

# Plan for food hub hasn't yet taken root in Central Mass.

Worcester County leads the state in farmland acreage, but not everyone is convinced the region needs a new way to connect its farmers with retailers



The produce at Flats Mentor Farm in Lancaster includes onions.

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FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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Worcester's business history includes a once-bustling manufacturing scene and education and health care sectors that are still thriving. And now, with Central Massachusetts boasting the largest amount of farmland in the state, local business leaders want Worcester to be a hub for the growing local food movement.

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Environmental Council of Central Massachusetts are exploring building a central food-distribution hub that would help connect busy and often struggling farmers to more retailers.

Worcester County has 1,560 farmers and 100,000 acres of crops, more than any other county in Massachusetts. Collectively, they sold about \$57 million worth of crops and livestock, or about \$37,000 per farm, according to the 2012 census of agriculture by the federal government.

The food hub effort is in its infancy, but so far the Worcester groups have identified a need for a commercial kitchen incubator where small businesses can rent space, a workforce training facility, and a cold-storage truck to transport goods from farms to a flash-freezing facility in Greenfield.

Among farmers in Central Massachusetts there is a mix of anticipation and caution.

Maria Moreira heads the nonprofit that runs Flats Mentor Farm, which gives aspiring farmers free cropland in Lancaster. Some of those farmers are immigrants whose produce is native to their home countries and is not carried by traditional grocers. She hopes the food hub will help those farmers connect with consumers.

"It would be a win-win situation," Moreira said. "You have farmers who are growing this stuff and communities that really want it."

Several farmers offered clear ideas about what the food hub should do: Dairy farmer Heidi Cooper suggested a commercial kitchen to make ice cream or butter, while Joanie Walker wants help finding more buyers of her grass-fed beef.

Yet the farmers are unsure if the food hub organizers really understand what they need.

"They haven't sat down at the table with the farms like they need to," said Michael Pineo, who runs a produce farm in Sterling. "There's a lot more talking that needs to be done. Without the farmers there's no food."

Tim Murray, a former lieutenant governor who now runs the Worcester business group, identified a regional food hub as a



John Gray-Storey misted the vegetables at Silverbrook Farm's stall at the newly opened Boston Public Market. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

priority when he joined the chamber two years ago. The Worcester project will probably become operational at the end of 2017, or later. Murray said the group hopes to strengthen existing food programs.

There are more than 300 food hubs in the country, including the new Boston Public Market, Commonwealth Kitchen in Dorchester, and the Western Mass Food Processing Center in Greenfield.

John Waite, executive director of the nonprofit that runs the Greenfield center, said it's tough to break even and provide affordable services to farmers and small businesses. A recent study of 48 US food hubs found that profits declined 2 percent, on average, in 2013.

"Every region all over the country is trying to figure it out," Waite said.

Some farmers are worried the food hub would displace other distributors they've come to trust — among them, Lettuce Be Local, a one-woman operation that buys food from 75 farms in the region and resells the food to restaurants, schools, hospitals, and small stores.

Cooper, whose family owns Cooper's Hilltop Farm in Leicester, and others are worried the chamber is trying to reinvent the wheel instead of supporting existing activities such as Lettuce Be Local. Cooper said she went to a meeting earlier this year on the food hub and came away with more questions than answers.

"My concern is that people are saying they are starting a food hub in Worcester, and I think we have one," Cooper said. "It insults Lettuce Be Local and the current food hub."

Lettuce Be Local was started by Lynn Stromberg, who has won the trust of farmers for her passion and her efforts to educate chefs about the farms.

Stromberg said the Worcester group has so far asked her for advice because of her experience, but hasn't indicated whether the food hub would help her business.

"As much as they say they are going to be mindful of my business, I don't know what that means," Stromberg said. "It's hard not to feel slighted and burned. At the same time, I try to recognize that there's a place for everybody."

April Anderson Lamoureux, an economic development consultant for the chamber, said the group has no intention of harming the Lettuce Be Local business. "If there was an opportunity to enhance her business model, that would be great," she said.

Lamoureux blames some of the farmers' concerns on misconceptions and bad communication. Nonetheless, she said the group has held at least 25 committee meetings, one-on-one meetings, and focus groups for farmers since March.

"I've been involved with a lot of projects," Lamoureux said, "and I don't think I've ever seen one as comprehensive and inclusive as this process has been."



MATTHEW CAVANAUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Liz Buxton at the Western Mass Food Processing Center in Greenfield stirred blueberries to make jam for Red Fire Farm in Granby.