Through Farm to Plate, local food producers, processing facilities, wholesale and retail outlets, and other members of Vermont’s food system are connected in a dynamic new way. As different stakeholders work together around common goals and challenges, the food system as a whole is better positioned to discover and embrace the opportunities that emerge from collaboration.
In 2009, policy makers in Vermont realized that their state food system had some gaps that needed attention. For example, land used for agriculture was declining at the same time that the rising cost of farmland was a roadblock to new farmers. Established food producers lacked good access to food processing plants that could transform their vegetables and meat animals into products that were marketable to retail outlets. Statewide obesity levels were rising, which meant that consumers weren't making healthy food choices, and some communities simply didn't have access to locally produced foods. It seemed that even though each sector of the food system was working in isolation to address these problems, and that a more comprehensive and dynamic solution was needed.

In 2009, the Vermont legislature passed the Farm to Plate Investment Program that tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF) with developing a 10-year strategic plan. VSJF was founded in 1995 by the VT legislature to accelerate the growth of the green economy.) VSJF began the careful process of launching an 18-month planning process that resulted in the launch of the Farm to Plate Network to implement the plan.

### The Context

In 2009, policy makers in Vermont realized that their state food system had some gaps that needed attention. For example, land used for agriculture was declining at the same time that the rising cost of farmland was a roadblock to new farmers. Established food producers lacked good access to food processing plants that could transform their vegetables and meat animals into products that were marketable to retail outlets. Statewide obesity levels were rising, which meant that consumers weren't making healthy food choices, and some communities simply didn't have access to locally produced foods. It seemed that even though each sector of the food system was working in isolation to address these problems, and that a more comprehensive and dynamic solution was needed.

### The Process

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### Farm to Plate Development Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td>Legislation is passed creating an initiative tasking VSJF with developing a plan to address current food system trends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2009</td>
<td>First F2P Process Team meeting to begin designing a strategy for the planning process.</td>
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<td>July 2009</td>
<td>Interviews take place with key stakeholder organizations, inviting participation and input.</td>
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<td>Sept 2009</td>
<td>An in-depth survey is launched to more accurately assess the landscape of Vermont’s food system.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov-Dec 2009</td>
<td>VSJF hosts 8 regional “local food” summits, as well as 24 focus group sessions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March-June 2009</td>
<td>Six areas of interest are identified which require future research, and six days are devoted to intensive discussion on those topics with key stakeholders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td>Study results and emerging goals are checked for accuracy with stakeholders at a statewide summit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 2011</td>
<td>Farm to Plate Executive Summary and additional chapters and sections of the plan are released.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 2011</td>
<td>Farm to Plate Network (F2P) is launched.</td>
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The Farm to Plate Process Team was developed with representatives from different sectors of the food system: state universities, rural development agencies, the state Agency of Agriculture, and 5 farmers. Under the guidance of VSJF, the Process Team spent 12 months conducting research, interviewing stakeholders, and hosting summits around the state. In total, the VSJF gathered the perspectives of over 1,200 Vermonters to guide the creation of a final product.

The planning, research, and Network design phase of the project cost approximately $500,000. Funding sources included the VSJF (which provided key staff), and grants from private foundations and the State of Vermont. Several years into the Network, the annual budget for F2P is between $550,000-650,000 depending on what Network wide annual projects are being moved forward.

Developing and launching the Farm to Plate Website (VT Food Atlas System), has cost an additional $200,000. Grant monies covered the one-time cost of launching web resources, while ongoing maintenance costs are covered by sponsorships.

From the beginning, VSJF was clear about its role as a facilitator in the process of gathering information, and not as an authority on the food system or solutions for moving forward. As a result, there was tremendous buy-in from a wide variety of food system members. This careful planning process was a very important step in developing a robust solution not only because in-depth research provided a rich and coherent sense of context, but also because the chance to be heard brought many people to the table early in the development process.

“When people develop trust and get excited about the topic of conversation, and are asked to share what they have experienced to be true in their lives, creative input becomes more accessible. People’s creative ideas bubble forth and we can connect to a bigger view of what is possible and what we want as a community, rather than simply presenting a perspective from an organization’s entrenched position. We’ve asked our Network members to “leave their organizational egos at the door” when they participate in F2P Network meetings, research, and gatherings. That does not mean that they leave their expertise, knowledge or other assets/capacities at the door. It simply means that you bring your organization’s best and highest self to the table – ready to contribute what you can to the greater whole. If you give a lot, you will get a lot in return. Hardened, entrenched positions are just not part of the F2P culture we’ve created.”

Ellen Kahler, Executive Director, VSJF
After two years of conversation, listening, and strategic planning, the Farm to Plate Network (F2P) was launched in October, 2011. Today, with VSJF as the backbone organization (and network coordinator), Farm to Plate is a dynamic network that connects the 350+ organizational members of Vermont’s food system. Rather than working in isolation to address sector-specific goals, partner organizations form a **unified network** with attention to 25 goals that benefit the food system as a whole. The network relies on a style of governance called **Collective Impact**, which is designed to promote and enable the participation of a diverse web of stakeholders. Collective impact employs strong communication and coordinated efforts to meet goals that advance a common agenda, and uses shared metrics for measuring that forward progress. When new members join the Farm to Plate network, they receive training to orient them to the collective impact approach.

F2P connects the different pieces of the food system into a unified network, instead of disconnected and unrelated pieces.
F2P’s foundational goals fall into 15 categories:

- VSJF provides 6 staff members (4.5 FTE) to help with program direction, research and evaluation, development of web resources, communications, and support for network working groups.

- A F2P Network Steering Committee of 10 individuals including the state Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development, 5 working group chairs, the Food Access cross-cutting team chair, and a representative from both the VT Food Funders Network and the Sustainable Agriculture Council.

For a visual representation of the organization of teams and working groups, see page 4 of the F2P Network Structure Update.
The Outcomes

Farm To Plate has just released a 2014 Annual Report to Vermont Legislators. The following visual representation of employment growth between 2002 and 2013 within the different food system sectors is an excerpt from that report.

Here are just a few examples of unique outcomes of Farm to Plate (F2P) as reported in the 2013 annual report to Vermont legislators:

- As fellow members of the F2P network, local food producers and institutional caterers have attended events designed to educate producers about the product needs of caterers, and caterers about locally-sourced food products.

- Most small-scale producers do not have the capital to build their own food processing facilities. Organizations like the Mad River Food Hub offer shared processing rooms, cold and dry storage, distribution, and meat co-processing facilities, which provide small producers with access to a larger retail market.

- The Vermont Farmland Access Network launched Vermont Land Link in 2013, which matches new farmers looking for access to land with current farmland owners. F2P network partners are also exploring ways to offer assistance in exploring innovative financing options for new farmers.

- Food gleaning organizations like Salvation Farms process produce donated by farmers or gleaned by volunteers and inmates from one of Vermont’s
correctional facilities to be distributed by food banks to food insecure Vermonters.

The work of the Farm to Plate Network continues to evolve in order to better support Vermont’s food system. New initiatives that are under development include:

- Launching a 5-year statewide, grassroots local food campaign designed to get mainstream Vermonters to purchase more locally produced food.

- Opening up new institution and independent grocery store market channels to local food producers.

- Working with local producers to help them scale up and get ready to sell into wholesale market channels.

- Reaching out to local and regional land use planning commissioners to help them align their zoning bylaws and planning documents to coincide with their aspirations to protect agricultural land for agricultural use.

- Working with the VT Agency of Natural Resources to implement Act 148 – Vermont’s Universal Recycling law that will require all food scraps to be diverted from landfills by 2020. This will lead to the development of dozens of new commercial composting operations around the state.

- Facilitating a group of career technical education and high school teachers to develop and share curriculum that brings awareness of the food system into the classroom. Additionally, a series of food system career profiles is being developed to provide students with more information about important careers in the food system, beyond farming.

- Continuing to strengthen the local, humanely process meat supply chain to meet growing local and regional demand.

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