"The vineyard was our first inroad to agriculture," he said. "When we bought Rockside, we had quite a learning curve, but a decent knowledge" of the challenges of production – aided by OSU Extension and the Ohio Grape Industries Committee, part of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Only about six of the 17 acres are currently used for the vineyard, barn, winery, and a field of lavender, where winery customers can pick their own flowers. Much of the property is grassland, but Coolidge said another five acres are suitable for growing grapes – or maybe something completely different.**



photo (Credit: Rockside)

Like dairymen and row-crop farmers, he doesn't want to be totally dependent on one crop in a time of volatile markets. His lavender field is one example of the diversity he's considering: Tending the perennial flowers is fairly easy, and their harvest period does not conflict with that of the grapes. He's also experimenting with beekeeping – primarily to produce honey, but perhaps at some point to supply other apiculturists or provide pollination services.

**"If one thing fails, we can try something else. It's easy to change if you don't have huge amounts invested," he said.**

For Rockside, keeping things in the family is economical. Valerie Coolidge manages the vineyard – tending the vines and spraying to keep molds and mildews in check. Son Ryan Coolidge is general manager and winemaker. But the family operation added a part-time field helper last year as the business diversifies.

Coolidge remains bullish on Ohio wines (and Ohio beer and spirits, which are served at Rockside), but is aware the market could become saturated, given that the number of Ohio wineries increased from 86 to almost 400 in about 15 years. Still, Coolidge sees nearby wineries as more of an opportunity than a threat right now because of the ability of groups of them to jointly market themselves as part of a "wine trail."



# OPPORTUNITIES (CONT.)

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Keller Market House showcases and provides a venue for some locally produced goods. It also provides limited functions of a commercial kitchen, as the 2011 Fairfield Growing plan suggested. Community kitchens – especially those that can accommodate canning and bottling of processed local products – have appeared in more and more communities around the country and the state. The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACENet) in Athens has been an incubator for Southeast Ohio local-food entrepreneurs for 25 years. Fairfield County farmers have expressed interest in that kind of facility. ACENet and Keller Market House already have embarked on a collaborative grant application partly as a result of the Fairfield Growing planning process.

Such value-added projects have become a goal of local-food initiatives in Ohio and other states. In addition, OSU Extension South Centers, in Piketon, offers business-development workshops, the Ohio Cooperative Development Center, and Direct Agricultural Marketing Program specialists knowledgeable about direct marketing, agrotourism, and using social media for marketing.



Ohio is seeing products and technologies that could bring new people into local agriculture, or create new opportunities for existing farmers. Ohio aquaculture had at least 59 farms on 1,387 acres, with \$6.7 million in sales, based on the 2017 Census of Agriculture. One of those farms, Don's Prawns – which has 2.5 acres of ponds – is in Fairfield County.

OSU Extension reports that the demand for Ohio-raised fish and seafood greatly exceeds the supply. A significant barrier to growth is the lack of processing that most consumers expect before buying fish. Most of Ohio's farmed fish and seafood comes from family-run operations selling whole live fish. Much of the rest is exported for processing, then re-imported for consumption.



# OPPORTUNITIES (CONT.)

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Vertical farming can come in many forms – from a large, new modern facility built specifically for growing indoor microgreens and other high value crops, to a garage or shipping container equipped with grow lights and racks for trays of plants with water lines for irrigation. Nationally, the concept is attracting investors with lots of money but a lack of growing experience. But Central Ohio growers have expanded into the field, usually producing for restaurants, and there is room for more such growth.

In a way, it's a new version of the old greenhouses that were common in many Ohio cities. Inefficient heating, high energy costs, and environmental regulations ended that era, but the new generation of vertical farms and modern greenhouses is taking root. In recent years, Northwest Ohio has had major investment in large, state-of-the-art greenhouses – all from Canadian companies. Local investment in such facilities could occur on farm ground or along industrial corridors.

Solar farms can present opportunity for some Fairfield County farms, adding another revenue stream. But it also takes land out of production – ideally the least-productive acres. It's coming to Fairfield and other Central Ohio counties, and yet there are many questions to be answered. Solar arrays may accommodate sheep grazing, but first there must be a steady market for lamb and/or wool. But if a farm owner gives up the agricultural use during the term of the solar lease, solar companies must contribute a payment in lieu of taxes for land currently affected by Current Agricultural Use Valuation. Perhaps the county portion of this payment could be dedicated to farmland-preservation programs. It's too soon to make detailed recommendations about solar farms, but local governments and the agricultural community need to study the matter and work closely together.

This report has more references to tourism, weddings, alcohol, and alternative energy than the 2011 plan did. That shows how much the agricultural economy has changed in just 10 years – and how many more sources of farm revenue are available. A decade ago, cold-weather production mostly meant livestock and winter wheat. But cover crops – including small grains for milling, distilling, and brewing – are becoming a common way to nurture the soil. Also, produce growers use high tunnels to extend their seasons. Seasonal activities and special events – building on the popularity of U-Pick apples, pumpkins, and strawberries – bring more and more city folk to the farm to spend money. Destination weddings have boosted the already-booming agritourism field. These do not supplant traditional farming, but add new revenue to stabilize on-farm economics.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ORGANIZATION

Re-establish an ongoing Fairfield County Local Food Council and create a comprehensive online resource for consumers, farmers of all kinds, food-related businesses and others – a “food and agriculture information hub.” These initiatives are the foundation of an ongoing effort to reach out and educate residents about local food and agriculture, and to advocate for the realization of all recommendations in this report.

**Fairfield County Commissioners** have requested a list of recommendations that can be launched relatively quickly in order to “jump start” the longer-term implementation of the Fairfield Growing plan. Below is a list of five recommendations from the plan that – while not necessarily the biggest ones – can be implemented quickly to plant the seeds of others:

- Create a Fairfield County Local Food Council to guide and advocate on behalf of the recommendations in this plan; the council should be affiliated with an existing civic institution; members should represent various interests, and should be approved by Fairfield County commissioners. *(Organization, recommendation #1)*
- Schedule a special meeting with Fairfield 33 Development Alliance, Fairfield County commissioners, and Local Food Council members to discuss the broader economic benefits of Fairfield Growing recommendations, and seek Alliance support for further studies. *(Value-added, recommendation #1)*
- Seek funding for, and conduct, a thorough, professional market study on realistic demand for local food and agriculture products. *(Organization, recommendation #4)*
- Engage the Council of Development Finance Agencies, or similar entity, to do an agricultural economic development “landscape map” to prioritize financing options. *(Value-added, recommendation #2)*
- Conduct an architectural/feasibility study of the Pirom’s Inc. site in Lancaster for redevelopment as a food-processing facility. *(Value-added, recommendation #4)*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ORGANIZATION (CONT.)

**To carry out the recommendations in this report, Fairfield County needs an organized entity to guide the process, continue gathering information, educate the community and civic leaders, reach out to and develop allies, make information widely available, and serve as a long-term advocate for agriculture – and social and economic development. Here is a list of recommendations to achieve this:**

### **1) Re-establish a Fairfield County Local Food Council**

The original council was created to advocate for and monitor progress of the recommendations in the 2011 Fairfield Growing Plan. It was active for several years and generated momentum to establish Keller Market House, promote local agriculture through the ongoing Fairfield Growing page on Facebook, support local restaurant and institutional purchases of local food, creation of the Fairfield County Local Foods Guide, and other activities.

A revived council is essential to moving forward on recommendations in this updated plan, but the new council must have institutional stability. Here are the recommended guidelines to ensure that the Fairfield County Local Food Council remains a long-term, viable entity.

- The Council will serve as the primary institutional advocate for adoption of these recommendations by local governments, businesses, and institutions.
- The Council should be affiliated with an existing institution or agency or organization to ensure long-term continuity. Such an established entity could serve as an ongoing force to keep the quasi-independent food council active.
- To further ensure long-term participation, the Council should have standard seats representing specific agriculture- and economic-related interests and entities. Such interests include, but are not limited to: farmers (local-food producers as well as commodity farmers); farm organizations; public health; economic development; local government; finance; FFA/4H agriculture education; restaurant/retail; institutional food buyers (schools, colleges, hospitals, etc.); not-for-profit/faith-based advocacy groups; and food supply-chain businesses. Members should be approved by the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ORGANIZATION (CONT.)

- Ensure active participation of agricultural education, public health, and other interests that opted not to be actively engaged in the planning process.
- By the end of June, Fairfield County Regional Planning, OSU Extension, and the Fairfield Soil & Water Conservation District will schedule an organizational meeting for a revived Fairfield Growing Local Food Council.
- The Council could (but need not) incorporate as an independent, not-for-profit organization.

### 2) Establish an online Fairfield Growing Local Food and Agriculture Information Hub

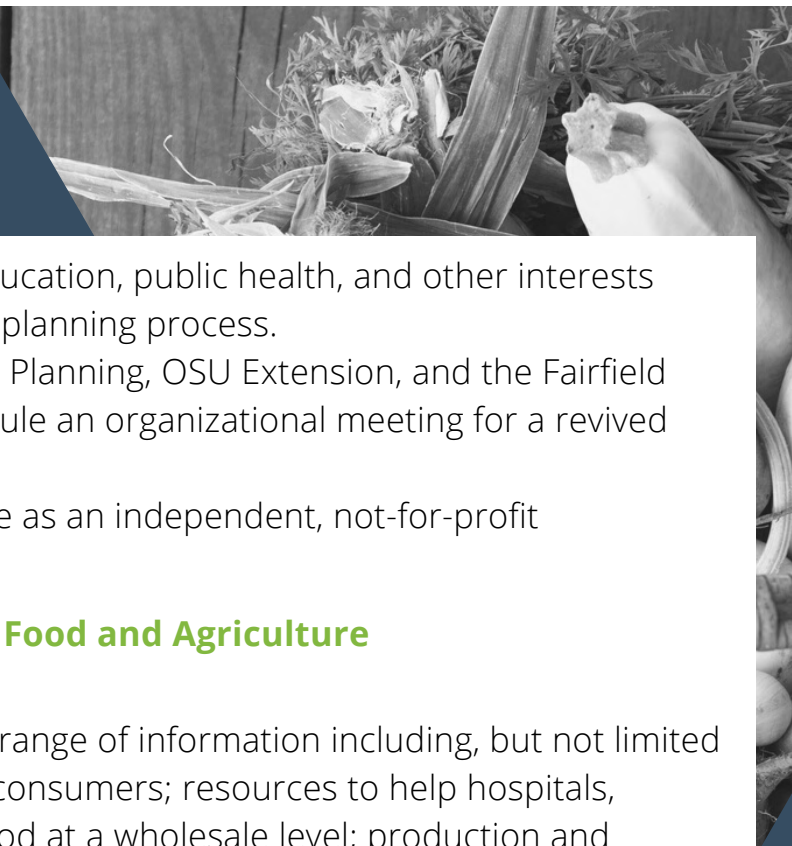
The database should include a comprehensive range of information including, but not limited to: nutrition and where-to-buy information for consumers; resources to help hospitals, schools, restaurants, and groceries buy local food at a wholesale level; production and marketing tips for farmers; information and resources to help farmers with business and succession plans, preservation easements, co-op development, etc.; resources and processes farmers can use to improve soils and mitigate environmental and climate challenges; state, federal, and philanthropic assistance for supply-chain development, marketing initiatives, adoption of new farm practices, and diversification. The information hub should:

- be affiliated with an existing civic institution, agency, or organization to ensure long-term continuity
- include separate pages or sections for consumers, producers, supply chain, businesses and other interests.

### 3) Produce an annual update on the progress of the plan for the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners.

### 4) Seek funding for, and conduct, a thorough, professional market study on realistic demand for local food and agriculture products – examining what's available, cost guidelines, and the extent of processing and/or packaging needed prior to delivery.

### 5) Develop partnerships with local organizations, businesses, agencies, etc., to assist with hosting and funding of community efforts to promote local, and to keep consumers' food dollars recirculating through our communities.





# RECOMMENDATIONS ORGANIZATION (CONT.)

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- 6) Re-establish fun promotional events such as Taste of Fairfield, 250 Plates,** etc. with new models, targeted events, funding, and ways to compensate growers and restaurants for their efforts, etc.
  - 7) Promote professional opportunities for producers,** on marketing, grant-writing, business-development, and, in particular, support for beginning farmers or farmers transitioning from one type of agricultural operation to another.
  - 8) Organize marketing forums to bring buyers, sellers, and supply-chain players together** – such as a facilitated program to make farm-to-school connections. (As with The Great Lakes Great Apple Crunch.)
  - 9) Organize regular farm tours** along the lines of the statewide series by Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association and OSU Extension – showcasing agriculture for consumers, as well as providing farmers with a showcase for different practices and products.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FARM VIABILITY

Ensure the economic viability of Fairfield County farms. Farms are not truly “sustainable” unless they are economically sustainable.



photo (Credit: SWCD)

Farmers have always known that the best way to preserve farmland is to make sure farms are profitable. That is at the core of this plan. The goal is not just to protect farmland – but to do so by strengthening Fairfield County’s agricultural economy. Farms are strongest when that economy – including entities from which farmers buy equipment and inputs and the supply chains through which they sell their bounty – has a solid local presence.



photo (Credit: SWCD)

Strong, viable farms also must be resilient. Changes are coming quickly, given the expense of farmland, cost of high-technology machinery, fluctuation of commodity prices, fluctuation from record droughts to record rainfalls, market volatility that has reduced the number of dairy farms, new and rediscovered farm practices to improve soils, and much more. Many farms are charting new directions; others are diversifying into additional revenue sources; all are experimenting with new methods and technologies. Developing options and opportunities for the next generation of Fairfield County farmers is imperative.

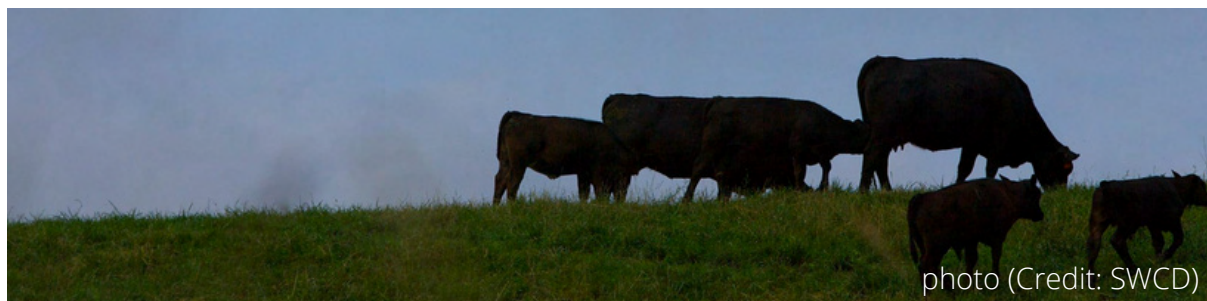


photo (Credit: SWCD)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FARM VIABILITY (CONT.)



1. **Promote on-farm diversity, soil health, and climate-smart agriculture.** (Ohio Smart Agriculture, a report published in 2019 by Solutions from the Land, provides extensive background and recommendations on how to do this in its “call to action for Ohio’s food system and agricultural economy.”)
2. **Encourage, promote, and possibly fund cooperation, particularly among local-food producers**, through shared aggregation, grading, storage, distribution and marketing of some locally produced goods. This could be done as a leading farmer, a co-op, or a third-party processor.
3. **Promote markets for small grains and other cover crops increasingly used by area farmers:** Local brewers and distillers are buying small grains that are malted, and small mills are emerging to use barley, wheat, oats, rye, and other crops.
4. **Promote on-farm experiences**, such as U-Pick markets, harvest-season activities, farm tours, weddings, bed & breakfast inns, and educational or environmental programs.
5. **Ensure rural access to broadband.** Too many Fairfield County farms lack reliable or fast internet access at a time when technology and information is increasingly vital.
6. **Work with agriculture attorneys on programs for farm business planning**, succession planning, incorporation, etc. The Ohio Local Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (LAEPP) intends to revise its application process to include additional points for farms that have taken such steps.
7. **Encourage farmers’ collaboration on challenges they share** – such as internet access, shared buying of inputs in groups to cut expenses, achieving economies of scale while remaining separate entities, and other opportunities.
8. **Seek additional funding for agricultural easement purchase programs.** This might include seeking state policy changes – such as ensuring that, when CAUV land is taken out of production for development, the recouped taxes can be dedicated to future easement purchases. Similarly, any local taxes collected on solar farms should be used to mitigate the loss of farmland. Seek more public funding for farmland preservation. With the likely growth of solar farms, holders of leases are expected to pay CAUV recoupment fees in the form of Payment in lieu of Taxes for the land taken out of production. County Commissioners should dedicate county portions to farmland preservation.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## VALUE ADDED

Support development of a robust supply chain for local food and other products from Fairfield County farms, and do so in a way that is fully integrated into the broader economy, draws on existing local businesses, easily coexists with other business development along the Rt. 33 corridor, and responsibly utilizes the county's land and water resources.

Developing supply-chain infrastructure is essential to achieving significant growth in local-food production and marketing in Fairfield and surrounding counties. Aggregating, sorting, grading and even packaging local produce under a shared brand with shared marketing will allow producers to scale up and build sales to restaurants, groceries, and institutions. That, along with much-needed expansion in meat-processing capacity, will create new jobs in the agricultural sector and extend the reach of food dollars in the local economy.

- 1) Develop a local-food supply chain and thoroughly incorporate the dynamic food system into the broader economy** by taking advantage of proximity to existing food-packaging businesses (Blue Label, Anchor Hocking, WestRock cartons, SRI glass etching, etc.). Tie it in with industrial development along the Rt. 33 corridor – which also presents opportunities for new operations such as vertical farming.
- 2) Engage the Council of Development Finance Agencies** (CDFA), or other entity, to do an agricultural economic development “landscape map” for Fairfield County that would identify finance options for such food-infrastructure development, including county-issued bonds, meat-processing grants from U.S. Department of Agriculture and Ohio Department of Agriculture, and other sources to enlarge county commissioners’ financing toolbox. (CDFA has worked with the Southeast Nebraska Economic Development District on a food finance plan for 16 counties.) This could be done, in part, with any American Rescue Plan funding remaining from the Fairfield Growing plan update.

# BLUE LABEL



## CASE STUDY

As a printing company, Blue Label can trace its ancestry back 65 years in Lancaster. As a label printer/maker for food and beverage products, the heritage goes back two decades. The evolution coincided with a decline in the need for printed forms and envelopes and rise in digital communication – and an emerging boom in local food, beers and spirits. Amid those changes and steady growth, the company has grown from 15 to 150 employees.

Blue Label was at the table for the 2011 Fairfield Growing plan and, since that time, has built relationships with many local farmers and food producers through the Lancaster Farmers Market and Keller Market House. The company has worked on projects with about 120 Fairfield County businesses over the last five years.



“Blue Label Packaging Company is part of this community, so what benefits the county benefits us,” said company president Andrew Boyd. “For that reason, we’ll always be proponents of the Fairfield Growing initiative and all it does for local agriculture and food.”

“As a producer of custom packaging, it is our goal to equip county growers and businesses with labels and packaging to allow them to be more competitive in larger markets,” Boyd added. That includes local businesses that have expanded to regional and national distribution. That kind of expansion meets the goals of local economic development as well as Blue Label’s goals.

Today, Blue Label serves businesses from coast to coast as well as in its own back yard – such as Vino de Milo in Athens, a maker of specialty foods. “Milo’s and Blue label spread their wings and grew together,” Boyd said. Other area partners include Rockmill Brewing in Lithopolis and Jackie O’s in Athens, along with Watershed Distillery, Middle West Spirits, and Land Grant Brewing in Columbus.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## VALUE ADDED (CONT.)



**3) Create an agricultural-finance task force** to analyze those and other tools and ideas used elsewhere in the country. Include a county commissioner and/or economic-development director on the panel. This could be a sub-group of the Local Food Council, with the addition of local bank lenders, Farm Credit, and others with knowledge of financing tools. Among possible tasks:

- Assemble a summary of all federal, state, and foundation grants, and other potential funding sources. USDA has a wide range of food-related grants, and during COVID has proposed additional funding for local and regional food systems.
- Consider partnerships with other food and agriculture entities in the region. Athens-based ACENet (Appalachian Center for Economic Networks) has offered to share grant-writing duties with Fairfield County efforts, in return for a 20 percent stake in the grants.
- Examine the 2017 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis report, Harvesting Opportunity, for ideas. The 300-page report, subtitled The Power of Food System Investments to Transform Communities, comprises 17 chapters of food-system case studies from around the country.

**4) Develop processing and distribution infrastructure** to create markets for a more-diverse array of locally produced goods and to add value locally to those goods. This could include, but not be limited to: a meat-processing facility (the creation of which would likely lead farmers to increase their herds, based on experiences elsewhere); milling and malting facilities to increase markets for small grains used by many farmers practicing regenerative agriculture; and commercial kitchens and other facilities for canning or packaging goods from produce farmers. USDA Local Food Promotion Program grants have been used for market studies and other planning initiatives.

- Explore adaptive re-use of vacant agriculture facilities (Thurston elevator, the former Pirom's Inc. frozen-food facility in Lancaster, etc.) as possible locations for new processing and distribution facilities.
- Include training and awareness initiatives as part of an effort to develop markets for small grains and other products of regenerative farming. Those products, used as cover crops or as part of robust crop rotations, can improve soil health, make soils more resilient during heavy rains or summer droughts, and sequester carbon.
- Include training in and awareness of aquaculture and aquaponics to produce local fish and seafood, and indoor vertical farming to produce microgreens and other leafy greens and vegetables, and support ventures to develop these kinds of farming..



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## VALUE ADDED (CONT.)

- 5) **Pursue agreements to sell local produce, protein, and other goods to institutional food-service** operations, such as Fairfield Medical Center, school districts throughout the county, and early child-care centers.
- 6) **Boost job-training efforts** that focus on farm work, meat processing, and other food-system skills.
- 7) **Develop a “Fairfield Growing” local brand** for marketing of local food and other farm products.
- 8) **Develop a winter farm market and a commercial kitchen** to expand uses and accessibility of local goods (possibly affiliated with Keller Market House).



photo (Credit: SWCD)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## HEALTH

Ensure that children and families in need are able to share in the increased bounty of locally produced and processed food in Fairfield County, and that local, state, and federal health officials work closely with local producers on ways to ensure the safety of food.

Public health is an underlying factor in all parts of this plan, but plays a distinct role that needs to be emphasized separately. Below are recommendations on food safety and nutritional value.

- 1) Coordinate with health officials** in neighboring counties and health and agriculture officials at the state level to ensure consistent interpretations of food-safety standards for meat, dairy, poultry, produce and baked goods sold at farmers markets and elsewhere. Farmers and vendors often face different standards at markets from one county to another.
- 2) Increase availability and awareness of WIC, SNAP, Produce Perks**, and other programs that make local and healthful food more accessible and affordable to people of limited means.
- 3) Develop goals and guidelines to make sure institutional food services** are able to accommodate people with special dietary needs in schools, medical facilities, and other sites.
- 4) Broadly increase nutrition education** and make recommendations available on the local food and agriculture information hub.

A close-up, low-angle shot of the American flag waving against a clear blue sky. The red and white stripes and the blue field with white stars are prominent.

# the CONCLUSION

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## FAIRFIELD COUNTY, OHIO

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Fairfield County is perfectly situated for an agricultural renaissance. Despite climate and environmental challenges, despite a current lack of processing infrastructure and loss of past infrastructure, despite an aging farmer population, and despite houses and businesses sprouting where corn and beans once grew, the county still has rich soil, a powerful agricultural heritage, and a growing population that is showing an interest in buying what's produced here.

This plan is an effort to harness those opportunities and steer them in a coordinated direction – and in the process, integrate them into the broader and historic economy. One such example would be new plants that package locally grown products in glass containers that represent Lancaster's heritage, and stamped with labels from still-new but burgeoning Blue Label.

**In subcommittee meetings, interviews with producers, and other community outreach, there was a consistent chorus of participants calling for value-added initiatives and the financing that drives them. The recommendations in this plan reflect that desire for processing and distribution infrastructure, an understanding that painful changes can lead to new opportunities in the next generation of farmers, and a hope to bring Fairfield County's rural and urban communities into greater harmony.**

In the last 10 years, the region has seen the birth of Keller Market House, the growth of farmers markets, and the popularity of Community Supported Agriculture and home delivered market baskets or boxes full of food from local growers. These have raised awareness of local food. Now there's a burgeoning agritourism movement to make people more aware of the farms and of agriculture in general.

All of these factors set the stage for an integrated economic strategy that links urban and rural parts of Fairfield County, increases the importance we place on farmland, creates new food and agriculture-related jobs, and keeps our food dollars recirculating in the local economy.



# HARVEST ADVENTURES

## CASE STUDY

Q: When did weddings become an agricultural crop?

A: When economic changes pushed traditional family farms to diversify.



Harvest Adventures – 80 acres on Locust Grove Road near Bremen – began in 2009 after a devastating drop in milk prices drove Doug and Lisa Burnworth to sell their dairy herd and try some new ventures, starting with pumpkins and produce, and, later, Christmas trees. The farm now offers a 4.5-acre corn maze, horse-drawn hayrides, autumn mums, and since 2021, alcohol – beer, wine, and cider.

That's the public face of the farm. But a large majority of its revenue is from traditional farming – corn, soybeans, hay, pasture, and cattle that's sold locally as freezer beef. State law requires that for a farm to be taxed only on the agricultural-use value of the land, at least 50 percent of the revenue must come from agricultural production.

**“The beauty of being self-employed is that you can adapt when needed,” said Lisa Burnworth, noting the many changes they’ve made in both sides of their operation the last decade or so.**

The Burnworths, who get 65 percent of their farm revenue from production, have no problem with that because the farming is their first love, and the revenue from Harvest Adventures helps ensure they can keep doing it. They can charge \$3 a head for people to wind through the corn maze, and then harvest it as maize – about 185 bushels per acre.

Doug Burnworth is a fourth-generation farmer, and the third generation on the Harvest Adventures land. For all but a few years, he has been a full-time farmer with no off-farm income. The family owns 106 acres and rents another 200 in the area for the cattle and row crops. For many years it was a dairy farm, milking 80 to 100 cows, but after years of low returns they sold the herd in 2015 – about the time weddings and special events in rustic barn venues were gaining popularity.



Their first on-farm wedding reception was held as a favor in 2012. The practice grew over the next few years by word-of-mouth, then evolved into a major part of their marketing. The evolution continues. Pick-your-own produce was an early feature for just a couple of years. Christmas trees were another several-year experiment. Hayrides, originally kid-focused, are now scheduled group events on weekends.



Like other farmers, the Burnworths continually adapt to new practices and techniques, changing customer preferences, and other trends. The flexibility rekindles their love of the land, keeps the business profitable, and ensures that the farm remains for the next generation.

# SCHULTZ VALLEY FARMS

## CASE STUDY

Schultz Valley Farms is a throwback to the old, modest-sized, traditional, diversified family farm. It's also on the cutting edge of marketing strategies, rotational grazing, and openness to agritourism.

The farm is across Zion Road from where Josh Schultz grew up. When he started on his own, he raised hay, cattle, and row crops. But by 2011, he knew he'd have to make changes if the farm was going to survive.



By that time, he was married; he and his wife, Lynne – who grew up on a dairy farm in Geauga County – had begun raising children as well as vegetables. The vegetable operation covers up to 20 acres, including a greenhouse for growing seedlings and, soon, a second high-tunnel to extend the season enough to provide vegetables for markets and CSA customers from Memorial Day to Thanksgiving – or beyond.

The entire farm, however, is 350 acres, and Schultz still produces hay, has a herd of about 80 rotationally grazed cattle, some feeder pigs, and grows 50 acres of row crops – primarily for feed. They also have poultry – a flock of layers, plus meat chickens – all for local sales. The steers and pigs are processed in Danville, Ohio, and the chickens 30 miles east in Baltic.

**“If you want to increase revenue per acre, produce is the way to go,” he said.**

In addition to feeding row crops to livestock, Shultz feeds any unmarketable produce to the pigs, and leftover pumpkins to the cattle.

As if that doesn't keep the Schultz family busy enough – with four children ranging from 3 to 11 – they dream of opening an on-farm market to sell what's produced on the farm. Their goal is to include a commercial kitchen to prepare pickles and other added-value products – and maybe eventually a cannery. With four children whom they hope will continue the farm, they want to leave plenty of options and opportunities.

They already have on-farm customers – for early-season U-Pick, an autumn pumpkin patch, and informal tours.

“We have an open-door policy,” Schultz says. “If you want to see how we do things, come on down and I'll walk you through it.”

# INSTITUTIONAL

## CASE STUDY

Let's say that Fairfield Medical Center, Lancaster City Schools, or Denison University wants to increase the purchase of local foods. It's not a simple matter of calling a farmer and putting an order in for the next nine-month school year or the coming fiscal year.

Will the institution adopt a seasonal menu to make use of cool-weather leafy or root vegetables? If not, can the institution spend money up-front so the farm can invest in high-tunnels or greenhouses to ensure a longer growing season?

Some local products – produced on small farms that lack the economies of scale on giant California or Florida farms, or their well-established long supply chains – are likely to be somewhat more expensive. But they also are likely to be more nutritious and fresher. Assuming the institutions are willing to pay more for local, the question is, “How much more?”

Are there special dietary needs for which local farmers, processors, and distributors need to prepare? In what form does the institution want to take possession of local produce or meat? Does it have the staff to break down and slice up a truckload of whole vegetables? Or do cabbage and lettuce leaves need to be separated and bagged? Do carrots or tomatoes need to be sliced and packaged? Can the institution break down a steer? Or does meat need to be delivered by individual cuts?

The Ohio State University is the state's largest university, and Columbus has the state's largest school district. The food-service heads of both institutions have made substantial commitments to buying local food in recent years, but both have said the greatest barrier is a lack of local processing and distribution capacity.

The Athens-based Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACENet) has shared-use kitchen and processing space for farmers and entrepreneurs across Southeast Ohio and parts of West Virginia. With locations in Athens and Nelsonville, it has been a business incubator for many food ventures. Research in other states suggest that when a small or mid-sized meat processing facility opens, pork and beef production in the area increases substantially. The same applies to produce. Is there enough local product to meet all these current and potential demands? As Leslie Schaller, ACENet's director of programs and business development, puts it: “If the market is there, growers will grow. It's a system.”

Ideally, the purchase of locally produced food by institutions is more than a business transaction. The impact is greater if it becomes a policy of the institutions to buy local and make long-term investments in the local agricultural economy.



## US Census of Agriculture data for Fairfield County, 2017 and 2012

	2017	2012
Acres	188,407	206,699
Cropland	153,607	162,932
Pasture	12,421	16,295
Woodland	16,591	19,144
Corn	62,000	59,000
Soybeans	66,700	68,100
Wheat	4,200	7,000
<b>Livestock Count</b>		
Cattle/calves	13,000	13,500
Milk Cows	700	1,000
Hogs/pigs	19,603	31,418
Sheep/lambs	1,432	1,097
<b>Cash receipts</b>		
Cattle/calves	\$8,516,000	\$7,857,000
Milk	\$2,563,000	\$3,605,000
Hogs/pigs	10,420,000	9,441,000
Sheep/goats	367,000	142,000
All livestock	22,356,000	21,773,000
All crop & livestock	99,750,000	105,843,000
<b>Rent/acre</b>		
Non-irrigated cropland	155 ('17)	162 ('19)

## Fairfield County Current Agricultural-Use Value data\*, 2011-2021

	Total CAUV acres	Dollars recouped
2021	203,109	\$320,838
2020	204,679	\$410,345
2019	203,984	\$351,649
2018	208,153	\$294,655
2017	208,702	\$149,347
2016	215,698	\$ 67,637
2015	216,120	\$121,026
2014	216,228	\$113,712
2013	218,063	\$112,531
2012	217,811	\$ 47,463
2011	217,592	\$ 23,533

\*Fairfield County Auditor's Office

# 2022 FAIRFIELD COUNTY LOCAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE SURVEY

The 2022 Fairfield County Local Food and Agriculture Survey was the first such poll conducted since the 2015 Fairfield Growing survey. The recent outreach, from mid-January until March 5, was conducted through SurveyMonkey in conjunction with the updating the 2011 Fairfield Growing Local Food and Agricultural Economic Development Plan.

It was modeled on the 2015 survey and previous annual polls dating to 2011, but added some questions to address changes in local and regional agriculture – such as the growth of on-farm activities known as “agritourism.”

One purpose of the 2022 survey is to gather general consumer preferences that can provide a baseline in efforts to implement the 29 recommendations in the updated Fairfield Growing plan. The current survey reached a smaller sample than the last version – 435 responses this year, compared with 645 in 2015. Detailed data from the survey are available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-LSKBQFCW/>

The main drivers in peoples’ decisions to buy local food are freshness (cited by 75 % of respondents) and nutrition (57%). About 62 percent said helping the local economy was most important benefit of buying local food.

Almost 75 percent of respondents grew some of their own food – almost half in gardens and about 26 percent in an herb garden or container.

Two-thirds have shopped at the Lancaster Farmers Market. Only about 10 percent buy from a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm. About half like the options of online ordering, central pick-up points, and home delivery of local food from farmers. Over 35 percent liked the idea of a brand for local food from Fairfield County and the region.

Fruits and vegetables were the items most commonly purchased from local producers, at 32 percent, followed by meat, at 26 percent. Nearly half had been to a local U-Pick farm. Cost, convenience, and availability were seen as the biggest barriers to buying more local food. Vast majorities of buyers rely on social media and word-of-mouth to learn about local food.

Almost 82 percent of respondents were women. A large majority of respondents are between ages of 35-75, with the largest cohort (55-64) accounting for 27 percent.



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James Mako, Executive Director, Fairfield County Regional Planning Commission

Rick Szabrak, Fairfield County Director of Economic and Workforce Development

Jonathan Ferbrache, Resource Specialist, Fairfield Soil and Water Conservation District

Carrie Brown, OSU Extension Educator, Fairfield County

Chip Nelson, Organization Director, Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, Fairfield County

Karen Kraft Crutcher, Co-Owner, Bay Food Market

Ann Brandt, Business Manager, Walnut Creek Seeds/Brandt Farm

Jonett Haberfield, Executive Director, Visit Fairfield County

Erin Harvey, Manager, Keller Market House

Hannah Halfhill, Fairfield County Health Department

Project Manager and writer: Brian Williams, Local Nexus LLC

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## Subcommittee members/resources

Trish Raridan-Preston, Preston Family Farm, Fairfield County Farm Bureau

Connie Smith, OSU, Fairfield County Agricultural Society

Stan Smith, farmer, OSU Extension program assistant

Kyle Sharp, farmer, agriculture journalist

Brad Berry, Berry Family Farm

David Smith, National Federation of Independent Businesses

Denise Hacker, National Federation of Independent Businesses

Chris Brandt, Walnut Creek Seeds/Brandt Farm

Jay Brandt, Walnut Creek Seeds/Brandt Farm

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Jason England, Night Crawler Garden

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Nikki Drake, Fairfield SWCD; Chamber of Commerce

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Andrew Boyd, Blue Label

Robin Coolidge, Rockside Winery

Josh Schultz, Schultz Valley Farms

Ralph Hugus, Hugus Fruit Farm

David Ochs, Ochs Fruit Farm

Leslie Schaller, ACENet, Athens

Carol Smathers, OSU Extension Farm to School

Haley Scott, OSU Extension Farm to School

Lauren Preston, OSU Extension Farm to School

Bryan Everitt, Dagger Law

Nolan Flowers, Dagger Law

Matthew Wideman, Fairfield Federal

Leland Tinklepaugh, Farm Credit Mid-America

Toby Rittner, Council of Development Finance Agencies

Allison Rowland, Council of Development Finance Agencies

Travis Markwood, Lancaster/Fairfield County Chamber of Commerce

David Scheffler, Mayor of Lancaster