



2018 Fall Forum Summary Report

The People That Make The Food System Work

Background & History

The Whatcom Food Network (WFN) is a group of organizations that came together in 2010 to create a more collaborative 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 2018 Fall Forum was the 16th biannual forum the WFN has held since 2011. The goals for 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 14th, 2018 the Whatcom Food Network hosted its biannual forum at BelleWood Acres. Approximately 60 individuals and representatives from different organizations and food businesses from around Whatcom County attended.

The forum began with an overview of the Network’s mission and goals and an update on current work, including news about the ongoing food system planning effort. In early November, the Whatcom County Council adopted Ordinance 2018-302, establishing a Food System Committee. The Food System Committee will consider best practices and make recommendations to the County Council, Executive, Health Board, and other appropriate officials regarding issues relating to our countywide food system. There was an open invitation to apply for the committee. Each committee member will be appointed for four years and will be expected to attend at least one committee meeting a month, starting in 2019. The Ordinance will be enacted in the next couple of weeks and the application will be available on the Whatcom County website around the end of November. [Visit this site to start the application process.](#) Committee applications are due at 10:00 a.m. on January 8th, 2019.



The remainder of the forum included three presentations related to the important role of workers across the food system, a group activity, and time for facilitated networking. Below are brief summaries of the forum presentations, all of which [can be can be watched online here.](#)

Session #1

Owners & Employer Lens

Presenter: Sara Southerland

Sustainable Connections Food & Farming Program Director

Sara gave attendees a general overview of the challenges and opportunities around labor from the food business owner perspective, and shared data from a business owner survey done in early 2018 ([see slides](#) for more detailed data). The survey respondents (from 47 local food and farming businesses) reported that:

- 72% say profitability is down from a 2017 year-to-date comparison
- 78% are seeing an increase in the costs of goods (i.e. ingredients, supplies)
- and 89% of restaurants, farms, and local food businesses reported labor costs are up

Businesses reported that the cost of labor, labor shortages, and the challenges inherent in seasonal work were their biggest concerns. Sara explained that food and farming businesses operate on very tight margins. Using restaurants as an example, for a \$12 plate of food, there is typically \$.60 left over for profit after expenses are taken into account (with labor being 25% - 35% of that). With the increase in minimum wage (a 30% increase over four years for all business types), food and farming businesses are already struggling to make ends meet. Only 40% of the responding food business owners had paid themselves that year as of the survey date.

Opportunities for addressing some of the challenges food businesses face include: Some farms moving to year round employment for farm workers, increasing consumer awareness of the real costs of food production, and the cooperative business model. Sara also outlined choices consumers can make to support a healthy and thriving local business sector which include choosing locally owned restaurants, buying food from local farms, and helping to spread the word about its importance. View [Sara's slides here](#) or [watch her presentation here](#).

Session #2

Overview of Labor Across the Food System

Presenter: Michele Stelovich

NW WA Central Labor Council

Michele spoke from the perspective of laborers – the people who work across all sectors of the food system. She emphasized that regardless of workers' race, gender, or disability status, *all work has value*.

In Whatcom County over 89,000 people are employed, and the agriculture industry is a large sector which

represents many different types of jobs.

Michele presented data looking at how wages relate to the cost of living, and also how wages differ for people of different races, ages, and genders. These differences in wages have significant ripple effects in people's lives, determining where they get to live and the neighborhood resources they have access to (e.g., schools, grocery stores). The average house in Whatcom County costs \$382,000 and rent for one-bedroom place is \$922. Over 51% of Whatcom residents rent and the rental vacancy rate is very low (1.56%). A lack of affordable childcare, and high healthcare costs contribute to the challenges for people working at low-wage jobs. To afford the basics, working at minimum wage, a person must work 52 hours a week.

Michele stressed the value of union membership citing statistics showing that union members make about 80% more than non-members. This represents a difference of about \$100/week for men and \$200/week for women. See all of [Michele's slides here](#) or [watch her presentation here](#).



Employee Panel

Thomas Charboneau, grocery worker
Ramon Torres, President of Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ) and farm worker
Edgar Franks, Community to Community and translator
Modesto Hernandez Leal, member of FUJ and farm worker
Joshua Davis, restaurant back of house manager

The members of Familias por la Justicia (FUJ) who spoke on the panel also emphasized the value of union membership for workers. Benefits they mentioned included the wages and benefits, which almost doubled, improved housing conditions, a feeling that workers' rights are respected, and most importantly, that they have a voice.



Restaurant manager, Joshua Davis, and grocery store worker, Tomas Charboneau, talked about the impacts of the rise in minimum wage on food businesses. While it has been good for workers, it has resulted in higher costs for employers. They are trying to save money in other ways such as cutting hourly staff hours and expecting more of salaried staff, and minimizing equipment purchases. Restaurants are needing to charge more for meals which impacts consumers, who may choose to eat out less. Again, the need for consumer education about the costs of local food was expressed.

There was a lot to capture here! [Please see the video](#) to listen to the stories and perspective of all on the panel.

Session #3

On A Knife's Edge

Presenter: Laura McWilliams

Industry Health

Laura outlined the challenges and opportunities faced by those in the “back of house” – i.e., working in restaurants or institutional kitchens. Laura brought to light three big challenges she has seen after spending thousands of hours in kitchens herself, and spending an immense amount of time talking to those who work in the restaurant industry. These challenges were: Growing up in the industry, lack of access to healthcare, and a lack of HR in the workplace. She then presented one approach to start working on solutions to all the challenges presented: a peer-based support program. This would involve electing or appointing a peer advocate who would dedicate 1-10 hours per week to provide peer support. The peer advocate would be a well-trusted kitchen employee trained in peer support, labor laws, dispute resolution, and substance abuse advocacy. [Read Laura's entire talk](#) here or [watch her presentation here](#).



Group Networking Activity

At the end of the event, attendees formed groups organized by food system sector. They introduced themselves and reflected on the day's presentations. Discussion focused on the following questions:

1. What sparked your attention?
2. What questions came up for you?
3. What excites you for the future?

Each person was asked to write down one takeaway from the group discussion on the event evaluation forms, all these comments are shared below:

- How stressful these industries are at all levels.
- People are working hard in these topics and progress is being made.
- All involved were fired up to make changes and move forward.
- The industry is going through really tough changes for owners at the top and "lowest level" workers in kitchens and farms.
- Greater sympathy for small business owners.
- I thought the panel was great! I agree with the panelist we need to invite more diverse community members/sectors.
- Compassion.
- More good connections.
- Complexity of challenges, how to increase equity to food access/consumption and ensure fair trade and treatment of farm workers.
- The passion of people.
- The need for education/advocacy.
- The problems are large and everyone is interested in solving them.
- All the concerns shared are valid and everyone is looking for an answer.
- We need to get more farmworker voices into the room more regularly at events and see how we can invest more into growing Hispanic farm owners.
- The connections with labor and water and land aren't often immediately apparent but we appreciated hearing about pesticide exposure from the farm workers and their health struggles.
- Need to look at wider perspective, and more sides to the issue.
- The importance of thinking about water and land connections.
- Learning more about how many connections there are in the food system and how early positive change could be if we use these connections wisely.
- The discussion was fruitful in that we spoke about our hopes for the future of food networks.
- Learned a lot about interesting things happening in the county.
- Capitalism and racism are within the food system.
- That we all want to have and create more awareness.
- Foods going have to get more expensive!
- I need to learn more about everything!
- We barely broached subjects and I would have liked to go more in depth.



Wrap Up & Next Steps

Watch for information about our next forum which will be held in the spring of 2019. Between forums please continue to use the WFN Listserv, subscribe to the WFN Facebook page, and explore our new website: whatcomfoodnetwork.org and Whatcom Community Food Assessment. Please contact the WFN assistant if you would like more information, whatcomcommunityfoodnetwork@gmail.com.