



Where are they now? Checking in with The Kitchen

In 2013, Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development (OED) completed an assessment on a potential community kitchen for the [City of Roanoke's Economic Development Authority \(EDA\)](#). Now a reality as of their grand opening on April 26, The Kitchen, located in Roanoke's West End neighborhood, aims to be a significant community resource and source of economic development for the area by providing rentable kitchen space for food-based businesses to use.

The OED's assessment, funded by Freedom First Credit Union and the EDA, set out to find whether the Roanoke area had untapped potential economic development in the region's food industry. "The answer was clearly yes," said Maureen McNamara Best, executive director at Local Environmental Agriculture Project Inc. (LEAP), a nonprofit dedicated to building stronger food systems in the Roanoke Valley.

The study found that there was opportunity for development in the food industry in the region, in part because there are numerous local organizations that would benefit greatly from the addition of commercial kitchen space, the use of which is necessary for food makers to become certified. The Kitchen is a step forward because it allows for rentable access to a commercial kitchen and acts as an incubator that connects growing food businesses and programs with the resources they need to take their business to the next level.

Since the completion of the needs assessment, The Kitchen has secured \$140,000 in funding. An early-stage grant of \$100,000 from [Roanoke Women's Foundation](#) of the [Foundation for Roanoke Valley](#) in Nov. 2014 preceded the awarding of a Nov. 2015 grant of \$40,000, split between a State of Virginia [AFID fund](#) and the EDA.

Brandon Turner, economic development specialist for the City of Roanoke Department of Economic Development, says this kitchen is important for the economic development of the region for two reasons.



"One, it further helps to revitalize the West End neighborhood; this is an area that was once derelict and run-down, but is now starting to 'pop' with energy and revitalization," Turner said. "The Community Kitchen, and associated market which is run by LEAP, is going a long way to help turn this into a truly up-and-coming neighborhood."

Second, Turner says, is that the kitchen will serve as a business incubator. The model has served food production businesses in other cities well, helping them grow their business and take them to the next level. Examples of success include the [Blue Ridge Food Ventures](#) in Asheville, NC, and [La Cocina](#) in San Francisco, CA.

McNamara Best said that The Kitchen aims to follow their successful models at a smaller scale in the Roanoke region, and will also look to La Cocina's model of especially assisting

refugees and immigrants. These and other models have proven beneficial to their respective cities, and The Kitchen hopes to follow suit in this region.

"We are hoping to replicate that model here in Roanoke and, ideally, see a few businesses spin out of the center over the next few years and maybe set up shop in the West End area, which further spurs growth and revitalization," Turner said.

To learn more about The Kitchen, visit <http://leapforlocalfood.org/kitchen/>. For more information about the OED's study, please contact Sarah Lyon-Hill at sarahlh@vt.edu.

