

# **Growing a Healthy Community Foodscape, Food System & Food Economy for the Culebra River Acequia Communities, Costilla County, Colorado**

## **PROSPECTUS**

(Please keep confidential for now – TAI Board use only)

Prepared by The Acequia Institute

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### **I. Project Design Principles: A Solidarity Economy**

This project is designed to significantly improve community health in the Culebra River acequia villages of Costilla County by reviving and strengthening our local agri-food system, rekindling our polyculture agroecosystem traditions, growing community food sovereignty and security, and supporting the creativity and commitment of our younger generations to remain living and investing in their villages by co-creating and participating in an interwoven array of local institutions and initiatives to generate agriculture-based wealth and keep it in the community. The project encompasses a solidarity economy integrating a (1) Milpa/Molino/Masa harina/Marketing (4MC) Collaborative, (2) the reinvention of the R & R Market as a community cooperative grocery and community agriculture innovation center, (3) the Food & Community Revolving Credit Association (RCA), and the (4) Move Mountains Youth Leaders Partnership (MMP). We intend to document each step of the process and outcomes to help other communities adapt and adopt the models we develop.

### **II. The Story of Our Community: Challenges & Opportunities**

*The Acequia Water Democracy.* The Culebra River watershed in Colorado's San Luis Valley is home to the oldest family farms and water rights in the state. Many of our farms have been operated by the same families for seven generations since the establishment of the acequia villages within the 1843-44 Sangre de Cristo Land Grant. The grant is located within ancestral territories of Ute, Navajo, Pueblo, and more recently Chicana/o peoples. Acequia farmers in the southern half of Costilla County irrigate approximately 23,000 acres of prime bottomlands and our flood irrigated methods produce 10,000 acres of wetlands and other vital wildlife habitat and riparian corridors (Peña 2003). Our acequias are celebrated across the Southwest and around the world as sustainable and resilient institutions for local democratic governance of watersheds (Peña 1998; Rivera 1998; Rodriguez 2006). Acequias are also acknowledged for vital ecosystem and economic base services valued in excess of \$250-300 million a year across the seven counties of the Upper Rio Grande watershed in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado (Peña 2003; Fernald et al. 2010). These facts were ascertained with passage in 2009 of Colorado's "Acequia Recognition Law" (House Bill 09-1233) that re-established the legal status of the allocational and communal customary norms of acequia governance and management of water rights (also see: Hicks and Peña 2003).

Such calculations are not inherent to the deepest instincts of the people of San Luis. Instead, our cultural memory summons us to be in deep care and relationship to the land and all of its inhabitants. While we understand the need to speak and navigate the language of capital markets, we do not intend to reproduce economic development through the lens of private capital investment. It will take much effort to re-invigorate the living working models of mutual cooperation and relationality, but this is what we intend to do because these are the only sustainable ways to build a resilient future in a unique community like ours.

*Structural Violence and Trauma to People, Water and Land.* Decades of structural violence (poverty, racism, land and water loss, cultural marginality) and intergenerational historical trauma – all associated with the illegal enclosure of the 80,000-acre common lands known locally as “La Sierra” – have undermined and diminished the capacity and resilience of our local agri-food system. While the historic use rights to the common lands were restored in 2002 and actual legal access restored starting in 2005, considerable damage has been left in the wake of the near 50 years of denial of these land rights. As a result of these harmful impacts, Costilla County is generally recognized as one of “three poorest counties in Colorado” with an official poverty rate of 25 percent compared to 9.3 statewide (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). This is a half-truth: While we are cash-poor, the acequia families are rich in land, water, livestock, seed, local knowledge, a healthy heritage cuisine, and strong traditions of mutual aid and cooperative labor. Our community also has a strong history of successfully defending environmental justice principles in opposing destructive environmental activities.

What concerns us is that our county also has some of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in Colorado. According to one recent report, 25.4 percent of the population in Costilla County is obese while 41 percent is overweight (Costilla County Public Health Agency 2018) more than twice the state-wide rates. The same report indicates that 13.3 percent of Costilla County population is currently diagnosed with diabetes compared to the Colorado rate of 5.6 percent. Among epigenetic factors, diet is strongly associated with emergent conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular illnesses. The evidence suggests community health and well-being in the acequia villages are casualties of the enclosure of the common lands and the dramatic long-duration effects including the diminishment of our food sovereignty and healthier heritage foodways.

*Community Health and the Echoes of Enclosure.* A startling historic fact underlies the design principles informing this project: The enclosure of La Sierra common lands (1960-2005) was accompanied by a shift in the structure of our economy: We experienced changes from a diverse polyculture subsistence and local-regional market agriculture economy focused on sheep, goats, and dairy cows to an export-oriented alfalfa and beef monoculture that produced cash for an emerging non-local food consumer culture. In other words, our farmers stopped feeding our own community. The resulting negative health impacts have been as dramatic as the underlying forces of this deleterious structural shift. This is the challenge we face.

### **III. A Food Sovereignty Initiative for Community Health Through Agricultural Wealth**

The underlying objective of this project is to improve long-term community health through a resurgence of food sovereignty by reviving and strengthening the local agri-food system, rebuilding our polyculture agroecosystem traditions, unleashing the creativity and commitment among our youth and younger adults to participating in and establishing a set of local institutions to generate and keep our agriculture-generated wealth in the community.

As it stands now, the project encompasses four major interconnected components:

*1. The Milpa/Molino/Masa harina/Marketing Collaborative (4MC)*, which assists acequia farmers in transitioning from cow/alfalfa monocultures to an agroecosystem that includes growing traditional non-GMO corn and associated companion crops. The corn producers will supply the cooperative corn mill for processing and packaging. This is envisioned as supporting local masa harina and tortilla production on a limited scale and connecting our artisan-milled heirloom corn to the tortilleria and restaurant markets in Denver and other Front Range locales involving both retail sales and wholesale contracts. The “Milpa” part of this collaborative involves producing companion plants like beans (bolita, fava), squash, cauliflower, broccoli, kale, chard, spinach, beets, and other crops that are part of our traditional and healthier adopted diets. These crops will supply the grocery cooperative with fresh produce and serve as a source of food stocks for the local food bank to support nutrition programs for elders, low-income families, and youth at greatest risk of recurring hunger and malnutrition.

*2. The R & R Grocery and Community Food Center* will involve the purchase, rehabilitation and upgrading of the community’s only full service grocery store. We will house a local cooperative grocery store, stocked with local and regional foods, a butchery with a commercial kitchen [for local food start-ups and classes on cooking and processing; and badly-needed community gathering and office space for food and other initiatives. The center will host and support local value-added foods projects funded by the revolving credit association (see #3 below). The revival and cooperative reorganization of the historic R & R Grocery will deliver the physical infrastructure needed to restore and re-invigorate our local agri-food system while providing a center space to nurture the artisan, entrepreneurial, and community-service energy of our youth and younger adults. The R & R Grocery is recognized as the oldest continuously operated commercial business in the State of Colorado and this historic status will play a major role in the branding and marketing of all the direct agricultural and value-added product development projects we seek to support through the revolving credit association to be housed in the second-story office suites, project, and meeting spaces. The restoration and upgrade for the second floor may involve modifying the current apartment scheme with a handful of guest quarters, entrepreneurial project offices, and room for administration and common art and performance spaces.

*3. The Food & Community Revolving Credit Association (RCA)* will provide zero percent interest credit to local agriculture and food producers, including those involved in value-added product development and marketing. Cooperative membership will be required and subsidized by TAI

for low-income participants. The RCA is the operational heart and soul of the entire project as it revives the “soft infrastructure” of our cultural heritage including the solidarity norms expressed in our acequia associations, land grant councils, and mutual aid and cooperative labor traditions and institutions.

One of the strengths of this project derives from the rental income of the second floor and storefront units at the R&R building. These are expected to continue generating at least \$40,000 in annual revenue. We plan to tap this revenue to support the endowment envisioned as a vital permanent fund to support the RCA and operations at the 4MC and coop grocery store.

*4. The Move Mountains Youth Leaders Partnership* will support young people (teenagers and young adults through age 30+) in (1) growing food for elders and families; (2) participating in the design and operation of the grocery and community food center; (3) developing their own food production and value-added food enterprises; and (4) developing the skills, knowledge and experience necessary for generating living incomes here at home while becoming the next generation of local leaders. For example, the youth will work with the local food bank (which is run by Move Mountains) to make sure a steady supply chain exists to connect production from the milpas to the low-income and elderly households in the community served by the Food Bank.

Our plan is to integrate youth and young adults into all of the stages involved in the 4MC. Our proposed implementation budgets include a \$2,000 subsidy to the farmers for their participation; stipends for youth milpa tenders (\$15/hr. for 40 hours of work per acre = \$710); a scholarship fund for youth/young adult training and internships in trade specialties needed in the agricultural community; an emergency fund for youth and young adults; and a paid staff member for counseling services. Mentoring of youth and young adults will be led by Move Mountains officers and staff in affiliation with milpa farmers.

#### **IV. Budget and Financing**

Draft Planning Budget Documents: See Appendices 1-3.

#### **V. Financing**

This project envisions a partnership between private, non-profit charitable, and government funding sources.

We have established or are developing relationships with the following potential partners some of which will provide grants, gifts; others PRIs, and yet others technical and organizational consultancy: Alternative Ownership Advisors; Andrew Family Foundation; Chinook Fund; Colorado Health Foundation; Costilla County Conservancy District; Colorado Open Lands; Dr. Bonners Family Foundation; El Pomar Foundation; First Nations Development Institute; First Southwest Community Fund; Ford Foundation; Laura Jane Musser Fund; NDN Collective; Nutiva Foundation; John Roulac; RSF Social Finance; Seed Commons; Slow Money (Boulder; Woody Tasch); Taskforce-connected donors; Slow Food-USA (Colorado Presidium); USDA Small Business Innovation, Rural Business Development; and Rural Cooperative Development grants; and others.

We anticipate a handful of private investors (and 'angel donors') will be attracted to Costilla County's status under Colorado Enterprise Zone tax credits and incentives.

Board member and President, Devon G. Peña, is committed to guaranteeing any Program Related Investment(s) up to \$1 million as long as these are tied to the creation of an endowment for a Perpetual Purpose Trust that will provide seed funds for the 4MC, RCA and emergency funding of operations at the R & R community grocery cooperative.

Current draft 2-21-2021

Lacking: Detailed business operations plan