

“Food Movement Momentum”

It has been amazing to see the growth of the food movement over the past couple of years in the region, and on Vancouver Island. Despite the challenges facing both our local and global food systems, there are a few indicators that speak volumes to the fact we are really gaining some momentum when it comes to shaping a healthier future.

Public interest has never been higher and mass media has fully embraced food as an important issue. Think of all of the books, articles, news stories, major films, documentaries, and gardening and cooking shows that have been hitting the air, cable, and virtual waves! Lately Michael Pollan’s “In Defense of Food,” hit the bestseller list in the US, and Food Inc. is being widely attended since its first screening this summer.

As people are becoming more aware of food issues, people are also getting more active. Not only are events such as Defending Our Backyard, the Tomato Challenge and Food Matters Forum well attended, but we are seeing an increase in the number of groups forming right from the neighborhood level and on up.

Last year, CR-FAIR launched monthly Food Roundtable meetings that rotate around the Capital Region. They were held in Municipal Halls, hosted by community organizations and on farms. Each meeting is unique, and sees both new and familiar faces around the circle. The function of the meetings is networking and information sharing, with no set agenda. The feedback about the meetings has been very positive and it is exciting to see that people want to get connected to each other. We also developed the electronic “Food Matters Calendar.” It is truly astounding to see the number of events and activities, EVERY DAY that are happening around the region. Check it out at http://www.communitycouncil.ca/crfair_nl/crfair_nl_events.html.

Another area where we have seen great shifts is the interest in local governments in food as a policy and planning issue. Last year many of the municipal and provincial election campaign platforms had food and agriculture issues front and center. Approximately 25% of the participants in the *Our Farmlands Our Foodlands Our Future Conference* last year were from government. Currently North Saanich and Central Saanich are undertaking Agriculture Area Planning, the City of Victoria is putting urban agriculture in the spotlight for its next round of reviews of the Official Community Plan, and the District of Saanich is looking at food issues in its sustainability planning. The CRD Planning and Transportation Committee have been discussing the establishment of a Regional Food Policy Council.

There are also connections being made up and down the island. Over the last year, we began to hear in many circles, a growing voice for the need to work more closely together on Vancouver Island. There are many pressing issues that face us in achieving a more sustainable and equitable food system on the island, and there

is a real desire to get better organized, to share information, and work inter-sectorally. We heard it at the VIHA sponsored Food Foundations Conference, the Vancouver Island Economic Alliance meetings, through the Vancouver Island Community Research Alliance, and percolating through our local groups and networks. A survey was sent out to see what people thought about the idea of setting up a network on the Island around food. Over 130 groups and individuals responded and 99% gave a resounding YES! The primary functions that were identified were information sharing, communications, capacity building and creating a platform for collaborative work.

This momentum was further reinforced at the 10th Annual Gathering of the BC Food Systems Network held in Chehalis this fall; the theme was "Bioregionalism". The BC Food Systems Network is discussing how to support food networking, information sharing, and capacity building at the regional level. Out of the 150 conference attendees there were 40 participants from Vancouver Island. These folks also supported the idea of building stronger island networks, and in ensuring that as networks develop that they are integrated with other networks that already exist or may form (such as with the Vancouver Island Traditional Foods Network, or Island Farm Alliance).

In November, a meeting will be held to gather folks who want to explore further the idea of forming a Vancouver Island Food Systems Network. (Contact lgeggie@telus.net to find out more).

And it goes on.....this work at the local, regional, and provincial levels is also being connected to national initiatives like the People's Food Policy Project and Food Secure Canada, and beyond! Local food and farm issues are connected with global markets, national and international health, agriculture, environment, social welfare policy and international trade agreements. Networks of foodies, farmers, processors, chefs, health promoters, and justice advocates are growing and responding to the necessity to work together in a globalized world.

So it is fair to say there is a lot happening, and involvement is growing from the neighborhood level to the international stage. Perhaps most importantly is the growing tendency to reach out beyond our traditional networks and to unify our efforts. The farmers and health advocates, or the municipal councils, university students and community groups, working across sectors with common purpose – the web is getting stronger, and so it should. We have important work to do.