

## Rocky Mount Farmer Listening Session Transcript

My name's Kevin Camm, Extension agent for the City of Lynchburg, I'm gonna facilitating this session tonight, so thank you for spending time with us. It's gonna be an open and engaging night, so basically tonight we're gonna talk about ideas and needs and challenges and problems around farming and food. We're gonna get into all that in a little bit, I'm gonna turn it over to Maureen and let her introduce herself and explain a little bit about what we're doing

Maureen – Hi my name is Maureen, I'm the director of LEAP, stands for Local Environmental Agriculture Project, we're a small non-profit based in Roanoke, and our mission is to support healthy communities and resilient local food systems, so we have a couple of markets, and we define local as within 100 miles, we've been working for a couple years...

Kevin – I'm gonna bring attention to the name placards here...

I'd like for us to go around and introduce ourselves and who you represent, if you're a producer what do you produce, let's just go around the room, if you want to take notes...

My name's Sam Lev, I'm with LEAP, I am the market manager of our Roanoke markets as well as program coordinator for our mobile market and shared commercial kitchen

My name's Matt Lawless, I'm the town manager in Boone's Mill. We host the Foothills Produce Auction, we're working on a year-round retail farmers market design, and I grow a little bit in my backyard

I'm Tim Belcher, Rolling Meadows Farms, we have a retail operation in Franklin County, we also sell on the historic Roanoke City Farmers' Market

Hey, Eric Pendleton, I manage the historic City Farmers Market in Roanoke, I'm here to meet new farmers

I'm Tina Workman with Downtown Roanoke Inc., we're the non-profit organization that manages the farmers market for the city of Roanoke

I'm John Dansby, and we have a U-pick operation including asparagus starting in April, raspberries in high tunnels, and soon, we bought a hundred blueberry plants, and that's in whitehead

Chris Jamison from here in Franklin County, and just a part time farmer trying to take a hobby into actually making some income with it, beef and pork mainly right now

Josh Wingfield, we're a local family farm, primarily beef and pork as well

Thad Montgomery, owner/operator of Double M Dairy, sell wholesale raw milk but also sell some pork, beef, and eggs

I'm Catherine Milazzo, we have a small farm called Hazy Mountain Farm, but I'm primarily here with Blue Ridge Mountain Bounty, we're a local food hub that's getting ready to launch in the SW VA area

Joyce and Jerry Conner, we're Four Oaks Farm, we have a hydroponic operation over in Wirtz, we do leafy greens and are branching out into some other things here pretty soon

I'm Sarah Ramey, I'm with the Society of Saint Andrew, we're a national gleaning organization, and our main office is in Big Island and I'm in charge of the state of Virginia, gleaning fresh produce from farms, farmers markets, food hubs, wherever we can find it and donating it to less fortunate

I'm Caroline Reilly, my husband and I own Four Corners Farm here in Franklin County, and we raise pastured poultry, range-raised pork, and grass-only beef, and raise kids, and I'm also a pipeline fighter, some of you probably already know that, so we're dealing with that on our land personally

I'm Ian Reilly, I'm with her

I'm Dana Lydon, we have Lazy Pigg farm out in Ferrum, and we do grass-fed beef and poultry as well as eggs

My name is Daniel Austin, I live between Rocky Mount, Ferrum and Calloway, at the six mile post area, I have a small seed business and run a non GMO feed mill

I'm Liz Spellman and I just moved here from West Virginia where I was a small producer, had an aggregated CSA, sold at a couple farmers markets, and also worked on state food policy to help farmers make a better living farming, and I'm here working with LEAP

My name is Bette Brand, I'm from Roanoke VA, I work with Farm Credit, so we provide capital to people to farm, both for land and equipment and everything, and the other reason I'm here is that we have a Knowledge Center, we work very closely with Extension and other organizations to provide resources for people that are just learning to farm or risk management classes for people that farm a lot, just a whole variety of things, so if it's a learning opportunity I'd certainly like to learn about it tonight and maybe we can help partner or even put on some of the... a lot of the classes we put on webinars, we have video series, we have all kinds of different things to try to help meet people where they need to learn about agriculture

I'm Chris Brown with the Extension office here in Franklin County, so Kevin's counterpart here

I'm Jim Monroe with Greenbrier Nurseries, we're a farm to table market in Roanoke County, touching local food on a lot of different levels, we have production, we have the farm market, we're ???

My name is Ned Savage, I'm an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with LEAP

Kevin – great, welcome everyone, did everyone get index cards? Everyone should have at least three index cards, and a writing utensil. Now it's time to jump on into things. What I'd like you to do, on each individual index card I want you to write a challenge that faces a farmer, that faces you. So if you've got three challenges on each index card, you're gonna write each of those. So, I'm not going to give you any answers, but you've got three index cards, take about two minutes, brainstorm, and come up with three challenges that face a farmer.

Anything? Kevin – anything, whether it faces you personally on your farm, it's a big, related to the hydroponics. We're gonna whittle these down momentarily.

Okay, does everybody have their three challenges, or at least three challenges? Okay, so what I would like for you to do, is we're gonna break you up into some small groups, okay, maybe groups of three, people sitting around you, each table usually has about three people to it, I want you to talk about your challenges, what you came up with on your paper, with each other, and then I want you to rank those

three challenges, because some might be similar, they might not be similar, but all of them, I want you to figure out what's the top priority and then the number two priority. Is there any question about what I'm asking? So if it's apples, oranges, and bananas, which one is the best, which one is the second best? Okay, we're going to take a few minutes to do this, and then we're going to report back, so why don't you break into the groups and I'm going to come around and give you one more index card and then we're going to write those down on this with some markers, okay?

Kevin – we're gonna bring it on back, we're gonna go around and share, Let's start over here on the left with Chris, if you could say the three and sort of explain a little bit behind the topics and I'm gonna take your cards and I'm gonna put them up here

Chris – so we had market accessibility, so if you're not trying to compete in the wholesale market but if you're trying to find a niche, that can be difficult sometimes. Regulations, funny coming from a government employee right? But regulations we see as a barrier. And labor, finding good consistent labor.

Kevin – Thank you. What I'm gonna be doing, I'm gonna collect these, we might have some similar challenges around the room, so we're going to group those together.

? - We did marketing and communicating our products and passions to consumers, finding like-minded people. Time constraints, kind of goes back to labor, because as a farmer you have to wear all the different hats, the marketing hat, the business hat, the farming hat. And then profitability and sustainability, environmental, financial, and social sustainability and finding that mix or blend.

Kevin – okay, thank you very much.

We said weather, that was our number one. Marketing resources, and labor and help, and having capital for growth.

Alright, so we have some of the same ones, the first one we did was profitability, so just getting fair prices. Next one is marketing, so getting the word out there and trying to expand your sales. And the last one we did was government intervention, so we kind of feel like the government, the way that the law is written, there's a lot of support for the big guys in subsidies and things like that, not so much for the little guys. Government picks winners and losers, the food pyramid's a good example, you know carbohydrates and crop oils are the winners, and animal fats and vegetables are the losers, and it's bad nutrition advice that comes from the government

Kevin – okay, thank you

This is from your group, we've got profitability and sustainability, we've got time constraints you said somewhat goes under labor, and you've got marketing. Okay, this group

We came up with a couple common things as some other groups, labor being one, capital being another, and finding the customer, which I'm gonna say forks in with the marketing aspect of it, I mean just where are the customers, when are the customers available, that kind of thing.

Kevin – okay, so now is usually the part where you have to move a little bit, because you know we've been sitting here for a little while, so you have three dots, what I'd like for you to do is take a minute, walk up here, throw a dot next to the one that is very important to you, and throw another dot next to

the one that is next important. And we've got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 if we wanna umbrella it, okay, we know that these go together, but there are some parts of labor that are broken down in here, we're gonna talk about it a little later, so I'm actually going to separate these. I'd like you to put a dot next to the ones that you think is the most important to you.

Can we put all three dots beside the same one? Kevin – yes, that's fine, if that's the most important one to you. So now we have five topics: Labor, Capital, Profitability, Regulations and Government, and Marketing. So let's take about two minutes to go throw some dots up there

(35:30) Did everyone have a chance? Let's go ahead and review what we have up here. Labor, 7. Capital, 6. Profitability, 17. Nine for Government and Regulation. Then looks like markets, and these are broken up, and thank you for doing this, because this shows where people's minds are, even though this is under one umbrella, so that when we talk about this we can flesh out some other things. Eighteen.

Tim pulled Russian involvement and put all three dots there!

This will be one, this will be two, and this will be three, okay. These two, I'm not saying that they're not important, they're topics four and five, and we are just gonna focus on one, two, and three today, LEAP will take this, though, because at another session these may be the top ones, and they're gonna hybridize a lot of stuff, since this is just a gathering of information. But today, tonight we're gonna focus on Marketing, Profitability, and then this whole thing about Government Intervention and Regulation. So let's go ahead and look at Marketing here.

So we're going to take these three topics that you have decided are the most important challenges that you face as a producer: Marketing, Profitability, and Government Intervention. What do we want to say about marketing that's important, that's a challenge?

Effective.

Effective, so is it a challenge because you want it to be effective marketing, is it tools or resources, can you elaborate a little more on that?

Time, tools, I guess time can be considered a resource.

Kevin – so maybe you need the resources to be able to market well

Catherine – I can't say from experience because we're not a big farm selling stuff yet but I've talked to a lot of farmers and they have stuff to do, they **don't have time to be sitting on the computer and writing blogs and being on Facebook and trying to look for those customers**, so that's kind of the feedback I've gotten. Another one is **not every farmer is tech savvy**, it's kind of a generational thing, don't get me wrong, there's people in every generation who are hip, but there's different types of people, and if you work with your hands and you prefer dealing with the real world instead of the virtual world, that's great and you're probably great at farming, but not everyone is technologically inclined

Kevin – and a lot of farmers don't have the time because what are they doing, they're farming

Daniel – This is more just a statement. In my business, everything we do is direct marketed, so we have to make a goal at the beginning of the year that **70% of our time is spent on marketing**.

Kevin – so how do you do that?

Daniel - Depends on what product we're pushing, but mostly face to face.

Kevin – and that's hard for you, I would think to set up a meeting.

Daniel – basically farming is something we do at night and on the weekends. Really depends on the market and, you know with the seed business that's large accounts, so you have to come through every month try to set up the year, and this quarter we need to see this tier of customer and in this quarter, one tier once a month, one tier once a year, and it's a huge deal. It has to be a system for me

Jim – I think the market accessibility thing is just the fact that that we're just reaching such a small percentage of the population, people love to read about local food on facebook or whatever but most people aren't participating and that's what the marketing needs to be doing, is trying to, is create awareness and figure out ways to get people in the market

Kevin – ways that they can buy food, local food, because we know that everyone's eating, how can we do that? Does anybody want to share some ideas

Carolyn – We need to educate people locally of the true cost of producing the products, because what they're buying at Walmart is not equivalent to what I'm raising, and they don't understand, they see the price difference, they don't understand the costs that go into that, and I think that education has to be a big part of marketing for the markets that our farm is trying to get into

Jim – that's the kind of thing that we can do collectively, that doesn't mean one market vs another market or one producer vs. another producer, it's almost like with the government stuff, try to do marketing campaigns, some way to make people better understand to support local agriculture

Catherine – I second that, not only the cost of producing it but the actual real value in knowing where your food comes from, how it was raised, knowing the person who raised it, I mean education is really huge, and I mean most people, and I can speak from experience, up until a few years ago I just ate whatever was available, what was there, whatever was convenient because I didn't know any better, it wasn't until I actually realized and started looking into and educating myself about where most of our food actually comes from, when I realized I don't want to support that system anymore. I think the schools are really the first place where we need to start, you need to get kids when they're young.

Kevin – I think you mentioned something about economics, something about putting money back into...

Jim – I think it's some kind of, any way that we can create a way where people can participate in some kind of marketing campaign, whether it's a publicly funded thing.

Bette – like branding? Virginia's Finest...

Jim – yeah, like Liz and I have both been around the Greenbrier Valley Grown program over in West Virginia, unfortunately the Roanoke Valley doesn't really have even something as simple as that, that would be a great project for you guys.

Bette - There is a state level...

Jim – yeah the Virginia Grown, but to really drill that down into something where, and you could have a lot of the education be on ??? have a website where people could go on there and find out where the products are available

You ask anybody out on the street, 'what does Virginia Grown mean', well, it's grown in Virginia, they don't really understand the whole thing behind it

Jim – there's plenty of bad food grown in Virginia. Let's really create something at the local level here, I think there is a captive audience here that we could do a better job of marketing

And other parts of the state, or regionally, I mean they're doing their own thing regionally, and there's absolutely nothing past Charlottesville. Nothing in terms of some sort of regional marketing campaign, something like the Greenbrier Valley Grown program, like Roanoke Valley Grown, that makes people realize that the food is from local farms

the Valley has one, Shenandoah Valley, Charlottesville area has one, Tidewater's got one, Northern Virginia's got one, Winchester's got one

And there usually are nice publications with it

Kevin – so an educational campaign under marketing, right?

I mean yeah I think it's awareness, I think its education, its really a community thing, its like, we're proud of where we're from, and if you're really proud of where you're from then support where you're from, support the community, and you're gonna get some good stuff out of it

Jim – And I think somebody like a hometown bank, there are opportunities to develop it without having it be a big cost to the producer.

I think the ??? groups, not just one, but Franklin County, but they're producing a booklet with farms and what they grow, and that has helped me tremendously. When I first started, I started in strawberries, and I went from ¼ acres to 4 acres in about 4 years, and one of the first years, every year I had to raise the price of strawberries because of the inputs, and so people started complaining, so I made a placard right there and got people if they were interested, if they fuss about the price, I'd say look at it from my standpoint, its \$7000 an acre to replant, that's without any equipment, any irrigation, any tractors, I'm talking about replanting one acre. When I had to buy the small plants from growers in North Carolina and then get a dozen Mexicans at that time for a couple days, and the plant, and I went through the whole thing and showed them, I'm not doing this for nothing, but I wasn't making much money either, and I explained it to them, and I had four acres, so that was \$28000 before the first customer came in that year, I think if you explain, like I said education, you explain, if you're only doing one or two crops, you explain where the costs are and where the problems are, and why. Well they say they can go to Kroger or Walmart and pay the same price, but I say yeah but you don't get to choose the raspberry or the strawberry and that makes a difference, and the other thing is those products are probably three weeks old from the field, and in some cases with asparagus a lot longer than that

Kevin – I think what you're saying goes back to what Catherine was saying, when they purchase it from you, that money stays in the community and then its spent in the community and it becomes cyclical, and they're supporting several different aspects from that once, and that's all about educating the consumer

Matt - As much as I love the farmers market and we're trying to establish more of them, the fact is that most people's produce shopping occurs in grocery stores, so with the franklin county produce that I've spent the most money on since I've lived here is homestead milk, because that butter and that ice

cream and that milk is in Kroger, and so I think that's the easiest value-added for marketing is if you can get your produce into that grocery store and then they do the marketing for you

Jerry – Do you know what it costs to get in there?

Matt – I do not, but as an observation, if that could be achieved

Kevin – or at least some assistance on that, because you've already looked into that for the hydroponics?

Jerry – We've already talked to Kroger. The insurance you've got to carry is outrageous, number one. They're a pain in the butt to deal with, two. They very much are, I'm telling you. Your worst customer that you used to stand across the cash register from is a lot better than the wholesale marketers. You get the least profit from it

Liz – do they ?? cooperatives?

I have no idea, when we dealt with them, they were so ?? it was like a shotgun, they just went all directions

Bette – but I think the convenience factor, however you get it, whether it's from a store or get it from homesteads trucks when they deliver, he delivers more than just milk to my house, that would affect me as a consumer. I'm traveling, I like local food but I've got to have easier access to it.

Matt – If our conclusion is that it's more trouble than it's worth, then that's good to know, but we should probably say that.

Thad – I think the education part perhaps needs to be to local government because of the value, the GDP that is produced, money changing hands, the value that that brings to local communities by the money that is produced by people who produce things, I did a study a few years ago on Franklin County that was real shocking to me that almost 35% of Franklin County's retail sales value comes from production agriculture, that's pretty unbelievable really, but you know people go and spend their money, and when they choose to spend it at Walmart, that money leaves town on a freight train bound for China, it don't even stop in Arkansas, it goes outta here, so that's a consumer dollar that no longer circulates through the local economy, whereas when it's spent with a local famer or a local person who produces something, that money generally changes hands four or five times at least, sometimes as much as seven or eight before it leaves the community

\$68 instead of \$42

So that's important for the localities to understand so that they can modify their economic development plans to include more small business owners and production side of the coin than trying to bring in someone who's going to employ 300 people

Kevin – and I think we can tie that with marketing and with government intervention, and if you're okay with that when we get to that one that'll be the first one

Jim – and I think that's a great point that there's a lot of economic development for a county like Franklin County that's basically a lot of small farmettes, much bigger opportunity to develop that from an agriculture standpoint than it is to find a Toyota maker that's gonna build cars.

So the convenience factor, for farmers markets, from a farmer point of view as well, my husband works off farm, so I'm a one-man-show, I don't wanna spend Saturday and Sunday sitting at the farmers market, that's the only time I get to see my family, and I don't want, from a convenience point of view, I'd love to market my product through a storefront rather than a farmers market

Catherine – I'm listening to everything that everyone's saying and I'm getting a little excited over here, because essentially, our hub, what we're creating is a year-round online farmers market, where producers can list their products, shoppers from Abingdon, Wytheville, Roanoke, NRV can all shop from this one online market, and then once a week we'll send you your pick list, the next day you got 24 hours to get all your orders together, Friday morning you deliver it to me at the hub, I'll sort it and then I'll deliver it back out to all the customers. So shoppers can shop at midnight if they want, they can shop 7 days a week, whenever they want, and you know ahead of time what you're selling. We're also doing a lot of marketing right now, we've got an ad in the Roanoker, we're doing Facebook stuff, the local food guide, so we're trying to create, essentially, that type of market, where it's very convenient for the customer, very convenient for the farmer, and something that's fair. I'm not happy that you guys have problems but I'm just kind of excited because this is what we're trying to do

Where's your hub at?

Jim: There's no local produce in the Co-Op in Roanoke, I just think that's incredible.

Catharine: Yeah, no that's crazy

Daniel: I was just gonna chime in with basically the same thing. In a big market in Roanoke, they need convenience, unless you're driven by true high ideals and have a lot of disposable income and time, there are a lot of families that are younger and have small children, or work far away, they don't have time to pursue this kind of thing. It needs to be convenient, convenience is huge in our society.

Catharine: I agree

John Dansby: Also, people enjoy a farm experience. I found that over at my U-pick, and that's all I do is U-pick. And occasionally we'll pick with other people or help them out, but 99.9% of my stuff is u-pick, and I've had people come from Christiansburg to pick asparagus and raspberries, and they come and walk, "what's in the woods?" "just go ahead and walk." I've heard time and time again where they just love the experience.

How many of you participate in the farmers auction in Boones Mill, and how was it for you?

I bought, I didn't sell. I loved it, I thought it went really, really well.

One of the main reasons why I came to this meeting, I think as a group we're at a stepping stone with Franklin County possibly getting a nice agriculture center, possibly a nice farmers market, it would be really nice if we had a hub like the Southwest Market that's in Hillsville. I don't know how many of you know that the government has sold the state farmers markets to local counties. And if Franklin County invested in the Sink Farm where they're planning on putting the agriculture center, and put in an operation similar to Hillsville, maybe not in the same format, but those guys, I don't know if any of you guys take any product there, but it's a really neat organization. It's all local product, if you aren't able to pack it, they will pack it for you. They market it to grocery stores, large grocery store chains, we're talking about selling truckloads of product, and it's just a... in our area, we have nothing like it. It's just



like, any of you that are doing beef, how would it be if you had a cooler in there with your product in it, they sold it for you, you didn't have to be there. We're at a point to where we could have something big if we push it as a group. This is something this area could really, really profit from. Because a produce auction, for myself, I sold a lot of produce **at that auction, and it commanded a lot higher prices** than I got retail for some of my stuff. And I look for that thing to get bigger and bigger and bigger, and I think it would even be nice if that were incorporated into this whole package. I mean it's like a group like us could put all our ideas together into some kind of plan for a perfect marketing situation to help every person in this room.

Thad: I think the **location is very important**. Looks like to me the place to put it would be right down next to Taco Bell below Kroger

Sink Farm... visibility. Visibility alone, I mean Jim, if you were out on the main road, look how much more business you would do. And same with me. We both would, would practically double, or triple.

Jim: Well Franklin County is important, and it's gonna have to put their food in this area, we want very much to, I mean many a time I've paid way too much for something at the auction just because I supported the \_\_\_\_ I think it's really important \_\_\_\_ successful and valued, although it's hard to get people to, not everybody's going to \_\_\_\_ To the Roanoke food market, Franklin county is imperative for success.

And the whole thing could **tie into the school systems**, you know you could **create a program that could pull everybody's product and supply the school systems – farm to school**

A lot of this stuff, if you don't have that government certification mess, you can't do it.

Catherine: Yeah, **GAP certification**

Josh: **That's the problem with beef and pork, you have to have it USDA processed**. Where ya gonna take that?

Catherine: Lynchburg.

Josh: Okay, I mean...

Jim: What states need is they need to look at **regional aggregation points where there's slaughterhouses and canning kitchens and produce storage**, that are regionally spaced out. Liz, Liz hasn't said a word but she's stinkin' smart and she's done a lot of this stuff already and she'll be a huge help to everybody here. That's what having aggregation points where somebody here who's got too much sweet corn can get that to Abingdon...

Jerry: I was just gonna say something about the auction. Presently how it's set up, having GAP certification means zero to the auction, and **for an auction to sell to a grocery chain is not gonna happen without the GAP certification**, every one of them want GAP now

I'm sorry, I'm ignorant, what's GAP?

Good Agricultural Practices. It's a certification for the Food Safety Modernization Act that passed back in 2012.

Thad: It's paperwork, it's just paperwork. It don't mean anything, it's just paperwork.

Jerry: But anyway, the other problem that we have with this produce auction thing is that there's absolutely zero protection for the farmer, none. I mean, you're at the risk, that the produce auction makes their money on both sides of the table, you gotta buy their boxes, you gotta do everything, and then you put your product out there and it goes for literally pennies on the dollar, or dollars, and that is just not right, and I won't participate.

Liz: I think maybe, I don't know what Jerry's saying, but I think the most successful co-ops(?) in this country are owned by farmers, so really keeping that ownership piece is key, so there's not some new scheme rolling in to aggregate produce and then sell things wholesale that maybe could be getting, I know Tim you were saying you got more value sometimes from direct marketing, so it's nuanced, but I think not forgetting the piece, maybe or trying to consider the piece of how farmers maintain ownership over any new marketing strategies is really important. And if folks are working together, like a cooperative model or any kind of group marketing structure, then there's Group GAP, which can be a lot cheaper and easier for individual farmers to go through than if they're each trying to individually be certified. But then I wanted to add a few minutes ago, customers are really fickle, you know, in the economy, so that they don't go backwards. Obviously it's necessary to make a living sometimes, but what could we maybe be thinking about so that we're not all bending over backwards and trying different ways to appease a customer who we have no idea what that person's gonna do, but where are we building power as small farmers in our region to maybe deal with marketing as a group instead of all individually trying to work for a customer who doesn't necessarily care.

Catharine: I agree with that, and to add on to that, kind of an idea that was birthed out of the last listening session that we had last week, is instead of all farmers working against each other price-wise, and you get into price wars, is kind of creating a co-op that is farmer-owned, where I personally think that if farmers band together, especially in the wholesale market, they can demand higher prices, because local food, consumers want local food, and if wholesale retailers want it so bad, they're gonna pay whatever price that is fair for the farmers. Because from what I understand, they tell you guys the prices right now, to me that sounds ridiculous. I feel like if the demand is there, if farmers work together we could really work toward getting fair prices.

Carolyn: So with our farm, we've done a lot of direct marketing, including getting people to come to our farm, you know we have the thought of, if they come they will buy, you know, if you tell a story, if we show them the land and the animals, and really have that transparency of what we're doing and the education aspect, they can't pick their own chicken or the eggs, but I guess part of me, we've enjoyed developing those relationships with people that come to our farm store, who come for farm tours, as well as at the market, you know that direct relationship is really valuable, and so I think it's hard to let go of product to be sold through something else where we don't get to hear 'that was the best chicken we've ever had' or, you know, not that it's all about our ego at all, but it's about the relationships, that's really a part of marketing, too, regardless, and telling the story, and it's a part of effective communication, again that's the local dollars, all of it, so the story, humans in action.

Kevin: That's one of the things that LEAP is gonna be doing, with what you were bringing up, and Maureen might want to mention, to add to what Tim was saying, that all this information is going to be aggregated, and to help you all from LEAP

Maureen: one thing that I found really interesting in reading all the ag plans and agritourism plans and county plans is that every plan in this area comes up with the same solutions. But does there need to be

a food hub in Botetourt County, in Bedford County, in Franklin County, in Montgomery County? And so how can we say, okay, these are the things infrastructure-wise that we as a whole region need, and where does it make the most sense for them to be located, or where are the biggest gaps? Or if we're going to come together and say, even, here are the top three biggest infrastructure things, how do we make it so we all work together instead of in opposition for similar funding? I look at Charlottesville, it's a huge area and they have one food hub, and it's doing great. But if you had all that same energy split over four food hubs in four different counties, it may not do as well. And so one thing that's really interesting is to hear similar stories and similar needs identified throughout the region, but then the next thing is, well how do we actually address some of these problems? And how do we do it in a way that we're all willing to put in our effort, even if it may not be directly the most convenient thing for every single person in the whole entire region, and it won't be. And so we've started, LEAP, we have a very small food hub for our mobile market. Is that serving the needs of the valley? By no means whatsoever, but is it what we need to be doing moving forward? I don't know, that's really where it comes down to, where the rubber meets the road, is what do people want, what do people need?

Kevin: I'm going to take one or two more so we can make sure we get some good conversation on those two up there, too, and be respectful of your time. Bette?

Bette: Yeah, I was just curious, have any of you all used, or know about **Market Maker**?

Jerry: It **doesn't work**.

Bette: It doesn't? Have you tried?

Jerry: Yes. I've been on it from the minute they announced it. I've received zero hits from it.

Bette: Is it because it's not populated enough, they don't the restaurants, the consumers on that end?

Jerry: I **don't think it's marketed** at all. I mean to the market, I don't know who the market is, but farmers throw their stuff in there, but you never hear of any hit whatsoever. I've never gotten a single hit, and I've kept stuff on there for a year.

What's it called? Market Maker.

Bette: I have some brochures on it, it's new, it's a national program that was started somewhere in the Midwest, but Virginia just started it, Dr. Kim Long and Kim Niewolny out of Blacksburg. So it is new, but it's kind of the **chicken or the egg, do you get the farmers to add products before you get the restaurants?** It's open to anybody, it's free, you can go in and register, put your products out there, restaurants can go out and look and say I need this much, I mean in an ideal environment it could be good

Jerry: But if the restaurants or whomever doesn't know it's there, it's like a tree falling in the forest, and nobody's there.

Matthew: Sounds like a similar problem as what the auction has on Saturday, too many suppliers show up and not enough buyers, and the price drops and nobody's happy. So as you build that market, you have to **ensure you have enough coming in on both sides** of it. Whoever's running Market Maker needs to be doing the same thing.

Jim: Marketing restaurants

That's the big thing with the auction, I went down to two restaurants in Roanoke and said, would you be interested in buying local produce? Absolutely, but we're not gonna come pick it up on Tuesday.

Jim: **Roanoke is ripe for a nice food hub**... (indecipherable)

Kevin: Any other comments on marketing? I think we've nailed a lot, I made some notes up here too, some of the things you've said that could fall under the other sections. And a lot of what we've had fall under profitability is sustainability too. I think marketing plays into sustainability, because if you don't market your product, you don't market your farm, you're gonna not exist unless you've got one major buyer that's gonna load you up every month. So we're going to go to profitability, which will lend itself to sustainability, so let's talk about profitability, why did we say that that was a challenge?

Josh: We have to be able to feed our families too. I've got three boys and a girl and none of them like to eat dirt, so they all want breakfast, lunch, and dinner, they all want something to eat, I have to be able to afford that food.

Thad: And you have to go in the house sometimes too, sit on the couch and read to them. There ain't but 24 hours in the day.

Reflects selling all your product, **if you don't sell all your product you're not going to make a profit**.

Catherine: I think **farmers need to get fair prices**, too. I think fair prices is really important, and when you're at the mercy of somebody who wants to buy a lot of your stuff, and it's either that or you don't sell anything, then you're kind of stuck.

Daniel: This may just be sort of a thought I guess, I'll try to flesh this out, I think a lot of the problem is our culture, our society is used to thinking in a linear way, so it works really good with making goods... One year we may have a very large surplus of something and the next year we may have a shortage of something, so basically it comes back to us as producers the **challenge of keeping records**, so we have a clue where we're at and where we stand and **how to market to get the correct profitability** that we need from this set.

Especially if you're GAP certified

It goes back to the chicken or the egg though, do I get my customers before I have enough beef to sell to them, or do I have the beef on the hoof and now I need to find the customers to buy it?

Desperately

Hope you have enough freezers to store it.

But then you have to pay the power for that.

Kevin: Going back to what John was saying earlier about \$7000 an acre, you had put your \$28,000 in before the first customer. How do you stay profitable? What's your game plan to be profitable knowing that you're already walking up the mountain?

John: Well first of all, you have to **set the price of the product**. I don't do strawberries anymore, my wife quit. (indecipherable) One of the most time consuming things, for the time period, and it's year-round. I used to belong to the National Strawberry Association out of North Carolina, and the North Carolina Strawberry Association, and we found that we were able to hold that crop between us, so that cut down

from \$7000 down to \$3500, and then there are growers that, when we got together, we found other ways to cut costs down a little bit. But basically you have to set your price.

Kevin: Do all of you base your price on each other, or on what the store, how do you set your price?

John: I have had asparagus for several years, and I don't know if you do, do you have asparagus?

No

John: Anyway, I set it at \$2.99, it's been like that for something like four years, five years now. Sometimes it goes, it's \$2.99, last week I went and it was selling for 99 cents there. But people understand when they come out and taste... break a stalk and tell them, break the end off and get them to taste it raw, a lot of people think you've got to cook asparagus, you don't have to. But anyway, you've got to set your price right and stick to it. And that's where the strawberries, every year we had to change, because the inputs change, and once I explained it to people, some people turned around and laughed, one out of three or four hundred strawberry customers would leave and go somewhere else, but my strawberries were on plasticulture? And in between the rows was a grass aisle that was cut at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, so you've got a lot of, but the customers appreciated that because they didn't have to go stepping in mud like at other places

Jim: I'll go back to what you said a minute ago about whether it's the chicken or the egg. I think there's no question, in agriculture you need to have a market before you produce it. I don't think there's any question. I mean, in our company, whether we're doing something that's going to be for the small (indecipherable) but right now we're selling (indecipherable) foods for 2022, 2023, you've got to be thinking about where you're going.

But if have a market with beef, you're two years out. So now you have a market, you can't sell

Jim: You start telling the story before

Kevin: Have any of you thought about combining efforts and focusing on a market to be profitable?

Jim: We have a pretty good collective thing we're doing with Terry and Homestead and some of those

Kevin: Okay, so there's potential partnerships for profitability as well, okay.

Yeah, one more thing about profitability, one of the hardest things for me personally, and those of you who deal with me probably find this pretty interesting, the hardest thing to do is say no. If you're going down the street. If we stand behind the quality of our product and what we're trying to do and if you're after a cheaper alternative, there are other folks who offer that, and that actually works really really good. You don't have to have this, this is a privilege.

Jim: You're never the cheapest.

Kevin: Anybody else want to say anything else about profitability? Why the big challenge? Other than feeding the family, because that is huge, this is your job.

Matthew: We mostly talked about the price on the buying side, we haven't talked about input costs. I don't know very much about that, but I thought I'd throw that out there.

Kevin: So that brings up a good point, input costs for your profitability.

Jim: It's an opportunity to collaborate, on plastics and seeds and all that stuff, that there's really no, even something as simple as a closed Facebook page where people could go on and say I'm getting ready to order

Isn't that what a cooperative, you know like Southern States, isn't that what they do now?

Jim: It could be drilled down to a smaller group, that you get the credit issues

Bette: Just to throw this out there, several of us have talked about co-ops and stuff, and it's interesting, I forgot the name of the group, Chris Cook is the guy, he works out of the Farm Bureau building, but he helps co-ops get started and stuff, and he actually said that because of Virginia law, an LLC is much more realistic now, that is would be not wise for a cooperative to form but rather an LLC, for whatever that's worth.

Liz: Well it all depends on (registration?). Because LLCs are sometimes much easier to start, but then depending on how many farms, you can only have 25 co-owners of an LLC. A co-op...

Jim: It's just simple things, like we participate in a cooperative, things like white plastics for high tunnels and greenhouses, and we do that with about thirty other nurseries in Virginia, and just one nursery is nice enough to put the bid out there and we all take advantage of that, and there's simple ways like that that are good ways

Bette: Is that a formal arrangement or just kind of good ole boys?

Jim: Good ole boy

Carolyn: When you're raising animals, you have feed inputs, you can't really cooperatively go in on feed necessarily, you know, so there's certain prohibitive costs that are just there. And then part of the cost is labor, I mean we don't pay ourselves, we've been doing this for, this is our seventh year, and we've never made (indecipherable), but we eat really well, so that's good.

Not being in the produce business, I have another question. So like in production ag, like especially row crops or dairy production, a lot of times we'll go and try to learn from someone, maybe as kind of an edge, something that they've kind of figured out that may work on their system, wouldn't you say, try to do that some, not necessarily copy that but take it back to our own operation, and how can we pull some of that, replicate

Kevin: So an education component to be profitable. Working together as a unit. Okay. Guess we won't even bring up the weather in profitability, it's already probably doing stuff for orchards right now. Anything else for profitability? Okay, so let's move to government. Let's call it government, since we've got regulations, we can call it Big Brother, doesn't matter. I do have two notes that I said earlier that I think would be good for this, that you mentioned. One was the education component, that the government needs to be educated, think you had mentioned that, and that's part of marketing, they need to be educated about really what the farmers' costs are, why the prices are the way that they are, what the farmer goes through, for them to be educated about that. Am I correct in that, what you had mentioned earlier?

I think as part of the government, we need to separate ourselves, right now they **dismiss us completely except to regulate us. Because their idea of ag is big ag, because that's who pays them,** and we don't. So **our voice is absolutely not heard at the government level,** at any government level.

Jim: I think that's changing, Liz, would you say that's changing?

Liz: I'm not sure, I think there are some pretty big advocates for sustainable ag kind of looped together, I don't know about in Virginia if there's any kind of front that speaks for the larger, I know (VIPKA?)

Thad: If you're expecting the federal government to do anything, you're just barking up the wrong tree, and even the state. The **best bet you have is local government,** you can get to those people and you have a conversation with them, but getting anything to change is a whole different story.

Kevin: I will put this out there, the new secretary for Ag, Basil Gooden, he's a sharp one, and he's a small farmer from Charlotte County, and just meeting with him several times, he's a big advocate on supporting all farmers in the state, he's going to do his best to help it out, and also we've got the assistant, Megan Siebel, who was with Extension, and her husband Andy Siebel, Extension, so they're really going out there right now trying to do what they can, because the number one sector in the state's economy is agriculture, and they realize that. They also realize the big black hole, if you will, that nobody wants to go in, or if they do they get sucked out, so that's the one little light on the dark area, so hopefully that'll help out. And then also, just to clarify my thinking, Tim brought it up, as far as the government, regulation, intervention, I'm going with intervention, you mentioned the Sink Farm, would that fall under this? Can you elaborate a little more on this and how it would go with the government so we can capture that data?

Tim: Well the **Sink Farm was bought by Franklin County to be used as an industrial park,** and there were also plans to **move the fairgrounds** for the Sontag area into this new development. And I know the **produce auction was looking at a spot,** and I think they went after some grant money, maybe through the Golden Leaf Foundation or something, I don't think they got it. And so, you know, it's kind of at Franklin County's discretion now, to **push them to look at this,** whether it's something they want to do. I just think it goes hand-in-hand, **if you're gonna put an agriculture center there, do the rest of it.**

Matthew: I think that's a pretty good summary of it. It's the **county's big economic development investment for the next generation,** 500 acres, and to say well **what are your target industries,** and if agriculture's gonna be one, let's (indecipherable) Toyota plant, **let's invest at least as much local government effort in supporting diversified local agriculture,** versus putting all our eggs in that one Toyota basket, which might be a long time coming, or might leave soon. So this is the opportunity, and **this is probably the group to organize that and advocate for it,** and I think you would have a **fairly receptive county board,** to say local agriculture matters, and this is the point to invest in a **positive government intervention.**

Thad: Toyota don't pay no real estate tax. And the **county lives off real estate taxes,** and the homeowners, for every dollar they pay in real estate tax, it costs about \$1.25 to provide the services. An **acre of corn** requires almost zero, and it don't go to school. So it pays taxes, even at a reduced rate, it's a **profit center for rural Virginia.** And they know that, but they continue to look at the Toyota plant because, you know, they get their name in the paper, have a picture with the big scissors cutting the ribbon.

Kevin: So how would you, would that be something that needs to be drafted up? How could you get that to be changed?

Thad: I don't know, talk to them I guess, I talk to them on a regular basis, I beat them up on a regular basis.

Catherine: I've got an idea. This is something I've seen in other areas where people are trying to start a movement, I mean we could **draft up a template letter** that clearly defined what it is that we want and what we're trying to do, and we could **circulate this** and get a bunch of people, like I'll sign the letter, I'll send it in, you sign the letter, you send it, if they get 500, 1000 letters all saying the same thing, that message is gonna get across.

Liz?: I think they're playing with people too, **paid lobbyists**, so if there's some kind of policy message you want, or that is the realm that you want to put some time and effort, **you have to play the game** that they're playing.

Jerry: All this is good and valid, but from my standpoint with the regulation thing, **the requirements for whatever certifications you have to have, for us its GAP, the burden of paperwork, the expense of the inspections**, the requirement by the customer base that you have and the lack of knowledge in the general public of what you have to do, **they hurt you in profitability** and marketing standpoint, because **nobody understands this GAP thing**, and you're just fighting, you start talking about GAP, they get a glazed-over look on you. And **nobody understands the value nor the cost to produce the product under a GAP umbrella**, whether it be GAP Plus, or for the USDA for other folks, or whatever, it hurts your profitability, it hurts your ability to market because **you spend hours and hours every week**, and Joyce does it a lot more than I do it, **just keeping up with the paperwork**. And I mean you're trying to grow your product, and it's just from my point of view, it's just eating up time that you don't already have.

Jim: I'd like to go back to the marketing thing, you have **terms like GAP and CSA, people have no earthly idea what you're talking about**. We've done such a poor job setting the tables of what we're trying to do and all that.

Thad: But it's ridiculous for the most part, because in my opinion, in the wholesale dairy, **I get inspected by the state** on a regular basis, VDACS, and also from time to time get **inspected by the federal government, and I don't even understand why the federal government even comes**, because what they do, it really has nothing to do with what I do. VDACS, okay, and when it comes down to the meat processing, why is it necessary to get a USDA stamp? Every plant is inspected by VDACS, even if they have to put 'not for sale', they're inspected, if you're gonna slaughter animals you're inspected by the state of Virginia, it's the law. **And so why is it even necessary to get a federal stamp?** To me it's just a money racket.

Carolyn: If it's safe for us to eat, **if it's safe for me to take my cow there and bring it home and eat it, then why can I not sell it**, why is it not safe for me to sell to my neighbor? And that just came up, it comes up annually to the assembly, this new they're trying to get \_\_\_\_ local custom butchers to say exactly that. But I don't understand what the pushback on that is, I mean that's not even a lobby, what could the pushback be on that? We're too stupid to know where our food comes from even if they dictate it.

Kevin: We move one step forward and two steps back.



Thad: It's all about the money.

Liz: It's also just totally schizophrenic, because it's like 'local economies' and then 'more regulations'. Okay, which one is it?

John: First of all, I want to say that Virginia Tech is wonderful, they've been a great help to me. But. And Chris is a great guy, and he'll talk to me, he'll come up and see me and we've been in several discussions. But I learned everything for what I do now from either Virginia State University in Petersburg or in Roxboro, North Carolina through North Carolina State. Because they have seminars at least once a month and once you go, they'll send you repeat things that come up. So I learned this whole asparagus thing from a day-long seminar about it. Now Virginia Tech, as far as small farms, they have not done their job, and there's totally, on beef, there's nothing wrong with it, but they're on beef cattle and corn and soybeans. And we need more seminars and more information. For example, if I hadn't known a friend at my church who brought up the idea of high tunnels, and he did work for NICS, still works for them but he's in West Virginia now, and I don't know how many of you have high tunnels, but I know there's 15 or 20 in Franklin County. I raise raspberries in mine, but that was, I got the biggest one, and it was free. I had to do the labor to put it up, so it doubles the cost, it's not absolutely free, but they will pay you for the package deal coming from wherever. But no one except North Carolina and a lot with Virginia State have done research on them. And Tech has been way behind on small farms. God bless them, I love them, and the only guy that helped me in my whole life with Virginia Tech was Charlie O'Dell, who was fruit and vegetable top dog for a long time, and he's even spoken in North Carolina several times, and there was nothing here, I said why don't they do something in Franklin County? He says I don't know, and he lived up right in Blacksburg. So we need more education. Education from government employees. I got no problem with 20 other people trying to grow asparagus.

Kevin: I know that Andy Hankins, when he worked a lot as Virginia State University with small farm educator, I don't think anybody's really taken his spot, other than maybe (Reysa?) and then Chris Mullins, so they do a total different thing than Virginia Tech does, but it's also different sectors that they both represent.

John: I've gone to day meetings where there's three thousand people. People won't believe it but 3000 farmers. They had a seminar on how to produce \$100,000 off of one acre of produce.

Jim: I was just going to say, how come Extension Service can't do combined GAP training to lower the cost per grower?

Kevin: That would be an Amber Vallotton question, I can't answer that, I'm not sure.

Jerry: You can go to a seminar, that's what we did, but in the end it comes down to that one-on-one visit at the farm.

Kevin: I know that Amber will drive from Blacksburg to any part of the state

Jerry: She's a great resource

John: Jerry, I have a question for you. If I step over the line, just tell me. But I know you can't go with grocery stores, you've said that, I mean it's tough, right?

Jerry: We've chosen not to, correct.

John: Right, so you're selling to restaurants and smaller vendors?

Jerry: Stores, schools, colleges, and markets

John: I've seen some hydroponic lettuce in Fresh Market. I don't know if it was yours, but it was from Charlottesville area somewhere, Harrisonburg.

Jerry: Yeah it's further north than that. Which is outside the 100-mile radius by the way. But yet it's got a Virginia Grown sticker on it.

John: I imagine it's tough. I was really interested in hydroponics at one time. The marketing here, it's tough. But I do know a guy in Mount Airy who's been doing it for 20 years.

Kevin: So any other last comments on government regulations, other than that they're horrible?

Jim: They're not horrible, but they're...

Kevin: You've got a lot of hoops and hurdles to go through to do something that you're passionate about.

: Instead of doing it from an educational standpoint and a development standpoint and an assurance for the market, they use it as a ruler to beat you over the head. And you're constantly looking over your shoulder waiting for the guy to pull down the road. And they make sure they let you know that that could happen. With the right mentality I think it would be good, but then there's no education to the general public as to what it's all about. Even the buyers don't know what it's all about. I've heard stories about Wal-Mart buyers showing up on farms and they can't be admitted because they're not properly attired, and they don't even know that.

Kevin: Anything else?

Susan: I've done a lot of listening and I've learned a lot, and I just want to invite you guys, I'll be glad to give you a card, if you have extra produce that you can't get rid of, that's days old and the market doesn't sell it, I'll be happy to take it off your hands and give it to hunger relief agencies within the local area. We try to do things as fast as we can, we try to have it on someone's plate within 24 hours, and we work really hard at doing that. We moved almost 2 million pounds in Virginia last year, and 70% of it was nothing but fresh, healthy, nutritious produce. And I thank you all for doing that, because it's wonderful to have the fresh produce to offer hungry people, that's not out of a box, that's not full of fat, that's not full of sugar, and salt, and they can actually fix it and put it on their plate and have a good meal and feed their children healthy food.

Kevin: Get with Sarah after the meeting. I want to personally thank you before I turn it over to Maureen. Thank you for being very willing to speak, to give your ideas, know that all of these ideas have been heard, captured, as you can see, especially marketing, and even though government is the shortest, we heard that too. So for me as facilitator, thank you for letting me be a part of this process, and I'm gonna turn it over to Maureen.

Maureen: Also thank you for being here, for being present, we really appreciate your willingness to come together and to talk about things that are important. At the last session people asked to have contact information shared with the group, if you guys are open to that we'll do the same thing, so that if there is somebody you didn't get a chance to talk to and you'd like to follow up, you can do that. Is

there anyone opposed to sharing your contact information? And we will compile everything that is (indecipherable) and then have a kind of a regional report of what are some of the big topics that came up, and you know if there isn't any follow-up on our end, that's my fault, but if there isn't follow-up on your end, then unfortunately what's going to happen is, this isn't going to go anywhere. And so, what a lot of other communities have done is have some sort of council or working group and so we're also trying to figure out how we can support an effort like that on a regional level. So if you have thoughts or ideas or want to step up and take a leadership role, that would be awesome. If what comes out is the biggest need is to deal with group GAP, and that's something that as a whole region we need to deal with, and that's something that you're passionate about, then it would be great to have active participation to get it off the ground. So if there are any questions, feel free to contact me or Ned, and you know this is something LEAP is trying to do to support the local food system, but we are not farmers, and so I want it to be what makes sense for the community and not necessarily what makes sense for LEAP as an organization, because it's not always one in the same.

Through this communication, will we see what the results were from the other listening sessions?

Yeah, so we'll share out the main points with you guys, and then we'll compile it, hopefully by mid-march we'll be able to send out something, and ideally we'll have some kind of a central meeting open to anybody, so that everyone who can come would come, location is challenging, but I'd love to hold something somewhere slightly more central, maybe in Roanoke, a meeting to report out and to figure out if there are follow up steps. Liz offered to host something around cooperatives, that was something that came up in the last one, so if there are other big themes or topics that really come out that we can provide support or services, whether that's partnering with Cooperative Extension, technical training, information around a specific topic, then we'd love to try to get that off the ground. Thanks, I appreciate it.