



Whatcom County

COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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Agenda Bill Master Report

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TITLE FOR AGENDA ITEM:

Resolution adopting the Food System Plan created by the Whatcom County Food System Committee

SUMMARY STATEMENT OR LEGAL NOTICE LANGUAGE:

Resolution adopting the Food System Plan created by the Whatcom County Food System Committee

HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE FILE

Date:	Acting Body:	Action:	Sent To:
04/25/2023	Council Public Works & Health Committee	RECOMMENDED TO HOLD IN COMMITTEE Aye: 3 Frazey, Galloway, and Kershner Nay: 0	
04/25/2023	Council	HELD IN COMMITTEE Aye: 7 Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Frazey, Galloway, and Kershner Nay: 0	Council Public Works & Health Committee
07/25/2023	Council Public Works & Health Committee	RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL Aye: 3 Frazey, Galloway, and Kershner Nay: 0	
07/25/2023	Council	APPROVED Aye: 7 Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Frazey, Galloway, and Kershner Nay: 0	

Attachments: Staff Memo for 4.25.2023, Proposed Resolution, Presentation on 4.11.2023 (from AB2023-221), Exhibit A - Food System Plan for 4.25.2023, Staff Memo for 7.25.2023, Edits to the Food System Plan for 7.25.2023, Revised Food System Plan for 7.25.2023

PROPOSED BY: _____

INTRODUCED: _____

RESOLUTION NO. 2023 - 018

ADOPTING THE FOOD SYSTEM PLAN CREATED BY THE WHATCOM COUNTY FOOD SYSTEM COMMITTEE

WHEREAS, Goal 7L in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan calls for the County to “Strengthen the local food system and take steps to improve conditions for a healthy, resilient, and prosperous food economy”; and continues on Policy Goal 7L-8 which states “Support establishment of communitywide food system development plans”; and

WHEREAS, on November 7th, 2018, the Whatcom County Council adopted Ordinance 2018-058, establishing the Whatcom County Food System Committee; and

WHEREAS, the Food System Committee has been tasked with developing a Food System Plan for Whatcom County; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County has a proud tradition of agricultural excellence and deserves a food system that supports our local food economy; and

WHEREAS, the economics section of the County comprehensive plan calls for a county-wide food system plan; and

WHEREAS, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed and highlighted the inequities and imperfections in our food system; and

WHEREAS, Federal and State programs for those impacted by COVID-19 have ended, leaving families faced with choosing between paying for food or rent; and

WHEREAS, local farmers, grocers, food banks and other businesses connected to Whatcom’s food system could benefit from intentional, well-planned actions on the part of the County; and

WHEREAS, the Food System Committee updated the Community Food Assessment in 2021, identifying inconsistencies and opportunities in the food system; and

WHEREAS, the Whatcom Food System Committee interviewed over 200 subject matter experts working on the front lines of our food system to develop this plan;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Whatcom County Council that the Food

System Plan be adopted, attached hereto as Exhibit A, and be administered by the Whatcom County Health and Community Services Department with oversight by the Whatcom County Food System Committee and the Whatcom County Council under the authority of the County Executive.

APPROVED this 25th day of July, 2023.

ATTEST:



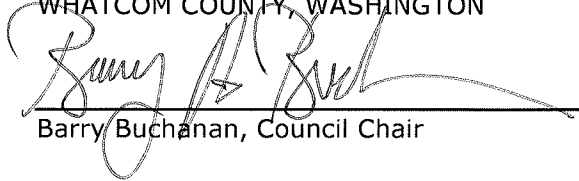
Dana Brown-Davis, Clerk of the Council

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

/s/Royce Buckingham approved via e-mail on 4/24/23/MR

Royce Buckingham, Civil Deputy Prosecutor

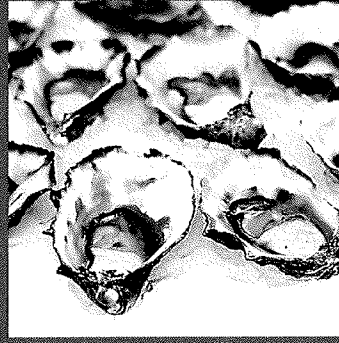
WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON



Barry Buchanan, Council Chair

Whatcom County **FOOD SYSTEM PLAN**

A 10 year plan for an equitable
and sustainable food system



Prepared by the Whatcom County Food System Committee with support from New Venture Advisors
July 2023

Foreword



Life in Whatcom County has revolved around food since the first Lummi fishing net dipped into the water. It is a commitment we made as a community from the first day Ben and Dorothy Haggen opened their grocery store in

1933, or Hemplers wrapped their first sausage, or Ed and Aileen Bransma milked their first pail of Edaleens milk. It is a belief churned into the soil of our raspberry fields, and served fresh in our restaurants each night. From farmer to factory and from shelf to spoon, the heartbeat of our county rises and falls with our food system and has since time immemorial.

But as we move forward into this new era, there are mighty forces that threaten to destabilize our food system. Devastating market swings impact our local farmers, harsh weather events – made even more dangerous by the growing impacts of climate change – destroy our crops and disrupt our supply chains. Stagnant wages and rising food costs make putting groceries in the refrigerator more difficult each year. Battles over natural resources, invasive species, land and water rights, and threats of economic recession challenge the very foundation of the food system upon which we rely.

If we are to survive and thrive during these challenging times, we need a County government

that shares that commitment to supporting our local food system. For too long, policy relating to food was handled in silos – blockaded into sectors by habit, bureaucracy, or neglect. If we as a community wanted to make our food system more resilient, we needed to take a much broader approach.

In short, we needed a plan. Built by locals, for locals.

This document is not filled with plug-and-play policies from other places. It is the result of

hundreds of conversations with the people in our community. You cannot solve a problem without talking to the boots-on-the-ground and this ten-year plan is filled with goals and action items from farm workers, buyers for grocery stores, food bank volunteers, nutritionists, fishermen, natural resource specialists and hundreds of others working each day with their hands and hearts to improve our food system.

This plan is a roadmap to a future where Whatcom County's commitment extends from seed to table. A future where our food system

is prosperous, equitable, resilient and once again, a core part of the Whatcom County experience.

Thank you for participating in making that future a reality. As every farmer knows, the best way to ensure a better tomorrow is to plant a good seed today.

“For too long, policy relating to food was handled in silos – blockaded into sectors by habit, bureaucracy, or neglect. If we as a community wanted to make our food system more resilient, we needed to take a much broader approach.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Riley Sweeney'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

- Riley Sweeney, Food System Committee Chair

Acknowledgments

First and Foremost we must acknowledge that what settlers call Whatcom County is the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish Peoples, who have lived in the Salish Sea Basin, throughout the San Juan Islands and the North Cascade Watershed, from time immemorial. We, the Whatcom County Food System Committee, as well as all residents in Whatcom County, extend our deepest respect and gratitude for our indigenous neighbors, the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe, for their enduring care and protection of our shared lands and waterways.

Over five years ago, the Whatcom Food Network and other food system leaders envisioned the development of a Food System Plan to provide guidance and strategy to the region's food system. This document is the fruition of that vision.

Who is New Venture Advisors LLC (NVA)?
NVA was hired to support the food system planning process. NVA is a strategy consulting firm specializing in food system planning and food enterprise development. The team is committed to environmental sustainability, social impact, equity, diversity, and inclusion as we help our clients realize their vision for a more just and sustainable food system.

Over the last decade NVA has helped more than 150 clients develop food systems through strategic investments and creative planning and programming.

Special thanks to the people and organizations who made this plan possible:

- Members of the Whatcom County Food System Committee past and present: Adrienne Renz, Amber Noskoff, Andy Enfield, Jon Maberry, Kendall Whitney, Krista Rome, Mardi Solomon, Margaret Gerard, Maureen Darras, Nikki Olsen, Noelle Beecroft, Paul Burrill, Rhys-Thorvald Hansen, Riley Starks, Riley Sweeney, Rob Dhaliwal, Sean Hopps, Trevor Gearhart, and Ali Jensen, staff.
- The Whatcom Food Network staff and Steering Committee.
- Whatcom Community Foundation.
- Whatcom County Health and Community Services.
- Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu.
- Whatcom County Council Members: Barry Buchanan, Ben Elenbaas, Carol Frazey, Kathy Kershner, Kaylee Galloway, Todd Donovan, and Tyler Byrd.
- Eileen Horn and Caroline Myran with New Venture Advisors.
- The hundreds of community members who participated in the surveys, community events, and public comments.

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Who is the Whatcom County Food System Committee?

Community members in Whatcom County began discussing our county's food system as early as 2007, when the Washington State University Extension Office in Whatcom County developed the first community food assessment (CFA).

Subsequent CFAs, conducted by the Whatcom Food Network (WFN), identified the desire for a countywide food system plan. In 2018, the WFN created a food system planning task force, which determined a Whatcom County Council advisory committee would be an appropriate channel for food system planning. The task force, with support from the Public Health Advisory Board, drafted an ordinance to create the food system committee (FSC).

The FSC ordinance called for the committee to draft, implement, provide oversight for, and regularly update a countywide food system plan to strengthen our local and regional food system. The FSC is made up of nine positions, representing different sectors in the food system.

The committee held their first meeting in February 2019. Their first task was updating the CFA. Committee members interviewed 58 subject matter experts to develop the Whatcom Community Food Assessment 2021 Update Report. [View the most recent CFA from 2021 at this link.](#) This assessment laid the groundwork for this county food system plan.

In early 2022, the county council allocated funds to the hiring of a consultant, New Venture Advisors (NVA), to assist the FSC in the development of a food system plan.

Membership

Many people have been involved in the FSC over the years. The current membership and the sectors represented are:

- Local sales/farming
- Food access
- Nutrition/public health
- Natural resources
- Whatcom Food Network
- Labor issues
- Processing/distribution
- Fishing industry
- Export sales farming

The FSC hosts a website with meeting agendas, minutes, and relevant documents at www.whatcomcounty.us/2992/Food-System-Committee.



What is the food system?

The food system is a web of interconnected inputs that moves food from seed to sandwich. It includes waterways and land, fishers, farmers, distributors, manufacturers and processors, retailers, and individual consumers. It also includes the waste streams that are generated from all of these steps along the way, including both food and packaging waste.

The food system is influenced by our policies, our culture, and our values. It intersects with many other Whatcom County priorities, including the importance of advancing equity in our food system and adapting our food system to a changing climate.

Food systems don't have set boundaries, due to the globalized interconnectedness of food production and the influence of state and local policies on the food system. For this purpose of this plan, though, we are focused on recommendations for the local food system of Whatcom County, Washington.

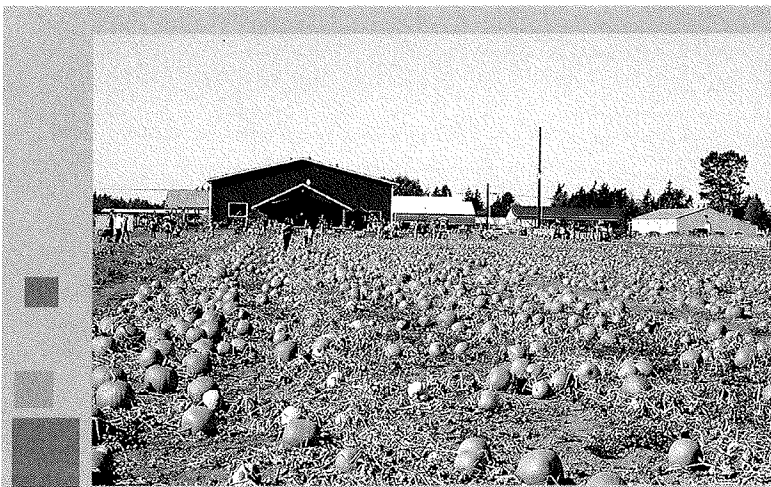
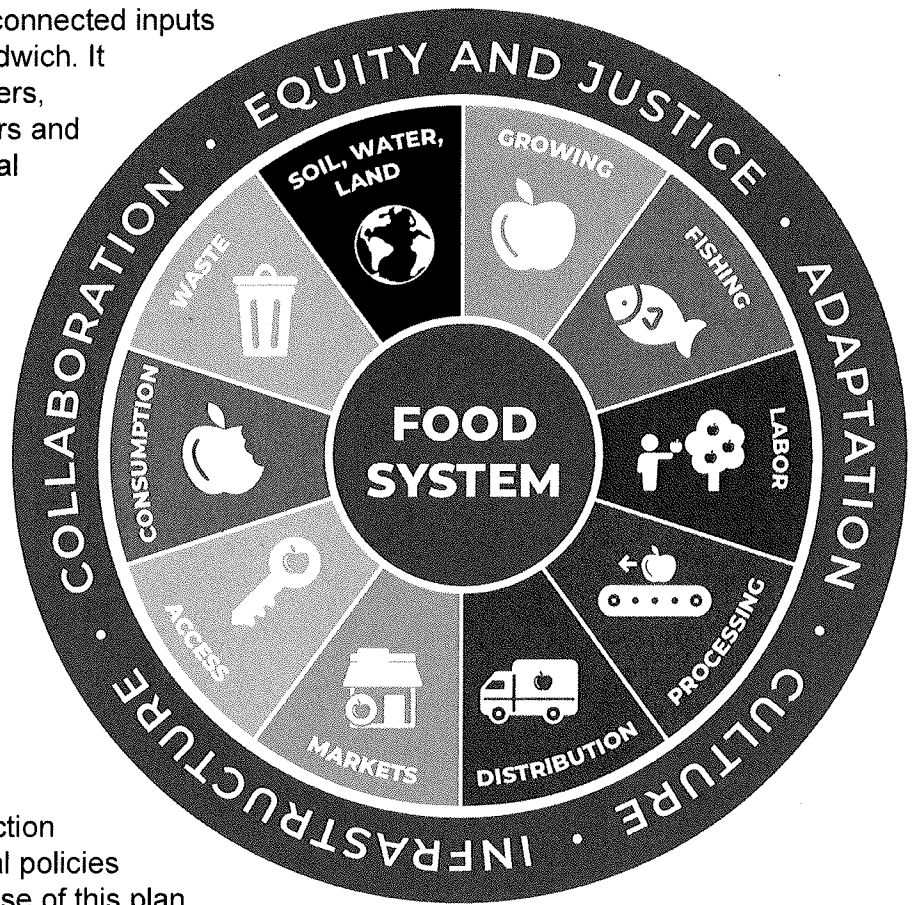


Photo: Margaret Gerard

What is a food system plan?

A food system plan is a long-range planning document that is driven by community input and strategic goals. It is defined by the American Planning Association as “a set of interconnected, forward-thinking activities that strengthen a community and regional food system through the creation and implementation of plans and policies.” It includes a baseline assessment of how we grow, distribute, consume, and dispose of food and identifies concrete actions to improve the policies, programs, and investments that shape how food moves throughout our community.

The Whatcom County Food System Plan sets a 10-year vision for the county’s food system.

The main audience for this plan is the local government of Whatcom County. Therefore, the objectives and actions in the plan are the areas where local government can have the most impact.



Photo: Margaret Gerard



Photo: Cat Sieh



Photo: Trevor Gearhart

Why do we need a food system plan?

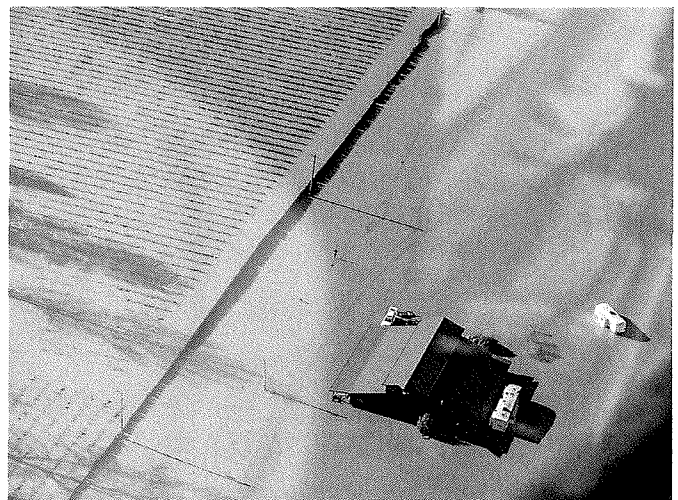
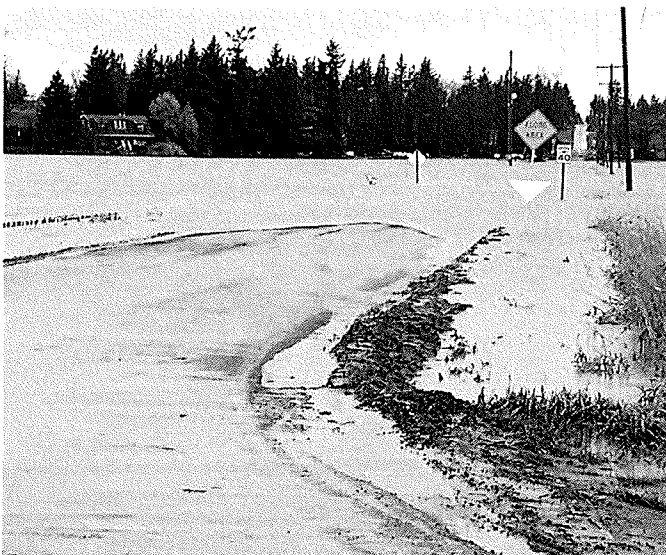
A food system plan is modeled after other county strategic plans, like those for land use, economic development, or recreation. However, unlike a department of parks and recreation, there is no county-level “department of food” tasked with stewarding these efforts. Local governments are uniquely positioned to lead food system planning because the food system overlaps with many of the structural and systemic issues that require attention in other areas of a community—for example, land use, water use, transportation, infrastructure, food access, and equity.

Groups across the country, like the Whatcom County Food System Committee, are leading robust community-driven planning efforts to capture the aspirations and needs of their residents to formulate a long-range vision for their food system. Cities and counties across the country are bringing a community planning lens to the food system to create focus and intention in its development and sustainability.

It has never been more urgent for Whatcom County to strategically plan for its food system. Growing economic pressures on the traditional model for farming had already strained the

viability of our local food system. These challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the vulnerabilities in our food supply chain and inequitable social systems. Severe weather events driven by climate change like flooding, drought, and fires are impacting our ability to grow and harvest food. Farmworkers, farmers, and fishers are subjected to more unhealthy air and higher working temperatures. People in our community, including food system workers, are struggling to afford food. Food banks in Whatcom County saw a 17 percent increase in utilization in 2022. The number of farms in operation is remaining steady; however their long-term economic viability remains in question. Despite efforts to emphasize local consumption, most of the food we produce is sold outside of Whatcom County. We produce more waste in our food system than ever before. Organic waste is a significant contributor of greenhouse gas emissions in our county.

COVID-19 and increased occurrences of disruptive climate events have underlined the dire need to create a more resilient, equitable, and just food system in our county. While a food system plan can’t eradicate hunger overnight, it provides strategic steps to reach food system goals for our county.



Photos from the November 2021 floods in Whatcom County.

Geography of Whatcom

Whatcom County is on the land of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi), Nuxwsa'7aq (Nooksack), Coast Salish, Nle?kepmx Tmíxw (Nlaka'pamux), Nuwhaha, Sauk Suiattle, Semiahmoo, and Stillaguamish tribes and people past and present!

Whatcom County borders Canada to the north, Skagit County to the south, Okanogan County to the east, and the Salish Sea to the west. Whatcom County is in the Nooksack River Watershed, which includes the Nooksack River, Sumas River, Lake Whatcom, Lake Samish, Birch Bay, Semiahmoo Bay, Lummi Bay, Samish Bay, and Bellingham Bay. Other important geographic features include Mt Baker, 130 miles of coastlines, and over 100,000 acres of active farmlandⁱⁱ.

Whatcom County has 130 miles of coastlines and over 100,000 acres of active farmland.

Whatcom County has seven incorporated cities (Bellingham, Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas) and several unincorporated communities with substantial populations, such as Columbia Valley, Point Roberts, Birch Bay, Acme, Van Zandt, South Fork Valley, Deming, Maple Falls, Kendall, and Nugents Corner.



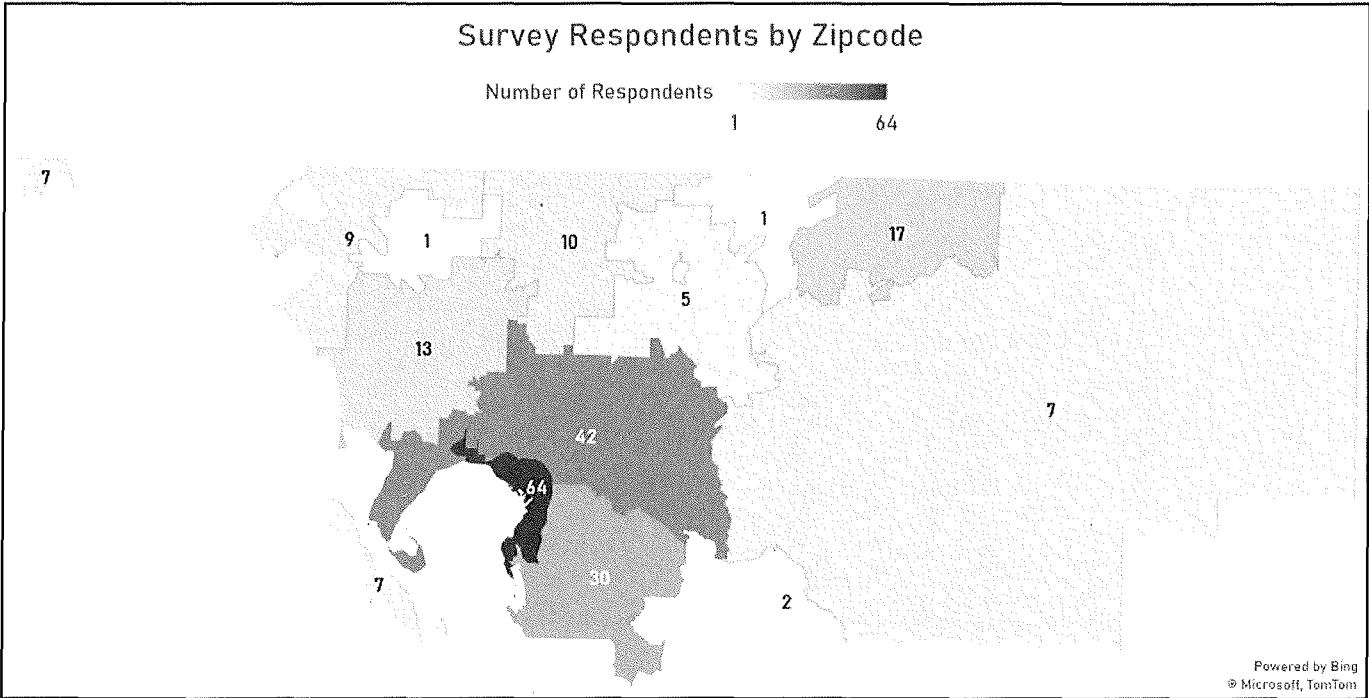
Aerial photo of Whatcom County, WA.

How was this plan created?

The FSC began the development of the food system plan in 2019. The first step was to update the Community Food Assessment (CFA), which identified key challenges and opportunities across all food system sectors—land, water, labor, farming, fishing, processing and distribution, consumption, and waste. The CFA laid a strong foundation for the creation of a countywide food system plan.

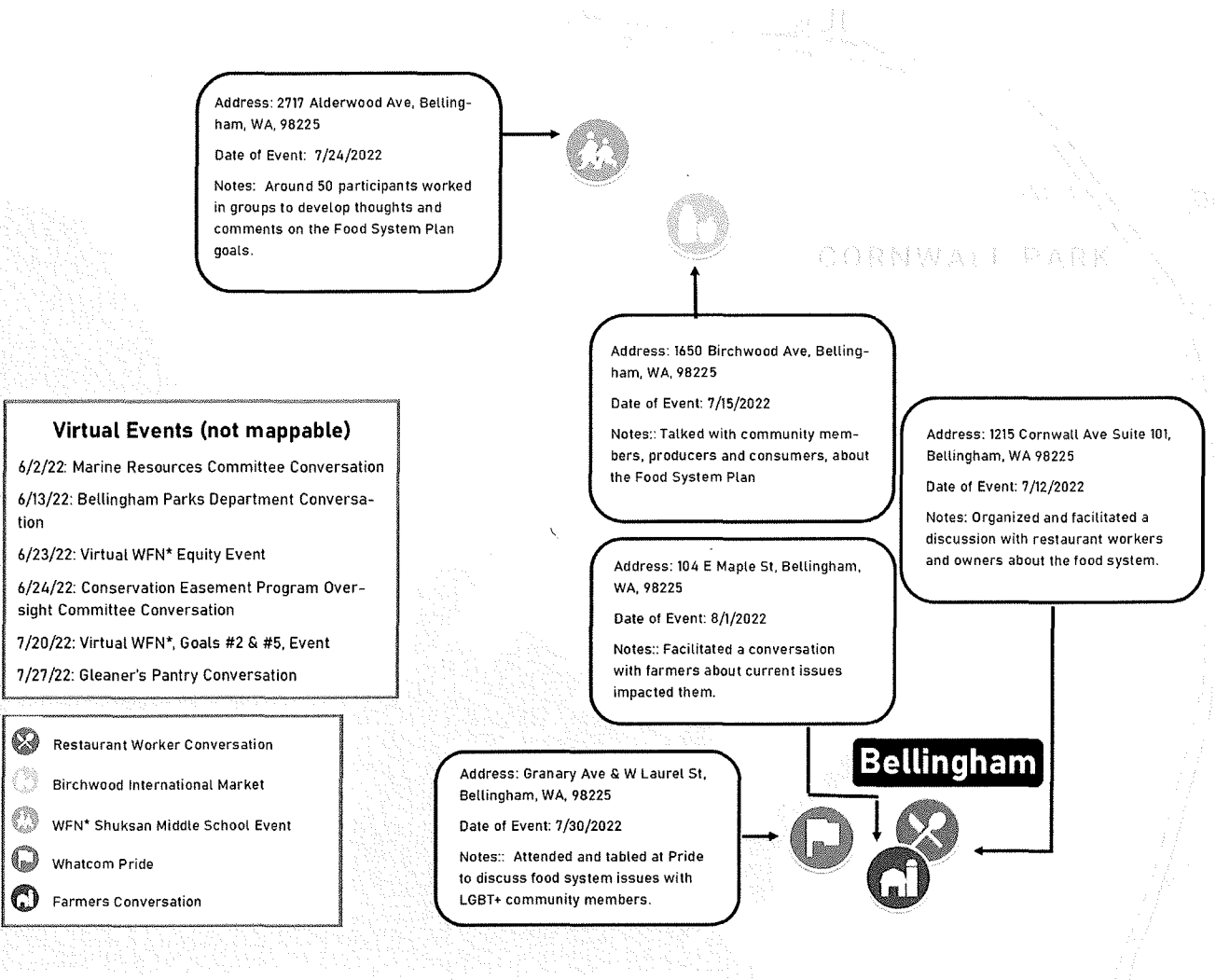
NVA, consultants specializing in food system planning and sustainable food business development, were hired to assist the committee in early 2022.

The overarching goals of the plan were developed utilizing the key findings of the 2021 CFA. These goals were drafted and then shared with the community through a public survey to generate input on the goals. Responses were used to create a list of actions that would be necessary to achieve those goals. The survey, open from April through June of 2022 and available in multiple languages, received 227 responses from community members.



Map of food system survey respondents by ZIP Code.

Community Engagement



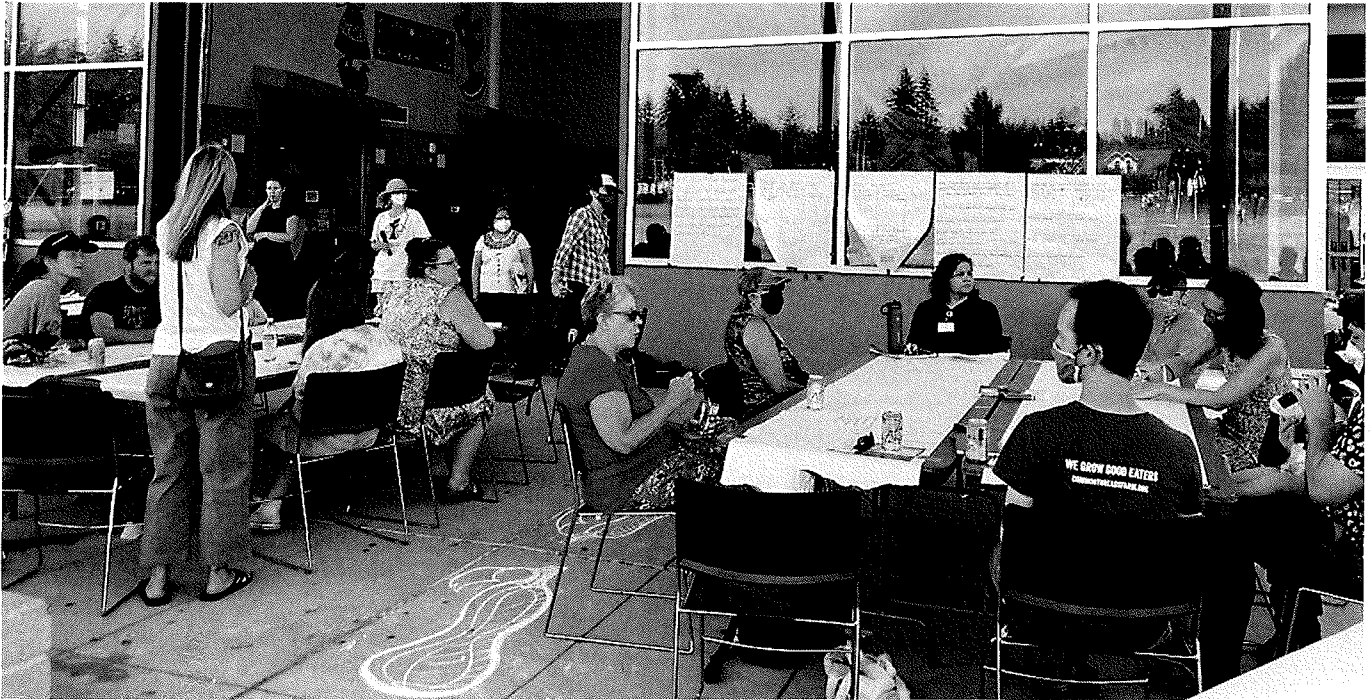
Community engagement events held throughout the county in the summer of 2022.

From May through August of 2022, the FSC and partners, such as the Whatcom Food Network, hosted more than 10 community events to discuss the draft goals and to receive additional input on potential actions. These community events included small group discussions with farmers and restaurant workers, community-wide conversations about equity and justice in the food system, and focused outreach in neighborhoods,

at farmers markets, and at community events. Hundreds of residents participated in these discussions and shared critical insights about their lived experiences in the food system and their ideas for how the county could improve.

All community input was compiled and analyzed for themes to identify key challenges and opportunities in the Whatcom County food system.

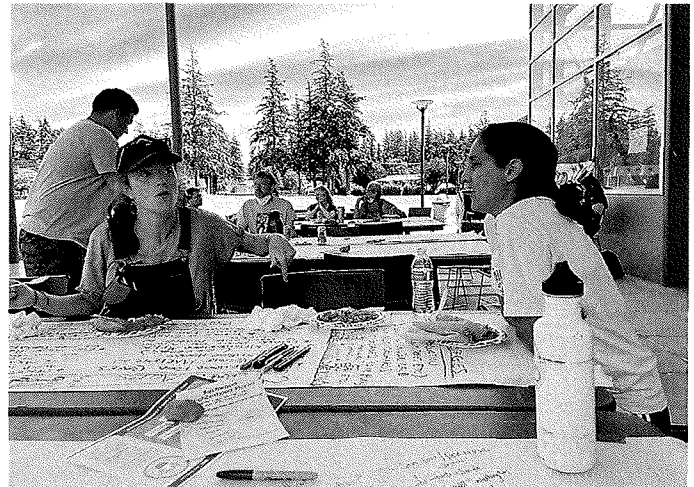
Community Engagement



Top and right, Shuksan Middle School community gathering on July 24, 2022.

Additionally, specific objectives and actions recommended in the CFA and other related county plans were included. These data sets were synthesized to create objectives for each food plan goal, along with specific actions to help meet each objective. This process yielded a large set of objectives and actions for the FSC to consider.

Throughout the fall and winter of 2022, FSC members divided into subcommittees, one for each goal area. They met multiple times to refine the objectives and actions from the community feedback. To validate potential draft objectives and actions, the committee members presented them to subject matter experts in the county and county staff who would be tasked with carrying out the actions. There were 11 total subcommittee meetings in the fall of 2022.



Local Food Economy:
stop the seperation of
business from community

Community Engagement

The first draft of the plan that resulted was approved by the committee on December 15, 2022.

The plan was further refined in January and February of 2023 through a community feedback

form and additional community engagement including an open house event to share the draft plan. Input from these final events was utilized to refine the first draft and to create the final Whatcom County Food System Plan that follows.



Top and left, Ferndale Pioneer Pavilion community gathering on Feb. 13, 2023.

How to read this plan

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. It will take the efforts of the elected officials and staff in Whatcom County, along with many community partners to see the plan through.

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.

Actions are organized into five key categories



Policy Solutions:

These are policies (ordinances, resolutions, taxes, economic development incentive, etc.) that the County could enact to strengthen the food system.



Community Collaborations:

These are the potential innovative partnerships between community food system partners to advocate for the local food system.



County Leadership:

These are opportunities for Whatcom County to lead by example within their own operations and internal policies.



Infrastructure:

These are investments in the physical assets of the local food system in the region, which includes the facilities and transportation networks needed to move food from farm to fork.



Education and Programming:

These are the community education programs about the food system that build awareness and knowledge amongst residents. Food system programs provide a variety of services to County residents - from cooking classes to composting initiatives.

Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system

In the United States and the Whatcom County food system, your race, ethnicity, gender, income, and zip code can dictate your access to healthy food, your ability to own farm land, and your access to capital to start your own food business.

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.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some of the current inequities in the Whatcom County food system include:

- In Whatcom County, 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.^{iv}
- 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.^v
- Approximately 9% of Whatcom County residents identify as Hispanic/Latinx, yet in 2020, 25% of Whatcom County COVID-19 cases were among Hispanic/Latinx residents.^{vi}
- In 2012, 44% of farmworkers in Washington State were undocumented.^{vii}
- Approximately 58.2% of WIC-eligible Whatcom County residents are not enrolled in WIC (*Washington State Department of Health*).
- Of the 2,982 agricultural producers in Whatcom County, 44% are female.^{ix}
- In Whatcom County, 862 farmers (29%) are new and beginning farmers who have operated a farm or ranch for 10 years or less.^x
- In Whatcom County, 274 farmers (9%) are veterans.^{xi}
- In a 2019 survey of restaurant workers, only 31% of employers offered medical insurance for employees.^{xii}
- In Washington State, 54% of farmworkers reported they have had more difficulty paying for food since the COVID-19 crisis began.^{xiii}
- BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) residents are disproportionately likely to face food insecurity. For example, 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.^{xiv}



Farmworkers are more likely to receive low wages, have few labor protections, and face threats to their health.

Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system

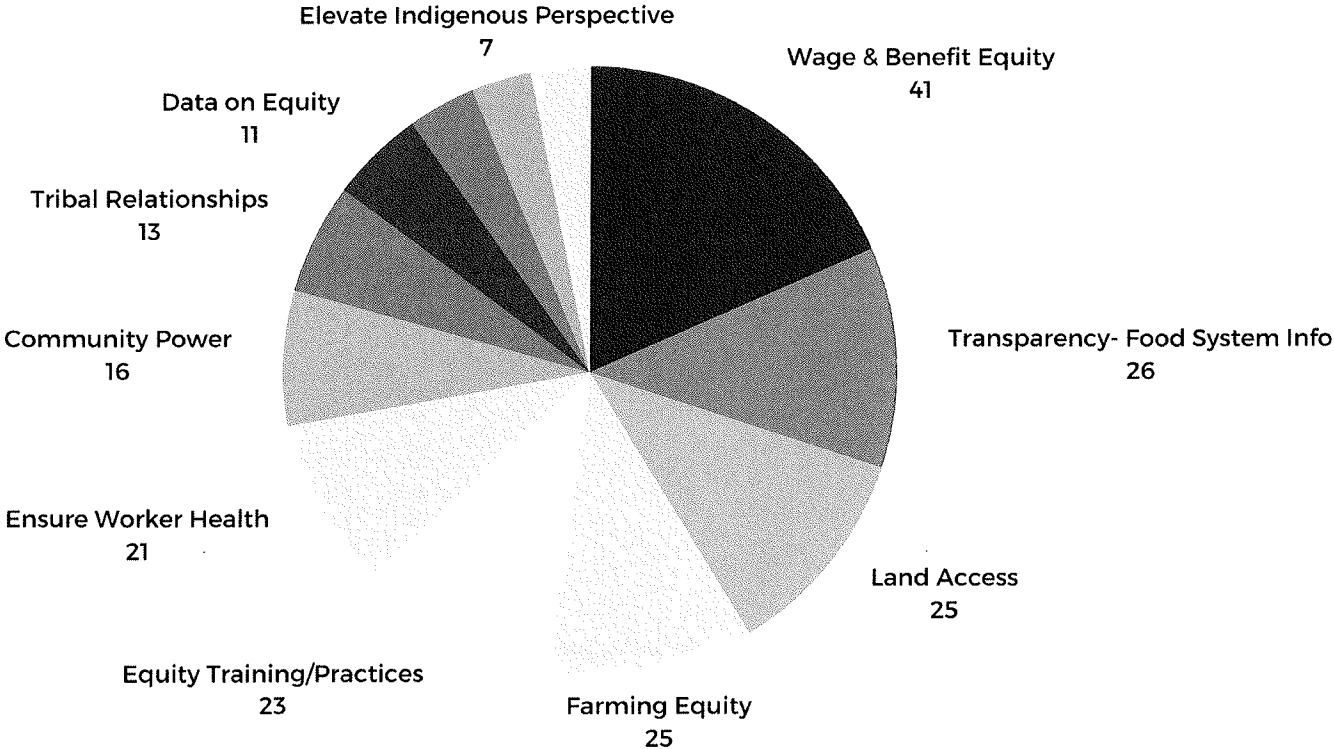
Throughout the community engagement process that informed this plan, it became clear that embedding equity in our food system plans was necessary to create the outcomes the community desired.

Participants spoke of the need for fair wages for food system workers, improved access to land for socially disadvantaged populations, support for immigrants, ensuring health for all workers, and improving the accessibility of the county's communications around food systems initiatives.

Addressing systemic barriers to full participation in our food systems will create the greatest opportunity to address the critical areas highlighted from public engagement. [See Food System Committee webpage for full community survey and event results.](#)

Through the Whatcom County Food System Plan, we have an opportunity to collaborate with organizations led by and for BIPOC residents to address these inequities.

Key themes from community engagement sessions:



Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system



Goal 1: Objectives & Actions

Category

1.1 Increase health, wealth, and leadership with BIPOC and under-represented communities across our food system	1.1.1 Remove barriers to engagement in local food programs (i.e., CSAs, farmers markets, Market Match, community gardening, etc.), create funding, partnership, and collaboration opportunities for organizations led by and for BIPOC and other socially disadvantaged communities		
	1.1.2 Improve access to financial tools for food systems development (i.e., access to capital, low interest loans, microloans, grant programs, and other funding opportunities), create funding, partnership, and collaboration opportunities for organizations led by and for BIPOC and other socially disadvantaged communities		
	1.1.3 Build relationships and opportunities for collaboration with cultural liaisons to support existing food sovereignty projects already underway		
	1.1.4 Engage with and reflect the diversity of our communities—across class, race and ethnicity, genders, belief systems, etc.—in all Whatcom County planning and communications about food systems		
1.2 Strengthen support for immigrants in Whatcom County	1.2.1 Support food policy-related goals in the Child and Family Action Plan and the Health Protection for Immigrant Families Task Force Report .		
	1.2.2 Strengthen the capacity of local employers, businesses, and service agencies to respond to immigration-related issues		
	1.2.3 Improve service systems to better meet the needs of families, including immigrant families		
	1.2.4 Require mandatory training for county staff and contractors (particularly criminal justice and health and human services) related to anti-discrimination/anti-bias approaches, culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS), and trauma-informed services		
	1.2.5 Ensure all materials developed by the county to support food system planning and implementation are offered in multiple languages and that county-sponsored food system events offer interpretation services on-site		

Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system

Policy



Collaboration



County Leadership



Infrastructure



Education and Programming



Goal 1: Objectives & Actions

Category

1.3 Empower food system workers to lead healthy and safe lives

1.3.1 Fund the engagement of food system workers to improve workplace health and safety standards that meet the principles of the Whatcom Food System Plan



1.3.2 Adopt a fair scheduling ordinance, designed by essential farm, food, and hospitality workers, in consultation with employers, to make schedules and breaks more consistent with routines that sustain healthy and safe lives for workers



1.3.3 Advocate that the Washington State Insurance Commissioner and Healthcare Authority provide food system workers with better and affordable physical and mental health insurance options



1.3.4 Coordinate with local tipped workers to advocate for changes in state laws around tip sharing so that back-of-house kitchen staff benefit and tip sharing is more equitable across the board



1.3.5 Support a Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) grant for community space that is open during non-traditional hours for food system shift workers



1.3.6 Fund and support the Food System Committee in the creation and maintenance of a food system information dashboard, building on the Washington State Health Disparities map, co-created with input from essential food systems workers across sectors that reflect the diversity of our communities



Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

Our soil, water, and land in Whatcom County provide the very foundation of our food system. The food production practices we choose can either extract from or regenerate this natural resource base. Preserving ecosystems for fish and wildlife habitat is also critical to the region's food supply. All of these natural resources are being threatened by warming temperatures, variable precipitation, and an increase in extreme weather events due to climate change. See goal 5 for additional information.

Soil and Land

Well-stewarded farm and forestry land provides environmental benefits in addition to food and fiber. These benefits include aquifer recharge, storm water retention, and wildlife habitat. They also provide aesthetic and recreational values.

In Whatcom County, there are 1,712 farms covering 102,523 acres of land. Of these 1,712 farms:

- 69 farms practiced alley cropping, silvopasture, forest farming, or had riparian forest buffers and windbreaks.
- Two percent of farms in Whatcom County are USDA certified organic.^{xv}

Valuable farmland and rangeland in Whatcom County is under development pressure. If current trends continue, by 2040, 6,300 farmland/ rangeland acres in Whatcom County will be converted to urban and residential land uses.^{xvi}



Water Quality and Quantity

A reliable supply of water is critical to agricultural production, and maintaining water quality supports fishing and shellfish production in the region.

- 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.^{xvii}
- Some drinking water wells have higher than the maximum level of nitrate.^{xviii}
- Lake Whatcom remains vulnerable to the harmful effects of algal blooms due to excessive levels of phosphorus.^{xix}
- 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.^{xx}

Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

Fish and Wildlife Habitat

Fish and wildlife are also critical components of the region's food supply. However, development and climate change threaten these populations.

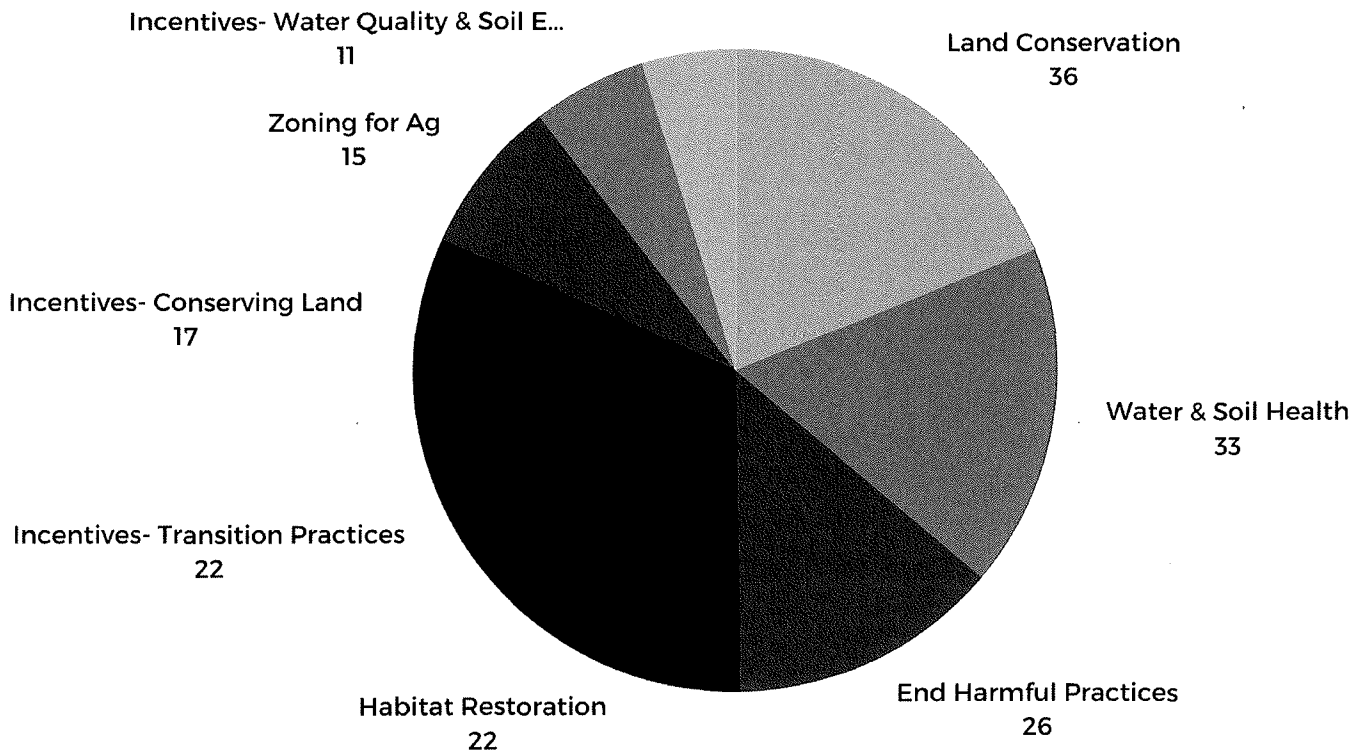
- Fish passage barriers, inadequate riparian areas, and inadequate instream habitat features impair the productivity of valued salmon species and impair the ecosystem processes that provide benefits for adjacent landowners as well as other fish and wildlife species.^{xxi}
- The lack of undeveloped and connected patches of native vegetation for movement and crossings in lowland Whatcom County limit movement both for local and migrating wildlife.^{xxii}

Throughout the community engagement process that informed this plan, the need to preserve and protect these natural resources was apparent.

Participants spoke of the need to support and grow existing natural resource programs, to support farmers transitioning to regenerative practices, to protect water—both quantity and quality—and restore wildlife habitat.

[See Food System Committee webpage](#) for full community survey and event results.

Key themes from community engagement sessions:



Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

Policy



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Goal 2: Objectives & Actions

Category

2.1 Protect Agricultural land in Whatcom County and increase the acreage used for local and regenerative food production

2.1.1 Establish a baseline inventory of the number of acres of agricultural land in Whatcom County currently used for local food production. Use the baseline inventory to set an achievable target of acres for local food production and organic food production for the county to strive for. Partner with the Ag Advisory Committee to achieve this action.



2.1.2 Increase the agricultural acreages placed under conservation easements through the current Whatcom County Conservation Easement Program; ensure adequate county staff support to facilitate additional conservation easement program outreach and signups and to leverage state and federal grants; actively seek funds for agricultural acreage utilized for local food production



2.1.3 Increase funding to the Conservation Futures Fund; direct additional revenues to increase the number of conservation easements with a focus on acquiring land that specifically produces food for local consumption



2.1.4 When the county updates the 1995 Open Space Plan, revise the public benefit rating system for the Open Space: Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land sub-classification to ensure more land management for agriculture



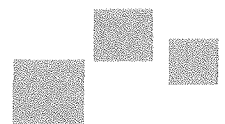
2.1.5 Support land trusts and cooperative projects to develop permanently affordable housing communities that provide farmland access for the residents for commercial and non-commercial local food production. Partner with the Ag program staff in Planning and Development Services to achieve this.



2.1.6 Work with farmers and land trusts to determine acreage goals and farmland preservation strategies.



2.1.7 Fund cross-sector collaboration to employ a food system lens for preservation and conservation strategies that results in locally-owned farms, forests, and working lands that benefit the public.



Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

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Goal 2: Objectives & Actions

Category

2.2 Improve the health of our county's soils

2.2.1 Increase funding support for Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the Whatcom Conservation District to increase technical assistance and educational opportunities for growers and future growers to learn soil management best practices and transition from conventional to organic production methods (See also related objective 5.3):



- *5.3.1 Promote adoption of farm management practices that maximize soil carbon storage and increase water and nutrient availability*
- *5.3.2 Coordinate state and federal agricultural adaptation resources (e.g., Inflation Reduction Act funds) to support farmers in making informed business decisions in a changing climate*
- *5.3.3 Increase farm resilience to sea level rise, shoreline erosion, and river flooding by protecting and restoring riparian estuary habitat, restoring wetlands, and increasing natural water storage*
- *5.3.4 Encourage increases in research and development of drought- and heat-resistant agricultural crops and flexible infrastructure to support diversified crops*
- *5.3.5 Reduce the risk of devastating impacts of extreme weather and natural disasters by encouraging food producers to diversify their products*

Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

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Goal 2: Objectives & Actions

Category

2.3 Conserve water and support water efficiency projects and policies

2.3.1 Work with the health department and state officials to explore opportunities for utilizing greywater for growing food; existing greywater rules need systems and implementation support to align with the needs of small-scale agriculture



2.3.2 Encourage municipalities within the county to set water rate policies that promote conservation and prioritize food production; this could include offering an "irrigation-only" reduced rate to gardeners and urban farmers using municipal water to irrigate their crops.



2.3.3 Collaborate to implement sustainable funding mechanisms that support water efficiency (e.g., providing technical assistance to producers, offering rebates for water efficient irrigation equipment)



2.3.4 Continue the Whatcom Water Alliance rebates for WaterSense irrigation controllers for county residents and encourage the City of Bellingham to continue their rebate program for WaterSense irrigation controllers



2.3.5 Support collaborative efforts to address water supply and salmon recovery



2.3.6 Support the creation of a local water exchange system that coordinates the lease and sale of water rights as they are freed up; ensuring equal access and affordable rates for diverse scales of locally-owned operations and producers.



Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

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Goal 2: Objectives & Actions

Category

2.4 Ensure water quality through habitat restoration and improved agricultural practices

2.4.1 Increase the number of acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to improve both water quality and fish habitat; encourage the Whatcom Conservation District to utilize available state and federal funds to supplement CREP



2.4.2 Explore the development of a “working buffers” program: working buffers are an approach to riparian conservation that combines stream restoration with low-impact food production in a way that incentivizes sustainable stewardship of the buffer area by the landowner



2.4.3 Explore the development of a flexible and reasonable “working buffers” program: working buffers are an approach to riparian conservation that combines stream restoration with low-impact food production in a way that incentivizes sustainable stewardship of the buffer area by the landowner



2.4.4 Ensure public landscape maintenance by the county adheres to best management practices—including integrated pest management, no-spray road maintenance, and the use of native plants—and does not negatively affect food production and water sources. Evaluate and update as best management practices change.



Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land

Policy



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Goal 2: Objectives & Actions

Category

2.5 Protect and restore natural ecosystems and wildlife corridors that community members rely on for food provision

2.5.1 Increase the number of acres enrolled in the CREP to engage more agricultural producers and landowners to plant native trees to enhance wildlife corridors and protect fish-bearing streams and rivers



2.5.2 Secure additional funds and increase capacity in the Whatcom Conservation District's Fish Passage program to convert culverts on county land that currently prevent fish passage



2.5.3 Secure additional funds and increase staff capacity in the Whatcom Conservation District to support programs to improve riparian buffer installations on properties that aren't eligible for CREP, such as the Salmon Recovery program



2.5.4 Prioritize conservation easement purchases that maintain habitat corridor connectivity to support populations of wildlife for hunting



2.5.5 Enforce the Open Space public access program to enable foraging, hunting, etc. on land enrolled in this program

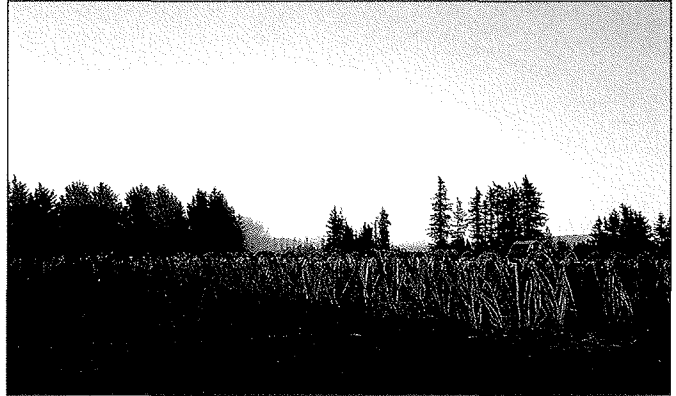


Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

The benefits of building a strong local food economy are clear: Farms and local food businesses boost employment and income in the community; buy from other local businesses, which increases economic activity; and build the local tax base that supports infrastructure and services. Although Whatcom County boasts some important local food system assets, significant opportunity exists to grow this sector of the economy to meet growing consumer demand for local and regional products. For this economic growth to support a more equitable food system, it is critical to center the rights of workers and value their contributions to the food system.

In Whatcom County, farming and fishing are significant contributors to the local economy:

- The market value of all agricultural products sold in 2017 was over \$372 million.^{xxiii}
- In 2017, 210 berry farms in Whatcom County accounted for \$112 million in sales (30% of the county total), and 103 dairy facilities generated \$180 million in sales (48% of the county total).^{xxiv}
- 41% of farms in the county are small farms with fewer than nine acres in production.^{xxv}
- 15% of farms sell directly to consumers—through farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), or farm stands.^{xxvi}
- The county has 51 businesses that are registered as “fishing” businesses and 12 registered as “shellfish” businesses.^{xxvii}



In 2017, 210 berry farms in Whatcom County accounted for \$112 million in sales (30% of the county total).

In Whatcom County, there are many businesses adding value to raw agricultural and seafood products, processing them both for export and for local sale, including 62 licensed food processing businesses and 84 commissary kitchens. However, kitchen access and space can be limited, and some industries lack the infrastructure to meet demand of both consumers and producers.

Farmers raising animals for meat and poultry struggle to find butchers. The main USDA-certified meat processing facility has a waitlist longer than three years.^{xxviii} Those in the seafood industry are met with regulatory and processing space barriers to scaling operations.

There are 560 businesses in the food services and accommodations sector, which includes full-service restaurants; limited-service eating places; special food services, such as food service contractors, caterers, and mobile food services; and drinking places.^{xxix}

Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

All of these food system sectors — from farming to food service — employ thousands of Whatcom County residents.

There are 7,544 farm laborers working on Whatcom County farms, with a total payroll of \$76,345,000.^{xxx} The H-2A temporary agricultural workers program allows Whatcom County farmers to hire non-U.S. labor. In 2020, there were 75 certified H-2A workers in the county (down from a peak of 496 in 2015).^{xxxi}

These 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.^{xxxii}

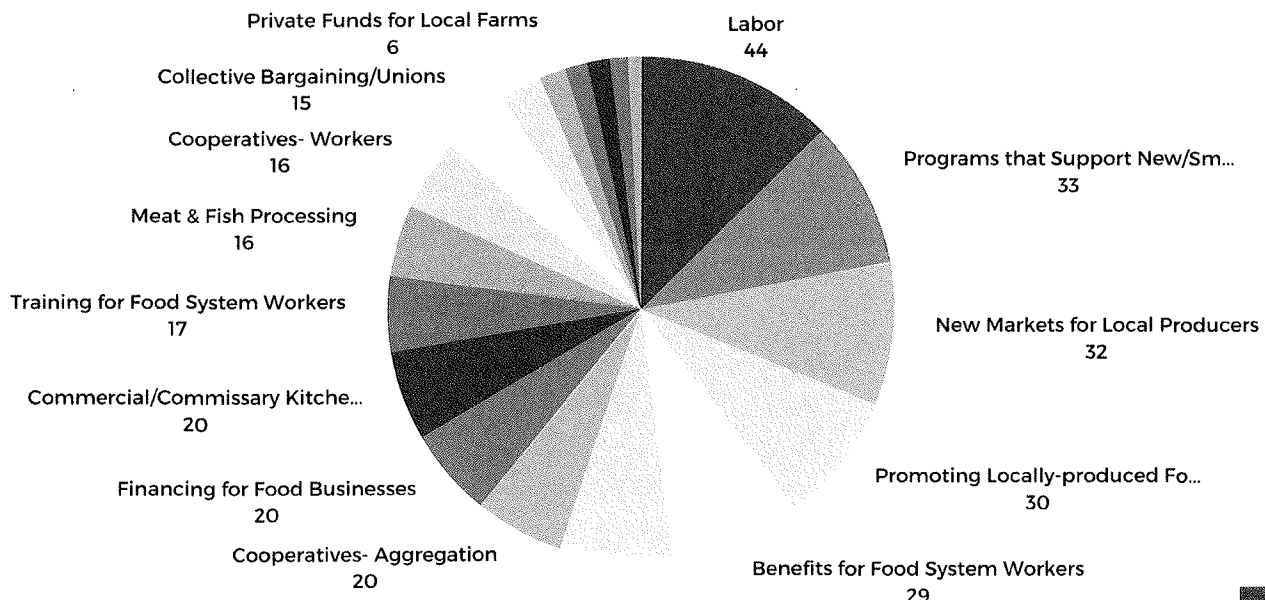
There is an increasing demand for locally produced food in Whatcom County. Dockside Market, which offers direct seafood sales twice a month, has grown rapidly since it was launched in 2020. The biggest farmers market in Whatcom County is the Bellingham Farmers Market, which has seen total sales double in the past decade, including a 16% increase from the 2021 to 2022 market seasons.^{xxxiii}

Throughout the community engagement process that informed this plan, there was much discussion of building a robust local food system for residents in the region.

Participants spoke to the need to increase the supply of locally grown food by supporting farmers and food entrepreneurs with food system infrastructure for processing. Participants also spoke to the need to remove barriers that keep locally grown food inaccessible for some residents by utilizing the marketing tools and buying power of local governments to build demand. There is a need to build a skilled labor force for agriculture and food processing and to support the next generation of farmers. And in all of these sectors, residents of Whatcom County were interested in supporting local and cooperative ownership of these food system businesses.

Through the Whatcom County Food System Plan, we have an opportunity to collaborate with community partners, small businesses, and cooperatives to build a vibrant and resilient local food system.

Key themes from community engagement sessions:



Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

Policy



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Goal 3: Objectives & Actions

Category

3.1 Increase the supply of local, sustainable food produced in Whatcom County

3.1.1 Secure additional funds to support partner organizations that provide small grants and low-interest loans to producers and processors who distribute products locally and who may not be eligible for traditional sources of financing



3.1.2 Create and expand the network of shared-use kitchens and processing facilities for food businesses, food producers, and retailers



3.1.3 Support the development of an affordable, local, commercially licensed smoker/processor for seafood, which will reduce carbon emissions from long-distance export



3.1.4 Collaborate with tribes to explore opportunities to increase our fisheries resource (i.e., salmon run size, and wild and enhanced salmon) in Whatcom County



3.1.5 Coordinate and support training for meat processing workforce development, including for custom slaughter butchers and Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) meat cutters, to increase the number of meat processors in the county.



3.1.6 Analyze and revise county permitting and zoning processes related to meat processing to remove barriers for small-scale butchers and WSDA meat cutters



3.1.7 Remove barriers to and support the development of additional food distribution and processing centers in the county



3.1.8 Support innovative methods to increase the supply of local food (i.e., aquaculture, vertical farming, etc.)



Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

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Goal 3: Objectives & Actions

Category

3.2 Remove barriers to and build consumer demand for locally produced agricultural products and facilitate markets for local producers and food businesses

3.2.1 Increase local food procurement for county departments and county-subsidized facilities and programs (such as childcare and senior meal programs)



3.2.2 Direct a portion of the Whatcom County Lodging Tax Advisory Committee (LTAC) funds toward supporting events that celebrate and enhance area agriculture, fishing, and food activities to build demand for locally grown and sourced foods; potential events could include Seafeast, Whatcom County Farm Tour, Eat Local Month Restaurant Week, as well as smaller farmers markets (e.g., Ferndale, Lynden, etc.)



3.2.3 Encourage cities within the county to waive all applicable fees for farmers and seafood markets and mobile markets, especially those in low-income areas



3.2.4 Invest in a relationship with the Port of Bellingham to identify opportunities to collaborate on food system projects that build demand for locally produced foods



3.3 Expand workforce development and readiness to prepare community members for successful food system employment

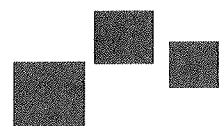
3.3.1 Fund and develop a county network of skilled workers to host the creation of skill, technical training, and apprenticeship opportunities within and outside current institutional education systems in the county (i.e., Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College)



3.3.2 Support the Workforce Training and Retraining Advisory Group at Whatcom Community College; encourage inclusion/appointment of community organizations led by/for essential food systems workers



3.3.3 Work with the Washington State Department of Commerce tribal liaison and collaborate with the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe to expand access to workforce development opportunities for their tribal members



Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy

Policy



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Goal 3: Objectives & Actions

Category

3.4 Support new and beginning farmers in acquiring farmland and support effective transition of farmland to the next generation of farmers

3.4.1 Advocate for the creation of a beginning farmer tax credit at the state level that would provide sales tax and use tax exemptions for beginning farmers



3.4.2 Advocate for the creation of a real estate excise tax exemption at the state level for transfer of ownership between current landowners and beginning farmers



3.4.3 Provide funding for the conservation easement program's buy-protect-sell initiative to continue the program once federal grant funds are exhausted; the buy-protect-sell initiative helps make land more affordable for beginning farmers



3.4.4 Develop a program to connect landowners who are either enrolled in or eligible for the Open Space: Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land program with farmers who are interested in leasing land



3.5 Invest in local and cooperative ownership of food system businesses

3.5.1 Support, collaborate with, and promote community development organizations that offer succession planning, employee ownership options (e.g., employee stock ownership programs, cooperatives, etc.), and similar business succession and retirement programs to preserve jobs, local ownership, and civic engagement



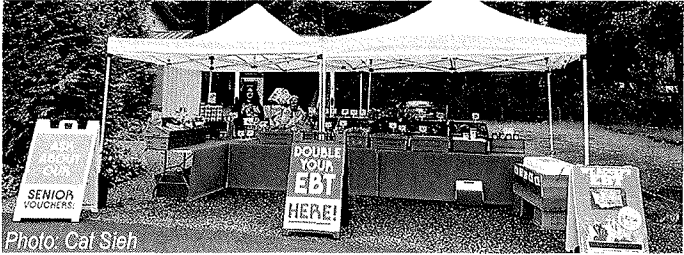
3.5.2 Provide grant writing support and technical assistance to cooperatively owned food and agriculture businesses applying for state and federal funding



Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

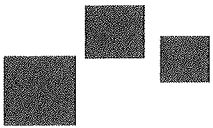
Fresh, healthy, local food is abundant in Whatcom County, but it is inaccessible to a significant number of our residents. In particular, food insecurity disproportionately impacts children and families.

- Prior to the pandemic, about 12% of residents were considered food insecure, and some estimate that one in five residents are now food insecure.^{xxxiv}
- An early indicator of rising food insecurity is the number of visits to the food banks in Whatcom County; 2022 has seen the biggest jump in utilization of food banks, a 17% increase.^{xxxv}
- 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.^{xxxvi}
- 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.^{xxxvii}
- SNAP and WIC are state-managed programs that offer food access support in the form of dollars for food purchasing, but users of these programs have fewer options for local, healthy food.
 - Some areas, such as the Foothills area in East County, have an inadequate number of vendors that accept WIC.
 - Of our five farmers markets in Whatcom County, three accept SNAP.^{xxxviii} Users of programs such as SNAP and WIC have fewer options for local, healthy food.
 - The Market Match program offers SNAP users double the dollars for produce purchases at farmers markets that accept SNAP. Unfortunately, matching dollars from the state are decreasing from \$40 per person per market to \$25 per person per market in 2023, while at the same time the cost of food is rising.



Above: There are limited options for SNAP recipients to get local produce.

Left: Open house of Foothills Foodbank, July 2021.



Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

Throughout the community engagement process that informed this plan, ensuring access to healthy food was a top community priority.

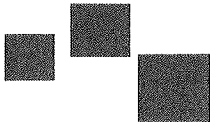
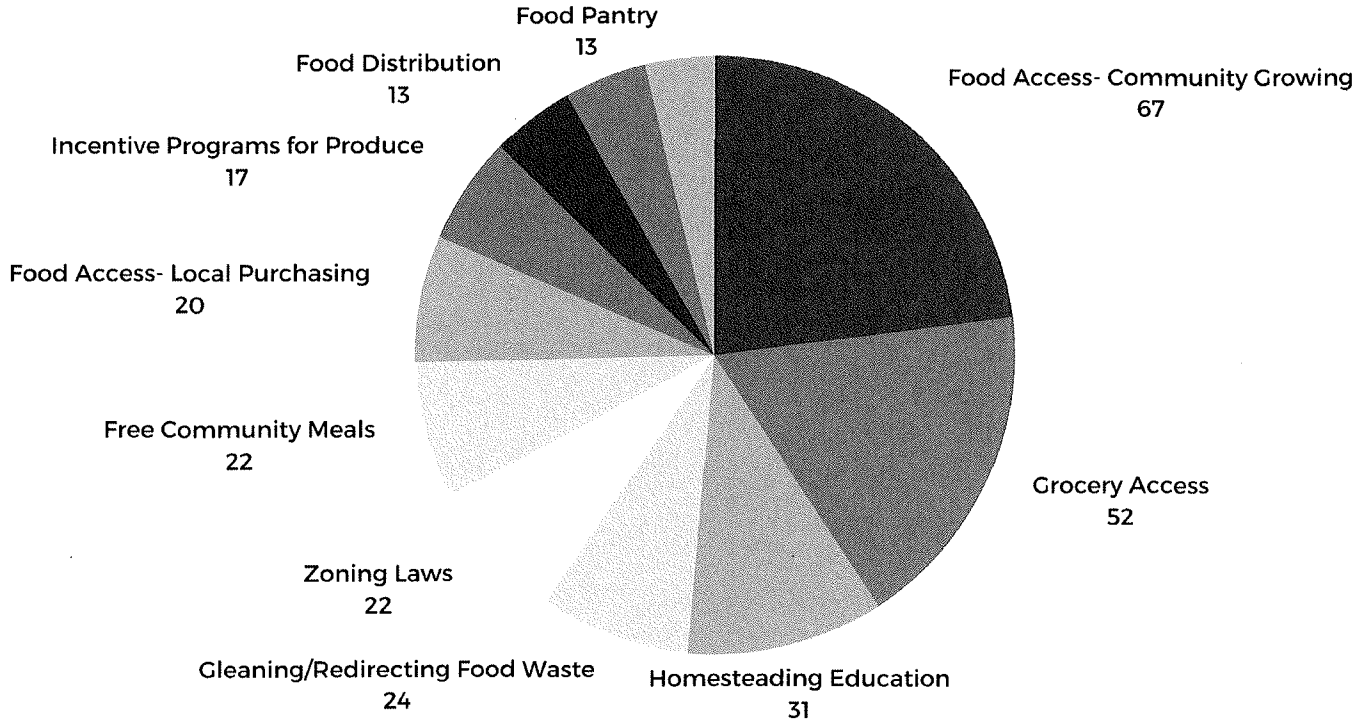
Participants spoke of the need to support the built environment infrastructure for food—grocery stores, commercial kitchens, and food banks. They also spoke of the importance of programs that support community members' access to food—both formal and informal. There was much discussion of the need to reduce wasted food

that could otherwise feed people, and the need to provide education and space for community members to grow their own food.

See [Food System Committee webpage](#) for full community survey and event results.

The Whatcom County Food System Plan provides the opportunity for the county to collaborate with the many organizations working to improve access to healthy food for all residents.

Key themes from community engagement sessions:



Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

Policy



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Goal 4: Objectives & Actions

Category

4.1 Build and design our communities to ensure food access and eliminate food deserts

4.1.1 Assess the policy barriers (i.e., non-compete clauses) that may prevent grocery stores from operating in recognized areas with low access to food



4.1.2 Consider waiving permit fees for grocery stores in USDA-designated low-income/low-access census tracts (aka "food deserts")



4.1.3 Conduct a nonprofit grocery store feasibility study to see if selling surplus food at low cost to food insecure individuals is a viable model for Whatcom County



4.1.4 Increase transportation access to food; locate existing programs along transportation routes and reroute public transits for more equitable access to food access points as necessary



4.1.5 Collaborate with community groups to mitigate the impacts of and eliminate the causes of food deserts



4.1.6 Work with the Whatcom County Food Bank Network to assess the needs at food banks service capacity (i.e., infrastructure, staffing/volunteer capacity, and funding needs); identify opportunities for shared resources



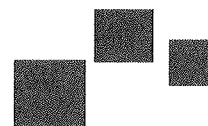
4.1.7 Explore opportunities for more commercial kitchens and cold storage available for community groups addressing food access and food recovery (i.e., food banks, homeless services, neighborhood groups)



4.1.8 Direct county parks and recreation department to explore upgrades to the Senior Center kitchen facilities to increase the capacity of the Senior Meals program; explore opportunities for shared use of these facilities with other community groups addressing food access



4.1.9 Identify and implement strategies like a Healthy Corner Store Initiative program or a Good Food Rebate program/tax incentive for neighborhood retailers and grocery stores to stock and promote nutritionally dense food options, including local fruits and vegetables



Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

Policy



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Goal 4: Objectives & Actions

Category

4.2 Create and promote opportunities for people to grow, prepare, and share their own food

4.2.1 Identify interest, land, and funding to develop more community gardens in low-income/low-access neighborhoods; partner with the WSU Extension Master Gardeners and the City of Bellingham Greenways program to identify opportunities to acquire and expand community seed gardens and community gardens in Bellingham

4.2.2 Increase support for community educational programs for gardening, seed banking, cooking, and food preservation; focus efforts on low-income/low-access areas in the county

4.2.3 Engage tribal partners and cultural liaisons to learn about barriers to and opportunities for hunting, foraging, and fishing as strategies to increase access to healthy food



4.3 Invest in programs that make healthy food more affordable

4.3.1 Adequately fund the Whatcom County Food Bank Network to meet the dramatic increase in food insecure individuals in the county; ensure that a portion of the increased funding to food banks is directed to purchase food directly from Whatcom County producers

4.3.2 Ensure consistent funding for and increase the number of farmers markets and food outlets that accept nutrition incentive programs for SNAP recipients

4.3.3 Work with WIC to expand its services to stores and markets in underserved areas (i.e., the foothills region)

4.3.4 Advocate that the state increase funding in the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition program and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program

4.3.5 Encourage large communal meal sites (community centers, senior centers, workplace cafeterias, etc.) to adopt healthy food procurement policies that prioritize access to healthy, locally grown foods

4.3.6 Support universal school meals, including summer meal programs, that are nutrient-dense and in-line with the principles in this food system plan.



Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all

Policy



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Goal 4: Objectives & Actions

Category

4.4 Scale up food recovery efforts in Whatcom County

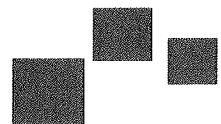
4.4.1 Coordinate efforts and collaboration between food recovery organizations, grocery stores, food banks, and community groups to ensure equitable and consistent food recovery to alleviate conflict over reclaiming food



4.4.2 Advocate for incentives for food businesses and farmers to donate surplus food



4.4.3 Fund and expand the food recovery program



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

Our food system is on the front lines in confronting the challenges of climate change. As one of the largest land uses in our county, agriculture can be a critical force for impacting our climate, for better or for worse.

Many food system activities contribute greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere, which accelerate the warming of our climate. These activities include emissions from fossil fuels used on-farm and in the transport of food, emissions from ranching and animal agriculture, and the greenhouse gas emissions released when wasted food decomposes. However, there are also unique opportunities available as part of our food system to capture carbon and cool a warming planet.

Also, 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.

The objectives and actions in this goal speak to *both* the need to reduce the emissions from food system and farming activities *and* the need to prepare our agricultural and food systems for the impacts of a changing climate.



This aerial photo shows Whatcom fields from the November 2021 floods.

In particular, Whatcom County is projected to experience the following climate changes, which will have a direct impact on the food system:^{xxxix}

A warmer region:

- By the 2050s, average annual temperatures in Puget Sound are projected to increase by 4.2°F to 5.5 °F under low- and high-emissions scenarios, respectively, compared to the 1970–99 average of 46.5 °F. By 2100, they are projected to be 5.5°F to 9.1°F warmer under low- and high-emissions scenarios, respectively.
- By the 2050s, under a low-emissions scenario, projections indicate at least 1 to 2 days per year in Whatcom County and at least 2 to 3 days per year in Bellingham specifically when the heat index is above 90°F, compared to zero days historically (1971–2000). By 2100, under a high-emissions scenario, those numbers are projected to rise to as many as 11 days per year in Whatcom County and 20 days in Bellingham.

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

More frequent and intense precipitation:

- Average annual precipitation in Puget Sound is projected to increase by 4 to 5% by the 2050s under low- and high-emissions scenarios, respectively, and another 2% by the 2080s under both emissions scenarios (relative to the 1970–99 average).
- Under a high-emissions scenario, heavy precipitation events west of the Cascades are projected to increase in intensity by 22% by the 2080s—meaning they will have 22% more rain. Meanwhile, those rain events will become more frequent, occurring five more days per year by the 2080s. (There is more rain in the winter months and less in the summer months.^{x1})

More frequent flooding and warmer rivers:

- Mountains draining into Puget Sound are projected to have 29% less snowpack by the 2040s.
- Flooding in the Nooksack River is expected to become more intense and frequent.
- Under a moderate emissions scenario, streamflow in the Nooksack River during a 100-year flood event (1% probability) is projected to increase by 27% by the 2080s. Under a moderate emissions scenario, summer minimum streamflow in the Nooksack River is projected to decrease by 27% by the 2080s relative to the 1970–99 average, and summertime stream temperatures are projected to increase, reaching levels that exceed the thermal tolerance of most fish species.

Rising sea levels:

- By 2100, relative sea level rise in the Bellingham area is projected to be between 1.5 (likely range of 0.9–2.1 feet) and 1.9 feet (likely range of 1.3–2.7 feet) with a 50% likelihood of exceeding those values under low- and high-emissions scenarios, respectively.

Higher risk of wildfire:

- By the 2050s, western Washington is projected to have 12 more days annually with very high fire danger compared to the 1971–2000 average.

Declining air quality:

- In the future, Whatcom County's air quality is likely to decline during periods of increased wildfire activity in the Pacific Northwest, especially during the summer and early fall.
- Warmer temperatures and increases in ozone pollution may reduce Whatcom County's air quality.



East Badger Road and farmland flooded in November 2021.

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

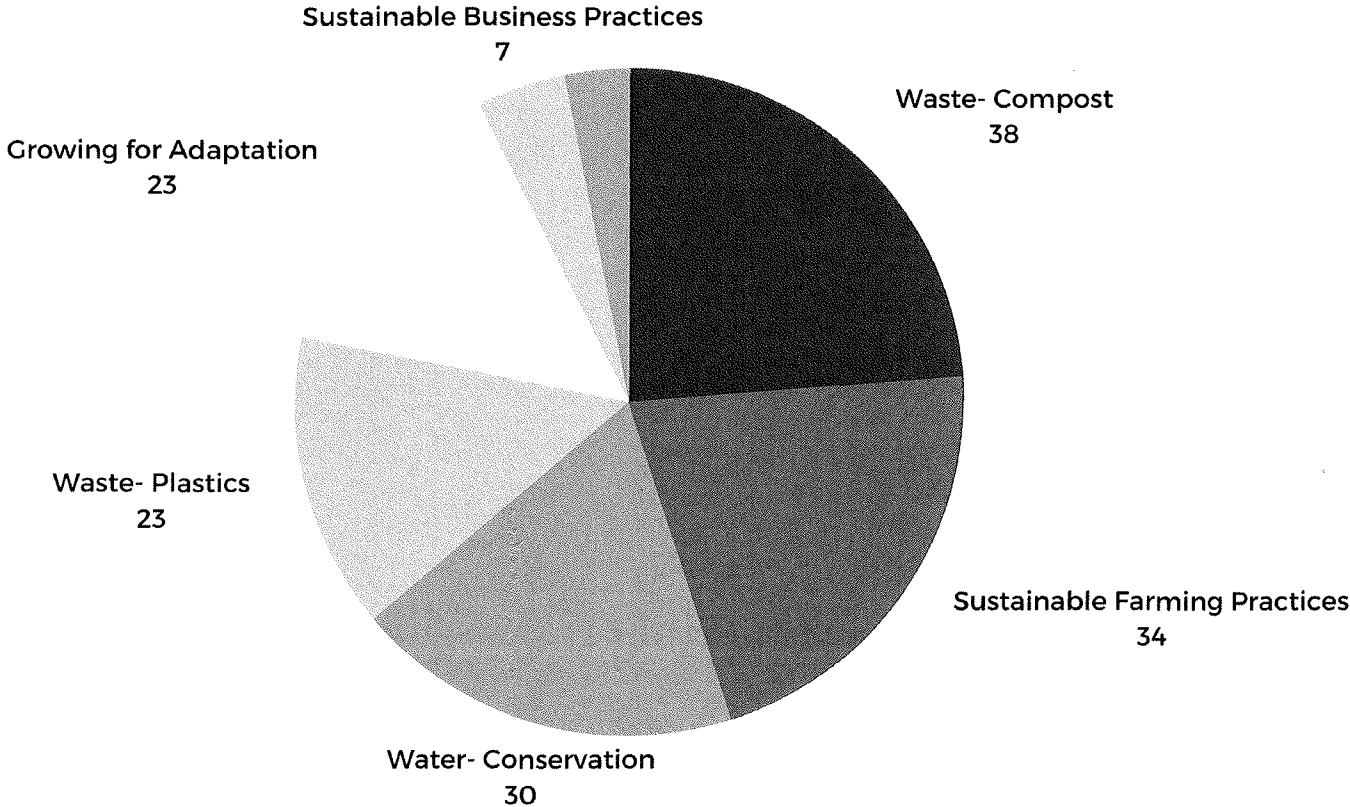
Throughout the community engagement process that informed this plan, climate change was a top concern among participants.

Participants spoke of the need to support farmers' transition to regenerative, sustainable agricultural practices. Also, participants were concerned about food and food-related waste at all levels of the food system. Participants spoke to the need for reduced packaging of food products and additional opportunities for composting services.

There was also much discussion of the impacts on water quality and quantity, which were included in the objectives and actions in goal 2.

The Whatcom County Food System Plan provides the opportunity for the county to collaborate with the many organizations working to improve access to healthy food for all residents.

Key themes from community engagement sessions:



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

Policy



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Goal 5: Objectives & Actions

Category

MITIGATION: Reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture and food system activities that contribute to climate change

5.1 Reduce GHG emissions from farming and food system activities

5.1.1 Support existing programs for energy efficiency improvements and alternative energy solutions for agricultural businesses throughout Whatcom County



5.1.2 Create a recognition program for agricultural businesses that achieve target levels of energy efficiency, conservation, and renewable energy use



5.1.3 Work with livestock producers in the county to reduce methane emissions from activities related to ranching and livestock production



5.1.4 Advocate for government and other incentives to encourage the use of low-emission vehicles on-farm and throughout food transportation systems



5.1.5 Encourage integrated crop and livestock production on farms in a closed loop system to reduce the transport of manure and the use of synthetic fertilizers



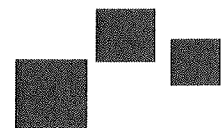
5.1.6 Encourage producers to reduce their use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, the manufacture and transport of which contributes to GHG emissions and to water and soil pollution



5.1.7 Encourage the reduction of short-term plastic use (e.g., plastic mulch) on farms



5.1.8 Encourage producers to participate in the Washington State Conservation Commission's Sustainable Fields and Farms program, a grant program that provides funds and technical assistance to assist farmers in implementing practices that sequester carbon



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



Goal 5: Objectives & Actions Category

5.2 Reduce waste in our food system and specifically reduce food waste by 50 percent

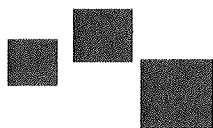
5.2.1 Adopt public procurement policies that guide food waste reduction at county facilities and events; aim for zero-waste events in all county facilities

5.2.2 Support a statewide plastic stewardship program: businesses who produce packaged goods would share the cost of ensuring that those materials are properly recycled

5.2.3 Expand curbside food waste and yard waste pickup and other options for composting countywide

5.2.4 Support recommendations and goals of the [2021 Whatcom Solid and Hazardous Waste Management Plan](#) specific to food waste and recovery:

- Increase support and advertising for the WSU composting education programs through the Master Composting and Recycling program
- Increase recovery of organic materials from multifamily, commercial, and industrial sources
- Periodically assess programs in development and the funds available and reallocate funds on an as-needed basis to meet the implementation priorities for waste reduction, recycling, and composting
- Support and fund commercial education through targeted outreach, commercial waste audits, and technical assistance specifically related to construction/ demolition and food waste



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

Policy



Collaboration



County Leadership



Infrastructure



Education and Programming



Goal 5: Objectives & Actions Category

5.3 Adapt our agricultural production systems and practices to a changing climate
(see also goal 2)

5.3.1 Build on the work many farmers are already doing to promote adoption of farm management practices that maximize soil carbon storage and increase water and nutrient availability



5.3.2 Coordinate state and federal agricultural adaptation resources (e.g., Inflation Reduction Act funds) to support farmers in making informed business decisions in a changing climate



5.3.3 Increase farm resilience to sea level rise, shoreline erosion, and river flooding by protecting and restoring riparian estuary habitat, restoring wetlands, and increasing natural water storage



5.3.4 Encourage increases in research and development of drought- and heat-resistant agricultural crops and flexible infrastructure to support diversified crops



5.3.5 Evaluate the risk of devastating impacts of extreme weather and natural disasters and encourage food producers to diversify their products when economically feasible



5.4 Protect food system workers during extreme weather events

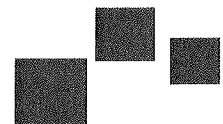
5.4.1 Support local programming and technical assistance for food and farm workers and owners about the impacts of heat stress and wildfire smoke.



5.4.2 Support investments in protective equipment and infrastructure (e.g., respirators, air conditioned and heated break rooms, shade structures) to protect food chain workers during extreme weather events



5.4.3 Ensure the health, safety, and well-being of Whatcom County's essential food system workforce, and provide additional support and resources during extreme weather events, as well as the enforcement of local, state, and federal laws protecting workers.



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

Policy



Collaboration



County Leadership



Infrastructure



Education and Programming



Goal 5: Objectives & Actions

Category

5.5 Fortify our food system against—and support recovery after—climate disruptions

5.5.1 Promote and support local, state, and federal emergency management efforts to provide food system businesses with disaster preparedness and climate resilience resources and tools



5.5.2 Conduct a food supply chain audit to understand where bottlenecks in food distribution/processing exist and what local infrastructure is needed to fill in supply chain gaps in case of climate disruption and natural hazards



5.5.3 Assess existing state and federal programs that help producers recover from natural disasters to identify gaps and opportunities for county action



How will this plan be implemented?

The Food System Plan will serve as a guiding document for Whatcom County for the next ten years (2023–33). A strategic plan is only as strong as its implementation, and to make systemic change, it requires action from all sectors involved—including Whatcom County council members, other local and tribal governments, institutions, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and, most importantly, community members.

The Food System Committee is required by ordinance to oversee the implementation of this plan, identify prioritized actions and funding needs for the plan, ensure ongoing assessment of the needs of the food system, and update the plan at least every three years or as necessary.

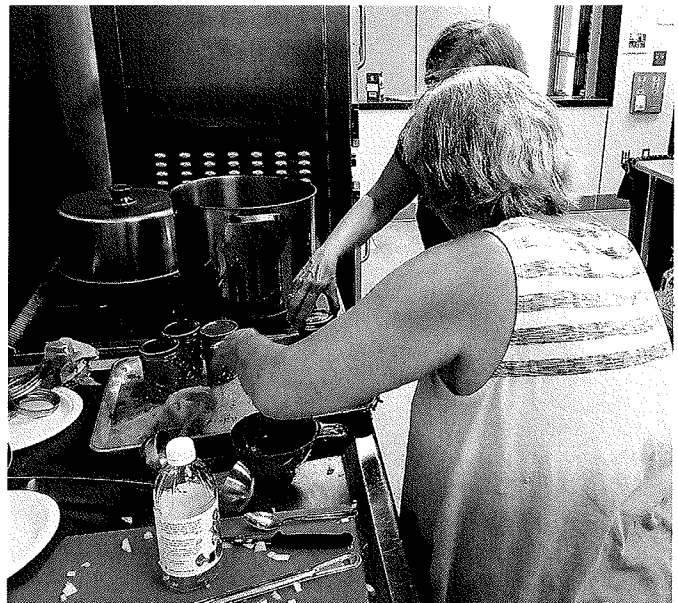
The Food System Committee will advocate for the creation of a full-time food system specialist staff position within Whatcom County government. Having dedicated staff to oversee plan implementation is a key success factor in other priority initiatives of the county. This staff person will lead the committee 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.

Get Involved!

There are many ways to stay up to date and get involved with plan implementation:

- Check the Food System Committee website for updates.
- Participate in a Food System Committee meeting.
- Join the Food System Committee or the Whatcom Food Network.
- Join a mailing list with information about the implementation of the food system plan.
- Join or create a workgroup to implement the actions in this plan.



Canning class.

How will this plan be implemented?

Everything in this plan is important and essential for a sustainable, equitable food system, however, there are over 100 actions in this plan, a daunting amount. Throughout the 2023 winter engagement process, Committee members and community members were asked to identify actions that were most interesting to them and they felt they had capacity to move forward. After a tally, the Cream of the Crop list was created. These are 12 actions that are being highlighted in this plan. Some will be easier to execute than others, but as a whole, they showcase the diversity and caliber of content in the food system plan.

Cream of the Crop: 12 Actions for Prioritization

1.1.2 Improve access to financial tools for food systems development (i.e., access to capital, low interest loans, microloans, grant programs, and other funding opportunities), create funding, partnership, and collaboration opportunities for organizations led by and for BIPOC and other socially disadvantaged communities

5.4.3 Support local, essential farm workers' advocacy for improvements in protections from extreme weather conditions at the state level.

2.1.5 Support land trusts and cooperative projects to develop permanently affordable housing communities that provide farmland access for the residents for commercial and non-commercial local food production. Partner with the Ag program staff in Planning and Development Services to achieve this.

4.2.2 Increase support for community educational programs for gardening, seed banking, cooking, and food preservation. Focus efforts on Low-Income/Low-Access areas in the county.

1.1.1 Remove barriers to engagement in local food programs (i.e., CSAs, farmers markets, Market Match, community gardening, etc.), create funding, partnership, and collaboration opportunities for organizations led by and for BIPOC and other socially disadvantaged communities

3.1.6 Analyze County permitting and zoning processes related to meat processing to remove barriers for small-scale butchers and WSDA meat cutters.

4.3.1 Adequately fund the Whatcom County food bank network to meet the dramatic increase in food insecure individuals in the county. Ensure that a portion of the increased funding to food banks are directed to purchase food directly from Whatcom County producers.

5.1.5 Encourage integrated crop and livestock production on farms in a closed loop system to reduce the transport of manure and the use of synthetic fertilizers.

5.2.3 Expand curbside food waste and yard waste pickup and other options for composting countywide.

5.3.1 Promote adoption of farm management practices that maximize soil carbon storage and increase water and nutrient availability.

5.5.2 Conduct a food supply chain audit to understand where bottlenecks in food distribution/processing exist and what local infrastructure is needed to fill in supply chain gaps in case of climate disruption.

3.1.2 Create and expand the network of shared-use kitchens and processing facilities for food businesses, food producers and retailers.

Endnotes

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