

Contending with the Local Food Access Puzzle

A Community Based Research Project: Summary Report August 2007

The members of the Vancouver Island Good Food Box Collective are committed to providing good food for their clients. We were curious about why getting access to local food was so problematic. We wish to increase the consumption of locally produced fruits and vegetables because of the known positive outcomes for individual and community health. We were pleased to obtain funding for a community based research project from the BC Medical Services Foundation in 2006. A series of enquiries were carried out. We found that the reason for less than 10% of the food we eat on Vancouver Island being raised here is an urgent and persistent farm income crisis. This crisis is an outcome of globalization and industrialization food systems, entrenched over the past 40-50 years. The production cost of local food is much higher than imports coming from countries that are unfairly subsidized, and/or where labour and environmental standards are questionable. Food system infrastructure has been hollowed out over the past 50 years making it difficult and very costly for food products to find their way to local consumers.

The impact of the dominant food system that depends upon oil for production and transportation is under serious question by health officials, environmental and community groups. There is a groundswell of activity promoting the benefits of eating locally produced food thus vastly increasing the demand for local food. We found that there is little assistance to farmers and communities to solve production problems to help increase supply. We concluded that all interested parties should work to emphasize to government that a shift to 'supply side' action is needed to support local producers—this is the crux of the local food access puzzle.

We found that there are many innovative approaches to solving this puzzle in the western world. 'The Islands Good Food Initiative' is working towards implementing best practices gleaned from many of these sources.

The study had a major focus on learning about practices in institutional food purchasing, since many public dollars are expended on providing food for residents, clients and patients. The hypothesis for the study was that mobilizing the buying power of public and community sector purchasing could become a tool for change.

A data-base of over 600 agencies/institutions was created and outreach to them resulted in participation of 114 agencies. The purchasing power of this group alone was over \$10 million dollars per year. 51 purchasers met in 5 meetings up and down Vancouver Island. They agreed that purchasers and other officials in their agencies need a lot more information about the impact on the health of their clients resulting from their purchasing decisions. They would like to work strategically with local farmers

to focus a 'friendly' demand and together, and with other partners, it would be possible to tackle many of the major problems farmers are facing and also provide healthier food for clients/residents/patients.

Results of studies of farming on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands indicated that farmers wish to increase their ability to produce and distribute good food to people in their communities but that they need partners to help solve what are in fact, system-level issues. They need help with access to finance, with finding trained and skilled labour and with rebuilding a local food system infrastructure including food manufacturing, warehousing and transportation facilities.

The study showed that although the level of awareness in the general population about the benefits of local food consumption is increasing, those who purchase food for agencies and institutions, along with the cooks and agency policy makers in their agencies, wish to learn more about the benefits and issues facing local food access.

The community based research project facilitated discussion and networking and began a process of collaborative knowledge-building that will be the basis for further organizing and strategic action aimed at increasing the viability of the local food system on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. It was agreed by all participants, that meeting this goal could have substantial impact on the health of the population as well as the health of communities in the region.

The study calls for partners to work together towards a vision aimed at improving individual and community health and reducing the vulnerability of the current food system on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

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For full text of the study see www.ediblestrategies.com/gfb.html