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Roanoke Foodshed Network

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If you asked the head of the Roanoke Foodshed Network (RFN), Mo McGonagle, to identify the two most important factors in building a network, she might point to two things that are quite different from each other: 1. Policies and procedures, and, 2. Relationships.

The first one helps an organization get clear about who it is and how it will operate. The second is what allows the work to be done on the ground.

It was particularly important for the RFN to get the first one right when it transitioned from being under the umbrella of LEAP — the Local Environmental Agriculture Project — to being an independent organization that uses LEAP as its fiscal sponsor. A $160,000 planning grant from USDA, received in 2020, helped RFN accomplish this transition.

“We got a lot of work done in terms of establishing the foundations of who we are and what we’re trying to do together, building relationships with partners, building a trusting base of community that wants to collaboratively bring the Roanoke Foodshed Network to life. And the Roanoke Foodshed Network was really born during that time,” McGonagle said.

“The structure and governance were a huge part of that process. Looking at how do we make decisions, how do we organize ourselves.”

During that planning process, RFN established working groups whereby they “collaboratively identified our vision and our mission, and then four core goals that we could all orient around together,” McGonagle explained. The first three of those were healthy food access; regional food identity (“storytelling and economic development, and communications more broadly”); and farming and food production. The fourth



working group — a smaller one called network development — is where the nuts and bolts of organizational development happened.

McGonagle said this group was “focused on building up the foundational charter documents and policies and procedures — the really unsexy stuff that nobody wants to do.” She laughed at that, before adding: “But that’s super important for the longevity of any kind of organization or collaboration.”

It also helps an organization know what it is — and isn’t.

“We spent a lot of time identifying what our function is,” she points out. “What roles are we trying to play in the community? How is a network different from an organization? There is a big difference. We made the decision that we’re not running programs. We are a connector, we are resourcing, we are building capacity. We’re communicating. We are advocating, which has its challenges also because we have partners that aren’t explicitly allowed to advocate.”

From planning to implementation

All that effective planning work bore fruit in the form of an $800,000 implementation grant from USDA, received in November 2024. Those funds helped launch the “Strong Food and Farm Future” project, “which includes more than 50 partners, including community groups, nonprofit organizations, farmers, food businesses, community members, higher education institutions, and government agencies,” according to an article from WFXR TV.

Now, it was time to ramp up the network building.

“We started developing strategies to bring people together in fun, creative ways, because the foundation of any kind of initiative like this is the relationships, and that’s where everything happens is in the relationships,” McGonagle stressed. “We did things like hosted regional farm tours, which we continue to do because they’ve been really successful. They’re opportunities for farmers to come together on each other’s farms, explore the operations, and then spend time together afterward, just to connect.

“It’s also been a really nice way to unite the broader region together, which is a two-city, seven-county region — so it’s pretty big — and historically not super well connected. We also hosted a lot of all-partner meetings, hosted some virtual learning exchanges, where we could bring people together around specific topics of interest, and showcase initiatives happening across the region or across the broader nation in other organizations, just to activate learning and [show] what’s possible.”

RFN also held many convenings and planning meetings to better understand the needs of partners across the community and to build that into what became our implementation plan, which is a high-level document that is guiding what we’re up to over the next three years.

All that work to identify RFN’s purpose shows up when McGonagle says, “We’re trying to connect our food system better, resource it better — in ways that partners need — and then identify priorities, and then basically make those priorities happen.”

Making your story make sense

McGonagle is quick to acknowledge that one of the biggest challenges is communicating your purpose to the audience beyond your everyday colleagues and project partners.

“This work is so big. How do you take something that’s so ungraspable and try to make it something that you can put your hands around,” she said. “Right now, one of our big struggles is ‘How do we communicate’ what we’re trying to do to all kinds of different stakeholder groups. Because it’s all clear in my head. But the reality — what people see — is ‘Why are you doing so many different things all at the same time?’”

Those people don’t see the connections among all the food system components that a group like RFN is trying to tie together.

“It becomes very clear when my own mom doesn’t understand what I’m doing. And if my mom doesn’t understand, nobody else [will],” McGonagle said with a laugh. “It’s really good to ground-truth it with people who aren’t in this world day to day.”