Developing a Bounty for Jackson County: A Plan to Decrease Food Insecurity
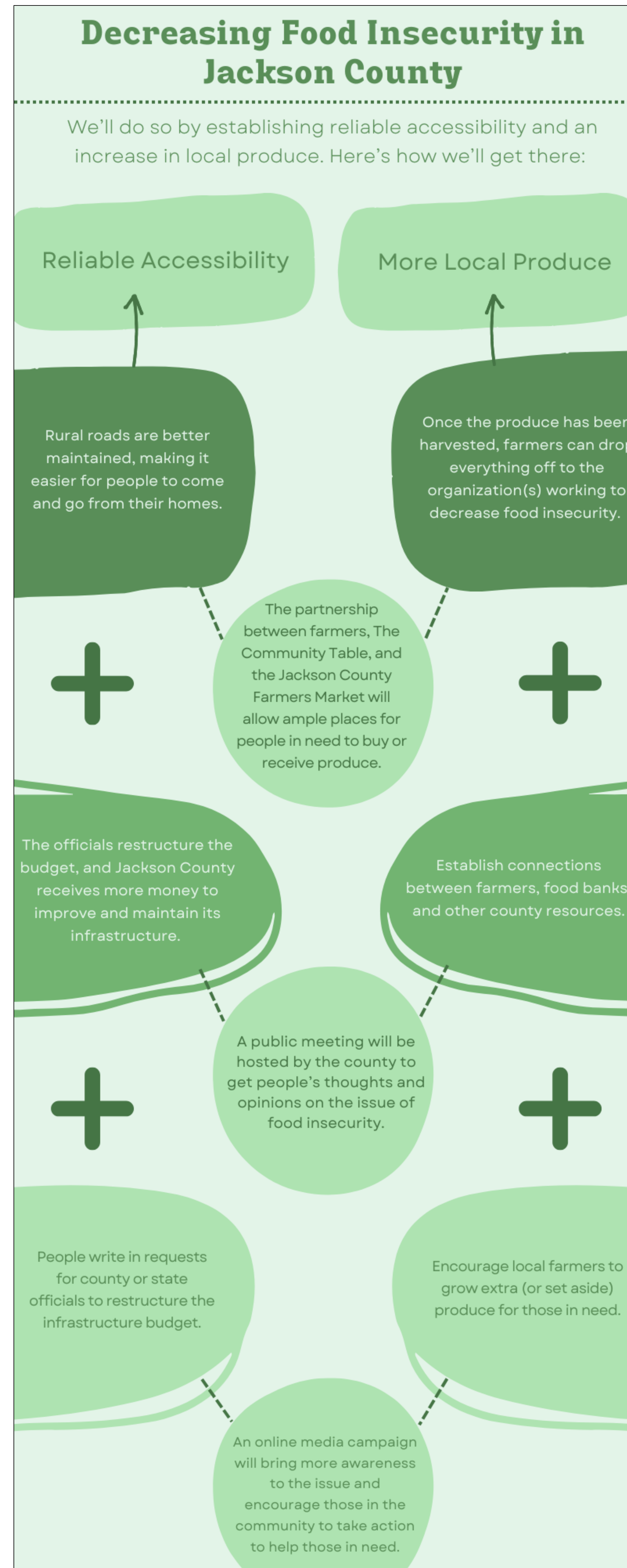
Maddie McCoy

ABSTRACT

Food insecurity impacts thousands of people across Jackson County, NC. In 2022, 17% of Jackson County residents were considered food insecure – a number that increased by 3% from 2021 (*Food insecurity*, n.d.). Residents in Jackson County are in dire need of more healthy, affordable food options. This presentation aims to explore simple steps Jackson County residents and officials can take to improve food access/options in their county. Factors like location, income, and transportation are outlined as contributors to the lack of healthy, affordable food options in Jackson County. A significant portion of the project revolves around community outreach. For example, the project argues that an online media campaign will be the catalyst towards creating change. A campaign would inform residents about the issue, encourage them to write to county officials. It would also gauge the interest of local farmers in giving excess produce to local food banks or selling it at the Jackson County Farmer's Market. Overall, the project emphasizes the importance of having a variety of food options and developing a supportive community.

INTRODUCTION

54 million Americans are food insecure, which means food is either too expensive or too far away for people to purchase (Ney, 2022). Nearly half of those Americans live in food deserts. Food deserts are a subsection of food insecurity and are areas where grocery stores are not accessible. People living in food deserts are suffering from only being able to buy highly processed foods. Their health and overall well-being are not being sustained through fast and cheap food options.

Food insecurity appears in Western North Carolina due to the ruralness of the region. Hills, valleys, and mountains are not synonymous with accessibility. Going through the mountains, where the roads are winding and not flat, takes a lot of gas and time. Giant trucks carrying fresh food and other goods cannot travel to some of the more rural areas in the region. Grocery stores do not care to market to people who cannot afford their products or are geographically out of reach. Food insecurity is an issue for just over 14% of individuals in Jackson County, NC (*Food insecurity*, n.d.). This prevailing issue throughout the county occurs because of several factors: location, income, and transportation.

INFOGRAPHIC

Decreasing Food Insecurity in Jackson County

We'll do so by establishing reliable accessibility and an increase in local produce. Here's how we'll get there:

Reliable Accessibility

Rural roads are better maintained, making it easier for people to come and go from their homes.

The partnership between farmers, The Community Table, and the Jackson County Farmers Market will allow ample places for people in need to buy or receive produce.

The officials restructure the budget, and Jackson County receives more money to improve and maintain its infrastructure.

A public meeting will be hosted by the county to get people's thoughts and opinions on the issue of food insecurity.

People write in requests for county or state officials to restructure the infrastructure budget.

An online media campaign will bring more awareness to the issue and encourage those in the community to take action to help those in need.

More Local Produce

Once the produce has been harvested, farmers can drop everything off to the organization(s) working to decrease food insecurity.

Establish connections between farmers, food banks, and other county resources.

Encourage local farmers to grow extra (or set aside) produce for those in need.

METHODS

An online media campaign is the necessary first step of this project because social media and other online sources have extensive reach. While the goal of the campaign is to reach those in immediate and close areas (Jackson County and its surrounding counties), gaining audience from others far away would be an immense help in developing momentum. The campaign would comprise of social media posts on TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and X.

Jackson County Courthouse in Sylva, NC.

A county-wide meeting will need to occur to find out what Jackson County residents think of food insecurity and their own experiences with it. Knowing the county contains eight different towns, a variety of different meeting methods will need to be implemented to ensure people's voices are heard. An in-person meeting, as well as a virtual one, coupled with online and physical surveys will be the best ways to get resident feedback. From this intervention, an open line of communication between Jackson County and its residents should develop.

Following the gathering of resident wants and needs, farmers who had previously expressed interest in setting aside or growing extra produce will be contacted. The following communications will reconfirm the information the individual had originally given (how much of what product they are willing to donate or sell). If the farmer wants to donate their produce, correspondence will be sent to The Community Table in Sylva, NC. On the other hand, should the farmer prefer to sell their produce, they will be put in contact with the Jackson County Farmers Market.

NARRATIVE

Per the request of the social media posts and newspaper stories/ads, people may choose to write to county officials, requesting improvements be made. Including a template email/letter in the caption of each social media post would be a helpful addition because the task of sending correspondence to a government official may seem daunting.

By the time the public meeting(s) come around, hopefully, enough people will have written in for changemakers to consider increasing the infrastructure budget. The process of writing to officials, planting a seed in their minds about a new budget, and putting the budget into place will take time. The outcome of an increased budget will be worth waiting for.

The increased infrastructure for Jackson County becomes more important at this stage. If workers can begin paving over poorly maintained roads (rural and ones in towns), ideally, people will have an easier time leaving their homes; thus, being able to attend events like the Jackson County Farmers Market or get meals from The Community Table. Other maintenance around the county will, again, improve the living conditions of residents and ensure longevity in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ideas outlined in the "Methods" and "Narrative" sections would ideally lead to:

- Improved accessibility within Jackson County and,
- The circulation of more local produce.

County officials should conduct research into the feasibility of holding public meetings, improving county infrastructure, and forming connections between local farmers and food banks.

References

1. *Food insecurity among overall (all ages) population in Jackson County*. Feeding America. (2021). https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/north-carolina/county/jackson
2. Ney, J. (2022, January 24). *Food deserts and inequality*. Social Policy Data Lab. https://www.socialpolicylab.org/post/grow-your-blog-community

Acknowledgements