

Grant program to boost local ag, food businesses

Michael Neary, mneary@newsleader.com 4:48 p.m. EDT March 27, 2014

A grant program to help small farms and other local food businesses with conservation and business techniques has launched.

The Valley Conservation Council, in partnership with the Staunton Creative Community Fund, is rolling out the Agriculture Cultivates Resilient Economies grant program, ACRES.

The conservation council will offer grants between \$1,000 and \$3,000 to recipients, and the community fund will supply business training. Applicants may come from Augusta and Rockingham counties, including the cities of Harrisonburg, Staunton and Waynesboro.

Kate Hopkins, local foods program coordinator for the Valley Conservation Council, said the program taps funds from the Agua Fund, a family foundation based in Washington, D.C., that emphasizes the importance of sound water quality.

Hopkins said some applications for the program went out on Tuesday, but she hopes that circle will expand soon. "We have a small group of interested parties" so far, she said.

Hopkins, a senior fellow with the Allegheny Mountain School, said organizers hope to fund about 10 projects, depending on their scope. She said she anticipates projects to be underway this summer.

Christina Cain, executive director of the Staunton Creative Community Fund, pointed out how the grant program could be particularly helpful in the Shenandoah Valley.

"The local food movement is something that has hit Staunton with a gale force, which is fantastic," she said.

The Valley, she said, is an ideal place for food production with its rich soil and favorable landscape. Still, she noted, food businesses such as farms, restaurants and cafes, can face tough challenges – such as the tumultuous nature of the weather.

"There are so many variables," she said. "It's just a very finicky business."

Access to capital, education and support, she said, are key to such businesses – and she said the grant program provides all of those things. Cain mentioned eight-week business classes offered by the community fund as possible educational resources, and she noted site visits by community fund staff members as potential sources of support.

Hopkins said some local farms and small businesses may already have implemented conservation practices — and so the array of projects for which they could use grant money could range beyond help with immediate conservation measures. "(The choice) is broader for those folks who have already taken on that conservation piece," Hopkins said.

Activities for which they could receive help might include creating a new website design or other projects to publicize their work, Hopkins said.

So a grant, Hopkins explained, could help a business to improve its conservation practices, and it could also help a business with already-strong conservation practices expand its reach.

Hopkins described an overarching goal of the grant as helping the local farm or food business thrive in an environmentally sound way. She said that was an important objective in a world where food frequently is transported over long distances and in large quantities before it's consumed.

"We are living in a world now where our modern food system is based on growing food in far-flung places in the world," Hopkins said, noting that transportation of that food entails extensive use of chemicals and fossil fuels.

Hopkins also suggested that grant programs such as this one could produce economic, as well as environmental, impact.

"(If) we can connect farmers directly to consumers without a lot of middle steps, that will be financially sustainable for farmers in the Valley and promote the Valley's rich agricultural heritage," she said.

People seeking more information about the grant program can call the Valley Conservation Council at 886-3541.

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