

# Bob Jacobus

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Community Development Specialist at Region VII Planning and Development Council. West Virginia.

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Bob has had a rich career filled with a number of experiences that intersect with food production, environmental planning, and economic development. He has supported his community by helping groups apply for development grants and manages compliance for state and federal grants. Bob speaks to the importance of keeping the momentum up with long-term community projects and having a champion who can carry the work through. He sees the need for better fresh food aggregation in West Virginia to help small farmers move their product to markets.

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My title is Community Development Specialist at Region VII Planning and Development Council. I have held the title for 10 years but I've been working at community development for probably 15 years. I'm a utility person here at the office. I write grants, do environmental reviews, labor compliance, and all sorts of activities that are required by federal and state grants. It's a very good job; I get to meet lots of wonderful people. I also get to serve the people in my region.

I have worked on a number of agricultural-based projects. Our office was instrumental in setting up a revolving loan for cheese equipment. I did most of the staff work. I was also on a renovation project for the Upshur County farmer's market here in Buckhannon. We were also able to do a really quick turn around for a water infrastructure project for a turkey and chicken

slaughterhouse in Barbour County. I think the USDA did a turnaround on that within three months, which is pretty phenomenal on a grant. One project that is just a little on the outside of food security is when I helped Tucker County with an *Assistance to Firefighters Grant* that funded interoperable radios. This was a project worth about a million dollars. We received money to standardize equipment for that whole emergency system in Tucker County.

I've been a career nomad. When I got out of college I ran the family farm and would put about 300 acres through a combine every year, and at the same time I was a coalmine environmental specialist. I ended up being a drilling and shooting supervisor in my early days. I worked as a wildlife manager for the state of West Virginia. I've also been a literacy teacher in a group home, and I've been a GPS field data collector for Allegheny Power. I've had lots of different work experiences. I'm at the end of my career now, so my goals have been accomplished pretty much. I think passing the torch might be my goal now, and the way to do that is get out information and institutional knowledge I've gained over the years of work.

I tried to develop my own business in 1995. When I was in college for wildlife science my professor had gotten a patent on walnut trees for fast growth and straight form. I thought West Virginia, being a forestry state, would be a place that I might be able to make a living developing walnut plantations, but I was unable to do so and I found myself in a spot where I took the first job opportunity I could. I worked here for a short period of time and went back to grad school to get a Masters of Science degree in Agricultural Education at WVU. When you have a home and you want

to stay in that home you're really limited in your job opportunities, and my old job here at Region VII came back open so I reapplied and came back to work here. Since then I've been here for 12 years. I've sort of had to learn to do things on my own. When I ran the family farm, of course family members helped, and I had some mentors in that aspect of my life, but that was 40 years ago.

*Buckhannon farmer's market project.*

Upshur County has an established farmer's market within two blocks of the central business district and it is quite popular. We wanted to improve that with a Buckhannon farmer's market project. The city of Buckhannon had some FEMA buy out properties in the floodplains. They had bought homes and demolished those structures and that space had to remain open space. They could use that property for a farmer's market so they moved the farmer's market to that location; the only problem was it was in an offbeat location in the city. The farmers didn't get much traffic there so they wanted to come back to Buckhannon Central Business District. They set back up in the lot where they used to have their farmer's market. The development authority director had spoken with the USDA state director who was interested in putting some money into a farmer's market so the Upshur County Development Authority approached Region VII to develop an application, which I did. We had the national trend of locally grown foods going for us and we put an application together that would take care of some environmental issues at Jawbone Park, plus it would provide

some nice shelters for local producers to set up in and market their commodities. We developed the application and pretty much just had it on the shelf here in the office waiting for the right fit.

Probably one of the best practices that you really need to look at in developing a project if you're going to go for funding through a grant project is to identify what you want to do and identify how much it's going to cost. Then there's a lot of peripheral information you've got to develop like the economy of the area, the population demographics, household income, unemployment, that sort of thing. So you gather all your information and you find an application that your project will fit and start filling that application out whether there's a funding cycle available or not. At least then you will have the project organized, and you can always cut and paste from one application to another if something comes up. We had a project developed, we had it on an application, the president declared Upshur County as a disaster area in 2008, and the president had his stimulus package so there was some money there that the USDA could fit into the farmer's market here in Buckhannon. We had the application essentially done and we were able to pull that application out, dust it off, put it into the format that needed to go to the USDA for the president's stimulus package, and it got funded. The city of Buckhannon did their environmental mitigation and then they put up the shelters for the farmer's market.

What has happened at the spot now is Main Street Buckhannon has partnered with Buckhannon and they have an event every Friday night during the summer called Festival Fridays. Local growers will bring their products and their value added products on "Festival Fridays." There

may be some kind of entertainment—a band or maybe a car show—something like that for people in the community to gather down at the Jawbone Park where the farmer’s market is. People that make value-added things like pies, pastries, jellies most generally sell out of their wares every night that they have a Festival Friday. Also people downtown have remarked that there’s more traffic in Buckhannon on Friday nights now and businesses are staying open a little later, so this has just been a synergistic type situation where there’s been a spinoff that’s helped the farmer’s market people and also retail businesses in the city of Buckhannon.

Buckhannon is pretty interesting, they have Main Street Buckhannon, they have Create Buckhannon, and they have a lot of community development groups working on different projects here in town. My role was to gather all the pieces and complete the application for funding. I can facilitate public meetings and I’ve done that in the past; however, in this case there were plenty of documented public meetings that could be used. Many grant application processes require public input, which may take the form of a public meeting, a survey on Survey Monkey- just some sort of public input where there’s some documented evidence that the project is needed. So I’ll generally gather that information, I write the narratives, I develop budget narratives. I just basically gather all the pieces of the project puzzle and put it together. One thing I can say, I’ve done two masters theses and a grant project is every bit as much a masters project as you can get. You just got to grind it out, start in on one of those and keep after it until it’s complete. That’s an accomplishment in itself. And meeting the deadline is a big accomplishment sometimes too. Environmental reviews I

have to do on small city projects a lot of times will be 150 pages long. So I would say people would identify with what I do if I say, "It's like being a perpetual student."

You have to be really persistent in these projects. A lot of times the people that had the vision will be worn out and give up at about the time it gets funded and the next group of people will not have the same vision, and it's difficult to transition because if it's not their idea. They are not always comfortable with the project. Success will keep people motivated. You may want to break the project down into pieces where you have an ongoing calendar of successes, because it's pretty euphoric to accomplish something. So on a really big project develop a division of labor and division of goals so that you have something to celebrate more often. That probably will keep things going as well as anything does. I would just say that the grant process often takes a long time, and you might have a changing of the guard that may or may not be sold on the project. In the Buckhannon project the issue was a bit different. There was not a clear division of labor and the project was not communicated very well with all the decision makers who needed to approve the application. There were some questions and hold-ups when the application needed to be signed.

In the Buckhannon project we worked with the Upshur County Development Authority, the City of Buckhannon, and the State Office of USDA. We always work on all of our projects with the State Historic Preservation Office in Charleston. That's one thing about any federal grant, if there's any construction involved, you always have to have culture and history comments, so I probably work with them on everything. In general I work with city and county officials, the appointed park

boards, and the development authority. We work with anybody that has a legitimate idea and is willing to put their own effort forth. We work with senior citizens a lot. It doesn't need to be a local government or special district. We work with everybody.

The Development Authority was crucial, the USDA state office was crucial, the City of Buckhannon was crucial. We did get some ancillary help from WVU Extension service. Early on I said that there has to be public input, and we needed some for this application. We needed input from producers on whether they wanted a farmer's market or not so I developed a survey to measure that. The local extension service agent in agriculture administered the survey to people. He was the market master anyhow so he had access to the users of the farmer's market. He was the best person to administer the survey to the users, which was probably a really important piece of the application.

We are in contact with the state USDA office all the time. They have an idea of what we have in terms of projects on the table. USDA will contact us when they may have a pot of money that our projects will fit, and then they just stay back and we actually do all of the labor work of putting the application together and then submitting the application to them. There is competition for funding, so there is incentive to get the application in before another project supersedes you. After the fact we also help with the distribution of funds. We seldom apply for grants ourselves, but we help others apply and oftentimes they will need some technical services on how to report and also how to ask for reimbursements or drawdowns to pay contractors and the like for services. So we prepare the application and then we usually take that document to whoever is the applicant and they sign off on

it. Sometimes they will send it in. A lot of times we will bring it back to the office and make copies and send it in from here, but we are not the applicant. We do all the legwork for them.

The City of Buckhannon was the main applicant for the farmer's market grant. The main reason they were the applicant was because they were the owner of the property. Grant programs are like bankers. They don't like to invest their money unless it's a solid investment, so they're going to be more likely to give money to the one who owns the property than to an entity who is just using the property. I probably completed the first application in 2005, and we got funded in 2008. The shelters were completed probably in 2012.

I think it's the most rewarding when I'm out on the street or at a meeting and people are talking about the project, and didn't have a clue that I participated in it, and I hear good things about it. And I can sit there with a Cheshire cat smile on my face. It's a pleasure to hear good things about a project and the people talking do not realize that somebody that did a lot of the legwork is sitting there listening to them.

Because I'm at the twilight of my career, my motivation is a whole lot like a 15 year old waiting to turn in his learners permit for his driver's license. Instead of getting to 16, I'm waiting to get to 62 so I can retire. For young people, it's a whole of different set of motivations.

In terms of food security, we're talking about people who don't have something to eat. In order for somebody to have something to eat there has to be more food available. For more food to be available there needs to be more people producing that food. It's a chicken or egg thing.

What do you do first? Feed hungry people or feed the people that produce the food that feed the hungry people? With the farmer's market we've probably provided a venue where the producers can actually see a little benefit and reward for their hard work, and they're probably producing more now than what they were. Also, there's something about West Virginia; if you got extra you give it away. I can tell you from my provider garden at the house, we gave away about seven gallons of green beans yesterday to people that probably are food insecure. Because there is now a place to retail fresh vegetables, there is an increase in production, which probably increases food security for some people.

I would say there's been an evolution of what community food security means to me. Food security, when I first heard the words, how I understood it to be, wasn't necessarily what the people that have worked in food security for a while see it to be. I was just thinking that it means that your food sources are safe. With that, you have all sorts of production issues, GMO issues, storage issues. But I've come to realize community food security is whether or not everybody in the community has enough to eat or not. If they can't get food they're food insecure. So community food security deals with whether or not there's enough food for everybody to not go hungry.

I'm a refugee from the flatlands. I'm not a child of Appalachia. I grew up in Indiana so my perspective is going to be from one that's not from within, but a perspective that's from an outsider looking in. The people of Appalachia are some of the most generous people I've ever met in my life. They also are some of the most abused people I've ever met in my life. Once they like you it's easy,

but you have to pay your dues, so to speak, in order to be received and accepted by the people here. So once you work with them, great. But you don't want to disappoint them because they've been used before. So then it becomes hard if you make a mistake. When you speak you got to weigh your words because you can't take anything back. You just have to realize that you're not going to be perfect and you can't work with everybody so you pick the ones you can work with and the ones that are hard to work with you work with them the best you can. I can tell when people started accepting me here in West Virginia because they quit asking me, "Where did you come from?" Now they ask me, "How long have you been here?" It took 15 years for the switch.

There are a lot of things going on in West Virginia. I just noticed today that there are some new activities at the farmer's market in Pocahontas County. There's been a lot of announcements for jobs working with local food systems come across my desk in the last month or so. Federal government agencies are taking notice of the trend to use local foods and are willing to invest in those trends. I'm seeing great interest in production among the generation that's just entering into adult life. In Upshur County up until this year I couldn't tell you where a combine was. Now I can tell you where there's a combine. So agriculture production is going up, and niche production is going up. People are interested in it, and when you apply intelligent interests to a problem area or a situation there's always progress. So I see a high interest level, and that's really encouraging to me.

I really would like to see some sort of aggregation. The way things are right now you produce, you go to the market, you sell your own goods, and you're really limited by time the

volumes that you can produce. Whereas if there was an aggregator or a distributor of foods, the producers could spend lots more time producing food and allow somebody else to market the food products. I think there needs to be a component of extended storage or processing so that you would not have to worry about the perishability of foods. Farmers could grow it and still be able to sell it five months down the road. One thing that Buckhannon has is one of the largest restaurant food distributors in the state; they truck food all over the state. Some kind of partnership with them for fresh foods might be a potential project but it would take a dedicated staff to pull that off, and somebody that would want to work with it for more than two years.

I'm working on a lot of community projects right now, not necessarily food projects, but I'm working on a lot of community recreation projects right now. I'm working on some projects to help fund improvements to some of our courthouse facilities. Again I'm a utility person and I sort of get my fingers in all those kinds of projects.

I'm nearing retirement, but retirement doesn't mean you quit everything. I think it means you have the freedom to pick and choose what you're involved in, and most of my friends and relatives that have ever retired are busier after they retired than when they were working. I really don't want to go that far. I have a homestead, 110 acres, and I have projects that I've been working on for 20 years that I haven't finished yet. I want to finish work on those. One of my first projects is to finish my composting facility; it's phenomenal to think you can make all the fertilizer you need right at the house, and all you need to do is apply some intelligence to the system and you got some really

good stuff. If you don't apply intelligence you make a lot of poison, so I want to finish the composting machine. It's a shed with different sections in it. I think I know how to mass-produce compost and I might play with that. But retirement will be interesting if I get around to mass compost production or not.

Postscript: Bob has now retired and is playing out that new chapter in life. Bob continues to serve as a community representative on the management team of the Appalachian Foodshed Project.