

## Rural Business Development Grant Program

### Success Story: Essential Storage Expansion Helps Food Connects Create More Capacity

**\$500,000**

Congressionally Directed Spending - VT Sen. Leahy

**\$50,000**

USDA Rural Business Development Grant

**\$150,000**

Funding from VT Dept. of Ag, Food & Markets

**10,000 sq. ft.**

Area of BDCC Warehouse Facility

**800 sq.ft. / 1600 sq.ft.**

Area of New Walk-in Freezer / Cooler

**\$3 Million+**

Food Connects 2023 sales, from over 150 producers

#### Feeling the Need for RESILIENCE & EFFICIENCY

Food Connects is a Brattleboro, VT-based nonprofit that 'builds healthy families, thriving farms, and connected communities' by delivering regional food and providing educational and consulting services aimed at transforming the local food system. The organization has grown significantly since Executive Director Richard Berkfield founded it in 2009, and took on an exponential level of importance during the COVID pandemic. As supply chain issues impacted distribution networks, Food Connects' customer base of producers and consumers doubled. Adapting to the new and growing demand for efficient, affordable food distribution would be the org's defining challenge.

#### Building Out Storage to BUILD UP RELIABILITY

Storage capacity is among the many typical bottlenecks that local food systems must widen to become more efficient. And with the reality of growing demand comes the reputational pressure to keep up with it, as farmers and producers will only do business with consistent distribution partners they can rely on to sell their products. Berkfield set his focus on securing more square feet of cooling and freezing space to sustain their heavy increase in operational activity. The Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC)—a friend to the org—offered a large warehouse in its industrial business park building, and Food Connects jumped at the opportunity to take it over.

#### Engaging Groups of DEDICATED FUNDING PARTNERS

The next step was to outfit the space with temperature- and humidity-controlled storage. In 2022, Food Connects launched a capital campaign to raise funds for the project through diverse investment partners. The State of Vermont contributed \$150,000, and Senator Patrick Leahy committed \$500,000 through congressionally directed spending. USDA Rural Development—which helped the org's earlier growth with a \$30,100 [Community Facilities Grant](#) in '18 and \$47,500 [Economic Impact Initiative Grant](#) in '21—obligated a \$50,000 [Rural Business Development Grant](#), securing healthy local food options for thousands of rural residents throughout the Northeast.

**For program regulations and requirements, please go to the [USDA RD RBDG fact sheets](#)**



*Food Connects Founder and Executive Director Richard Berkfield stands in the footprint of what will be a gigantic walk-in freezer—one of the features to increase cold storage capacity by 2,400 sq.ft.—ensuring produce like carrots from Picadilly Farm (below) stay fresh.*

