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Study: Enfield Area Lacks Grocery Demand

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Enfield — Mascoma Valley residents spend more than $20 million on groceries outside the region, but that still isn't enough demand to entice a big-box supermarket to the area, according to a new draft study on the feasibility of an Enfield-area food cooperative or grocery store.

The study was paid for by a $12,000 federal community development block grant and presented to a room of about 20 people at a public hearing on Monday night. It found that Mascoma shoppers annually spend about $21 million at grocery stores. Ninety-nine percent of that is spent outside the area.

"As a total, it is not sufficient to attract a large Market Basket, Hannaford (or) Shaw's," said Stuart Arnett, a consultant with Better Future Alliance, the Concord-based firm that drafted the study.

There is a market that's not being met locally, and that leaves open an opportunity for someone to take advantage, he said. But it's unlikely a chain will open a store so close to existing ones in Lebanon and Plymouth, N.H.

The report also is doubtful about the chances of a specialty "stand-alone boutique-style grocery" opening in the region. It found that area demand for speciality foods is about $1.5 million, and nearly all of that money is spent outside of the Mascoma Valley.

Proponents of a Mascoma Valley grocery store say food choices available to residents are sparse, especially when it comes to fresh vegetables, compared to those at large stores in Lebanon. Yet some area businessmen like David Zani, owner of Papa Z's in Canaan, say those options are

available, and small grocers exist to fill the community's food needs.

If Mascoma Valley towns decide they want to expand their food choices, Arnett said, three things can be done: the study's findings can be shared with existing small stores in hopes those stores will expand, the information can be shared with possible developers, or the towns can seek a "community champion" group that will rally public support for a cooperative.

The right choice might be different for each Mascoma town, too, he said. Enfield's high-traffic roads means it's more likely to share the study information and find a developer willing to open a mixed-space complex, while Canaan might find it easier to develop a space in its village, close to its aging population, parks and other amenities.

Arnett said the report brings some good news and some challenges, but there's also a real question about the communities' capacity to move forward with the report.

Unlike other parts of the state, where community and business "champions" can push for growth, he said, "there is no natural champion for us to hand this report to and say, 'Now make it happen.' "

But there is an advisory committee that has spent time meeting with consultants. It is comprised of representatives from Enfield, Canaan, Dorchester, Orange and Grafton.

"It's saying that folks spend their money someplace else," Enfield Town Planner and committee member Scott Osgood said of the study. He said the report shows that the most economically viable option is for the area's small stores to expand and better capture the demand that currently is going elsewhere.

Development of a new or larger grocery store also could bring more jobs to the region, according to the report. In a comparable southern New Hampshire area, the number of grocery store jobs have increased by 28 over the past five years, bringing that area's total to 890 jobs.

"We think that the labor force for this is possible and available," Arnett said.

The median yearly earnings on those positions was $23,012.

Although that's not a high salary, Arnett said, grocery store jobs often attract people in low-income households without a college education, making a grocery store's development more likely to be eligible for federal funding.

A final report will be completed and sent to Enfield town officials on Monday, Arnett said.

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