The Whole Community Food Network is an innovative model that brings together a food bank, farms, communities, educational institutions, nonprofits, and businesses to build the local food system. By leveraging food bank assets and expertise, the model will greatly improve local food security and self-sufficiency while fostering farm and business development.
The Whole Community Food Network

Rabun Branch Overview

Despite 20 years of the Food Bank's work, 25% of our residents--mostly children--still struggle with hunger. At the same time, obesity is skyrocketing. Underemployment, erosion of industry, and persistent poverty are long-standing issues. The recent recession only widened the meal gap, thrusting even more families into crisis. It’s time for an expanded and proactive approach to these issues. Building on the assets of community, land, and people, the Food Bank’s innovative model will build a sustainable local food system in the Georgia mountains.

In 2013, we launched a $3.2 million capital campaign toward a permanent facility to house the model. The facility will include sufficient warehouse capacity, a quick-freezing operation, commercial kitchen, food hub, and community education space. Our partners include the Pittuloch Foundation, county governments, schools, UGA, Georgia Organics, farms, local nonprofits, and community residents.
The Food Bank of Northeast Georgia’s mission is to work toward ending hunger as part of an overall community effort to alleviate poverty.

Our main activity is to source, store, and distribute food in 14 northeast Georgia counties. In fiscal year 2013, we distributed 12.8 million pounds of food—3.5 million in the five counties served by the Rabun branch. Our Feeding America goal is to reach 18 million, and to do that, we need additional space.

Our current rented space in Rabun of 12,600 sq. ft. is inadequate for our dry, frozen, and refrigerated storage needs. Our goal is a 15,000 sq. ft. warehouse with 5,000 sq. ft. in freezer and cooler storage. This will allow ample room for storage related to the food hub, quick-freezing, and community kitchen operations.

We also plan to build offices, community rooms, and classrooms so that our partners, staff, volunteers, and community members can work, meet, and learn.

Outcomes: 5.5 million pounds of food distributed annually in the five counties.

The warehouse’s infrastructure, staffing, and equipment are central to the operation of the community kitchen, quick-freezing, and food hub. Our role in the community is to bring partners together.
Warehouse

The Rabun County location serves 5 mountain counties—Rabun, Towns, White, Habersham and Stephens. In fiscal year 2013, the Food Bank distributed 3.5 million pounds in this region. The goal is to distribute at least 5.5 million pounds per year to the estimated 30,000 needy individuals. This distribution represents about 25% of the Food Bank’s total activity.

The present facility employs four, supplemented by volunteer labor. Forty-four agencies distribute food, and programs include Food 2 Kids, mobile pantries and deliveries to the elderly.

The Food Bank enjoys an extensive network of community support. Local businesses and individuals donate food, money or time.

Significant funding and donation sources include USDA, GSNAp, the United Way, Walmart, Kroger, Publix, and Sam’s Club.

The Whole Community Food Network project’s expected new supporters and constituent groups will further strengthen the Food Bank’s ability to impact food insecurity and poverty.

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Quick-Freezing

The Quick-Freezing Operation will process fresh fruits and vegetables in a tunnel freezer with a capacity of 1,200 pounds per hour. This equipment will allow the Food Bank to preserve fresh produce for later distribution by local agencies or other food banks.

Sources of produce include local farms, grocery chains, the national food bank Choice System, and gleaned crops from South Georgia. Frozen food is nutritious and is free of sodium, sugar, or other additives.

Trained Food Bank staff will operate the fresh prep and freezing operation. The fresh prep area will also allow for the washing, sorting, and packaging of fresh produce for distribution.

Farmers and value-added businesses will be able to contract our fresh prep and freezing services for a small fee that covers costs. Donations in-kind of fresh or frozen produce will also be considered.

Outcomes: Leverage of Food Bank dollars presently used to purchase canned goods; preservation of produce otherwise wasted; improved diets and nutrition for Food Bank recipients; creation of value-added capacity and associated farm, business, and job growth.

The Quick-Freezing Operation supports the development of the local food system and the provision of nutritious food to the needy.
The Food Bank as anchor tenant of the quick-freezing operation maximizes the investment of private and public dollars while providing access to co-packing services for farms and value-added businesses.

Quick-freezing, or IQF, is a relatively low cost processing technology that is being used in food hubs and Farm to School programs nationally.

The quick-freezing operation has been designed around a nitrogen tunnel freezer with a capacity of 1,200 pounds per hour and 15,000 – 20,000 pounds per week.

The frozen produce will be stored in our 2,500 sq. ft. freezer and later distributed to local agencies, the Athens warehouse, and other food banks. Farms and businesses can be able to rent storage space.

Staffing will include a manager, who will oversee the kitchen operation and food hub activities, a production lead, and two production workers.

The staff and facility will be licensed to produce food that is qualified for resale. Food safety training will be ongoing.

Our costs include the following estimates to reach $.46 per pound frozen:

- Food and VAP (value-added packaging) - $.08
- Transportation (freight in) - $.03
- Labor – $.09
- Nitrogen - $.07 per pound
- Bag - $.05 each
- Electricity - $.01
  Water/sewer - $.03
- Overhead - $.10

Canned cost: $.88/pound

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We anticipate reaching 875,000 pounds in Year 2. Additional capacity can be added with another freezing line.
Community Kitchen

The Community Kitchen will provide licensed space for farmers and value-added small businesses to produce new products using locally grown food. Other uses include child and elderly meal programs, Farm to School cafeteria worker training, job training classes, and cooking and preserving lessons.

Rabun Phase 1

Partners
Sustainable Mountain Living Communities
Northeast Georgia Locally Grown
Georgia Organics
University of Georgia
Small Business Development Center
USDA
Community Partnership of Rabun County

No shared-use commercially licensed kitchens exist in our mountain counties. This facility fills a gap in food industry development services and job training opportunities. As businesses grow, they can move on to co-packing or build their own commercial kitchens. Users will be able to package products in jars, bottles, cans, and pouches.

Outcomes: New and expanded farms and businesses, job creation, trained workforce, improved nutrition, cost-effective meal prep, and increased self-sufficiency.

The Community Kitchen supports the development of the local food system, community education, and the provision of nutritious meals to the needy.
The Community Kitchen will encourage value-added food product development and spur job creation by allowing small farmers and entrepreneurs inexpensive access to the equipment needed to produce products in bulk.

Companies that grow can use the Food Bank’s co-packing services and then graduate to for-profit co-packers. The Community Kitchen will partner with UGA, Georgia Organics, and others to help clients grow and access needed resources such as capital and new markets. In addition, business and farm planning assistance will be offered.

Community residents represent another facility user group. Our model has been designed to improve diets, nutrition, and self-sufficiency for our clients and others. We plan to offer kitchen access for individual use, as well as a series of classes in gardening, nutrition, cooking and preserving. Professional development classes for food and social service professionals are also a component of the kitchen program.

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Food Hub

The Food Hub will provide marketing, aggregation, and distribution services to northeast Georgia and adjoining North and South Carolina farms.

The Rabun facility will offer fresh prep and processing capacity, storage, and transportation infrastructure and equipment. Staff will provide one-on-one assistance to farms as well as market development, sales, and distribution.

Key opportunities identified to date include Farm to School, winter farmer’s market with frozen produce, and sales to restaurants and grocery chains. 80% of food hub revenues will go to farmers.

Individual farmers will also have the opportunity to develop value-added and frozen products through a kitchen use fee and/or co-packing with our quick-freezing services.

Outcomes: Farm revenue growth, with associated jobs created; development of the local food system; increased access to healthy food for local residents.

The Food Hub benefits from the availability of other pieces of the network, such as warehouse, processing, and transportation capacity.
Creating a food hub in the mountains will help small, local farms access new markets in a coordinated fashion. As a result, farm revenues will grow and jobs will be created.

A recent study, *Is There Farmer Interest in Food Hubs in Georgia? A Needs Assessment Survey*, by the University of Georgia, found widespread interest in food hub and processing activity in our region.

Hubs help small farmers by leveraging resources. For example, the investment in processing equipment, trucks, and marketing activities is often too large for a single farmer. The Food Bank as a partner reduces capital needs even further.

The majority of farms in the region are small in terms of revenues. They sell mostly at farmer’s markets and through an on-line cooperative marketing site, Northeast Georgia Locally Grown. At a meeting of Northeast Georgia Locally Grown, farmers expressed a desire for assistance in helping them expand their farms.

**Food Hub**

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**Opportunities for NE Georgia Farms:**
- Farm to School
- Winter Sun coop frozen produce
- Restaurants
- Sales to major grocery chains such as Whole Foods, Walmart, Publix, and Kroger
- Colleges, jails, and child care centers
- Direct to consumers
Community Education is a key facet of our Whole Community Food Network model. Beyond providing fresh and nutritious food to the needy, we want to empower people to make better choices and learn new skills. Our program will educate adults and children regarding diet and nutrition and teach them how to grow, cook, and preserve fresh food.

Obesity rates are skyrocketing in Georgia among children and adults both. Factors contributing to this problem include the low cost and availability of high calorie and processed foods; lack of time in working families to prepare fresh meals; and the loss of connection to growing one’s own food. Yet our constituents desire information on how to feed their families better within their limited budgets.

Outcomes: Improved diets and nutrition for low-income residents; decline in obesity and associated health issues; increased skill in growing, cooking, and preserving fresh food.

Community Education is a connecting thread through all aspects of the model, including the kitchen, food hub, quick-freezing, and warehouse operations.
Our community education program will have three main components: adult health and self-sufficiency, children’s education, and professional development.

Our program for health and self-sufficiency will teach adults how to grow, prepare, and preserve fresh produce. Classes will include information on eating well on a budget, the dietary needs of children, and general nutrition.

Through Farm to School, our children’s education program offers hands-on learning that can easily be tied into math, science, economics, language, history, and social studies curriculums. These classes also prepare this generation to be more empowered and knowledgeable about diet, nutrition, and food self-sufficiency.

Cooking, preserving, and food safety classes will be offered to food service professionals in restaurants, social services, and institutions. Nutrition and diet classes will be offered to a wider range of participants, including health and child care professionals.

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