How can we grow, process, and sell more food in Harvey County?
About this report: The Harvey County Health Department, on behalf of the Harvey County Food and Farm Council, received a grant from the Sunflower Foundation to better understand opportunities for healthy food access in the county. The health department engaged Sarah Green, a writer and consultant with experience in local food systems, to research and write a report that looked at current practices and potential opportunities to grow, process and sell more food in Harvey County.

Green spoke with 12 people who are actively involved in purchasing food, growing food, selling food, and processing food in the county. The following information came from 12 interviews conducted in October and November of 2017. Additional information for this report came from the 2016 food system assessment written by Barbara LaClair, and the 2017 FEAST event sponsored by the Food and Farm Council. Other research and data sources are cited as they were used.

Green would like to thank those interviewed for this project, as well as staff from the Harvey County Health Department, for their time and interest in this work.
Objective of this report

Determine capabilities and opportunities related to local food production, processing and purchasing in Harvey County.

In other words, this project set out to find possible answers to the question: how can we grow, process, and sell more food in the county?

Findings

The county has a diverse range of agricultural and food offerings. There are very large farms that export most of their product to other markets. There are very small producers who make just enough to perhaps sell their goods once or twice a year at a farmers market or flea market. There are dairies and egg producers and hunters who are providing meat for their families and farms organized under a Community Supported Agriculture model. There are local restaurants and fast-food restaurants and bread makers and makers of jams and jellies. There are ranchers and butchers and a large grain processing facility in the middle of the county’s largest city. There are purveyors of organic products and conventional products, local food markets and larger grocery and discount stores.

Because the spectrum is so large, we focused on producers and processors and retail outlets that are focused on “local food,” or products that are made and kept in the region. We asked those producers and retailers what it would take to capture more business in the county.

If the county kept more food, some noted, perhaps it would be more accessible to the county’s residents. People who buy food also span a broad spectrum. The 2016 food assessment completed by Barbara LaClair noted that Harvey County residents have access to a large number of fast food restaurants, but also locally owned, scratch cooking restaurants. Many residents reported that they cook at home, while others cook meals occasionally.

Purchasers of local food in Harvey County tend to be older, the businesses owners interviewed for this project said. The second largest group identified was “young families.” They live in Newton, North Newton, Halstead, Burritten, Walton, Hesston, and Sedgwick, but often shop in nearby communities and counties where they might be able to access larger discount or club stores.

The 2016 food assessment and the FEAST event earlier this year both yielded feedback that more education would be needed for local residents – from help with cooking to understanding the benefits of local food to education about nutrition and healthy diets. These educational opportunities are critical – and, many interviewed for this project confirmed that education would always be a priority for this kind of work. We also asked about additional priorities, and they are outlined below.
Here are some specific opportunities identified through this project to grow, process, and produce more food in Harvey County.

1. Promotion and marketing assistance
2. “Local food literacy” for current local food business owners
3. Transportation for elderly and homebound residents
4. Recognition of businesses that support local food ventures

**Opportunity #1: Promotion and marketing assistance**

“If I want to make any money, I have to go to Wichita.”

Several mid-sized and larger business owners mentioned that Newton was “too small” to be considered a main market for their products. Smaller producers and processors seemed to be more satisfied with their options at local markets and in non-traditional settings, such as flea markets. For one large produce operation, Newton is just one of the markets in which they sell.

Others seem to bypass the county entirely, choosing to focus their energies in the larger cities and towns to the south.

What would need to change to keep more of those producers in the county? More customers and more business, they said.

Several of those interviewed said they would like to see more efforts to promote local food businesses. Others said they perceived a lack of identity and pride in the county, which helped them look elsewhere for goods and services before they shopped in their home county. (It should be noted that all of the business owners who said that more marketing was needed also said they recognized that they needed to spend more of their own time and energy in this pursuit. The responsibility, in other words, should be shared.)

One opportunity mentioned by several people would be to consider downtown Newton as a hub of activity. A common word used by those interviewed was “visibility.” Visible businesses or locations to sell food are highly preferable to capturing customers and sales.

There also are likely opportunities to promote locations that accept food assistance dollars from the SNAP and Women, Infant and Children’s food programs.

There was some confusion over the status of past and current local promotion efforts in and around the county. The one project spoken of with certainty was the holiday receipt program sponsored by the Hesston Chamber of Commerce, which encourages residents to save their local shopping receipts and enter them for a chance to win prizes based on their local spending.
Everyone interviewed talked about the need for consumers to better understand where their food comes from. There are “agritourism” venues in the county that could further assist with this goal.

**Opportunity #2: “Local food literacy” for current local food business owners**

There might never be a reason for a produce grower to need a meat packing plant. However, this project unearthed an interesting finding about knowledge of what exists in and around the county in terms of services for local food production.

When asked about knowledge of/use of certain value-added and educational businesses and services, not a single person could accurately and confidently identify the presence of (or lack of) all of the businesses in (or around) Harvey County. (Although several were very close.)

Here are three examples:

**Meat processing:** There are generally two categories for inspected meat packing plants in Kansas: those that are federally inspected – and can sell product across state lines – and those that are inspected by the state of Kansas. In both cases, an inspector is present for slaughter and processing of meat that is sold to the public. These processing plants might have a retail component. They are different than a butcher shop that sells cuts of meat, like Gillespie’s.

There is a state-inspected plant in Harvey County: Mark’s Meats, in Halstead. (There are other nearby state-inspected plants in Yoder, Valley Center, and Mulvane, to name a few.) And, there is a larger federally inspected plant in McPherson County.

**Wineries, brewerries, distilleries, cider houses, meaderies:** Production of wine, beer and spirits often goes hand-in-hand with local food production because of the agricultural products used to craft them. Small producers of these products are generally more interested in local production of grapes, grains, honey and other agriculture products to keep their own product as local as possible.

While Grace Hill Winery identifies more with the nearest town of Whitewater (which is in Butler County) – the winery and its own vineyard are actually located in Harvey County. To date, there are no breweries or distilleries or businesses making cider or mead (honey wine) in the county, although there were reports of an active homebrewing culture. There are breweries in Wichita and McPherson and a distillery in Wichita. There may be cider and mead production happening on an individual scale in nearby counties.

**Incubator (or certified) kitchen:** These kitchens meet all the requirements of a food business as set forth by the state’s food code. Such a kitchen is available to rent, for a fee, to those wishing to produce a value-added product, such as salsa or a baked good, that must meet food safety guidelines in order to be sold to the public.
There is an incubator kitchen in Harvey County – at The Nest at 112 in Hesston. This kitchen is relatively new and still determining its capacity. This is a service that garnered much interest and was identified as a need to keep more food in the county.

Greater knowledge of some of these areas will also likely lead to a better understanding of the challenges faced by certain producers, such as herbicide drift that can affect fruit and vegetable crops.

There is another important element in local food literacy. Large purchasers of local food produce, specifically fruits and vegetables, report that they need more product than is currently produced. This is a “chicken-and-egg” scenario: producers can be reluctant to increase acreage of certain fruits and vegetables without knowing that they can sell them. Purchasers need a consistent supply – both quantity and quality – and might be reluctant to contract with a producer who may not be able to deliver what’s needed and when it is needed. Understanding who is interested in doing what could lead to more business opportunities for production, processing, and purchasing in the county.

Finally, local food literacy also could help with a perception that certain products are overrepresented in Harvey County. One example is tomatoes. Tomatoes are considered a staple of home gardens in Harvey County, based on those interviewed for this project. Large producers, small producers, and everyone in-between also grow them. There may be an opportunity, then, for some tomato producers to diversify into growing and selling a different vegetable during tomato season to increase the diversity at the farmers’ market.

At the same time, large institutional buyers say they often can’t get enough tomatoes. Efforts to better match producers and purchasers could go a long way to both grow more and keep more food in the county.

**Opportunity #3: Transportation for elderly and homebound residents**

This was among the most specific priority identified by those who took part in this project.

About 18.6 percent of people who live in Harvey County are age 65 or older, according to a 2016 Census report. There are already a number of businesses, non-profit organizations and government agencies that serve this population in the county. The Water’s Edge restaurant is one example of a multi-generational opportunity to share homemade and seasonal food with elders. Other businesses make single-serving frozen meals for those who live alone, including seniors and those who are homebound.

Seniors are also reportedly some of the best customers at the Harvey County Farmers Market.
However, there was a sense among many interviewed that more could be done to address food access for this group – and some efforts are underway. This opportunity is included in this report to reinforce it as a priority for Harvey County, and to note that it could also help the goal of keeping more food in the county for use by its residents.

**Opportunity #4: Recognition of businesses that support local food ventures**

Two specific markets emerged as hubs for local food retail: Prairie Harvest, and the Harvey County Farmers Market. These two entities both exist for the purpose of marketing local products to the public. Because of its storefront and product selection, Prairie Harvest is a destination for customers from both Harvey County and surrounding counties and communities all year long.

Also, there are other food-related businesses not yet mentioned in this report that support producers, such as local grocery stores and ethnic food markets and local restaurants, to name a few.

But there are other places where a producer might sell their products. One person mentioned flea markets as a place to sell homemade food. Another noted the liquor store in Sedgwick that carved out a small space for milk, bread, eggs and other staples. These smaller and perhaps more unusual locations are also opportunities to keep food in the county.

“Pop-up” markets and vendor stalls, like those at The Nest at 112 in Hesston, can also help consumers access food while helping small businesses get started.

There are other services that can also support food businesses, such as testing from Kansas State University for certain food products. Homemade salsa, for instance, requires an acidity test to ensure its safety. This is an important component of starting many small food businesses. K-State Research and Extension in Harvey County is a resource for this information and much more.

And, there are other sectors that support local food ventures. Local banks, hardware stores, printing companies, construction contractors, graphic designers, office supply stores and others play an important role in a thriving local food economy.

There might also be ways to capture other sales leaving the county. Big-box stores, club stores and online retailers often offer producers and processors convenience and low prices – and, sometimes, the opportunity to purchase items that may not be available locally. Plastic shopping bags were one item mentioned several times as something that was not available locally but available at a good price at a club store in Wichita.
Appendix A: Action items for each opportunity

These items were identified by the 12 producers, processors and purchasers interviewed for this project. It is important to note that there may not be broad consensus for each of the following items. However, there are two points that were shared by everyone interviewed:

- Education is a priority, particularly to help consumers understand where their food comes from
- Each person interviewed for this project cares deeply about their work. Even though each person represents a different perspective, there is passion for a thriving food system in Harvey County.

Opportunity #1: Promotion and marketing assistance

- Promote local food businesses through local promotion programs
- Promote convenience and “one-stop shopping” opportunities for consumers
- Market local food – particularly competitive prices and freshness for seasonal goods
- Create events and more opportunities for people to gather downtown
- Increase visibility of the farmers’ market in Newton
- Build a sense of pride in Newton and Harvey County

Opportunity #2: “Local food literacy” for current local food business owners

- Educate producers, processors and purchasers about each other and create opportunities for connections
- Diversify offerings at the farmers’ market
- Understand the scope and scale needed for processors retail and restaurant and institution purchasing – how many pounds of tomatoes, how many dozens of eggs or large bags of flour, how many pounds of grapes, etc.

Opportunity #3: Transportation for elderly and homebound residents

- Provide reliable and affordable transportation to markets for seasonal food
- Find safe ways to provide transportation for food shopping in the challenging winter months

Opportunity #4: Recognition of businesses that support local food ventures

- Local business owners could capture “convenience” items for food businesses – i.e., plastic shopping bags, other inputs
- Support services – banking, construction, designers, etc. – are also playing a role in supporting food businesses in the county
- There may be additional need for (or marketing of) food business “incubators” to help businesses get started or scale up

Additional Feedback:

- Options for reasonably priced insurance plans may be limited, particularly as producers scale up
- Local laws are seen as less restrictive than state and federal policies