



2016 Fall Forum Summary Report

Background & History

The Whatcom Food Network (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 WFN mission is:

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

The 2016 Fall Forum was the 12th biannual forum the WFN has held since 2011. The goals for member forums are two-fold: to increase participants’ awareness of work being done across the food system, and to create a connecting point for the richly diverse organizations involved in the food system to come together and discuss important topics.

Forum Overview

On November 17th, 2016 the Whatcom Food Network hosted its biannual Fall Forum in the Whatcom County Public Works building in Bellingham. Approximately 60 individuals and representatives from different organizations around Washington State attended.



Two Whatcom Food Network Steering Committee members, Sara Southerland and Diane Smith, started the forum by reviewing the purpose of the Whatcom Food Network and the successes of the Network over the past year. In addition to its role as a partner organization dedicated to holding a space for education and collaboration across the food system, the WFN Steering Committee has two major projects underway: conducting the next update of the Community Food Assessment (to be finished in 2017); and developing the framework for a food system planning process for Whatcom County, including outreach and engagement to capture diverse community input. Members of the Whatcom Food Network also reported a number of successes including:

- **Whatcom Farm-to-School:** An exciting collaboration with Sustainable Connections to take the Harvest of the Month program community-wide, food education in school gardens and cooking in classrooms by Common Threads Farm, and the Community Food Co-op's "Real Food Show" which is performing in schools throughout the region
- **Community Food Coop:** Hit \$245,000 provided to 50+ local food and farming projects, provided 144 community cooking classes, and make the EPAs top 30 in the nation for green power retailers.
- **RE Sources for Sustainable Communities:** Engaged the public to successfully prevent urban sprawl into rural and sensitive areas in the 2016 Whatcom Comprehensive Plan update, did extensive sustainability education in local schools, and cleaned up 80 miles of rivers shorelines, and beaches with their Clean Water Program.
- **Expansion of the Fresh Bucks** program to the Bellingham Farmers Market, the Community Food Co-op, and other local markets
- **Viva Farms:** Started a new agricultural program at Skagit Valley College, won a new farmer/rancher grant, had a full incubator program and is now looking to purchase new land so as to continue to serve more beginning farmers
- **Sustainable Connections:** Expansion of Harvest of the Month and successful events all through 2016 including the annual Trade Meeting which resulted in \$500,000 in new local food sales
- **Community to Community Development:** Along with their partners succeeded in forming an independent farm worker union after a 3.5-year boycott of Driscoll's – a huge win for workers' rights. The Food Chain Workers Alliance (of which they are a part) has released a new report: [No Piece of the Pie: US Food Workers in 2016](#)



The remainder of the forum included two presentations, detailed below, networking activities, and concluded with Open Space discussions to continue conversations started in the presentations, and address any new topics members wished to discuss.

Session #1

Values Based Purchasing

*Colleen McKinney, Associate Director,
Center for Good Food Purchasing*

Community to Community Development and the Food Chain Workers Alliance worked with the Center for Good Food Purchasing to develop the Good Food Purchasing Practices, a model built of 5 key values: local economy, health, valued workforce, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Edgar Franks, from Community to Community introduced Colleen who gave an in-depth presentation on the history of the Center for Good Food



Purchasing and the impact that values-based purchasing has had for multiple cities across the nation.

Based on the initial work done with the L.A. Unified School District, which adopted the Good Food Purchasing Practices in 2014, the school district was able to shift \$12 million from out of state/international producers to local producers while remaining cost neutral. They also implemented meatless Mondays, got a contract with a company for antibiotic free chicken, created around 150 new jobs in the area because of increased local demand, and helped 160 truck drivers unionize leading to increased local wages and job retention.

The work in L.A. has inspired a national movement with the Center for Good Food Purchasing working with national and local partners to bring food policy to life and create solutions that work for each community. Other cities that are working with the Center include Oakland, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Chicago and more. The Center provides the tools to help institutions align their food purchasing with values that support a healthy and just food system, and to measure the impacts of their purchasing practices on the local economy and environment. To learn more about the Center for Good Food Purchasing visit their website: goodfoodpurchasing.org or email info@goodfoodpurchasing.org.

Session #2

Towards Zero Food Waste
Mark Peterson, Sustainable Business
Development Program Manager,
Sustainable Connections

Mark, who heads Sustainable Connections Toward Zero Waste (TZW) Program, addressed the challenges and opportunities currently surrounding organic waste in Whatcom County. Since its founding, TZW has helped over 450 businesses reduce at least 50% of their waste, and has recently received significant County funding for the first time since its inception in 2009.



Though there are a number of star performer businesses in the community who are dedicated to reducing food waste, it is clear there is a lot of room for regional improvement. It is estimated that less than 10% of food businesses in Bellingham participate in the Food Plus composting program. Reducing food/organic waste going to landfill has major environmental benefits and also boosts the local economy with composting infrastructure creating a number of local jobs. Mark stressed the need to re-imagine the waste system, communicate across different sectors of the food system, focus on increasing participation in composting, work with packaging producers, and help businesses start with the end in mind to generate a clean stream of compost.

If anyone would like to learn about how to take advantage of the free Towards Zero Waste consulting services for your food business, or receive invitations to upcoming workshops, you can contact Mark at Sustainable Connections (mark@sustainableconnections.org).

Open Space for Member Topics

*Facilitated by Melissa Morin,
Whatcom County Health Dept.*

Participants divided into small groups to continue the discussion related to Whatcom food system planning, Good Food Purchasing Practices, and reducing food waste. A summary of the discussions follows:



1. Food System Planning Discussion

This group continued discussion about the creation of a food system plan for Whatcom County and what considerations should be made while doing this work including, but not limited to:

- Broad outreach that includes all sectors, diverse communities, and consumers
- Consideration of both rural and urban food access issues
- Including food security and disaster planning as a part of the plan

Anyone interested in the food system planning process can contact Chris Elder (CElder@co.whatcom.wa.us).

2. Center for Good Food Purchasing

This discussion was an extension of the conversation started earlier in the day and continued exploring questions about the impact of values-based procurement and opportunities for this kind of work in both large and small communities.



3. Towards Zero Food Waste

Discussion in this Open Space group centered around how to advance food waste diversion in Whatcom County. Ideas included increasing educational opportunities, including multi-family complexes into the program, and doing individualized outreach to restaurants.

Wrap Up & Next Steps

We encourage everyone who did not complete a Forum evaluation to please do so and return it via email (below). Input will be incorporated into planning for the next Forum which will be held in May of 2017. Until then, the WFN Steering Committee will continue to meet quarterly, and the Coordinating Team will continue to meet monthly.

Between forums please continue to use the WFN Listserv. Everyone is welcome to subscribe and submit emails. Please contact the facilitator if you would like more information (Diana Meeks, dianam@sustainableconnections.org). In addition, connect with the WFN Facebook page to stay up to date on WFN and local food system news.