

Community Food Hub Project

Project Description

This project seeks to create, establish, and sustain a long-term, community-centered agricultural food hub that brings local foods to local tables and strengthens the region's agricultural heritage. The hub would serve as a dynamic marketplace and gathering place where ranchers, growers, producers, restaurants, and residents connect around locally sourced food. Core elements include developing a year-round agricultural marketplace—both physical and online—where residents can purchase local beef, hay, vegetables, and value-added products, and where restaurants can reliably source farm-fresh ingredients. The effort envisions expanding the existing farmers' market into a four-season venue that includes meat ordering, producer showcases, and cooperative education, while also exploring the creation of a Co-op Extension to build producer capacity and offer community learning. A valley-wide online store and swap site would help manage product surplus and distribution, supporting a future brick-and-mortar food hall anchored by an engaging ranching exhibition with multimedia storytelling. Additional components—such as work-for-food exchange programs and producer-led educational offerings—would ensure the Food Hub becomes both an economic engine and a cultural anchor, celebrating local agriculture and keeping community food dollars circulating locally.

Strategic Alignment with Community Vision

The Community Food Hub Project strongly supports the community's long-term vision by reinforcing the economic and cultural foundations that define Custer County. By strengthening local food systems and keeping agricultural production viable, the project helps preserve working lands, open spaces, and the rural landscapes that contribute to the county's scenic beauty. Expanding markets for locally raised beef, hay, produce, and value-added goods enhances the sustainability of family ranching operations—ensuring that agricultural lands remain productive and intact for future generations, rather than vulnerable to fragmentation or loss. A thriving, year-round marketplace and food hall also celebrates the region's rural heritage, showcasing stories, traditions, and practices that connect the community to the land. By supporting local producers and building community-wide awareness of where food comes from, the Food Hub strengthens the community livelihood that underpins Custer County's identity, while contributing to a resilient, place-based economy that complements outdoor recreation, healthy landscapes, and long-term stewardship.

Community Support

57% of community survey respondents rated this project Important or Very Important.

Actions

1. Organize Kickoff Meeting and Form Core Collaborative Team
 - a. Convene a small steering group representing producers, food banks, restaurants, schools, wellness agencies, and local government.
2. Refine Action list and organize into Gantt chart
3. Define purpose, expectations, roles, and decision-making structure.
 - a. Map Stakeholders & Conduct Early Listening Sessions
4. Identify all producers (ranchers, growers, value-added makers), food assistance organizations, school food service leads, restaurants, and health agencies.
 - a. Conduct listening sessions or 1:1 interviews to understand needs, capacity, seasonal challenges, and opportunities.
5. Assess Supply & Demand

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- a. Gather data on what producers can supply (quantities, timing, products).
6. Document what schools, restaurants, food banks, and residents want or need.
 - a. Identify gaps and alignments (e.g., beef availability vs. school lunch needs).
7. Define the Food Hub Model & Core Services
 - a. Decide on the initial model: physical hub, online store, expanded farmers market, cooperative structure, or phased hybrid approach.
8. Set priorities: aggregation, storage, distribution, education, co-op extension, work-for-food program, etc.
 - a. Develop a Business Plan
9. Outline revenue sources, cost structure, staffing, logistics, and partnerships.
 - a. Include steps for profitability and long-term sustainability.
10. Evaluate options for a nonprofit, cooperative, or hybrid governance model.
 - a. Identify a Physical Space & Digital Infrastructure
11. Explore the location for the brick-and-mortar hub and ranching exhibit.
 - a. Start planning for cold storage, handling space, and demonstration areas.
12. Begin design of the online marketplace and producer portal.
 - a. Secure Early Funding & Develop Longer Term Funding Plan
13. Identify grant opportunities, philanthropic sponsors, and potential investors.
 - a. Prepare a funding package including cost estimates, community impact, and metrics.
14. Explore partnerships with state/local agencies, economic development groups, other food hubs, and tourism boards.
 - a. Launch Pilot Programs
15. Start with manageable pilots to build momentum:
 - a. A winter farmers market series
16. A small online ordering trial for meat and produce
 - a. School or senior meal partnerships using local foods
17. Producer education workshops
 - a. Collect early data to refine the model
18. Build Community Awareness & PR Plan
 - a. Create messaging around “Local Foods to Local Tables.”
19. Promote through social media, local press, schools, restaurants, and event
 - a. Highlight producer stories and community benefits (food access, health, economic impact).
20. Create Operational Systems
 - a. Establish processes for aggregation, ordering, pricing, distribution, safety compliance, work-for-food coordination, and volunteer systems.
21. Finalize vendor requirements and producer onboarding.
 - a. Formalize Governance & Long-Term Partnerships
22. Establish the cooperative, nonprofit, or hybrid structure.
 - a. Build MOUs with producers, food banks, school districts, restaurants, and health agencies.
23. Set shared goals, commitments, and evaluation protocols.
 - a. Open the Hub & Scale Up
24. Launch the physical space and online store with a coordinated marketing push.
 - a. Incorporate the ranching exhibit and educational/Co-op extension components.
25. Gradually expand services based on community demand, producer capacity, and financial performance.

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Metrics for Success (KPI's)

- 1) Total Revenue & Net Operating Margin – measures financial viability of the hub.
- 2) Producer Income Growth – annual increase in earnings for ranchers, growers, and local producers participating in the hub.
- 3) Number of Active Producers & Product Variety – tracks growth of the local agricultural economy and diversity of offerings.
- 4) Volume of Local Food Sold (Online + In-Person) – total pounds/units sold, indicating market adoption and community demand.
- 5) Restaurant & Retail Purchasing of Local Foods – number of buyers and purchase volumes from local businesses.
- 6) Year-Round Market Participation – vendor counts, customer counts, repeat visits for the expanded farmers market or food hall.
- 7) Community Benefit Distribution – meals, pounds, or value of food provided through partners (Veterans programs, Public Health, Senior Services).
- 8) Food Access Expansion – measurable improvement in availability of fresh, local foods for vulnerable populations.
- 9) Educational Engagement – number of workshops/trainings delivered, and participation levels (e.g., Co-op Extension programming, producer education, community learning).
- 10) Local Economic Impact – estimated dollars retained in the local economy due to buying local, plus indicators of long-term sustainability (e.g., reduced food waste, expanded producer capacity).

Probable Collaboration Partners

- o Local agricultural producers
- o Local restaurant owners
- o Farmers Market
- o Other Regional food hubs
- o Wet Mountain Valley Outdoors
- o CSU Extension Office
- o Local county and town government
- o School District
- o Wellness non-profits

Community Sign-up List

NAME	ORGANIZATION	EMAIL ADDRESS	Include me on the communication list for this project.	I would like to be part of project development work
Deb Follien	WMVO	debfollien@yahoo.com		1
Deb Van Doren		debvandoren1@gmail.com		1
Sally Strom	WMVO	sally.b.strom@gmail.com	1	1
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Cynthia Gaskill	Retired Vet	cynthiagaskill2@gmail.com	1	

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TOTALS			6	3