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Investors jump fast track for farm lanes

by [John Golden](#) April 27th, 2012



Brian Kaminer, co-chairman of Slow Money NYC, in Armonk.

An entrepreneur from Ulster County and former stock trader, Jim Hyland was in Westchester County on a rainy Sunday afternoon to spread the word about his 3-year-old food packing business among like-minded supporters of sustainable farming and potential investors. He was among several food and urban farming entrepreneurs speaking at an Earth Day showcase sponsored by Slow Money NYC at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills.

Hyland needs financing – \$750,000 to start – if his business, Farm to Table Co-packers, is to expand as planned and speed up production to meet the growing demand from food companies and area farms. The business will need to invest another \$2 million to \$5 million to bring its regional contract-packaging model to other metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit and Chicago, he said.

“That’s when Co-packer becomes not just a supporter of sustainable food growing and farming, but as importantly, a sustainable business,” he said.

Started in 2009, Farm to Table Co-packers occupies 30,000 square feet of space in Kingston’s Tech City, the former IBM complex, where it employs from 20 to more than 50 workers according to seasonal demand. Its revenue totaled \$1.21 million last year and is projected to grow to about \$1.58 million this year. Hyland projects revenue of \$2.2 million in 2013.

“We make money by helping food companies and farms reach the market,” he told his Stone Barns audience. The packer’s Northeast customer base includes 40 food companies and 60 area farms. Hyland said he has been in talks with two “very, very large companies.” One, an organic food company, is looking to create a supply pipeline in the area, and Farm to Table would work with farmers producing for the company.

Hyland's business could be an appealing opportunity for investors whose principles are aligned with the Slow Money Alliance, a 3-year-old national movement that, quietly and still in apparently small numbers, has established a presence in Westchester.

The movement's first principle is to "bring money back down to earth," in the words of Woody Tasch, founding chairman of the nonprofit Slow Money organization and a philanthropist and venture capitalist for community development and sustainable businesses. His 2009 book, "Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money: Investing As If Food, Farms, and Fertility Mattered," served to launch the movement.

"All the lobbying in the world is not worth as much as starting one of these small food enterprises," Tasch, a New Mexico resident, told the Earth Day audience at Stone Barns.

His goal with Slow Money is to have 1 million Americans investing 1 percent of their assets in local food systems within a decade.

Formed last year, Slow Money NYC is one of 14 chapters in the U.S. and Canada. Nationwide, Slow Money members to date have invested more than \$17 million in more than 100 small food enterprises, Tasch said. In Brooklyn, 10 Slow Money members invested \$250,000 in chef and restaurateur George Weld's opening of Parish Hall, a farm-to-table restaurant. None of that slow money has yet to reach entrepreneurs in Westchester and the lower Hudson Valley.

The New York City chapter has attracted 450 people to its meetup groups and has 60 dues-paying members. It includes some Westchester residents, said Brian Kaminer, the chapter's co-chairman from Armonk.

The movement, said Kaminer, has attracted "food activists, foodies, financial activists, general impact investors and, to some degree, people like myself that are just intrigued by the concept of slow money. There's a certain way that money has been moving around the earth in the last decade or so that's just been too fast."

Slow money investments offer "a spectrum of returns," some of which could be product instead of capital, Kaminer said. Typical capital return rates range from 1 percent to 8 or 9 percent.

For investors, "The kind of growth rates that we're accustomed to, you can't squeeze that out of food," he said. "You squeeze that out of food and you're going to get the industrialized (farm) factories that we already get."

"I think slow money is applicable to more than slow food," Kaminer said. Food, though, "represents one of the most engaging opportunities to get people to start thinking differently about investing."

Kaminer worked 17 years in his family's brokerage business in the tristate area. "It got to the point where I realized there were some personal disconnects for me with business at large. It was about trading value rather than creating value."

He left the family business and in 2007 started at his Armonk home an energy conservation and sustainable-investment company, Talgra L.L.C. He has completed and owns two small-scale, rooftop solar power generation projects in New Jersey.

Kaminer said the Slow Money movement has natural allies in community banks and in recently formed economic development groups such as the Hudson Valley Food and Beverage Alliance and the Westchester County Association's Blueprint Accelerator Network. "I think there's an opportunity for a lot of these efforts and organizations to think about community engagement through investing. The whole idea is that change can happen on a very small, local basis. A lot of that can happen by investing in these businesses and building up these relationships."

Jim Hyland said though he spoke with some like-minded investors in Westchester, "Nobody handed me a bag of money."

"If it comes in, it's helpful," he said. "Whether it's slow money, fast money or medium money, as long as it comes in."