

# Local food movement ratchets up in Piedmont

## New wholesale plant planned for Culpeper

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Jim Epstein is hopeful that locally sourced food will provide at least one of the ways in which his residential development at Clevenger's Corner will become a community.

In December, Epstein, chairman of EFO Capital Management Inc., presented a proposal for a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development to the Culpeper County Planning Commission (*see sidebar*).

The project is on 125 acres at the approximate junction of Fauquier, Culpeper and Rappahannock counties, abutting the intersection of U.S. 211 and Route 229.

A far-larger Centex Homes development has been approved on 1,700 acres directly across Route 229 from the Epstein property.

He intends to foster the creation of backyard and community gardens as the project gets underway, and, "in terms of the village center and the retail component, it would really be centered around a family-style restaurant, perhaps an inn to go with it, that would be focused on locally sourced food," he said.

Originally, Epstein had envisioned a local food wholesale aggregation center on the site. That vision, however, soon outgrew the natural resources of the tract — to say nothing of the roads and other man-made infrastructures. "I realized it's too big a system, and the access at Route 229 and U.S. 211 isn't where you want it to be," he said.

"There are a lot of smaller systems — Farmer Girls and farmers' markets and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), farm-to-restaurant and farm-to-family systems," Epstein said when he sat down

with Piedmont Business Journal before Christmas. "All those systems are great, and they are expanding and they are diversifying. But nobody is doing this on the wholesale level to serve Sysco and Sodexo and the school systems and all that. No one is doing this at scale."

Epstein and partner Mark Seale, owner of Simply Fresh Produce in Charlottesville, are close to closing on another, more appropriate, site in Culpeper County. The deal was still being negotiated and thus the location remained undisclosed when this edition went to press.

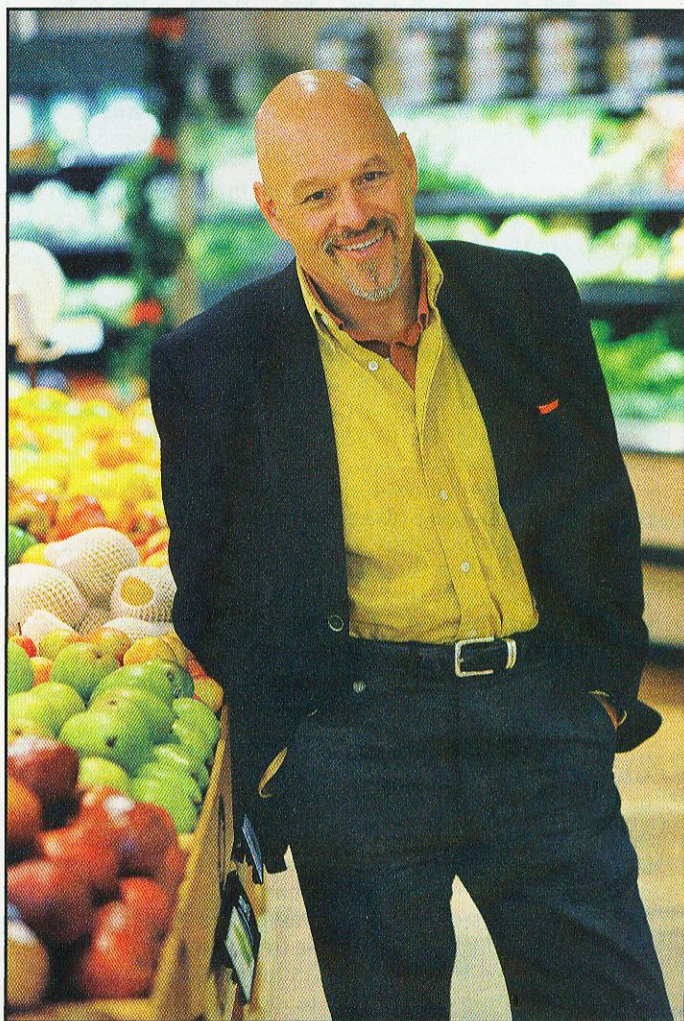
The partners' business plan calls for using a new warehouse facility for food bought directly from farmers growing within a 75 to 100 mile radius. There, it will be washed, sorted and sold to major distributors.

The consumer-driven demand for locally sourced food has evolved from a trend to a movement, Epstein said — and that's a big part of the attraction.

"I'm something of a social- and environmental-enterprise person," Epstein mused. "I like enterprises that are not just businesses. Common-good enterprises ought to be about making money, but also about serving the local community and the local environment."

To those same ends, Epstein serves as vice president of the philanthropic Triskeles Foundation, which notes on its website that he also "currently serves as chairman of DC Greenworks, a social and environmental enterprise organization focused exclusively on green roofs in the Chesapeake region.

"Jim is also an emeritus board member at Pathfinder International, a family planning service delivery organization that has worked in more than 80 countries over the last 50



Piedmont Business Journal Staff Photo/Randy Litzinger

**COMMUNITY SPIRIT:** A wholesale hub for locally sourced food is not Jim Epstein's first foray into community-good enterprises. The D.C. entrepreneur likes to make money with projects that also serve a common good.

years. He is a member of the Social Venture Network and the Threshold Foundation."

Epstein's proposed local food aggregation business "completely spoke to me about the opportunity to preserve the Piedmont region, which I have visited for 50 years and completely love and wanted to find a way to continue to support the agriculture," Epstein continued. "There is that social component of serving the farmers and also

serving an environmental-preservation component."

Thus, Epstein added, the local food aggregation business would increasingly evolve toward organically grown produce and livestock.

The Triskeles Foundation underwrote an August 2010 study conducted by FamilyFarmed.org and the Wallace Center titled "Local Food System Assessment for Northern Virginia."

The report summary noted

that “while there are supply-side issues that cannot be ignored, there is a business opportunity for the development of a local food system supported by an aggregation center in Northern Virginia.

“The market and political environment is favorable, with wholesale demand not even close to being met by local suppliers, and a local food trend that is expected to gain momentum.”

The report notes that everything about farming and food production is risky, “but a skillful operator should become financially sustainable provided local farmers step up to the plate and start growing for wholesale markets....”

A native of Washington, D.C., Epstein said he has been a frequent visitor to the Piedmont since his family first bought land in Madison County in the late 1950s.

“I have been out here for a very long time,” Epstein said, “and what I have come to realize is that the primary business out here is agriculture. It’s huge, and there has been a tremendous number of artisan farms that have developed in recent years. You’ll find a remarkable number of vineyards, shittake mushroom growers, apple orchards, lambs, turkeys, bison – it’s really remarkable, this sort of micro-agriculture that exists here. I want to take advantage of that.”