



Food System Committee

Wednesday July 8th, 2020

3:30-5 PM

Zoom Meeting

Minutes

Members Present:

Name	Sector	Present
	Export Sales Farming	
Margaret Gerard	Local Sales Farming	X
Kendall Whitney	Fishing	
	Processing/Distribution	
Riley Sweeney	Food Access	X
Amber Noskoff	Nutrition/ Public Health	X
Maureen Darras	Labor	
Krista Rome	Natural Resources	X
Mardi Solomon	Whatcom Food Network	X

Staff: Ali Jensen, Whatcom County Health Department

Call to order: Riley started the meeting at 3:37 pm

Land Acknowledgement Statement

Determination of Quorum

Quorum

Approval of minutes

Motion to Approve Minutes: Mardi moved, Amber 2nd. Approved by Committee.

Public Comment

Margaret had the following to say: I too have been reflecting on the complexities of our food system and discussion from last week. Krista says farmers aren't making money, Maureen says farmers need to pay workers more. How can farmers pay workers more if they aren't making money? A just and equitable food system will require consumers to pay more for their food. I don't see a way around this. There has never been a time in history where the percent of income spent on food has been so low. I also do not think it is something we can legislate. But I think it is a meaningful and necessary mindset to have when doing this work, that by placing a higher dollar on our food, we are placing a higher value on the people producing it. I encourage each of us to pause before we eat, to think about all of the hands it took to produce that food, to think about the quality of their lives. When we are willing to pay more for food, we are willing to say we value the lives that created it. Cheap food exists because of exploitation, of land and people. If this committee is to help build a more sustainable and equitable food system, I believe this concept needs to be present. Large scale agriculture instigates this type of exploitation,

small scale agriculture inherently works to do the opposite. When moving forward with this work I think we should keep in mind the drastic difference between these two types of agriculture, and how many of our goals can be achieved by supporting smaller scale agriculture.

At one of our recent meetings there was a question about what percentage of local agriculture is sold and eaten locally. Does anyone remember this detail? I think this is an important detail to consider when thinking of Whatcom County's food system and that one of our goals should be to get the percentage of food grown here and eaten here, higher.

Krista responded with: I agree that we absolutely need to get an estimate for what percentage of farmland acreage in our County is currently used for local/regional marketing as well as the percentage of organic (including non-certified organic). Those numbers apparently do not exist, as I have been asking Chris Elder and Sustainable Connections as well as the Ag Census people who I work for, and nobody has the numbers. I see this as a very important primary goal to include in our Food System Plan as targeting an increase in acreage for local and organic will help on pretty much all of our sectors' goals (including reducing pollution to the waters that support the fishing sector). The Export Farmer seat can help brainstorm ways to make that transition as well, whether it be through a new agrarian land trust purchasing farmland from retiring export farmers or whether it be putting things in place like local processing and storage facilities and purchasing contracts that would inspire export farmers to transition to growing local & organic instead.

Review Recommendations for Whatcom County Council

The Committee reviewed recommendations and discussed each item and finessed the recommendation letter to Council. Draft is below.

Next Steps

- Ali will send draft recommendations to today's absent Committee members for review.
- Committee will send notes to community partners by Wednesday, July 15th.
- Ali will put letter on County letterhead and send to Council on Thursday. Offer that if Council members want representative to present, Riley is available.

Riley moved to adjourn. Amber seconded. Group adjourned at 4:46 pm.

DRAFT recommendation letter

To: Whatcom County Council

From: Whatcom County Food System Committee

Subject: Recommendations for Immediate Action by the Council relating to our Food System

Date: July 8th, 2020

COVID-19 is impacting almost every aspect of our lives as well as our food system which is essential to our survival and our economy. From our hardworking farms, to our vital distribution networks through our markets and grocery stores, to our homes, each sector of our food system is struggling to confront the impacts of this virus. We cannot let them fight those challenges alone.

The recent outbreaks in Yakima County, centered in food processing facilities, highlight the dangers of leaving our food system workers unprotected. The immediate and ongoing economic impacts of this crisis have been, and will continue to be, devastating to our local farmers, grocers and consumers if left unaddressed.

The Whatcom County Food System Committee was created in 2018 by Ordinance 2018-058 to strengthen and protect our food system from seed to table, and to provide recommendations to Council. In the wake of the unprecedented dangers and impacts of COVID-19, we are recommending immediate action by the County Council to stabilize our food system and protect the health, safety, and economic well-being of those who feed us. To address these challenges, local action is required.

The Food System Committee has developed the following list of recommendations to the County Council based on the Committee's analysis of current challenges and weaknesses in the local food system. Many of these recommendations are directly aligned with the Washington State Food Policy Forum's [Early Implementation Action Report](#) (Draft) to the Governor which recommends strategies to address vulnerabilities in the food system that have become especially apparent in the light of COVID-19.

We recommend the Council take the following steps:

1. Protect the health and safety of workers across the food system:
 - a. Utilize the latest information about the Yakima outbreak to implement immediate, strict and aggressive safety measures at all agricultural facilities to protect our agricultural workers.
 - b. Coordinate proactive COVID-19 support, testing, and inspections for food processing facilities, farmworker housing, and other congregate working facilities.

- c. Close loopholes in Governor Inslee’s agricultural operations order, specifically relating to social distancing to protect farm workers and consumers.
2. Stabilize our food system to benefit both local economic development and food access initiatives:
 - a. Use CARES Act funding to immediately offer year-long operations grants to Whatcom-based farmers and local grocers/markets impacted by COVID-19.
 - b. Seek funding for employee training for key agricultural supply chain positions to help build regional-scale production, processing, and distribution systems needed to make our food system more resilient to the pressures of a crisis such as COVID-19.
 - c. Funding purchases of locally grown and processed food for food banks, schools, and other food distribution programs.
 - d. Provide grants to support training and technical assistance for local farmers to develop online sales platforms to market products, given that other sales options are severely limited because of COVID-19.
3. Increase local food processing capacity to meet increased demand for prepared and packaged foods.
 - a. Identifying storage, warehousing, and processing facilities to prepare packaged food for distribution to homes, food banks, schools, and other distribution centers.
4. Increase access to healthy and local food for people dealing with economic hardship created by the pandemic by
 - a. Encouraging the State to allow for flexibility in WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP), and SNAP and SNAP Market Match, to continue to function as farmers markets change operation models. Explore ongoing funding opportunities for these programs.

The Committee understands that not all of these recommendations are easy or straightforward to enact but we urge swift and direct action to strengthen and protect our food system.

Thank you for your consideration,

Signed,

The Whatcom County Food System Committee

Riley Sweeney - Chair
Maureen Darras - Vice-Chair
Margaret Gerard
Amber Noskoff
Krista Rome
Mardi Solomon
Kendall Whitney