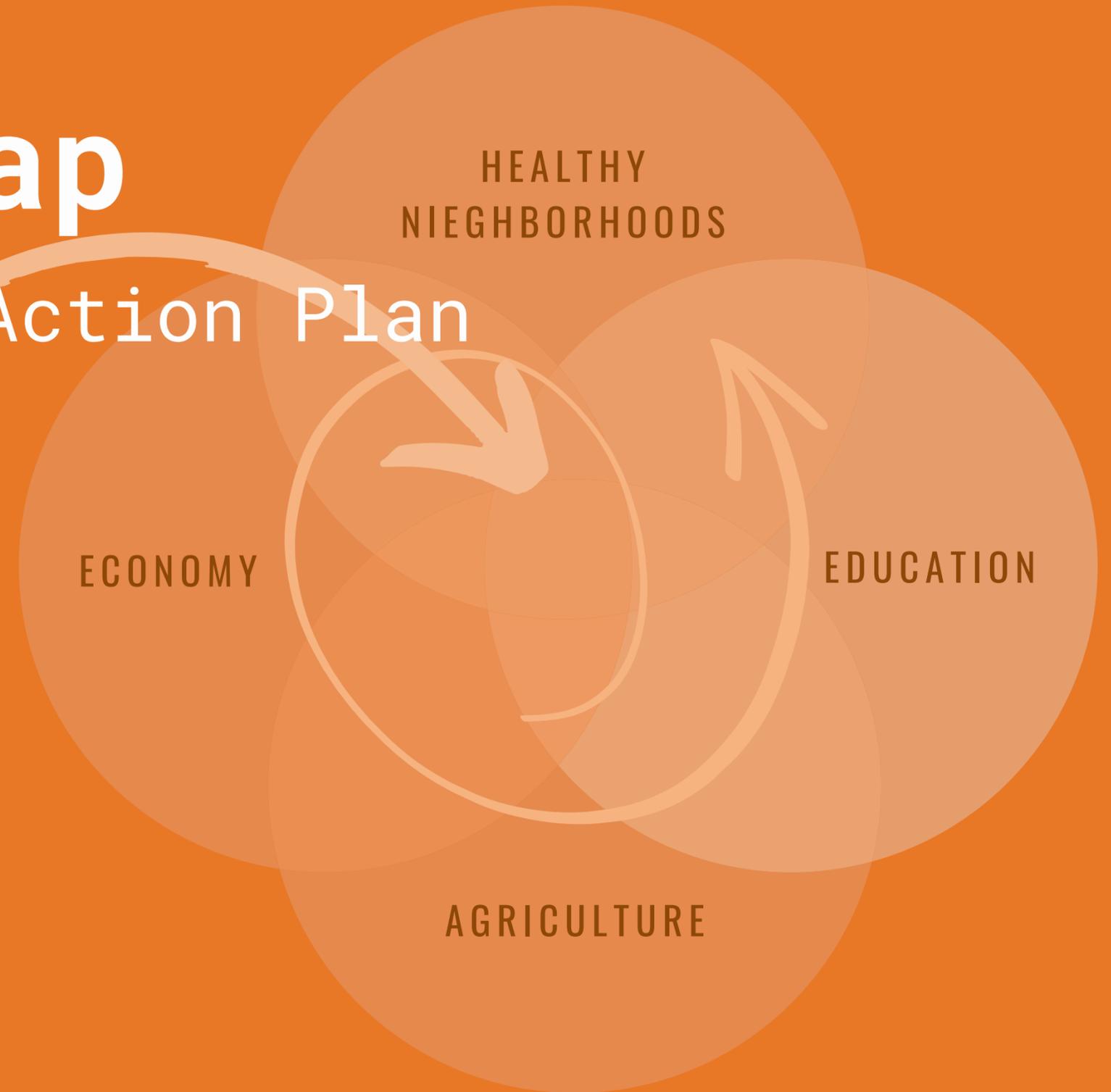


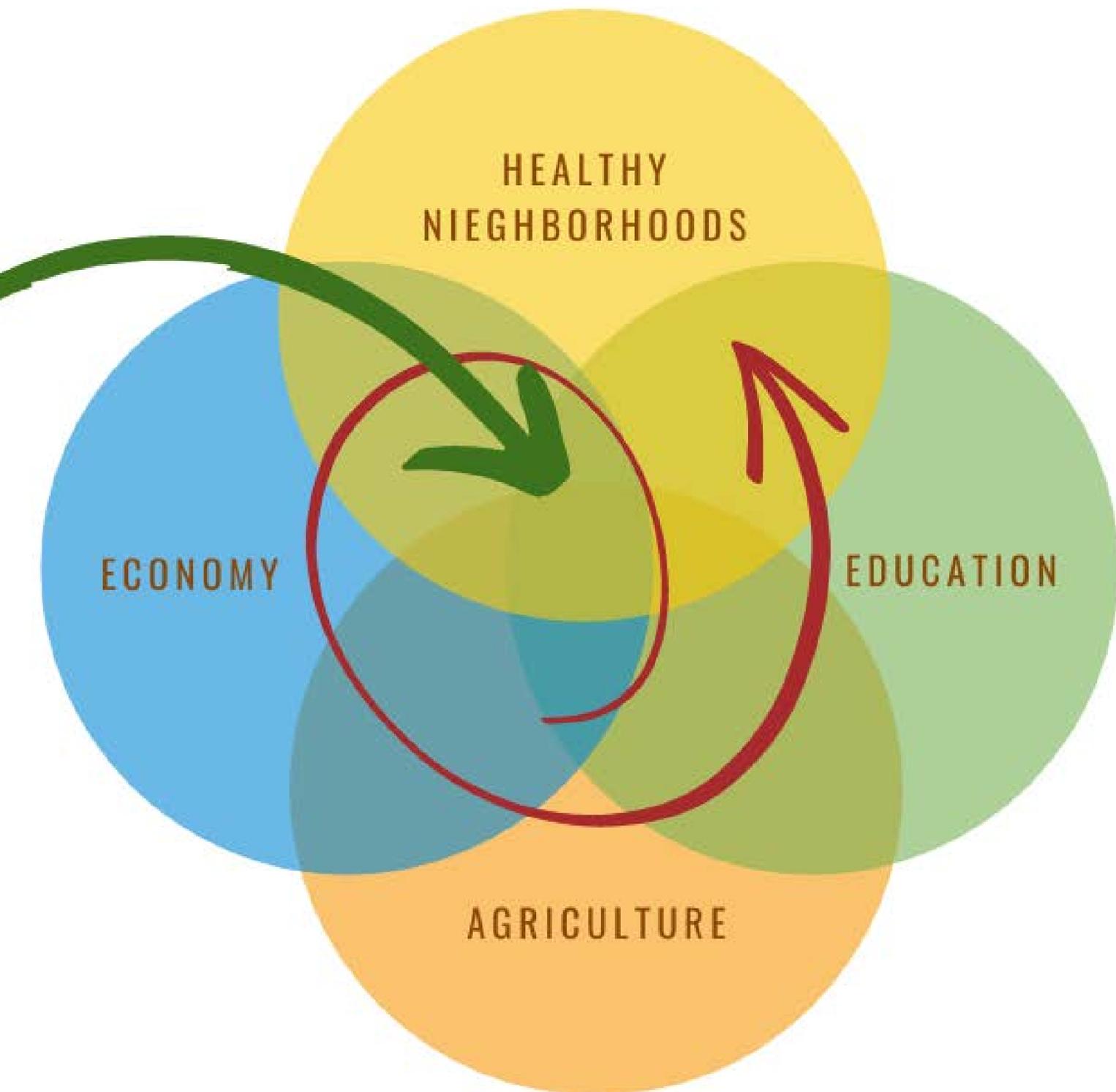
Prepared by
Buffalo Moose Group
2021

Healthy Food Healthy People
coordinated by
Field & Fork Network

Strategy Roadmap

Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan





Executive Summary

Food is a natural convener of people – family, friends, welcome guests, and new ideas – so should an organization rooted in food access.

The *Niagara Falls Food Action Roadmap* calls for the work to be a relevant celebration and opportunity – of strength rather than poverty. Since 2009, when the Niagara Falls residents began its investigation into quality of life, health, and safety, the need to improve health outcomes for residents has become clear. Thanks to the work of the Local Food Action Plan, channels to support improved health have now been identified, and this roadmap for the development of a new and sustainable organization dedicated to improving food access is taking shape for the benefit of all Niagara Falls residents.

Now, residents of Niagara Falls, New York, are mobilizing to create a robust and healthy community through the vital source of food. Today we see an opportunity to secure the strength of our community, allowing food to be the catalyst for growth it is, but not just for healthy bodies. We see the potential for food to have a positive impact on economic development, community, good health, learning, growth, and great conversation. This roadmap is focused on activating the talents and resources of our region to create change around food in Niagara Falls. From this inquiry we see opportunities for small-business development, entrepreneurship, neighbors helping neighbors, increased equity around how food resources are distributed, and the natural creativity and vibrance of a healthy and intact community. We see the opportunity to achieve balance through food justice and access, and in the process begin to restore trust in our community.

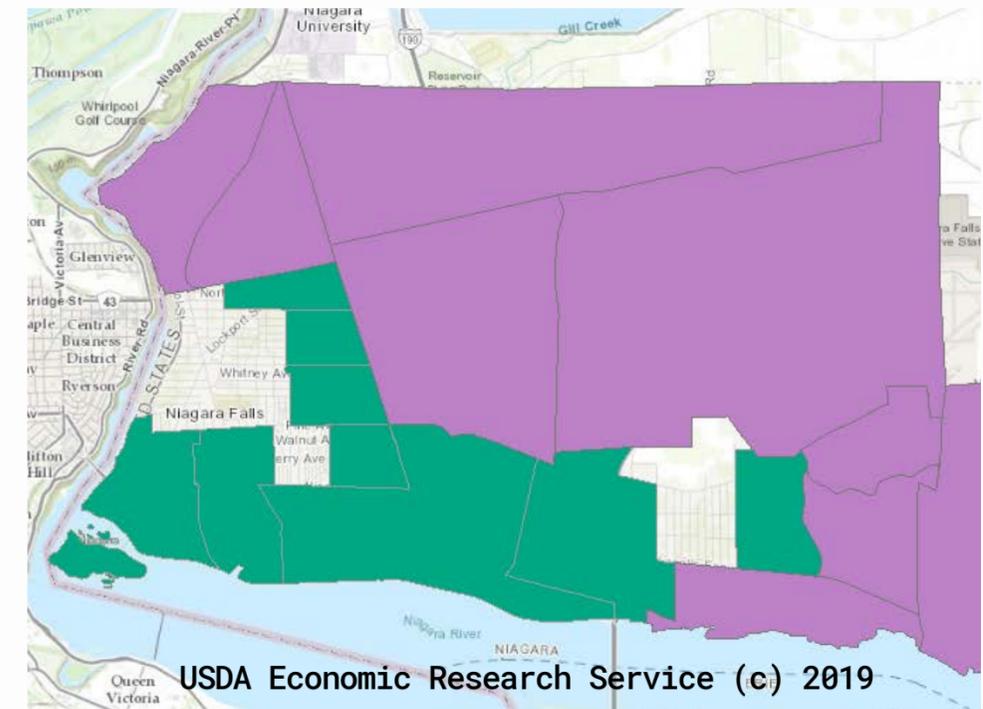
Need

Following decades of disinvestment due to declining industry, Niagara Falls residents now face a higher degree of difficulty accessing healthy, fresh, and affordable foods than residents across the rest of New York State. This is despite the fact that our state boasts over 33,000 family-owned farms. Clearly our food systems are broken.

At the end of the 19th Century, industry in Niagara Falls was booming, thanks to the power of our natural waterways, and our ability to harness that power for shipping. During this boom time, more people came to Niagara Falls than there were jobs or housing available. Soon, industry departed for more favorable wages and taxes, and the population, which peaked at over 102,000 in 1960, continue to shrink to 48,252 in 2019. While the estimated number of tourists visiting Niagara Falls was 7.6 million in 2017, the highest rate of employment by Niagara Falls businesses over the past two years was 18,620 employed in July 2019.

Niagara Falls' population is now equivalent to a medium sized town, and there are not enough jobs for the people who still live here, and infrastructure of local shops and businesses does not support equitable access to healthy food. In 2019, 65% of residents received SNAP benefits (U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and 76% of the school district's children were economically disadvantaged. Median income for those living in Niagara Falls in 2019 was \$23,888. 77% of residents responding the Food Action survey reported they traveled for 30 minutes or more to get to their grocery shopping destination.

**Niagara County has 576 farms;
127,367 farmed acres for a
population of 212,500 (1 farm for
every 369 people) – it is an
opportunity of abundance.**



Green: Shows Census Tracts in which at least 500 people or 33% of the population lives farther than 1/2 mile from the nearest supermarket.

Purple: Shows Census Tracts in which at least 500 people or 33% of the population lives farther than 1 mile from the nearest supermarket.

Niagara Falls Health Initiatives -- Timeline



- 2009: Mayor Paul Dyster launches the **Task Force for a Healthier Niagara Falls** with an initial focus on health, livability, and safety.
- 2013: The **Healthy Food Healthy People Coalition** is created with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with a vision of supporting all Niagara Falls residents in making and accessing healthy food choices.
- 2016: The **Healthy Food Healthy People Coalition** administered the Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan survey to over 350 Niagara Falls residents and gained a better understanding of the barriers Niagara Falls residents face when it comes to accessing healthy and affordable food.
- 2017: The **Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan** process is initiated and develops the focus on four priority areas: Agriculture, Healthy Neighborhoods, Education, and Economic Development.
- 2018: **Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan** is published and approved as the official Food Plan for the City of Niagara Falls, leading to the establishment of short-, mid-, and long-term priorities.
- 2020: A Project Director is hired by **Field & Fork Network** to move the plan forward; task forces are established; the Strategy Roadmap process is initiated; a General Motors Grant for workforce development is awarded; Healthy Food Healthy People joins the **Niagara Falls Health Equity Task Force** which is created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2021: **Healthy Food Healthy People** joins the **Western NY Regional Food System Initiative Regional Advisory Council**.

Trends 2000s – Diversity, equity, Inclusion – New Leadership – Local Food

In the 2000s we began to see nonprofits and industry at-large examining questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their operations. Regionally, the **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo** brought together a group of leaders to work on the **Racial Equity Roundtable**, commissioned a study, and released a data-driven report in 2016 compiled by the **University at Buffalo Regional Institute**. The trends revealed across Western New York include hiring practices, employment opportunities, and social services lagging behind many other parts of the country. Niagara Falls, with lower growth and investment than our neighbor, Buffalo, is also further behind in practicing inclusion and equity.

Since then, more and more organizations and community leaders around the globe have been practicing and developing new models for organizing, empowering residents, and assuring a diverse and equitable workforce is engaged in the work of community building from the ground up.

While the diversity movement began to expand, the local food movement also grew. Farmers, artisanal grocers, chefs, and consumers are prioritizing local food sources for reasons including health, conservation, and economic development. As people seek ways to reduce use of fossil fuels at-large, the local food movement presents a part of the solution. The emphasis on “buying local” also means that communities can keep dollars in the hands of our neighbors – both 100 feet away and 100 miles away. Finally, studies suggest that communities that are built around knowing your farmer, your grocer, and the other people who have made your food tend to have healthier outcomes for individuals.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Western New York in March 2020 after reaching the United States in January. With all the tragedy the pandemic brought internationally, it also shone light on the weaknesses of our infrastructures and communities. Farms and distributors who dealt primarily with school districts, food service, and restaurants were hit hard as the way that people found and

prepared their food shifted. During the pandemic, New York State farmers were forced to sell dairy herds, reduce staffing, and cut production due to lack of demand. They have also had to store products for a longer time and continue to have difficulty finding access to processing.

This crisis brought about by the pandemic led to unusual solutions, new collaborations, and opportunities to lift promising practices to help people survive major loss of employment, food shortages, and infrastructure collapse. Prior to the pandemic, eco- and agri- tourism had begun to be seen as a potential economic opportunity, with special attention being paid in New York State, especially in the Finger Lakes region. Now, as the virus continues to linger in communities across the globe, opportunities for local and regional tourism that do not require air travel, and outdoor vacation activities are swelling. This represents an opportunity for areas like Niagara Falls with its outdoor world wonder in such proximity to farms and food artisans, like **Becker Farms**, **Kin Loch Farmstead**, and **Blackman Homestead Farm** found in Niagara, Erie, and Orleans counties.

Confronting Supremacist Culture

Definition of Terms

- Food Access - Individuals have adequate incomes or other resources to purchase or barter to obtain levels of appropriate foods needed to maintain consumption of an adequate diet/nutrition level. (USAID)
- Food Justice - Access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life: the availability of nutritional and safe foods and the ability to acquire the food in socially acceptable ways. (USDA)
- Food Insecurity - A lack of access to enough good, healthy, and culturally appropriate food. (Food Forward)
- Social Justice - The objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest. (Oxford Reference)

At the same time that individuals were called to service around food security, people have been motivated to act by a constant stream of injustice to people of color. The Black Lives Matter movement was brought to a new level when video tape of George Floyd's 9 minutes and 29 second murder by a police officer in Minneapolis went viral. Since his murder in May of 2020, we have been continually harangued by the ongoing massacre and discriminatory treatment of black people in this country at the hands of police forces everywhere.

In response, organizations and individuals have begun to make public statements decrying white supremacy as evidence of their dedication to moving our nation away from old and outdated systems that institutionalize injustice. It is no longer a faux pas to call out systemic racism or racist acts among some white people. While it remains to be seen how far this call for justice will go, this new awareness means that any organization, and especially a new one, must be devoted to serving the needs of those living in or surrounded by poverty and other forms of systemic injustice, and that they be forthright about their intentions to operate this way.

Global and Local Shift



The global and regional shift of priorities around food access and anti-racism creates a moment of opportunity as well as a need to reassess the priorities for the Food Action Plan for Niagara Falls.

In her article, "Local Food Movements Won't Save The World," for The Bittman Project in March 2021, Loren Cardeli, founder of A Growing Culture, writes, "Because white people are often the designers of such systems, the narratives surrounding local food movements generally reflect white cultural values and narratives. The nostalgia that is built into narratives of local food, for example, largely ignores the injustice in the history of farming systems. As Julie Guthman writes, in the United States, "land was virtually given away to whites at the same time as Reconstruction failed in the South, Native American lands were appropriated, Chinese and Japanese were precluded from landownership, and the Spanish-speaking Californios were disenfranchised on their ranches."

Colonialism and its continuing effect on contemporary practices has repercussions that need to be addressed in the creation of a Local Food Action Plan. By focusing on local, and the Niagara Falls community that is most in need of access to healthy food, the Food Action Plan can make room for systemic change. The project evolves into an organizing movement that prioritizes the voices, wants, and needs of residents.

Partnerships -- Collaborations

Critical to the success of this road map is the need for the newly created organization Food Action to leverage existing local and regional partnerships around food access. Rather than duplicating efforts, this new organization should uplift partner organizations. For example, the Food Action Plan may help to elevate youth development in food entrepreneurship as a priority for the **Niagara Falls Culinary Institute** and **Cornell Cooperative Extension Niagara County**, which would then provide the program. Program design may be contributed by Planned Parenthood's **The Connection** staff and youth who have experience in creating and running programs.

Currently, the **Heart, Love, and Soul's** outdoor gardening space benefits from education resources and gardening materials from **Grassroots Gardens**, which will allow community members to grow their own food.

The **Niagara Falls City School District** partners with Grassroots Gardens for school gardens, and **F-BITES** on food education programs. **Create a Healthier Niagara Falls** is mobilizing residents (literally) with wellness walk. These are just some examples of the collaborations that have resulted from the work that was kicked off with the Food Action Plan process.

This kind of collaborative, resident-organized work is complex and relies on slow and steady relationship cultivation. Few of today's leaders have been trained for community organizing and shared leadership, having been employed by traditional institutions in the past. Therefore, we recommend taking advantage of local strengths, and learning from the work of the **Crossroads Collective** in Buffalo, NY.

Specifically, monthly coaching with staff of PUSH Buffalo will help staff of the Food Action Plan to understand and build a movement. That movement includes mobilizing residents with weekly and monthly connections, to learn what they need, and how they want to make it happen. Staff of the new organization may learn organizing and advocacy, how to hire from the neighborhood for leadership roles, and how to build sustainable workforce development programs.

Working with the larger Crossroads Collective members, staff, board of directors, working group, and members can secure leadership, organizing, and Just Transitions professional and personal development.

Partnerships may be built with organizations like **Open Buffalo, Cooperation Buffalo, LISC Buffalo**, and others for specific areas of community leadership development.



Recommendations

- As this plan transitions into a sustainable organization carrying forward goals of the original Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan, we recommend adopting a new name that will be embraced by participating residents and communicate the mission clearly.
- The new organization should be led and staffed by the people it aims to serve. For the past four years, the plan has been led by individuals who are leaders in institutions serving community needs in health, youth development, services for senior citizens, education, and economic development. These individuals are crucial allies; however, the actions of this work should be led by residents, and those who have struggled to secure healthy food for their families in Niagara Falls.
- We recommend working with a marketing expert that will engage with Niagara Falls residents to ensure a name that resonates. The new organization will require a powerful logo that reads well from a distance, communicates empowerment, and looks great on a t-shirt.
- The new organization must employ people of color who live in Niagara Falls, and must also have a shared leadership model to ensure priorities are collective and that residents of Niagara Falls are active in generating a movement, ultimately empowering them to secure their own futures. Moving away from the colonialist model of doing things **to or for** people toward **working with** and supporting work **by the people** (residents).
- As indicated in the section above, we also recommend a heavy reliance on partnerships with aligned organizations to ensure non-duplication and shared resources.
- We also recommend that staff of the new organization be sufficiently compensated, have comprehensive health benefits, staff development and training opportunities, and be encouraged to explore new ways of doing things. We hope to see them empowered to take the risks that will result in real change.

We learned from our process, that we need not to only rely on consumer and commodity-based methods for food access – in other words – we can move beyond the need to improve public transportation routes so that it is easier for residents to get to grocery stores that are 30 minutes from their home. Instead, a variety of new tools can be implemented:

- Corner stores and area vendors need support to provide local produce and accept SNAP benefits and Double Up Bucks.
- Local farmer's products can be brought directly to the housing clusters and developments where people live.
- Neighbors can be supported to work together in growing and storing their own food
- Entrepreneurial food and agricultural businesses need technical and financial assistance in getting through their start-up phase.

The staff of the new organization will organize work to serve the needs of the community with the many collaborating workgroup organizations and new partners.

Other recommendations include:

- Finding a space to collocate with fellow work group members for a few hours a handful of days each month in the Highland and/or North End neighborhoods.
- Organizing monthly community programs connecting the resources of partner organizations with residents in multiple neighborhoods. Spending time with these residents each month asking them what they desire for their community and recording their stories.
- Working with the Underground Railroad Heritage Center on vision focused creative story (legacy) recording projects in neighborhoods.
- Taking advantage of current abilities of the working group and steering committee members to organize, advocate, and provide.
- Seeing the work of Food Action as an opportunity, not a project of poverty.

New Models





Food Action as Opportunity

We recommend reviewing the original priorities of the Food Action Plan and recognizing that numerous priorities in education, agriculture, and healthy neighborhoods may be key factors in reenergizing the economy. The top example of this revision of priorities is the City Market. The City Market must not only focus on its agricultural partners to succeed. With a population below 50,000, Niagara Falls does not have a huge customer base. The City Market can serve both residents and visitors with local produce, dairy, and meats, as well as artisan goods, and delicious prepared foods and regional specialties. With those resources together, it can be both a huge asset for residents and widely marketed as a destination.

For many years, New York State has been highlighting workforce development and neighborhood improvement as economic development. All Food Action projects may be examined and explained through this lens.

Nonprofit organizations often suffer from a culture of poverty, chronically underpaying staff and providing substandard benefits (or none at all). For the new organization to thrive, it needs to begin with a culture of health – holistic and equitable. Therefore, staff salaries and benefits should be shared transparently, so that everyone employed feels fairly employed.

The organization should be sure to budget for annual raises for successful work completed. Current technologies should be provided, reimbursement for use of cell phones if they are often utilized for the execution of work, coverage of travel, and provision for annual professional development.

Mentoring and continuing education should be key to the organization's culture. Because the organization will maintain a board of directors with a majority of residents, board development should be a part of each year's annual activity plan.

As stated above – branding for the organization should communicate empowerment, mobilization, and be driven by the community. Communications should be open and transparent. Ideals aligned with the residents, with attention to equity and inclusion in should be present on website with clearly stated values, and in practice. Examples include taking special care as to who leads the board of directors, who leads (or co-leads) community meetings, where offices are located, whose photographs are featured, and who writes and creates marketing – specifically social media content.

Food Action – its members, staff, partners, and board of directors – need to be steadfast in their commitment to coming from the people of Niagara Falls, and the important work of serving the mission of local food access and the opportunities it presents.

Organizational Culture and Public Perception



Process

Buffalo Moose Group's team Cynnie Gaasch, Gamileh Jamil, and Heidi Romer worked with the Food Action Plan steering committee, work group, and partners to come to the recommendations provided here. During our process we met with, researched, and surveyed Field & Fork Network staff, Niagara Falls residents, government officials, educators, public and private institutions, area nonprofits, food and agriculture professionals, and service providers. This narrative is accompanied by significant documentation of all research, and references for recommended contacts, mentors, and resources, as well as a business model, organizational charts, templates, and tools for the group to move forward.

566 individuals were surveyed. 519 of those were Niagara Falls residents, and half of the participants would like to learn more or get involved. We conducted 70 interviews with 74 people. Focus groups connected us with The Niagara Falls Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative and youth at The Connection. We reviewed accomplishments of the Plan and the many partners and researched best practices in order to map the assets at hand. During the process we investigated the theory of change and easily achievable work. Key potential partners were connected. Many thanks to everyone who supported the development of this roadmap.

An extensive toolkit has been provided to move this Strategy forward. It includes recommended approaches, referrals, templates, suggested resources, as well as all content of interviews, group meetings, and the survey provided as support materials.

The process was guided by project director, Tom Lowe at Field & Fork Network. The steering committee was a monthly focus group on each priority area: Brian Archie - Create a Healthier Niagara Falls, Lisa French - Field & Fork Network, Lisa Neff - American Heart Association, Lynne Neveu - Planned Parenthood of Western and Central NY, Jeanette Koncikowski - Grassroots Gardens of WNY, Jen Regan - Cornell Cooperative Extension of Niagara County, Rob Sozanski - USA Niagara-Empire State Development.





Work Group members represent: African Heritage Food Co-Op; American Heart Association; Buffalo State College: Center for Health & Social Research; Catholic Charities; Cazanovia Recovery; City of Niagara Falls; Community Health Center of Niagara; Community Missions of Niagara Frontier; Cornell Cooperative Extension of Niagara County; Create A Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative; Empire State Development; FeedMore WNY; Field & Fork Network; Footprints on the Future; Grassroots Gardens of WNY; Heart, Love and Soul; Independent Health Foundation, LaSalle Vineyard Community Garden; McCollum Orchards; New York State Health Foundation; Niagara County Department of Health; Niagara County Farm Bureau; Niagara Falls City School District; Niagara Falls Community Development; Niagara Falls Culinary Institute; Niagara Falls Housing Authority; Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center; Niagara Falls Peacemakers; Niagara Falls Youth City Council; Niagara Global Tourism Institute; Niagara University; Oishei Mobile Safety Net Team; Pine Avenue Redevelopment Project; Pinnacle Community Services; Planned Parenthood of Western and Central New York; Power City Eatery; Resident Engagement Council; and YWCA of Niagara.

Those interviewed include: Saladin Allah, Max Anderson, LaVonne Ansari, Brian Archie, Mark Baetzhold, Julie Barrett O'Neill, Sheila Bass, Bob Belton, Harper Bishop, Kayla Briggs, Mike Cardus, James Ciliberto, Larry Cook, Alison DeHoney, Andrew Delmonte, Pam Dixon, Kelly Fletcher, Melissa Fratello, Lisa French, Lamont Glover, Beth Gosch, Kathy Granchelli, Amanda Henning, Brittany Honeyman, Portland Jackson, John King, Robyn Krueger, Chris Lee, Beth Leipler, Jeanette Koncikowski, Emily Lonigan, Tom Lowe, Sam Magavern, Kristie Munson, Lisa Neff, Lynne Neveu, Stephanie Nick, Leslie Nickerson, Clement Nsiah, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Diane Picard, Katie Pieri, Jen Regan, Robert Restaino, Cassandra Salter-Smith, Tracy Schmidt, Clifford Scott, Ezra Scott, Robert Sozanski, Karen Spaulding, Ally Spongr, Brownyn Starr, Robert Sozanski, Amber Thiel, Jessica Thomas, Annie Todd, Lauren Van Osten, Anthony Villardo, Chris Voccio, Whitney Walker, Liz Ward, Karl Wende, Stan Wojton, Bree Woodbridge, Alexander Wright, Eileen Wrobel, and Liz Yarussi.

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Strategy Roadmap

Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan

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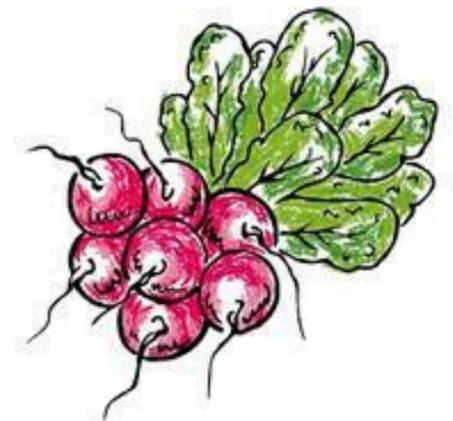
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**Niagara Falls
Local Food Action Plan**



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