



# 2015 Fall Forum Summary Report

## Background & History

The WFN is a group of organizations that came together in 2010 to create a more just and coordinated food system in Whatcom County, from farm to fork to food disposal. The Whatcom Food Network's (WFN) mission is:

*"Working to build common understanding and facilitate collaborative efforts toward an equitable, sustainable and healthy food system for all."*

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## Forum Overview

On October 23, 2015, the Whatcom Food Network (WFN) hosted its annual Fall Forum at the St. Luke's Community Health Education Center in Bellingham. WFN forums, which are held twice a year, are designed to provide current information on relevant topics through presentations by representatives of various food system sectors, and to foster engagement and collaboration through dialogue groups and time for networking.

Approximately fifty representatives from a variety of Whatcom and Skagit County organizations attended the Fall Forum. In addition, two farm worker activists visiting from South Africa participated. The keynote speakers were Eric Holt-Gimenez, Executive Director of Food First, and Ted Sullivan, King County Farmland Preservation Program Manager. Following their presentations, the remainder of the forum was devoted to discussing the benefits and barriers to forming a Food Policy Council.

## Keynote Speaker

*Eric Holt-Gimenez, Executive Director  
Food First*

Topic: Benefits, Successes & Challenges of Organizing Food Systems and Food Policy

Eric Holt-Gimenez gave a dynamic presentation in which he focused on the global food system and why it is imperative for those who care about local food security to develop and work on “taking back our food systems.” The following summarizes main points from his presentation.

Holt-Gimenez stated that we have a capitalist food system which acts in the ways capitalism acts – market liberalization and concentration of wealth. The key problem he emphasized is that people don’t have a chance to say how the food system works – how food is distributed, how it’s bought and sold. We don’t have control over any of it.

*“Knitting together social networks to transform significant parts of the food system will advance the reconstruction of the public sphere and be difficult for policy makers to ignore.”*

History can give us a clue as to how these things come about. In 2008, and again in 2011, we saw a food crisis with record food prices, record food production, a spike in hunger, and record food profits for some of the world’s largest companies. Holt-Gimenez believes we are on the cusp of another food crisis as we see banks and corporations again making record profits, and a lack of protections and regulations. The rules that do exist are governed by institutions over which the public has no control. In addition diet-related diseases are on the rise, and mid-size and small farms are declining. According to Holt-Gimenez, we are losing the democratic middle who used to control the “public sphere.”



Holt-Gimenez noted that the public sphere has been disappearing for half a century. This poses a significant problem; at the root of it is the privatization of everything, including food. Communities need to be able to come together and solve problems, and engage in the market, associations, and the government. Knitting

together social networks to transform significant parts of the food system will advance the reconstruction of the public sphere and be difficult for policy makers to ignore.

Holt-Gimenez highly recommends working at the local level to take back the food system, noting that the international food system isn’t working. Bringing people together to brainstorm ways to change food politics, farming practices, consumer



habits, and food processing, and establishing food policy councils are great ways to build political will and community ownership.

### **Keynote Speaker**

*Ted Sullivan, Farmland Preservation Program Manager  
King County*

**Topic: Incorporating the King County Food Initiative into farmland preservation**

Ted Sullivan has been managing the farmland preservation program in King County for three years. King County has made a commitment to dedicate land to agriculture through their [Local Food Initiative](#), which has the goal of increasing local food production and access. There are several other county programs that work in conjunction with the farmland preservation program to develop the county's local food system (i.e. infrastructure, facilities, road access, producers, etc).

Farmland preservation takes a lot of money and work to designate "agricultural resource areas." King County has preserved 13,000 acres spending over 63 million dollars to achieve that. Their goal is to preserve 41,000 acres.

Sullivan also spoke about using the Transfer of Development Rights to gain ag land easements, and stated that these easements should positively impact the value of the farmland. Sullivan admitted that the Transfer of Development Rights program is not yet as successful as hoped. He would like to see the language and the development codes tightened up and use incentives for developers to make it more appealing.

Consumer outreach and education is another goal of the food initiative. Sullivan would like to have more signage developed for farmland preservation locations so the public will see the gains of the Local Food Initiative.

### **Guest Speaker**

*Norah Mlondobozi, South African farmer*

Norah Mlondobozi, a visiting farmer from South Africa, spoke about how, when apartheid ended, black people in South Africa thought they would be free, but that has not been the case. She stated that farmers who agree to plant Monsanto seeds get government support in her country, and small scale farmers do not have access to indigenous seeds. When farmers in South Africa plant hybrids from Monsanto, they need chemical fertilizers to grow, which creates numerous problems and Mlondobozi described the situation



as dire. She is encouraged to hear about the changes we are trying to make in our food system here, and hopes and believes they will have an impact on the food system in South Africa.

## **Strategic Conversations**

*Facilitated by Holly O'Neil*

Participants divided into small groups to discuss two specific questions. A summary of responses are reported below:

### **1. What are the important take-away messages you have heard today?**

- How do we make the true cost of food available and make it accessible to all
- Importance of education and mobilization at the grassroots level, and engaging the public as well as all stakeholders in the process
- Linking local food systems to the much larger conversations re: food justice and sustainability
- Loss of public sphere and political will and how a Food Policy Council could help remedy that

### **2. What would be the benefits and barriers to forming a Food Policy Council in your community?**

#### **Benefits**

- A localized food system; less dependence and more resilience
- Inclusivity - involving the voices from all stakeholders
- Empowering community members to take food system issues into their own hands
- Educating people who are involved in policy decisions on importance of food system and key local food systems issues
- Highlighting the importance of land preservation & infrastructure to the local food system

#### **Barriers**

- Regulations and inertia
- Making sure the council is visible and active
- Being able to shift from simply talking about changes and the needs to implementation
- Political will - Food and food systems infrastructure are not understood/valued at a political level in Bellingham/Whatcom County

