

# **Developing Sustainable Local Food Sales to a College Institutional Market**

## **Summary as of December 31, 2005**

Vital Communities (VC) has developed a task force of farmers, Dartmouth Dining Service (DDS), students, faculty, and wholesale representatives to create strategies for selling locally grown food to DDS. We provide training and technical assistance to project farmers enabling them to profitably produce food to DDS's purchasing specifications. By addressing real and perceived barriers to local foods sales, combining production capacity of several local farms, and drawing institution-wide effort to the project, we are creating a profitable and satisfying market for local foods no one farm could establish by itself.

## **Objectives/Performance Targets**

Ten VT/NH farmers of produce, meat, poultry, dairy and other products will establish profitable and satisfying wholesale or direct accounts with DDS by the end of three years.

## **Accomplishments/Milestones**

### **1. 50 farmers express interest in Dartmouth sales                      ACHIEVED SO FAR: 61**

Sixty-one farmers have expressed interest in growing for the project. They have expressed this interest through postcard replies, emails, personal conversations, and telephone calls. We have interviewed each interested farmer to get a clearer picture of what they are interested in selling to DDS, what their T/TA needs are, and whether or not they have the capacity to be part of the project at all.

### **2. 30 participate in introductory workshops                                      ACHIEVED SO FAR: 15**

We didn't hold the one major orientation session and subsequent workshops that we had originally planned. It seemed that the strategy of quickly introducing a number of small farms to DDS through a public event could lead to unmet expectations and worse, failed attempts at business relationships. It became clear that we need to treat each farm differently and provide a number of options for both DDS and farmers. While the plan was originally for most farmers to sell directly to DDS, DDS did not consider that to be a workable option until recently, so workshops highlighting direct sales opportunities were not appropriate. Instead, we gave the buyers complete information about what the wholesalers could offer and when, and how the buyers could order it simply, since this met their needs at the time.

Meanwhile, we held farmer tours of DDS, at which eight farmers from seven farms attended. We also held strategy sessions on meat, produce and dairy; two farmers and a

wholesaler attended those, along with the DDS Purchasing Manager, and invited guests, a Coop Extension Livestock Specialist and the Perishables Manager at the nearby Hanover Consumer Cooperative.

In December 2005, upon DDS's change of heart toward direct product purchases, we held workshops for produce growers who had been interviewed and seemed likely candidates for direct sales to Dartmouth. Six growers attended one of two sessions with the Director and Associate Director of Dining, the Purchasing Manager, the Manager of one of the dining halls, and the Manager of the Dartmouth Organic Farm. At these two discussions substantial breakthroughs were made: DDS now wants to commit this winter to buy produce directly from approximately four farmers starting in spring 2006. (This is a major shift; in September 2004 it was seen as a major milestone when a DDS buyer suggested that they could switch to having the standing request to the two local produce wholesalers be to provide "local whenever it's available".) Happily, because of the experience doing just that, the obvious limitations of working only with wholesalers became apparent: the buyer can't always know which farm the local product came from, which makes it hard to promote to consumers; and sometimes though "local" was asked for and recorded on the invoice, it was not what was picked for the truck (because of mis-picks and local supply running out). DDS is of course nonetheless happy to have the wholesaler option, as it is easy and usually works; however, a summer of this caused them to want more consistent supply and quality such as they can get through direct purchase.

*Coming up:* We will in February 2006 hold a planned session to match DDS buyers and produce farmers where they can commit to spring 2006 deliveries. We will rely on advice from the Hanover Coop buyer who has a long history of arranging with farmers over the winter who will grow what for him for the coming year.

### **3. 20 provide product for tasting events for DDS chefs and administrators**

**ACHIEVED SO FAR: 32+**

We have held six local dinners, luncheons, and large tasting events, for which 32+ different farms provided product:

Sigma Nu Fraternity Tasting Party August 2004: 2 farmers' products  
Freshman Local Foods Dinner September 2004: 10 farmers' products  
Administrators Local Foods Luncheon March 2005: 11 farmers' products  
Flavors of the Valley Tasting Event May 2005: dozens of farmers sampling  
Amarna Wine & Cheese Party May 2005: they bought cheese from 2 farms  
Freshman Local Foods Dinner September 2005: 7 farmers' products

We have also brought samples from 3 farms (a beef farm, an orchard, and a cheese-maker) to some or all of the DDS buyers. Others are scheduled for this winter.

#### **4. 15 will decide to produce for this project and receive T/TA**

**NOT ACHIEVED YET**

We are currently talking one on one with farms who have expressed interest in this project and are assessing T/TA needs with them. We have 11 farms who have so far asked for T/TA and we are in the process of refining what they need.

### **Impacts and Contributions/Outcomes**

1. So far our very preliminary data suggests that DDS bought \$400,000 of VT & NH farm products in 2004, and increased that to at least \$440,000 in 2005. There is much data yet to be tracked, so this is definitely not complete.
2. Dartmouth is ready to commit to several produce farmers over the winter that they will buy products directly from them starting next spring.
3. Two draft logos for “Farm to Dartmouth” are being finalized for a decision; they will be used to highlight products from VT and NH offered at Dartmouth.
4. We have created an “Institutional Buyers’ Guide” based on farmers interested and able to sell to Dartmouth on a specialty or regular basis. Farmers are included based on our interviews with them and their ability to meet Dartmouth’s needs.

#### **PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT BACKGROUND**

We continued to interview farmers for our farmer database. We met with dining hall managers, specifically Don Reed of Collis, to investigate strategies for Collis Café. We interviewed specifically meat producers, looking for someone to provide a substitute for the breakfast meats in Collis. This was difficult and had no clear result: no farm was a perfect fit for the size, packaging, price, and pre-cooked aspects Collis is used to. We also began to investigate what it would take to implement new all upper-valley grown recipes, including main entrees, soups, and chili. We twice updated the Dartmouth Local Food Project e-bulletin, with project updates and information about food in local dining halls.

#### **DATA TRACKING BACKGROUND**

A new effort has been initiated to create a template for tracking Dartmouth’s local food purchases. Our research shows that such a tracking system is unprecedented within the local food projects at other educational institutions. There are many obstacles to overcome, as Dartmouth’s invoice system is not organized in a manner that would facilitate such tracking using Dartmouth’s information alone. Sales data must be collected from individual vendors and distributors, several of which also do not keep records in a manner that can be easily accessed for review. Thus far, all vendors have

been willing to cooperate with our efforts, and the snags we are experiencing are purely based on book keeping strategies. Our preliminary data, however, shows that at least \$440,000 dollars has been spent on locally grown food in 2005, representing roughly 9% of Dartmouth's food purchases, and an increase of \$40,000 from 2004. Included in that number are approximately seven local producers that have sold to Dartmouth as the direct result of efforts by Vital Communities.

## MARKETING BACKGROUND

As local foods begin appearing in Dartmouth's dining halls, the DLF project has begun planning how best to identify, label, and market these products. This project began in July of 2005 and will continue through the rest of the DLF project's lifetime.

The marketing effort has four major stages.

1. Research
2. Focus Groups
3. Prototype Development
4. Implementation

### 1. Research

Intern Sarah Hackney spent several weeks researching local foods marketing efforts across the country. Logos, posters, labels, and signs were gathered to get a sense of what others are doing in similar programs. This research revealed a wide variety of approaches, from simple hand-drawn logos to the professional marketing kits available through Foodroutes. Additionally, we had to address the discovery that New Hampshire statutes prohibit labeling non-NH products "local" – even if they come from a farm neighboring the VT/NH border. A list of possible phrases for marketing was drawn up. This research became a jumping-off point for developing a distinct local foods marketing strategy for Dartmouth.

### 2. Focus Groups

After gathering a body of research, several Dartmouth students were invited to be a part of focus groups to give feedback. The purpose of the focus groups was to ascertain what methods and styles of marketing might be most effective for Dartmouth students. The intern facilitated the sessions, presenting examples from other programs and soliciting the students' feedback. Students noted that any marketing strategy must take into account Dartmouth's demographics in appealing to the widest variety of students. Additionally, since local foods are typically not 'branded' or marketed extensively on a national scale, the students valued seeing materials from other campaigns. Much of the research material was deemed not optimal for a student market, so the intern asked students what might be superior alternatives and noted their suggestions. After the sessions, the intern gathered students' feedback and used it to determine the best route to take for prototype development.

### 3. Prototype Development

Utilizing both student feedback and meetings with DDS managers to assess their needs/ideas for marketing materials, a 'local foods logo' emerged as the highest-priority item. This logo will be designed to fit in with a broader marketing campaign and be present on all materials that are planned: informational labels, signs, placards, and posters. The intern developed a series of prototype logos and then presented these first to students and then to DDS managers for feedback. These two groups selected the logo designs that they felt were the most informative, clear, and effective.

#### 4. Implementation

The prototype logos selected by students and DDS managers are currently being developed into fully rendered, usable logos that DDS will be able to start using in January 2006. Once these are ready, the marketing intern will turn her focus to using the logo and other marketing materials to 'brand' local foods at Dartmouth with a recognizable and appealing identity. Once the logo is complete, the intern will work with DDS managers to determine the most effective way to display it when local foods are present in the dining hall.