

Food System Vision Prize – Design Thinking Narrative

“It’s 5:30 on a chilly Illinois morning in January 2050, and Jake Russell is heading out to work on his crops. He pulls his boots and coat on and walks the 100 yards to the “field”. Jake and the other guys that are working indoor farming still call it a “Field” even though their great grandparents would look at it as a giant barn, or greenhouse. When he opens the double door protected by an air curtain, he smells the soil in the new beds that have been turned over yesterday and hears the familiar hum of the CO2 concentrator pumping enriched air for the plants to breath.

Even in January the Field stays 50-60 degrees allowing Jake to grow a variety of crops year-round. In the 20th century Americans decided as consumers they wanted to be able to eat vegetables whenever they wanted, free of the seasonal cycle that defined farming at the time. The vegetable farming was moved to warmer climates that could grow year-round edible vegetables and Jake’s Grandpa was pushed into what was called Industrial Ag, where one or two crops were grown on a thousand acres or more for little profit. The economies of scaled forced farmers to borrow for more and more land, and those that couldn’t borrow anymore sold what they had to large companies. The most ironic part was that the crops that they grew weren’t even edible. They were grown for Ethanol production and animal feed mostly. The days of walking into the field and tasting the produce were long gone.

It seems strange to Jake that his dad had to fight for Jake’s Grandfather to let him try indoor farming and break the cycle of Industrial Ag. It had started on one acre with some hoop houses and a small aquaponics system. At the time fresh local produce was a cottage industry and only sold at farmers markets in the summer. This didn’t pay the bills however. In order to grow healthy food for his family and neighbors to eat, and make a living, Jake’s dad had to stretch out the growing seasons. Pretty soon it was a year-round fulltime job. The buildings got larger, Jake’s dad and other fellow farmers developed better techniques, and a future for Jake as a farmer started to look like a possibility.

All morning Jake and some farm hands have been picking produce and packaging it at the edge of the field. Some employees clean and cut the produce before packaging, adding further value to produce before it’s sold. This helps Jake’s farm keep more of the profit from the food chain and allows him to hire the employees he needs to make the farm work. All together he employees 10 farm hands, creating jobs for his rural community. He’s thinking about processing his product further into prepared salads or dehydrated snacks if he can finance the equipment to make it happen.

At noon Jake and some of his employees take the produce they’ve harvested to the producer-cooperative. Jake runs into Allison at the cooperative, who owns a cattle ranch that grows a heritage breed of beef. Next year she is going to try a series of bee hives in the pasture to produce honey as additional income. It had taken some convincing for Allison’s father Jim to join the cooperative and bring his cattle there for sale. He had always handled the marketing and sales of his Geltman’s Farm’s beef and the idea of someone else explaining why his beef was worth buying made him nervous. Besides, why should someone else get part of the profits from the sale? Eventually one of his neighbors who produced hogs explained how much more work on the farm he could get done by letting the co-op handle some of those things. Besides, he wanted to be a farmer not a salesman. “But what if they don’t handle things the way you want them to” asked Jim Geltman. “Well, it’s a cooperative” his neighbor had said. “If I don’t like something, I can bring it up at the co-op board meetings. I’m an owner of the co-op, like all of the other members, and I get a say in how its runs”. This was enough to get Jim to try

the cooperative several years ago, and now he would hate the idea of making sales calls instead of working the farm.

Since Geltman Farms started processing their own beef and producing items like sausages there really wouldn't be any time for sales calls anyway. The cooperative was doing a good job with both the sales of his new products and with shipping them to customers so Jim could focus on other ways to increase the value of his cattle. Jim already had 6 people working in the processing building and he would need time to interview for a few more positions if he wanted to grow the variety of products he sold.

Javier, the manager of the producer's cooperative/food hub was a little panicked. He had to get a shipment of cut vegetables from Jake's farm to a nearby school cafeteria for tomorrow's lunch and one of the co-ops trucks had suddenly broke down. "Not a problem" said Jim Geltman. "I've got a truck the co-op can use for a day or two. If the co-op loses money so do I" he says. Javier thanks him and moves on to more sales calls. This cooperation between farmers is what makes the co-op/food hub work.

There was a time when Javier had to work in a larger city to find work. His Grandparents had moved from Mexico to the Midwest to find work. His parents' families used the hard-earned income from their parents and some farming techniques they brought with them to start a small indoor farm. But Javier was a natural born salesman and he really liked interacting with people. When his parents told him about the cooperative looking for someone to manage their sales, he jumped at the chance to make a living doing what he loved in the town he grew up in. Several of his classmates had already moved back to raise their children the way they had grown up and with the food industry growing in the region they were able to find jobs in their fields of IT, chemistry and business.

At 3:30 Javier calls the local Community Owned grocery store to get their order for the next day. The manager John, a retired school teacher, gives him a list of items and asks what new seasonal stuff might be in. John was a champion of the Community Owned store when it started. All of the funds were raised locally without a commercial loan so the ability to cover the stores expenses is pretty easy. After the store was set to open John placed his resume with the board and the community members voted to hire him. There are 4 of these grocery stores located in this county and several more in the surrounding counties. Most of them rely on the producer co-op for goods, especially fresh food. Larger distributors won't make the trip to deliver for a small load. The Community Owned Grocery stores need the co-op/food hub as much as the hub needs them.

At one time there wasn't a place to buy fresh food within 30 miles. About 50 years ago the grocery stores went from supermarkets to giant megastores and the smaller rural grocers just couldn't compete. The megastores could negotiate deals for massive quantities of processed food and store it until needed. The wholesale prices the local rural store could get were higher than the megastores retail price and rural people couldn't afford not to drive into a city to buy groceries. Eventually the rural grocers starting closing their doors.

And then something changed. The small communities started taking matters into their own hands. After years of trying to entice grocery stores to move back to small towns the communities opened their own stores. Without an entrepreneur or company as owner the goal of the store changed from making a profit to covering the expenses needed to provide a place to shop. Being self-sustaining was the new goal. In much the same way electric cooperatives brought power distribution to underserved areas, these Community Owned grocery stores were bringing food distribution back to rural communities. As

the evening winds down John prepares to close the store. The last customer, Jake Russell is picking up some items for a late dinner after working on his farm. He gets a really satisfying feeling being able to purchase the food the he and his neighbors in the community produce. He knows where the food came from, who the farmer was and how it was handled. Even without Organic or other certifications he trusts this food because the people that earn a living growing it, sustain that life by eating it.”