



2016 Spring 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 Spring Forum was the 11th forum the WFN has held, having two forums every year 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 May 18th, 2016 the Whatcom Food Network hosted its annual Spring Forum at the WECU Education Center in Ferndale. Approximately 30 representatives from a variety of Whatcom and Skagit County organizations attended the Spring Forum.



Two distinct topics were explored, followed by Open Space discussions amongst Network members. The first session addressed food policy councils, including what they are and what one in Whatcom County could look like. The presenters for this first session were Laura Ridenour, MA Principal Consultant at Food System Strategies, Community Food Co-op Farm Fund Committee Chair,

and WFN Founding Member; and Sara Southerland, WFN Coordinating Team Member and Sustainable Connections Food & Farming Manager. Included in the presentation was a real-time survey, where Forum attendees providing feedback about forming a Whatcom food policy council.

The second session was facilitated by Whatcom Farm-to-School Support Team Coordinator, Mardi Solomon, who introduced the Farm-to-School Program and sought input from Forum participants to inform planning for the next phase of program development.

The Forum concluded with Open Space Discussions to continue conversations started in the work sessions, and address any new topics members may wish to discuss in order to collaborate across food system sectors.

Session #1

Food Policy Councils

Laura Ridenour, Principal Consultant, Food System Strategies

*Sara Southerland, Sustainable Connections Food & Farming Manager,
WFN Coordinating Team Member*

The WFN's participation in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Planning process, and the 2015 Fall Forum, initiated discussion about forming a Whatcom food policy council. It became clear from these conversations that WFN members and associates would benefit from a broader introduction to food policy councils to learn more about exactly what they are and can do, and to create a common language for further discussion. Laura Ridenour gave an informed presentation on food policy councils (FPCs).

Her presentation described what a FPC is, and gave a brief overview of the history of the WFN and food policy. In addition, she offered examples of how different FPCs around the country have formed, the kind of work they have carried out, and possible next steps for a FPC in Whatcom.

Sara Southerland then gave Forum attendees an update on how the WFN has been participating in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan update process and led a live polling session to collect feedback from Forum attendees on action the WFN should take related to a Whatcom County FPC.

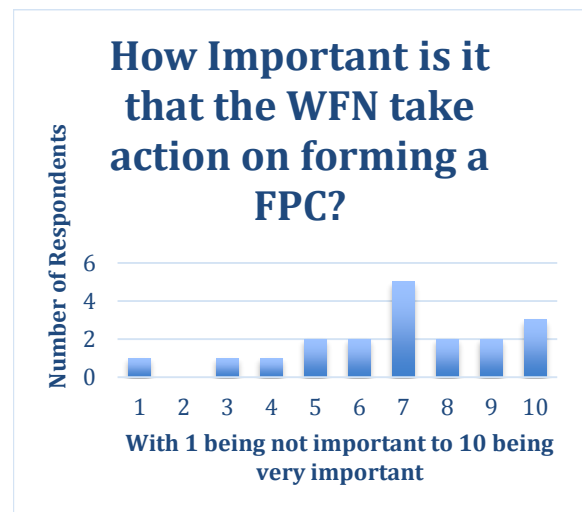


Figure 1

Through the live poll we learned that many WFN Members are part of an organization or business that has crafted policy or incentives to further food system goals, and the overwhelming majority believe that taking action around a FPC is a good next step for the WFN. Figures one and two present attendees' responses to the final two questions.

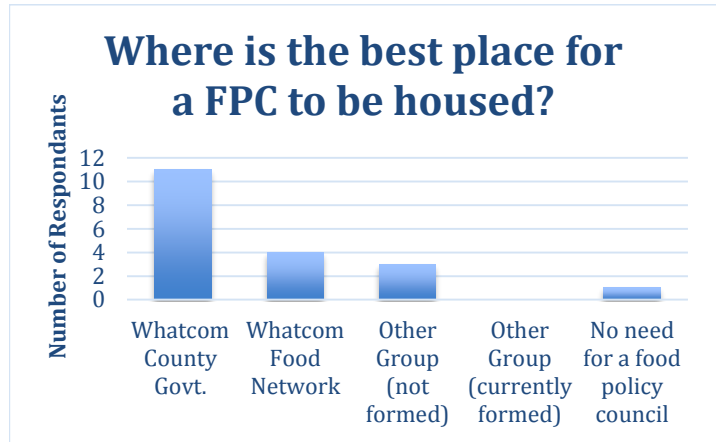


Figure 2

Session #2

Whatcom Farm to Schools

Mardi Solomon, Coordinator, Whatcom Farm-to-School Support Team

Mardi Solomon and Holly O'Neil (who was not in attendance) have been helping to coordinate the Whatcom Farm-to-School (F2S) Program for seven years, and now the F2S Support Team is planning for the next three-year period. Mardi introduced the program, describing its goals to help bring more fresh local produce into Whatcom County schools, encourage children and families to eat healthier foods, support our local farmers, and develop food system infrastructure. Mardi pointed out the alignment of Whatcom F2S and WFN goals and asked Forum participants for input on how F2S can help advance WFN goals related to environmental stewardship, thriving economy, social justice, and collaboration/participation in the coming years. Participants discussed this question in small groups brainstorming action items Whatcom F2S could pursue to further program and WFN goals.

The discussion produced many thoughtful ideas and multiple possibilities for Whatcom F2S to consider as they move forward. Some of the ideas for each WFN goal area were:

Environmental Stewardship:

- Organize school field trips to farms
- Install murals in cafeterias illustrating food principles and environmental principles

Thriving Economy:

- Have a policy for local purchasing
- Support a new central kitchen which will help increase local purchasing and increase kitchen staff jobs

Social justice:

- Initiate a "bring your dad/mom/etc. to school day" with some of the many kids who have family members who work on farms
- Introduce the diversity of farmers and workers

Collaboration/participation:

- Continue to integrate local food into school meal programs
- Tell the story of local food with a traveling presentation

Open Space for Member Topics

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

Participants divided into small groups to continue the discussion related to food policy councils, the Whatcom F2S program, and other topics brought forth by Forum attendees. A summary of the discussions follows:



1. Food Policy Councils

The FPC discussion was an extension of the conversation started earlier in the day and continued exploring questions about potential focus areas of a Whatcom FPC, where it could be housed, and where existing assets for a FPC currently reside.

2. Whatcom Farm-to-School

This group continued discussion about how Whatcom F2S can grow and advance WFN goals. Members discussed different ways to include education around environmental issues in an unbiased way, like the idea of embodied energy and water in food. In addition, participants brainstormed a number of ways to get students more involved, either through including youth in a food policy council or Farm to School Advisory Groups.



3. Broader Scale Ag. Issues/Non small-scale organic

Discussion in this Open Space group centered on challenging the “big is bad” attitude, avoiding pitting small producers against large, encouraging large-scale ag to do a better job of storytelling around their conservation work, doing farm tours on larger farms to show the public how operations work, and being able to provide exemplary transparency.

4. Food Security in Whatcom County

The Food Security discussion delved into how we are, and are not, prepared to maintain food during a natural disaster, such as an earthquake. There was reference to the upcoming Cascadia Rising event that will allow various organizations to run a mock crisis scenario to aid in situation planning. In addition, the group discussed the need to encourage individuals and families to make natural disaster preparation kits. Whether this is through a community promotion or through individual determination, it continues to be a need even for people thinking and working on this issue.

Wrap Up & Next Steps

Following the Forum, the WFN Coordinating Team reviewed forum evaluations completed by 17 attendees. The majority of survey respondents agreed that the Forum helped them identify and connect with valuable partners (82%) and engage in productive discussion (100%).

The Coordinating Team commits to keep WFN members apprised of any developments related to the Whatcom Comprehensive Plan update, and any additional discussion or action on the part of the WFN regarding local food policy and forming a food policy council.

Feedback given about what attendees feel would improve future forums included working to increase outreach for the Forum, increasing networking opportunities, and further clarifying the WFN mission and goals.

Possible topic ideas suggested by attendees included economic development opportunities in agriculture, what does food justice mean, how WFN partners can assist in strengthening access to healthy food for all, covering environmental stewardship issues in Whatcom County, and a Community Food Assessment update.

The Winter Forum is slated for November. The WFN Steering Committee will continue to meet quarterly, and the Coordinating Team will continue to meet monthly.

Between forums please keep an eye out for, and continue to use, the WFN Listserv. Everyone is welcome to subscribe and submit emails. Please contact the facilitator if you would like more information. In addition, connect with the WFN Facebook Page to stay up to date on WFN and local food system news.



Whatcom Food Network Forum
May 18, 2016
Forum Evaluation

17 Evaluation forms submitted/ 29 attended

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:	Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree
The Forum helped me identify or connect with valuable partners.			3	6	8
Today's process created a welcome environment for participating and sharing ideas.				3	14
This Forum format (with presentations and breakouts) was valuable in meeting WFN goals.			1	8	8
It was an engaging and productive discussion.				8	9

Please rate how the presentation on food policy increased your knowledge on this topic. 0 = 0 1 = 1 2 = 3 3 = 8 4 = 4 15 total responses (one was presenter and another person skipped this section) (Scale: 0 = no change and 4 = greatly increased your knowledge)	
Please rate how the presentation on the Whatcom Farm to School Program increased your knowledge on this topic. 0 = 0 1 = 0 2 = 2 3 = 9 4 = 5 16 total responses (Scale: 0 = no change and 4 = greatly increased your knowledge)	
Please rate how useful the time for networking was for you. 0 = 1 1 = 0 2 = 2 3 = 7 4 = 7 16 total responses (Scale: 0 = no use and 4 = very helpful)	
Please answer the following (additional space on reverse if needed):	
What inspired or motivated you to attend this forum?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Interested in how farming was represented in these programs -Was invited, looked interesting. -Like to attend all, if I can fit it in. -Interested in addressing all issues with food and farms in county, more than just WFN goals. -I am a retired farmer and graduate student studying food policy as it relates to public health. -Learn more about the effort to establish a FPC and network with local food advocates -I love the WFN! -Learn whats happening and what current goals are, how I and my organization can partner and support -Interest in FPC, and social/food security -Wanted to learn more – see where different agencies intersect. What impetus/forces are leading toward a food policy network. -Knowing what's going on in the local food system - I have a degree in food systems and I like this community so it makes sense. -Interested in topics, had not yet attended -Good topic -I liked the idea of a FPC 	
What could have been improved?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It was great. Handouts of the slides would be helpful. -Policy council presented as foregone, conclusion as a priority for the WFN. Suggest finding a few policy changes needed first. Try changing those few and see how it goes for folks, then go bigger if needed. -(SC) Better outreach -More networking/discussion -More time spent on comparisons between other communities FPC work. 	

- Target outreach to more farmers, although, the Spring is a busy time with them
- Introductions, who is in the room at the beginning
- More time for next steps and being a part of the initiatives
- I didn't understand what the current network is – function
- More engaging audience interactions
- More clarity on what a policy looks like
- Seems like more time could have been helpful – OR more focused goals for each section and change to create actions plans
- Slightly shorter ppt of FPC

Do you have any suggestions for future Forum topics? (We hold Network Forums twice a year, typically late spring and late fall).

- Economic development opportunities in ag.
- (SC) next steps in FPC
- Making some of the Food Assessment gaps operational (ie work on making actionable steps to improve our local food systems)
- Environmental stewardship (water quality and quantity in Whatcom)
- How the WFN Functions (who sets leadership and funding)
- What's up with membership – value for members and how do members participate besides the forum
- What does food justice mean?
- How do we assist in strengthening full access to healthy food for all?
- Food access and food deserts
- CFA update, start the process

How do you prefer to get information regarding the Whatcom Food Network (e.g., email, Listserv, Facebook, visit website, etc.)?

Email –IIIII IIIII IIIII I
 FB – II
 Website – III
 Listserv – I

Do you have any reservations about the forming of a local Food Policy Council? If so, please tell us more about what they are.

Ok, as long as it includes all Ag.
 Yes, scope (more than just WFN agenda), Governance (to achieve more than just WFN agenda), politics in county
 None
 Only that it will need consistent leadership and tenacity
 No. Great next steps
 No. Should be done
 No
 Only about how it happens – keeping moment would be good

How would you like to engage/be a part of the formation of a Food Policy Council.

Depends
 Actively
 Would like to offer my research skills – Matai
 Advocating for it to the public and local elected officials – possibly serving on the Council if/when its formed
 Totally willing – whats needed?
 Be part of team and learn from what other regions/policies are doing and how we can adapt for our region
 Meeting open to the public with suggestions on direction
 Be kept informed of opportunities to get involved
 I'll be there – public outreach and education important

Any additional comments?

Very informative, I'll be back.
 Lots of thank yous!
 I feel like we talked through the FPC discussion and its time to take action