

Town of Unity, Maine
Letter of Interest
Local Foods, Local Places program

The Town of Unity seeks technical assistance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and its partners in the *Local Foods, Local Places* program to meet the following needs that have been identified by the community:

- to create a more connected, walkable community,
- to create a community “brand” to better market our community’s agricultural character, and
- to bring the various agricultural interests together to provide a reliable and seamless way to provide local food to residents of Unity and the surrounding communities.

Background

The Town of Unity is a rural community that lies at the western edge of Waldo County in central Maine. A small municipality of 2,100 residents, it nonetheless serves as the center of commerce for communities that are even smaller. The surrounding towns of Burnham, Freedom, Thorndike and Troy have populations of 1,164, 719, 890 and 1,030, respectively, routinely rely on services found in Unity. These communities do not have downtowns; only one has what could be called a village center. In contrast, Unity hosts a grocery store, two laundromats, two hair stylists, two accountants, a land surveyor, two restaurants that are open in the evening, a café, three churches, a Bed and Breakfast, a health center, a leather shop, pottery and forge, automotive service, a bank, a credit union and a pharmacy, among other providers of goods and services. The nearest grocery stores from Edwards Family Shop and Save in Unity – other than convenience stores that primarily sell gasoline, potato chips, milk and liquor – lie 17 miles to the west and 25 miles to the east. Western Waldo County is located in a USDA-designated food desert.

Unity is the home of Unity College a small (under 600 students) environmental college that was created, improbably, by community members trying to counteract the decline in the Town that occurred once the interstate highway was built. The College has won awards for its sustainable practices, but still struggles to attract the number of applicants that would allow it to be more selective, and suffers from a relatively low graduation rate. The College library serves as the library for the Town of Unity and for surrounding communities. The College also supports Lake Winnecook (Unity Pond) water quality projects, and uses its watershed as a model for science classes and research.

Work done to date

Within the past two or three years, Unity residents have become more engaged and energized regarding the direction the Town should take. There have always been a few local leaders, but more people than ever are becoming involved in the following Town’s undertakings, and have formed the following three new committees:

Unity Comprehensive Plan Committee (20 members)

The Town hired a consultant to assist in a revision of the 20-year-old Comprehensive Plan. As part of the Comprehensive Plan process, a visioning session was held in January 2014. Over 100 people attended and identified positive attributes and areas of concern for six specific topic areas: natural resources, relationship with Unity College, community spirit, governance, farming and agriculture, and economic opportunities and business. These topic areas were chosen from the results of surveys previously completed by residents.

The Comprehensive Plan Committee has developed a framework that includes the following objectives, relevant to the *Local Foods, Local Places* project:

- Objective 1a: Celebrate our unique identity as both a farming community and market center.
- Objective 8a: Create a completely walkable/bikeable downtown.
- Objective 8b: Ensure that healthy foods are available and affordable for all residents.

Unity TIF Advisory Committee

This Committee was formed to include residents in decisions regarding the disbursement of the Town's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) money. The Committee discusses allowable projects and plans that are brought to the annual Town Meeting for approval by Unity citizens on disbursement of the town's TIF revenues.

The need

Despite the recent efforts that the Town has made, this small community can go only so far without expert assistance. The ideas are there; the expertise to create the action plans to implement those ideas is not. Unity has no Town Manager: the three Selectmen are paid only small stipends and are virtually volunteers. The population is dedicated to the Town but is working, attending school or raising children. Time is precious, and fleeting. The work that has been done over the last two or three years is likely to go no further without the guidance of those who are familiar with the path from plan to reality.

Specific needs, as listed above, are:

1. To create a more connected, walkable community

Unity has a downtown – but it stretches 1.75 miles, mostly without sidewalks. Particularly in winter, one sees motorists drive to the local bank or credit union, drive to a shop, drive to the grocery store and drive home. Being attractive to bicyclists and pedestrians would make the downtown more inviting, resulting in greater economic activity.

2. To create a community "brand" and to market our assets

Unity has many assets, including a reinvigorated agricultural community, but does not effectively communicate about them. "Branding" the community may also interest other business to locate in Unity, where an identifiable brand will boost the value of their advertising dollars.

3. To bring the various agricultural interests together to provide a reliable and seamless way to provide local food to residents of Unity and the surrounding communities

Unity has much to offer in the areas of agriculture and local foods: farms, many of them operated by young people; a farmers' market; a Food Pantry; the Open Door, a project that serves soup and sandwiches for one week at the end of each month; Veggies for All, a project of Maine Farmland Trust that raises over 15,000 pounds of fresh produce annually for food pantries; the new Unity Food Hub, which will be in operation in 2015; Unity Barn Raisers, which supports local farmers by purchasing local products for its Community Meals; the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, whose Common Ground Fair draws approximately 60,000 each year; and Unity College, which offers a Sustainable Agriculture degree. Every one of these organizations has value to the community, but might have more through a cooperative approach. The Town would like to see that cooperation, and integration with the downtown.

Technical assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program will address these needs and help the Town of Unity to take deliberate action to achieve the goals that it has already set.

Partner support

The Town of Unity has the strong support of: Kennebec Valley Council of Governments, established in Maine law to serve the two and one-quarter counties that includes western Waldo County, and named as the regional Economic Development District by the EDA; the Unity Barn Raisers, a community economic development and betterment (501)(c)(3) organization; and Maine Farmland Trust, a statewide organization, with an office in Unity, that works to protect farmland and to keep farming in Maine viable and vital.

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