

Food21's Larimer Fresh Project: Social Enterprise as Community and Economic Revitalization in Pittsburgh

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Abstract. This case study details an effort undertaken to address the wicked and complex problem of food insecurity by Food21's Larimer Fresh project, a social enterprise with the goal of providing economic and community revitalization through the establishment of a food hall and community center in Pittsburgh, PA. The Larimer Fresh project aims to provide self-sustaining access to fresh and affordable food for community members. The case study provides context and details for the proposal Food21's CEO, Joe Bute, must make to various stakeholders involved in the project to secure access to land, funding, and community support – all of which are essential to the success of the social enterprise. In developing his proposal, Bute must weigh the input of investors, community members, city agencies, and demonstrate a deep and genuine understanding of food insecurity, its causes, and the impacts of his social enterprise on residents of the Larimer community.

Keywords: food insecurity, social enterprise, social sustainability, social responsibility, ethics, stakeholder management, gentrification, food desert, community revitalization.

1. Introduction

Residents of Larimer, in Pittsburgh, have long been disadvantaged and excluded from the fruits of government funded infrastructural changes and redevelopment that have taken place throughout the city and surrounding communities. Members of the Larimer community are heavily burdened by lack of food security – access to fresh, healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant sources of food. This crisis is exacerbated by limited public transportation and a fading commercial presence in the area.

Joe Bute sees the crisis as an opportunity to address food insecurity through an innovative business venture, Food21. Food21 is a non-profit geared towards combating food insecurity through the strengthening of local food networks and economies. Bute, as the CEO of Food21, is planning the construction of a project called Larimer Fresh: a food and celebration hall in Larimer to reinvigorate the community's food system and provide a space for community engagement.

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In order to move forward with the project, he must first gain approval from the Larimer Consensus Group, which was formed to promote self-sufficiency of Larimer residents and promote the community's well-being through affordable housing, economic development, and the addressing of environmental, social, and public safety issues. Bute and Food21 also need to earn purchasing rights from the Urban Redevelopment Authority through a rigorous proposal process to acquire the land for the Larimer Fresh project.

Consulting with the lead investor on the project, Bute describes the circumstances facing his proposal: "I don't think you understand. I must do more than prove there is a market and a demand. A business proposition alone will not earn that land. A million companies have tried to buy it, and Food21 must be different. We have no chance in Larimer if we can't prove we are able to generate both profit and actual change in the community. Larimer has needed a community actor like us for quite some time now, but none of it means anything if we can't get past purchasing the land from the URA."

This project could be a milestone of Joe Bute's accomplished career in community development and capital management. Bute, a longtime entrepreneur and community builder, has lofty visions for what he could create and catalyze in the Larimer community. He envisions a small plot in Larimer to be the site of Larimer Fresh, where a multi-organizational collaboration will foster a food and celebration hall, with freshly grown produce and on-site agricultural cultivation. His goal in the establishment of the community center is to demonstrate the efficacy of a model that uses food as a method of community revitalization, through economic development.

The lead investor responded: "Joe, we have to be honest with ourselves. Without revenue, you cannot operate. Are you confident you can consistently generate revenue while also moving forward with your mission? I understand social change is the focus of your project, but if you can't present me with consistent and growing revenue or potential, we unfortunately can't see you as a target investment for the firm. We require our investments to show growth in 3 consecutive quarters, or an exceptional plan before we consider. You've been in the industry. You know how it works, Joe."

The meeting and presentation to the URA is crucial to continue with the project. Without the land, Larimer Fresh must be delayed or canceled entirely. Joe has a 15-minute meeting to present the case for Larimer Fresh as a viable and socially impactful business in the Larimer community, a presentation the entire project depends on. Due to the history of business ventures proclaiming to be concerned with revitalizing the Larimer community turning their backs and abandoning their commitments, the URA will be highly skeptical of Bute's pitch, and Joe must provide an ironclad plan for maintaining both the social and economic missions of the Larimer Fresh project.

Rehearsing, Bute goes through his overarching goal in building the Larimer Fresh project. "Our goal is to use food to revamp and revitalize the community,