

Whatcom County Food System Committee Report to Council June 2024

Overview of the Food System Committee

The purpose of the Whatcom County Food System Committee (FSC) is to draft, implement, provide oversight for, and regularly update a county-wide food system plan to strengthen our local and regional food system. (Ord. 2018-058 Exh. A).

The Committee, established in 2019, has 9 sector representatives, with all seats currently filled.

The Committee is called to:

- Conduct stakeholder outreach.
- Assess current assets and challenges of our food system.
- Create a report on the state of these challenges to report to the County Council.
- Identify prioritized actions within the Food System Plan.
- Identify funding needs to achieve Food System Plan goals and objectives.
- Oversee the implementation of these action items.
- Review implementation programs for effectiveness.
- Update the Community Food Assessment at least every 3 years.

Visit the [Food System Committee](#) home page with more information and a list of current Committee Members.

10-Year Food System Plan Adopted July 2023

The [Whatcom County Food System Plan](#) was designed to enhance community collaboration and to guide and foster a vibrant local food system in Whatcom County. The timeline for the plan is 10 years, recognizing that some actions may be able to be implemented immediately, while others will take additional development.

The actions are focused on Whatcom County government and represent the areas of the food system where local government policies can have the greatest impact.

The plan is organized from broad goals to specific actions:

- **Goals** state the desired outcomes and future vision for Whatcom County's food system.

- **Objectives** are more specific, measurable strategies to guide local work to reach each goal. Each goal has multiple objectives that support it.
- **Actions*** are the specific policies, programs, and initiatives to meet the objectives.

You can find [the Whatcom County Food System Plan here](#).

*Reference note: With more than 100 actions referenced in the plan, specific actions referenced will be accompanied by a reference number, ie 3.4.6, which would refer to Goal #3, Objective #4, Action #6

Overview of FSC Work Since Plan Adoption

July-December 2023

- [The Food System Plan](#) was adopted by resolution in July, 2023.
- In 2023, The Whatcom County Executive’s Office and the County Council granted ARPA funds for two Food System Plan-related projects:
 - [East Whatcom Regional Resource Center kitchen upgrade](#) (\$150,000).
 - [Funds to offer an unlimited Market Match for SNAP dollar use at three farmers markets in the 2024 market season](#) (\$50,000).
- FSC developed a data subcommittee as a first step towards developing a food system information dashboard as outlined in the Food System Plan action 1.3.6.

Jan-May 2024

- FSC elected Rhys-Thorvald Hansen as new chair, when long-standing Chair, Riley Sweeney, left the committee in January.
- FSC met with the County Planning Department to participate in the Comprehensive Plan update process, making recommendations for updates in Chapters 7 & 8.
- FSC sent Council a letter of support for an Agriculture Innovation Center.
- FSC Held a strategic retreat in April, where the committee established:
 - A yearly calendar to organize the work in overseeing the implementation of the Food System Plan and other core functions of the committee.
 - Committee-led taskforces for each of the five goals of the Food System Plan, which will lead on stakeholder outreach on behalf of the FSC, and elevate community needs and opportunities back to the FSC.
- FSC began initial planning for a community engagement event to share updates and ask for feedback from our stakeholders in Summer 2024.

State of Whatcom County Food System

Key Challenges:

The key challenges in the local food system, outlined below, are organized to line up with the Food System Plan goals which seek to address each challenge. This information was sourced

from the 2021 [Community Food Assessment](#) (CFA), the 2023 [Food System Plan](#), as well as contributions from FSC sector representatives and community members.

Our food system is in a state of polycrisis as we navigate a changing climate, a food access crisis, and a community and economy that has deeply stratified accessibility. This stratification and its impacts were exposed and laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent floods and wildfires that ravaged Whatcom County. In short, we have a long way to go on our core challenge to create a food system in line with the food system plan.

Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system

► Key Challenges highlighted by Food System Committee Members and Community Partners:

- Equitable investment in local ownership and stewardship of food system infrastructure. Support community led collaborations and projects.
- Essential farm and food workers, including immigrant farm workers, want a voice in local government and a seat at the decision making table in addressing the issues that impact them. The County Council and Health and Community Services made a good start, but so far the corresponding actions and policy initiatives that they suggest have not been realized and supported.
- Aggregating accurate and timely data to measure where systemic barriers are impacting community populations is challenging without specific funding and dedicated staff time. A robust food system data dashboard is essential.

► Key Challenges identified in the [2023 Food System Plan](#) (p 14-15):

- The COVID-19 pandemic put additional stress on systems that we already knew were broken (including food systems), further exposing and increasing health disparities and heightening awareness of racial inequities and injustices for many in our community.
- Access to healthy foods varies based on geography, income, and race or ethnicity. Health outcomes are poorest among youth who are English language learners and for youth and adults who are low-income and/or people of color.
- In Washington State, 54% of farmworkers reported they have had more difficulty paying for food since the COVID-19 crisis began. Approximately 75% of farmworkers in the United States are Latinx migrants. Many of these farm workers receive low wages, have few labor protections, and face threats to their health from pesticide use, physically demanding conditions, and an ever-warming climate.
- In Whatcom County, 4.5% of SNAP users are American Indian/Alaska Native, while only 2% of the total population is American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 7% of SNAP users are two or more races, while only 3.5% of total residents are two or more races.

► Key challenge identified in the [2021 Community Food Assessment](#) that remain relevant:

- Immigrants and minorities have additional barriers accessing food.(p28)

Goal 2: Protect and Regenerate our Soil Water and Land

► Key Challenges highlighted by Food System Committee Members and Community Partners:

- The [WRIA 1 Water Rights Adjudication](#) process will create significant upheaval with far-reaching implications for agricultural production and other food systems sectors, with no known timeline for resolution.
- Farmland and food system infrastructure is a constrained resource and land prices continue to increase. This makes it difficult to build community assets and wealth in the food system. Locally owned farms give way to corporate franchised farms. Local ownership of infrastructure, like grocery stores and food processing and storage, gives way to ownership and interests that reside outside of Whatcom County

► Key Challenges identified in the [2023 Food System Plan](#) (p 18-19):

- Shellfish harvest areas in Portage Bay remain closed to fall harvest because of high fecal coliform in growing waters. Drayton Harbor is at risk of a shellfish growing water downgrade.
- Some drinking water wells have higher than the maximum level of nitrate.
- Lake Whatcom remains vulnerable to the harmful effects of algal blooms due to excessive levels of phosphorus.
- The Nooksack River streamflow is strongly seasonal. An oversupply of water occurs in the winter and early spring and can often result in flooding. Droughts in the summer result in lower streamflows during the months that require the most irrigation water use for crop production.
- Fish passage barriers, inadequate riparian areas, and inadequate instream habitat features impair the productivity of valued salmon species and impair the ecosystem processes that provide benefits for adjacent landowners as well as other fish and wildlife species.
- The lack of undeveloped and connected patches of native vegetation for movement and crossings in lowland Whatcom County limit movement both for local and migrating wildlife.

► Key challenges identified in the [2021 Community Food Assessment](#) that remain relevant:

- Farmland is a constrained resource (p5) and land prices continue to increase (p16).
- Goals and practices for soil conservation and maintaining soil health have not been widely implemented (p6).
- County policies are needed to address habitat loss and impacts on biodiversity (p6).
- There is a need for more data to determine best practices for maintaining the health of farmland and water (p6).
- Concerning water, there are competing needs for water and a limited quantity available. (p9), water quality is being degraded by multiple sources of contamination (p10), and it is

difficult for farmers to obtain an adequate, legal water supply in the form of a state-issued “water right” (p10).

- Access to land for both large and small acreage farms is a long-term issue (p16).
- Some regulations in place to protect food safety and promote good nutrition also lead to food waste, and there are challenges with composting food waste (p33).
- Agricultural and fishing industries rely on many plastic products (p33).

Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

► Key Challenges highlighted by Food System Committee Members and Community Partners:

- Essential farm and food workers continue to be heavily impacted by inflation and rising costs of food, housing, and other essential needs. Many lack affordable housing, healthcare, and mental healthcare.
- [Bornstein Seafood shut down their local processing facility](#), leaving 70 workers unemployed.
- In 2024 the North Cascades Meat Producers co-op dissolved, leaving Skagit county-based Island Grown Farmers co-op the only local option for Whatcom County producers to process their meat. Whatcom County producers are having to ship livestock as far south as Olympia for processing with significant wait times, sometimes having to schedule a year out.
- Many essential farm and food workers lack meaningful pathways to grow their income and benefits to a living or thriving wage. For these workers, the pathway up the economic ladder is often to start their own small businesses.
- L&I and other State regulatory agencies are dependent on worker grievances from the bottom up. On the other hand, the County depends on the State agencies for data and information in order to protect our local workforce. This creates an endless loop of inaction and all sectors of the food system and the tax payers of Whatcom County ultimately pay the price.
- There is a need to build a skilled local labor force for agriculture, processing, and other food business owners and stewards.
- The increase in cost for producing food is impacting farm and business viability.
- There needs to be more investment for and fewer barriers to food system worker housing.

► Key Challenges identified in the [2023 Food System Plan](#) (p 25-26):

- Commercial kitchen access is limited.
- Many industries that add value to raw agricultural and seafood products lack the infrastructure to meet both the demands of the producers and consumers.
- Farmers raising animals for meat and poultry struggle to find butchers.
- The seafood industry is met with regulatory and processing space barriers to scaling operations.
- Farm workers often make low wages, barely above the state’s minimum wage.

- Meat, poultry, and fish cutters and trimmers, along with fast food cooks are among the lowest paid food system workers in the region.
- There is a need to build a skilled labor force for agriculture and food processing and to support the next generation of farmers.

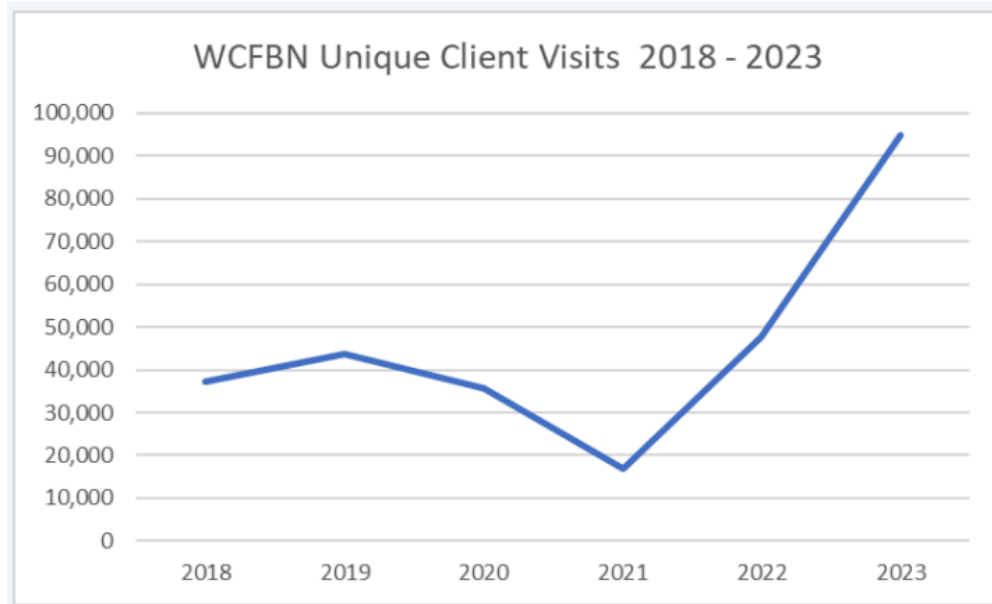
► Key challenges identified in the [2021 Community Food Assessment](#) that remain relevant:

- Immigration policies impact food system workers in Whatcom County, and in particular the H2A Guestworker program is harmful to our food system (p13).
- Food system workers are underpaid, with inconsistent work schedules resulting in inconsistent income (p14).
- Many food system jobs have unstable and unsafe working conditions (p14).
- Competition from other countries and regions is impacting local farms and the food system (p17).
- Food prices are lower than the actual cost of production (p17). It is difficult for local farmers who are selling locally to be profitable (p18).
- Whatcom County lacks some of the infrastructure for processing and distribution and access to viable markets that are essential ingredients for sustaining local and regional agricultural systems (p24).
- Fishing is becoming less profitable in Whatcom County (p21). It is challenging to calibrate the scale of processing and distribution operations to achieve economic viability (p24).
- Small-scale processing and distribution organizations have higher turnover (p24).
- National recalls on food have local impact (p24).

Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

► Key Challenges highlighted by Food System Committee Members and Community Partners:

- The people of Whatcom County are navigating an escalating crisis of food insecurity.
- Food bank visits in Whatcom County grew by 127% 2021-2023. The WA State average of food bank visits grew by 50% over the same time period.



- Food banks in Whatcom County have about 9,000 household visits each week in 2024.
- Bellingham Food Bank is the busiest food bank in the state with about 5,000 household visits each week.
- Nearly 35% of Whatcom County food bank clients are children and nearly 20% are seniors.
- Rural areas are particularly challenged in food access. They often have limited delivery route availability for food banks, as well as, limited access to transportation.
- Emergency funding available in COVID is ending, coinciding with record-high service numbers.
- The poundage of food recovery donations has decreased across the county.
- There is inadequate county funding being made available to respond to this crisis.

► Key Challenges identified in the [2023 Food System Plan](#) (p 30-31):

- Over 40% of Whatcom County school children are eligible for free or reduced lunch, with rates as high as 66% in some districts and 82% at tribal schools.
- Whatcom County has three census tracts that are considered food deserts. Over 24,000 residents live in these census tracts, a number that is sure to increase with the closure of more grocery stores.

► Key challenges identified in the [2021 Community Food Assessment](#) that remain relevant:

- We still do not have equitable access to healthy food for our whole community (p28).
- Some food banks lack adequate storage for food donations (p28).
- Schools would like to do more to address food and nutrition education but lack funding and capacity (p29).
- Tax breaks for food donations don't benefit small-scale farmers (p33).

Goal 5: Mitigate emissions from food system activities and adapt the food system to a changing climate

The food system is increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of the climate changes that are already occurring, as the warming temperatures, variable precipitation, and increase in extreme weather events impact food production, farmers' livelihoods, and farmworkers' health.

► Key Challenges highlighted by Food System Committee Members and Community Partners:

- Record temperatures in summer strain food system workers in both indoor and outdoor conditions, with inadequate or poorly enforced workplace safety standards for heat waves.

► Key Challenges identified in the [2023 Food System Plan](#) (p 35-36):

- The food system is increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of the climate changes that are already occurring, as the warming temperatures, variable precipitation, and increase in extreme weather events impact food production, farmers' livelihoods, and farmworkers' health.
- Flooding in the Nooksack River is expected to become more intense and frequent, and summertime stream temperatures are projected to increase, reaching levels that exceed the thermal tolerance of most fish species.

► Key challenges identified in the [2021 Community Food Assessment](#) that remain relevant:

- The impacts of climate change will reduce available land and water for agriculture (p5).
- Climate change will require different growing practices (p18).

Key Developments in Plan Implementation

In response to the critical crisis of food access in the County, a number of partnerships and projects in alignment with the Food System Plan generally, and Goal 4, Food System Committee members Noelle Beecroft and Sierra Crook, as well as, Committee Staff Ali Jensen, have been key participants in helping to drive a coordinated response to a community-scale emergency.

Here is some work being done:

- The Whatcom Food Bank Network (WFBN) has continued to grow, working together to access collective funding and increase local food purchasing for food security purposes. Highlights of their work include:

- As a cohort, WFBN were awarded the WE FEED WA Grant for \$876,000 and received \$1,000,00 for food spending in ARPA funds from Whatcom County for CY 2024. ([FSP 4.1.6](#))
- Salvation Army's new food pantry opened in Birchwood Neighborhood in March ([FSP 4.1.5](#)).
- East Whatcom Regional Resource Center kitchen upgrade project was initiated ([FSP 4.1.7](#)).
- More than \$275,000 in food was purchased from local producers for distribution in the community, and projects \$300,000 in purchases in 2024 ([FSP 4.3.1](#)).
- Three farmers markets received \$50,000 in funding from Whatcom County to offer unlimited Market Match for SNAP dollar use during the 2024 market season ([FSP 4.3.2](#)).

► Other initiatives concerning food access and the hunger crisis include:

- Whatcom County has two [Freedges](#), which address food waste and hunger. The most recent Fledge in East Whatcom is the result of a collaboration between Sustainable Connections, WSU Extension, Whatcom County Health and Community Services, the Foothills Community Food Partnership, and the Whatcom County Library System.
- Several Food Banks have pre-season contracts with small farmers, which allows money to stay in the local economy. The Foothills Food Bank, for example, were awarded a grant for \$33,000 to purchase foods from local farms.
- The Whatcom Grown pilot project, which offers \$150 to 35 WIC-eligible families in East Whatcom County, launched in May, 2024. Participants receive a debit card for Crossroads Grocery in Maple Falls, to be spent solely on food produced in Whatcom County, via the Puget Sound Food Hub.
- Market Match is unlimited, thanks to ARPA funds provided by Whatcom County, at all three Farmers Markets that accept SNAP in Whatcom County.

Other Food System Plan goal areas have seen some marginal progress. For example:

► FSC Labor Representative Sean Hopps is working to establish partnership between community groups and land trusts with the goal of collaborating on conservation strategies that result in locally-owned farms, forests, and workinglands that benefit the public. ([FSP 2.1.7](#)).

► Community to Community Development established a community trust for community asset building for farmworkers. This project was awarded \$824,000 for farmland acquisition in a 2023 State budget proviso. Council provided a letter of support to encourage this investment in a project led by and for farmworkers. ([FSP 2.1.5](#)).

Support Needed from the County Council

Despite the large scale and breadth of the challenges that exist within our food system currently, there is also enormous opportunity. The Food System Committee needs ongoing funding and staff support to fulfill the core functions of overseeing plan implementation and providing policy recommendations to the County Council.

Two areas that have repeatedly come up in our meetings that require Council attention:

- 1. Commit yearly funding to the Whatcom County Food Bank Network and other critical food access organizations actively responding to the escalating food access crisis.**

A hungry community is not a community that is able to address any other crisis in the food system or elsewhere. Priority action must be taken to address the current emergency, as well as address the root causes of food insecurity in our community.

- 2. Commit to creating and funding a full-time food system specialist staff position as outlined in the Food System Plan.**

Having dedicated staff to oversee plan implementation is a key success factor in other priority initiatives of the county. Without this role, the committee is severely limited in capacity to carry out core functions and purposes. This staff person will lead the committee and the community through the following to satisfy the requirements laid out in the ordinance:

- Determine food system indicators and metrics and a means of collecting and publishing the data.
- Develop an implementation plan based on the prioritization of actions.
- Collaborate with and support organizations already carrying out some of the actions.
- Work with elected officials and County government to pass the necessary policy changes included in the plan.
- Maintain community engagement and communicate with residents about progress made and updating the plan.
- Report updates of the plan to the Whatcom County Council.

Conclusion

What is reflected in this report is that our food system is in crisis. Stakeholders from all sectors are struggling to survive, let alone thrive. It is clear that the objectives and actions within the food system plan remain critical to the well-being of our community.

This first year since plan implementation has focused on internal work, shifting the core work of our committee from planning to overseeing implementation. Yet even as we build the internal systems to support tackling far-reaching goals, the economic and social challenges on our food system persist and grow. The Committee is approaching this work with care, seeking to not

replicate the impacts of systemic injustices that have excluded some from the table of governance.

Despite the challenges, stakeholders across the County continue to act to find common interests and collaborate in creating a vibrant food system with a healthy mix of locally owned and operated food businesses and living wage jobs. As a committee, we continue to engage with these cross-sector collaborations and participate in offering input and recommendations in county-wide policy processes, such as the 2025 Comprehensive Plan update.

The Council and Executive have already identified and supported many of these efforts. We look forward to further collaborations that will help us move from crisis to well-being.