

Pathways to Prosperity: Summary of Wayne County, OH Field Research Observations

Prepared by the Pathways to Prosperity Project Team
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This document presents a summary of observations from interviews with local stakeholders conducted as part of the collaborative learning project, Pathways to Prosperity (Pathways).¹ The observations are based on interviews conducted in 2020 with residents of Wayne County connected to food and agriculture. Participants described significant local assets in the County related to agricultural economic development, including agriculture’s diversity, value-added processors, markets, and work of the Ag Success Team. However, participants also shared deep concern about the decreasing number of farms, farm stress and concerns about how this will affect the larger farm economy, and ultimately the ability of the County to maintain its agricultural identity and heritage. The document concludes with observations on key opportunities to expand economic development in the County.

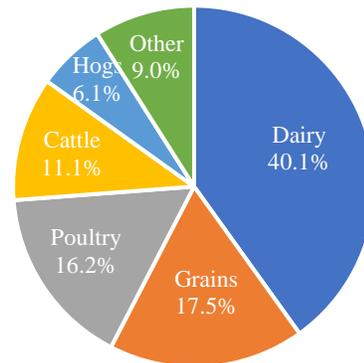
ASSET STRENGTHS

Wayne County is rich in local assets, including prime farmland and a diverse and vibrant local economy. Though there has been significant urban growth and manufacturing development, agriculture has remained an important economic and cultural centerpiece. The following are key assets noted by interview participants.

Diversity. Interview participants frequently cited Wayne County’s varied economic activity, rich farmland, and a diverse agricultural sector as key asset strengths. Importantly, this diversity—not only in economic activity broadly, but in agriculture specifically—was described as a great asset for Wayne County. One person explained how the diverse economic activity of the County allows it to “*hold more than its weight in economic output*” compared to neighboring counties that have larger populations.

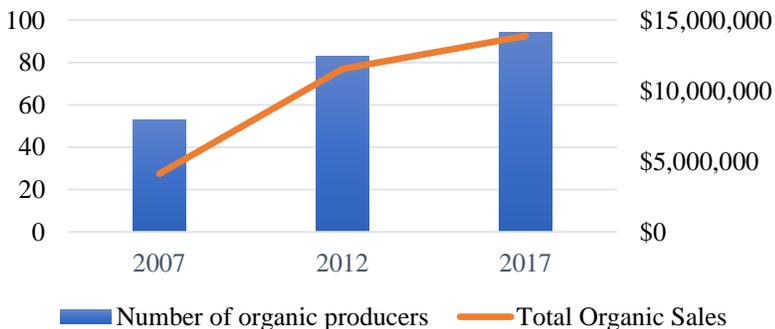
In particular, Wayne County’s *agricultural diversity* includes a wide variety of products (e.g. dairy, row crops, etc.) and farm sizes. This includes traditional commodities, most notably milk, which is the dominant commodity in Wayne County, accounting for 40.1% of the County’s \$327.9 million in total agricultural sales in 2017. The County also produces many other traditional commodities, including grains (17.5%), poultry (16.2%), cattle/calves (11.1%), hogs (6.1%), and a range of other products including vegetables, hay, etc.

Major Agricultural Commodities
by % of Total Ag Sales



Among types of commodities, organic agriculture has grown significantly in Wayne County since 2007, in large part due to Amish farmers transitioning into organic systems. In 2017, 94 farms in Wayne County reported a total of \$13.9 million in organic sales. This represents a 13% increase in the number of farms and a 20% increase in sales compared to 2012. The growth of organics in Wayne County reflects a nationwide trend in growing organic sales.²

Growth in Wayne County Organic
Production

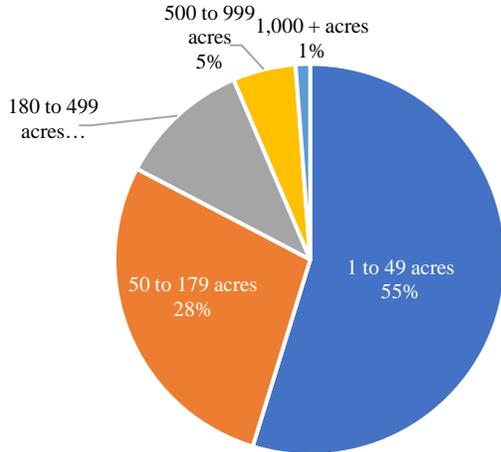


Overall, organic operators in Ohio are also more optimistic about the future of their farms than other producers. A 2020 OARDC survey of Ohio farmers found that 65% of organic farmers would encourage their children to become farmers, compared to only 32% of conventional farmers, and 73% of organic

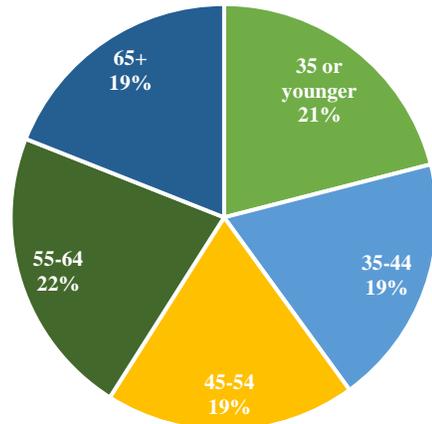
¹ For more information on the project team, more detail on the overall project, and local and national partners, please see the project website (<https://localfoodeconomics.com/pathways/about-pathways/>).

² For more information, see the USDA Economic Research Service “organic market overview”; <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/natural-resources-environment/organic-agriculture/organic-market-overview.aspx>.

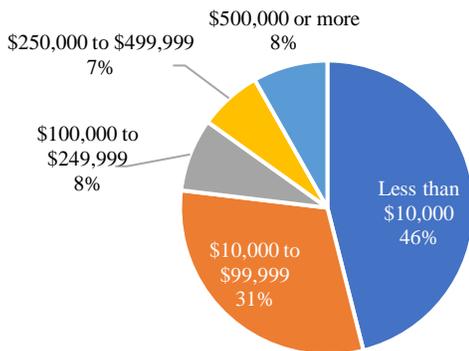
Acres Class (% of all operations)



% of Farm Population by Age



Farm Sales Class (% of all farm operations)



farmers reported that they believed their children could afford to take over the farm, compared to only 55 % of conventional farmers.

The county also stands out for its relatively young farm population compared to the U.S. as a whole, with 59% of the farming population under the age of 55. Additionally, Wayne County also has a relatively high percentage of small farm operations. As of 2017, 83% of Wayne County farms were less than 180 acres and 77% reported less than \$100,000 in sales.

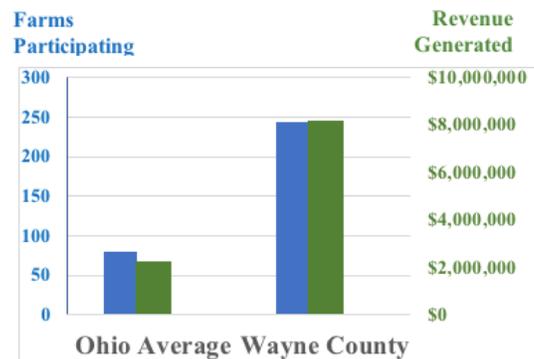
Participants also emphasized the County's *demographic and cultural diversity*, most notably the Amish, Mennonite, and Apostolic communities. Wayne County is home to the fourth largest Amish population in the U.S. behind Lancaster County, PA, Holmes County, OH, and Lagrange County, IN. Amish

adherents constitute approximately 8% of the total Wayne County population, making Wayne the 11th largest county by percentage of total population. [1]. Additionally, as of 2010, the Mennonite population in Wayne County was 3,241 or 2.8% of the County's total population and the Apostolic population was 1,517.³

Value-Added Markets and Processors. Wayne County also benefits from its position as a center for food processing in its multi-county region. There are a number of food industry companies in and adjacent to Wayne County to support the agriculture economy, ranging from larger processing businesses such Smith Dairy, Gerber Poultry, and Daisy Brands, to smaller dairy cooperatives and processors, such as Hartzlers Dairy and Paint Valley Farms, in addition to many cheese processors.

Additionally, there are several important direct-to-consumer/intermediated market venues in and adjacent to the county, such the Green Field Farms, the County Line and Mt. Hope produce auctions, Wooster Farmers' Market, and Local Roots Market & Café, which offer important opportunities for small and mid-sized farm operations. These venues contribute to *Wayne County having the largest local/regional food economy in Ohio, with combined sales and total operations from local/regional sales over three times that of the average for Ohio Counties.* In 2017 Wayne County farms reported a total of \$5.4 million in sales through intermediated markets (e.g. to retailers, food hubs, institutions, etc.) and \$2.8 million in sales through direct-to-consumer markets (e.g. CSAs,

Local Markets



³ For more information, see; <https://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010A.asp?U=39169&T=county&Y=2010&S=adh>.

farm stands, farmers' markets) with a combined total of nearly 250 farms participating in these markets.⁴ USDA Economic Research Service found direct-to-consumer markets are particularly important for new and beginning farmers, who – regardless of farm size – are significantly more likely to stay in operation when their business includes direct-to-consumer sales.⁵

The County's Agricultural Identity. Another asset in Wayne County that participants described is the important place of agriculture as not only an economic centerpiece, but a cultural one. Participants described a widespread connection to and familiarity with agriculture across the local population. Agriculture frequently came up when people talked about a belief in a “collaborative culture” in Wayne County. When describing where this collaborative culture originates, people tended to relate its origins back to the agricultural connection that people have in the County.

Several people also described how being people's individual connection to and familiarity with agriculture shapes non-agricultural businesses. For instance, three participants independently described how County residents tend to prefer local banks rather than national chains because local banks are a) more likely to employ locals who know about agriculture and b) more likely to use that agriculture knowledge to accommodate the needs of farmers. Several farmers noted that this kind of ability and willingness to understand agriculture in practice makes it easier and quicker to get loans from local banks compared to national chains. Such characterizations also extended to other types of businesses and sectors.

The Ag Success Team. The Ag Success Team (AST) has been an important group working to support agriculture's viability in the County. A first step for AST in protecting and being an advocate for all forms of agriculture was ensuring that there is land available to farm, which remains central to the group's mission. In addition, one of the group's most important contributions has been to provide a venue in which to bring together representatives of various organizations and institutions to “keep ag visible” in local economic development. A critical outcome of this work that participants described was the creation of an agriculture economic development project manager within WEDC. *However, despite the work of the AST, a number of people we spoke with in the County were not necessarily aware of the group and its role in supporting agriculture.*

NEXT STEPS

The Pathways project is dedicated to working with our partner communities to advance and strengthen the value-added food and agriculture sector in Wayne County and the San Louis Valley. Based on the data analysis, we share three broad opportunities for advancing agriculture economic development in Wayne County.

1. Implement Community Economic Development Strategies. One strategy that has gained increased attention as a means of supporting local business development is community economic development, which emphasizes public-private collaboration as a means of leveraging local assets to meet economic needs. Below are some ideas for how the County can continue to innovate by building a community economic development approach;

- ***Encourage the continuation of the agriculture development project manager position within WEDC.*** The agriculture development project manager position with WEDC was described by participants as an important component of maintaining agriculture's centrality within Wayne County's economic development. This role's *explicit* and focused responsibility for agriculture economic development was described as centering agriculture in a more meaningful way than if other WEDC staff members had some aspects of their roles devoted to agriculture. However, since the last person to hold this position left for a new role, to our knowledge it has not been filled by WEDC. An important step for AST is to encourage WEDC to fill and maintain this position.
- ***Conduct a value-added infrastructure assessment.*** An opportunity that the AST is perfectly positioned to coordinate is an assessment of existing value-added infrastructure and opportunities in the County. This assessment could be a helpful resource for future conversations on how to support and facilitate agriculture development going forward.
- ***Promote and support Value-Added Producer Grant applicants.*** Along with its role in helping promote statewide farmland preservation programs, the AST could similarly work to coordinate the promotion and support for Value-Added Producer Grant applicants. Increasing awareness of this grant opportunity and providing support for applicants pursuing it could increase opportunities for value-added products and businesses.

2. Expand Participation in Ag Development Planning. An important component of community economic development strategies includes expanding participation in planning efforts related to ag economic development to ensure development that meets the needs of the County's diverse agriculture sector. Diverse engagement would help ensure that planning

⁴ 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture data on direct-to-consumer and intermediated sales are not directly comparable to previous years because of a classification change in the 2017 Census.

⁵ For more information, see; <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=80041>.

discussions reflect the diversity of the County and would help that development plans preemptively identify and “get ahead” of new challenges and opportunities for agriculture economic development. In addition to expanding membership on the AST, other strategies might include;

- **Temperature Check Surveys.** Incorporating a routine “temperature check” survey into County operations (administered by the AST or other entity) could be an approach to incorporating farmer input. This kind of survey might be conducted annually/semi-annually with a brief set of informative questions that remain consistent from year to year and distributed to a careful sampling of farmers to ensure diverse input.
- **Public outreach and information sharing.** Another strategy would be to simply invite public input as part of a broader public outreach and information sharing in ag development planning. Creating more public awareness about opportunities to engage in ag development planning, including the AST, and inviting feedback through online or mail-in approaches could be another way to incorporate more perspectives. For instance, creating a newsletter (email or hard copy) or incorporating a section about the AST into an existing newsletter that includes information about how to submit comments/feedback to the group could be a way to update, inform, and invite feedback from the public on agricultural issues.
- **Rotating listening sessions.** A key challenge for incorporating different voices is the difficulty of getting those people in-person. This is particularly true for farmers and Amish. One idea for improving access could be incorporate listening sessions in different parts of Wayne County over the course of the year. This could involve scheduling one AST meeting each quarter to be in different locations around the County and/or at different times during the day to improve accessibility for Amish and farmer participants.

3. Focus on Value-Added Agriculture Markets. While land is essential to agriculture viability, so too is access to varied value-added markets that can support the diversity of Wayne’s agriculture and larger regional economy intertwined with the farm sector. As the dairy sector continues to decline, Wayne County has multiple agricultural assets it can invest in to off-set the losses from dairy and farm consolidation.

- In particular, local and regional value-added development is a growing investment area, both locally and nationally, that offers opportunities for strengthening agriculture economies. Small and midsized farms in particular benefit from value-added markets as alternatives and/or supplements to conventional commodity markets. Additionally, local, regional, and value-added agriculture markets can strengthen local business development and retention that, in addition to creating jobs, also supports a vibrant and diversified local economy, which attracts new businesses and is more resilient to external shocks.
- In 2017, the U.S. Federal Reserve published a report highlighting recent growth in these markets and identified public-private collaboration strategies and policies to strengthen them [2]. Similarly, organizations such the National Association of Counties and the National Association of Development Organizations have also begun to highlight the economic growth potential from investments in local, regional, and value-added agriculture markets. Most recently, the Council of Development Finance Agencies published a report on strategies growing local food systems through development finance [3]. The existing capacity of the County’s value-added markets and the growing potential of them presents a key opportunity to support the diverse, vibrant, and robust agricultural economy that is foundational to the County.

REFERENCES

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3. Rittner, T., A. Rowland, and A. Miller, *Advancing Local Food Systems Through Development Finance*. 2020, Council of Development Finance Agencies: Columbus, OH.

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