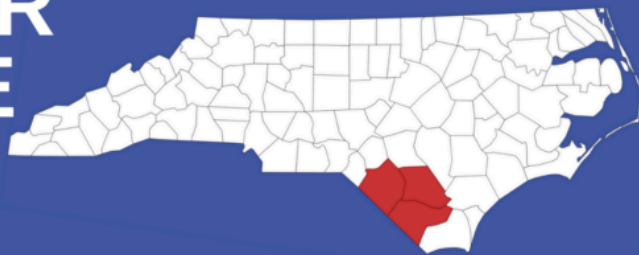


VISIONING OUR FOOD FUTURE

FOOD SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT FOR
BLADEN, COLUMBUS, & ROBESON
COUNTIES



NC STATE
UNIVERSITY



February Food Forums 2024
Research Brief



Background

In February 2024, the Visioning Our Food Future (VOFF) team held four community events in Bladen, Columbus and Robeson counties to present the food system development strategies to community members for their review. These strategies were based on a 2-year assessment and data collection process talking to people across the three counties. The nineteen program and project strategies varied based on the area of the food system, cost, length of time to complete the project, and needs they could meet.

We held events in four locations across the project region: UNC Pembroke – Thomas Entrepreneurial Center and Biggs Mall in Robeson County, Southeastern Community College in Columbus County, and Bladen Community College in Bladen County. These February Food Forums fostered conversations among community members and asked participants to prioritize, through the process of voting, what they would want to see in their county.

Methods

The nineteen projects and programs were divided into the themes Youth & Workforce Development; Innovation; and Food Assistance (Table 1). Participants were asked to focus on the twelve projects within the two themes 1) Youth & Workforce Development and 2) Innovation with the question “which ideas do you want to see become reality?” Participants were asked to vote for their 4 preferred projects. They submitted a vote by sticking a dot in the project box (Figure 1). Participants could vote for a project regardless of its corresponding theme and as many times as they wanted up to their total of 4 votes. We also encouraged participants to add thoughts on sticky notes to give more context to their votes.

Table 1: Description of themes

Theme	Youth & Workforce Development	Innovation	Food Assistance
Details	Grow the next generation of farmers, educators, and decisionmakers	Foster innovation to improve food access and build a viable food system	Meet the immediate needs of food insecurity
Number of Project Ideas	6	6	7
Action items	Vote – specifically,	Vote – specifically,	Input – specifically

	vote on ideas they want to see become reality	vote on ideas they want to see become reality	add programs they knew about already doing the work
--	---	---	---

We did not ask participants to vote for strategies in the remaining theme, 3) Food Assistance, because many of these programs already existed. Instead, we asked participants for input on the ideas presented and to indicate what programs they knew about, so that we could add those programs to our knowledge base for potential partnerships in the future.

We provided lunch at each forum event. We also included introduction and exit posters to help guide participants through the forum and understand how we got to the forums and where we plan to go next. As part of the introduction, we asked “what motivated you to show up today?” and at the exit, we asked “how are we doing?” Participants had the opportunity to leave their thoughts on sticky notes. In some cases, we facilitated participants through the forum posters after we gave them a brief introduction to the project. In other cases, we gave participants space to get what they wanted from the experience – most of these participants walked themselves through the forum (Figure 2) and voted whereas others were not interested in engagement through the voting process.

Figure 1: Example of Dot Voting for Food System Development Strategies



Results

Participants expressed excitement to attend the forums. Some participants attended because of the free food, but stayed to learn about what we were doing. For example, one participant wrote about their motivation to attend on a sticky note: “To eat and learn about any information I can! [heart]” Others attended because of their desire for a place-based food system: “I like the idea of bringing focus into EC [Eastern Carolina].” They thought we were “Hearing and responding to the voices in need!” Finally, participants were already invested in the food system and wanted partners: “We are excited & interested in how we can become involved in your initiatives.”

We estimate about 120 participants were at the events and we received 434 votes, which suggests about 110 of the 120 participants voted if each participant used all 4 of their votes. There were 91 votes from UNC Pembroke, 78 at Bladen Community College, 142 at Biggs Mall, and 123 at Southeastern Community College.

Each location drew unique populations based on occupation and type of involvement in the food system. At the UNCP Entrepreneurial Hub, farmers and non-profit and cooperative extension representatives attended. The highest farmer representation was seen at the UNCP location. At Bladen Community College, cooperative extension and local government representatives attended as well as students, faculty, and staff working with the culinary program. At Biggs Mall, people off the streets and in the mall and cooperative extension representatives attended. At Southeastern Community College, students attended, as well as people who had jobs focused on youth development, such as a high school farm educator and youth-focused non-profit representatives.



Figure 2: Food Forum participants reading food system development strategies.

Once the food forums were complete, we summarized and analyzed the data a few ways. In this brief, we include the data by frequency of votes per project and forum location (Table 2 and Figure 4). The top six projects were the following: 1) youth leader

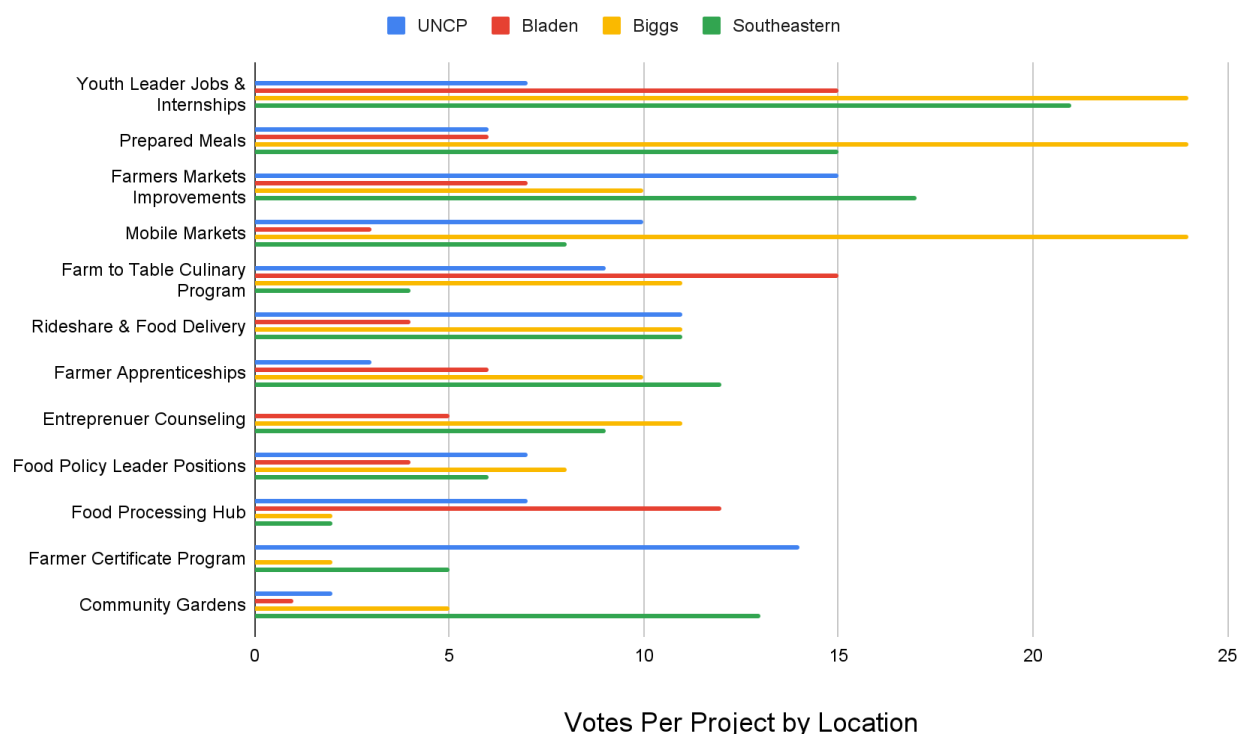
jobs and internships, 2) prepared meals, 3) farmers markets improvements, 4) mobile markets, 5) farm-to-table culinary program, and 6) rideshare and food delivery.

Table 2: Strategy Votes by Location at VOFF February Food Forums*

	UNC Pembroke (Robeson)	Biggs Mall (Robeson)	Bladen CC (Bladen)	Southeastern CC (Columbus)	Total Votes by Strategy
Youth Leader Jobs & Internships	7	24	15	21	67
Prepared Meals	6	24	6	15	51
Farmers Markets Improvements	15	10	7	17	49
Mobile Markets	10	24	3	8	45
Farm to Table Culinary Program	9	11	15	4	39
Rideshare & Food Delivery	11	11	4	11	37
Farmer Apprenticeships	3	10	6	12	31
Entrepreneur Counseling	0	11	5	9	25
Food Policy Leader Positions	7	8	4	6	25
Food Processing Hub	7	2	12	2	23
Farmer Certificate Program	14	2	0	5	21
Community Gardens	2	5	1	13	21
Total votes by location	91	142	78	123	434


*Note: UNCP (UNC Pembroke – Thomas Entrepreneurial Center), Biggs (Biggs Mall) - , Southeastern (Southeastern Community College), Bladen (Bladen Community College).

Figure 4: Strategy vote frequencies by Location





In Table 3, for each priority strategy, we include a description of the potential project impact and example actions. These were included in the presentation of projects when participants had the opportunity to vote on them. We also display comments from participants in quotes – these are not comments that represent the overall sentiment of the participants, but instead, are included to share opinions about the projects

Table 3: Strategies within Top 6 rankings at the VOFF February Food Forums




Project	Description	Example Actions
 Youth leader jobs and internships	Increase opportunities for youth to work with food and farming businesses “Developing future leaders is critical”	Offer paid leadership jobs and internships; examples: Food System Internship, Youth Ambassadors for a Better Community

 <p>Prepared meals</p>	<p>Increase convenience of healthy food consumption through prepared meals available at nearby markets, including for Spanish-speaking consumers and migrant farmworkers</p> <p>“Allow people access to prepared meals that can be delivered to front door...”</p>	<p>Support local chefs and small businesses that prepare healthy ready-to-go meals and connect with existing market outlets; examples: Good Bowls, Dish to Door, Extension Healthy Food Retail Toolkit</p>
 <p>Farmers market improvements</p>	<p>Increase local food products and make spaces more inclusive for customers and farmers at existing farmers markets</p> <p>“Farmers aren’t back since COVID”</p> <p>“In Pembroke farmer market”</p> <p>“More of a local responsibility”</p>	<p>Create community-centered spaces; examples: The Ingredients for a Welcoming Farmers’ Market Toolkit, Farmers Market Association, Fresh Bucks Incentive Program</p>
 <p>Mobile markets</p>	<p>Increase local food accessibility for community members by bringing local and healthy food products directly into communities</p> <p>“Tour the whole county, All of it”</p> <p>“Mobile market to sports park on sat am?”</p>	<p>Develop and fund mobile markets to bring food to housing authorities, seniors, and other communities; examples: Healthy Robeson Mobile Market, Ripe Revival Mobile Market, Grocers on Wheels</p>

 <p>Farm-to-table culinary program</p>	<p>Increase knowledge for area chefs in local food sourcing, meal-planning, and value-added skills and cultural foodways</p> <p>“Meat cutting butchery skills & vegetable cutting”</p>	<p>Support local chefs and small businesses that prepare healthy ready-to-go meals and connect with existing market outlets; examples: Good Bowls, Dish to Door, Extension Healthy Food Retail Toolkit</p>
 <p>Rideshare & food delivery</p>	<p>Increase ability of community members to purchase or access healthy food through rideshare and food delivery</p> <p>“Probably beyond the scope of financial resources”</p>	<p>Support ride services to include market or grocery stops and develop new food delivery businesses examples: South East Area Transit System (SEATS), UberEats</p>

We present the data by location but we also dig deeper to understand if there were different priorities by county. It is important to consider that county boundaries might impact funding or policies for programming at the community level. We highlight three projects (Table 4) that did not make the top 6 based on the overall frequency of votes, but were ranked high at the forums with the lowest quantities of votes (i.e., lowest participation in terms of number of participants) or ranked high in only one county. The food processing hub strategy ranked third at Bladen Community College (BCC), where there was representation from local government, cooperative extension, and BCC’s culinary program. The farmers certificate strategy ranked in second place at the UNCP event in Robeson County where there was a high representation of farmers and farmer support organizations. The community garden strategy ranked fourth at Southeastern Community College in Columbus County, where Waccamaw Siouan tribal members were present, even though it ranked low at the other locations. We include these to ensure each group of participants is represented even if their votes do not reflect the overall votes.

Table 4: Additional Strategies Not Reflected in the Popular Vote

Project	Description	Example Actions
<p>Food processing hub</p> 	<p>Increase local food aggregation, distribution, and access to processing equipment for farms, institutional buyers, and new food businesses</p>	<p>Plan and fund regional food hub and equipment that can work with existing community partners; examples: Sandhills Ag Innovation Center, ByWay Foods, Men & Women United for Youth & Families, Gullah Farmers Cooperative</p>
<p>Farmers certificate program</p> 	<p>Increase farmer revenue and increase production of sustainable food products</p> <p>“More of a state ag responsibility”</p>	<p>Develop farmer education and network programs; examples: UNCP EHub Sustainable Agriculture Certificate Program, Cooperative Extension Small Farm Boot Camp</p>
<p>Community Gardens</p> 	<p>Increase food production knowledge and access to garden space for community members as well as tribal seed and plant sales opportunities for gardens</p>	<p>Fund and share resources with existing community gardens around production and business development, examples: Extension Community Garden resources, Alliance of Native Seedkeepers</p>

Finally, here are themes from participant comments to supplement the voting data.

- Community gardens consisted of the smallest percentage of votes at three of four forums. However, participants had the most to say about them! Participants shared the sentiment that community gardens are a low priority relative to other project ideas, because of their questionable sustainability. “We have had 4 failed community gardens in the Robeson County.” At Southeastern Community

College, where there was the most votes for gardens, one participant commented, "School gardens to add to the education piece," which could have meant they thought gardens could work as a part of the farm-to-table culinary program.

- A few participants included comments that suggested they were thinking on a larger scale for potential farmer programs, ones with government support. One participant commented, "Instead of an apprenticeship program interested in an incubator farm program like Lomax. Problem with apprentices is that it depends on their attitude and any mistakes can cost you! [Arrow from apprentices to] they're there for the \$." Other comments included "Voluntary agricultural district," which is a program to protect farmland from development.
- Participants mentioned older adults in the comments across the project ideas, often in response to the focus on youth and with the desire to get older adults into gardening - one participant commented, "Need help for seniors to help with gardening and other projects."
- A couple of participants focused on meat instead of fruits and vegetables: One participant commented, "Deer donation sites - "Hunters Feeding the Hungry," which is a program where hunters get permission to hunt for deer on farm property and donate the meat to food pantries.
- A handful of participants were concerned about which ideas could be sustained based on grant funding and how we will ensure the region has the resources to meet needs if the implemented projects fail: One participant commented, "is there a security plan here?" and another mentioned a desire for the local and state governments to have roles.



Overall lessons learned

- Participants wanted opportunities for youth available in the region but also for people who are interested in working in the food system. Youth leader jobs & internships was in the top position, which may have been emphasized more since we collected data at community colleges and they were described as paid positions. The farm-to-table culinary program was also ranked high, which may have been because of the desire for programs to allow continuing education and food system engagement without being a student or young person.
- Participants wanted convenience products, not just produce – Prepared meals was in second place, and in the description of the high-ranked culinary program, we described the program as making foods which are “ready to go.” The rank of these projects indicate people are interested in convenience options.
- Participants want improved markets for regional products that rely on existing public infrastructure, including existing farmers markets and mobile markets which go to public locations. Participants may have had the desire to reach more people than the local foods movements usually does through a few farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants. As commented by a participant on the mobile markets project, “Tour the whole county, All of it.” Further, the rideshare project was ranked sixth on the list of project options, which included improved public transportation stops at food markets, and another participant suggested “mobile market to sports park on sat am?,” which suggests the mobile markets may be best suited to go to public locations where people congregate instead of individuals’ homes.
- There was more of a focus on consumption (e.g., prepared meals) compared to other parts of the food system likely because a majority of the participants’ roles in the food system were limited to accessing and preparing food for meals. However, production (e.g., farmers apprenticeships, farm certificate programs) and processing (e.g., food processing hub) will need to be addressed to support participants’ desire for a variety of local products, including prepared meals.

Authors:

Lindy Olive, Robyn Stout, Dara Bloom, Duarte B. Morais, Hannah Dankbar, Niesha Douglas