

Foothills Food Summit Report

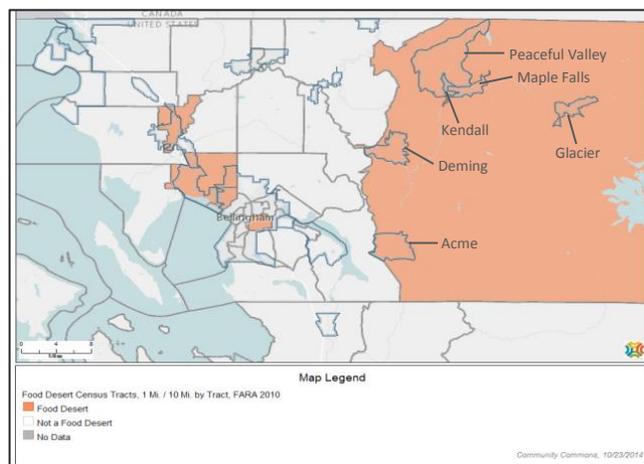
November 12th, 2014

Overview

The “Foothills” refers to the rural area of Eastern Whatcom County which is home to roughly 9,000 people in a geographic area spanning approximately 620 square miles.

The USDA classifies the Foothills as a “food desert,” meaning that there is a high percentage of lower-income residents, and inadequate access to nutritious food. In November of 2014, sixty local residents, farmers, businesses, non-profits, funders, and government agencies, gathered at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center for the

Foothills Food Summit to share information and create partnerships among community leaders. Our common interest: **that all Foothills residents are fed, nourished, and have the resources to access the food they need.**



Map of Whatcom County Food Deserts (in orange). Foothills is the large area located on the right.



The Summit

The Summit was organized by the Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP)* following a series of community listening sessions. At the Summit, leaders shared what had been learned so far, and powerful testimonials were offered from those on the front lines of the issues.

Jerry DeBruin's story:

District Fire Chief Jerry DeBruin brought to light a particularly critical need when he spoke about his past experience responding to an emergency call of diabetic shock. Upon arriving he had discovered that the diabetic shock was caused by the patient being without food for several days because of lack of money and inability to access emergency food providers. Sadly, it is becoming increasingly evident that being forced to go without food is not an isolated occurrence, especially among the elderly and homebound that lack the mobility to use community services.

This Report summarizes the information shared at the Summit, and the exciting solutions that emerged from participants' discussions.

What's Next? In early 2015, the FCFP will draft an Action Plan, reach out to everyone who has expressed an interest, and help facilitate bringing solutions to life.

Food Access: Understanding the Problem

What food access issues are facing residents in the Foothills? Melissa Morin from the Whatcom County Health Department shared the current data to provide a framework of understanding. In the Foothills, food access barriers include:

- **Lack of transportation:** Columbia Valley community members without access to a vehicle are forced to ride WTA busses an estimated 2 hours and 17 minutes into Bellingham for groceries – one way.
- **Distance to grocery stores:** at least 1 in 3 people have low, or no, access to a grocery store. This means there are no full service grocery stores within 10 miles “as the crow flies,” which doesn’t take into account whether a road actually goes to that grocery store within ten miles or not.
- **Lack of healthy options:** most stores in Foothills are convenience stores that lack the adequate infrastructure and/or sales volume to sell many nutritious options at a reasonable price.
- **Cost of food:** combined food costs for common items are considerably more in Foothills. Crossroads Grocer was the closest store to many Foothills residents that carried all the items listed above and had a total cost of \$33.33; Winco’s cost - \$17.29.
- **Poverty:** 21.1% of all Foothills households rely on food stamps and 68% of children at Kendall Elementary qualify for free-and-reduced lunch.

Sumi Suda’s story:

Sumi Suda, an eighth grader in the Mt Baker challenged the grown-ups in the room to consider, “What would it take to transform our school menu? I’m not sure, but I think it would make a difference in more than just our health. I think that when you eat good food you feel better about yourself, like, ‘Good job, Sumi, you just ate a healthy lunch!’ You actually feel proud about your choices and it builds your confidence for lots of other things...I also wonder if the schools could help kids learn about how to eat better, so that when my class grows up, they could be the kinds of parents that know how to make vegetables delicious for their kids”

Testimonials

The human element of the cumulative effect of these barriers was presented through personal stories shared by community members Sumi Suda, Jerry DeBruin, Victoria Mayers and Jessica Bee. These presenters spoke of the struggles of accessing food on a limited budget as well as the state of current school nutrition, which so many families depend upon. Each reported on the negative consequences they have encountered. The reality is that many in the Foothills community regularly skip meals simply because they lack the funds to purchase enough food and/or don’t have transportation to get to locations to buy it or receive emergency food assistance. This causes a heavy burden on people across the age spectrum.

Improving Food Access: Potential Solutions

Barriers to accessing healthy and affordable food can be reduced or eliminated with community leadership. By researching other communities who have struggled with food insecurity in the past and fought to change the food landscape in their rural areas, the FCFP found inspiration and model solutions to use as a foundation. Cheryl Thompson from the Foothills Food Bank gave a glimpse of some of these potential solutions:

- **Expanded Food Bank Infrastructure:** a central hub for food storage and distribution at the EWRRRC and complementary programs. Improved facility at Nooksack Tribe.
- **Expanded Mobile Food Bank:** the use of mobile refrigerated trucks to expand food bank distributions to high need locations at convenient times in Foothills.
- **Expanded Meals on Wheels:** expanded service, specifically in Foothills, to reduce the amounts of homebound and elderly that go without food.
- **Expanded Hot Meals Program:** more organizations offering hot, nutritious foods to individuals and families in need.
- **Summer Food Sites:** a Summer Feeding Program (a minimum of 8 weeks) that serves hot meals with healthier options to school age children, in more locations.
- **Expanded Winter/Spring Pantry Program:** a Winter/Spring Pantry Program with higher quality foods that includes Harmony Elementary School in addition to efforts at Acme and Kendall schools.
- **Backpack Program:** a weekly backpack program where children are sent home with a backpack full of nutritious foods each weekend to supplement their parents pantries, ensuring kids come to school well fed and ready to learn.
- **Expanded Farm-to-School and addition of Farm-to-Preschool:** food education to all grades that incorporates growing, cooking and nutrition education in the cafeteria, in the classroom and at home.
- **Expanded Community Garden Network:** all Foothills community members have access to a garden plot where they can grow their own produce if they do not have access to one at home.
- **Mobile Farmers' Market:** a mobile farmers' market that travels to various locations in Whatcom County selling locally farmed produce at specified locations during specified times, including schools and libraries.
- **Buying Club:** Foothills residents pooling their resources to take advantage of wholesale pricing when purchasing from local distributors.
- **Full Service Grocery Store/Food Co-op:** a full service grocery store with a wide selection of affordably priced goods in a convenient Foothills location.
- **Cooking and Nutrition Classes:** frequent community cooking classes that teach Foothills residents how to use healthy ingredients in nutritious meals.

Summit Discussion

The primary purpose of the Summit was to gather leaders together to imagine creative solutions and discuss the resources it might take to create healthy food access in the Foothills.

Following the presentations and delicious refreshments donated by the Community Food Co-op, participants joined in a “World Café” process to share their ideas. Moving around the room and joining in discussions with different combinations of people, three key questions were discussed.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does healthy food access mean to you?
2. If you had a dream of what could happen here in the Foothills, what would that be?
3. What is the first step you or your organization could take to help move something forward?

The table discussions were recorded on paper and were also shared to the whole group at the end of the session. Highlights from the report-outs included:

- **Expand the East County Regional Resource Center** as a food hub that houses multiple community programs and services. Resources and programs could include:
 - Foothills Food Bank, a farmers’ market, cooking and nutrition classes, community meals, prep site for Meals on Wheels and a mobile food bank/farmers’ market, a gymnasium, expanded summer meal program, WIC services, etc.
- **Educate children about gardening, cooking and nutrition at a young age** to facilitate healthy eating for a lifetime. Taste is an acquired trait, and if children learn young that healthy food tastes good, they will have a strong foundation to build upon for the remainder of their lives.
- **Host multi-generational meals** to build community across the age spectrum. Combine cooking classes with these community meals.
- **Encourage victory gardens, community gardens and food bank gardens** to empower people with the skills to grow their own food and increase the amount of fresh produce available to residents of Foothills.
- **Use mobile food delivery options to bring food to people**, instead of having people come to the food. These mobile options could include a mobile farmers’ market and/or food bank that travels throughout the Foothills with specific distribution sites and times. Included with this could be a “glean mobile” that would pick up excess produce from farmers’ and community gardeners and deliver it to Foothills Food Bank for later distribution.
- **Offer more local and fresh food, with taste tests and recipes at food banks, schools, and other outlets** to increase the exposure to nutritious foods. Healthy, budget-friendly cookbooks could be created and given away or sold to help families incorporate new ways of eating.
- **Help address diabetes in the tribal community**, by promoting gardening, healthy eating, and traditional plants to improve overall health and to help people make sound nutritional choices. Involving people suffering from diabetes in these gardens and other programs could have a significant impact on those who are at the highest risk.

Conclusion

It will take a cohesive effort from the community and the implementation of many of the ideas generated at the Summit to create a food landscape that ensures all Foothills residents are fed, nourished and can access healthy food. Luckily, there is the will and the way. After the Summit, one of the participants sent this email which sums up the spirit of the day...

“It was a wonderful moment for me. Over the past six months two key words keep coming to the forefront of my mind...community and transformation. I’ve come to learn that I tend to get tunnel vision about details and results. Yes, these things are within the nature of my work and responsibilities, but they don’t give me much lift. Before two key events [during] these past three months I found myself praying for just one thing, one result. I prayed that we would all have a profound sense of belonging. I wanted everyone to feel like ‘this is my place and these are my people.’ And this prayer was answered. I sensed and experienced great alignment in the room yesterday as well as compelling needs for transformation. I would like to be a part of this.”

- Jeff Voltz, Northwest Agricultural Business Association (NABC)



Foothills Food Summit Attendees

First Name	Last Name	Organization
Karla	Atwood	Mt. Baker School District
Jessica	Bee	East Whatcom Regional Resource Center
Marjie	Bell	Local Food Works
Rebecca	Boonstra	East Whatcom Community Council
Nancy	Boschma	East Whatcom Regional Resource Center
Matthew	Brouwer	Opportunity Council
Maureen	Brown	Foothills Resident
Sandra	Bura	Nooksack Tribe Diabetes Program
Charlie	Burleigh	Mt. Baker School District
Beth	Chisholm	WSU Extension
Mike	Cohen	Bellingham Food Bank
Jerry	DeBruin	Kendall Fire Department
Michael	Deitering	Cloud Mountain Farm Center
Terry	Drussel	Foothills Resident
Dave	Finet	Opportunity Council
Javier	Flores	Opportunity Council
Austin	Fowler	Food Lifeline
Ellen	Gehling	Bellingham Food Bank Board
Elyse	Guizetti	Common Threads
Dave	Halladay	Foothills Resident
Ryley	Haveman	Whatcom County Health Department, AmeriCorps VISTA
Anne-Marie	Impero	Friends of the North Fork Library
Mauri	Ingram	Whatcom Community Foundation
Sue	Koenig	Foothills Resident
Deborah	Lubbe	Lubbe Organic Farms
Terri	Maik	Jerry H Walton Foundation
Amy	Margolis	Everybody's/South Fork Valley Community Association
Jeff	Margolis	Everybody's/South Fork Valley Community Association
Victoria	Mayers	Nooksack Tribe
Julie	Meyers	Whatcom County Council on Aging
Kelly	Molaski	Whatcom County Health Department WIC
Melissa	Morin	Whatcom County Health Department
Astrid	Newell	Whatcom County Health Department
Holly	O'Neil	Facilitator
Wendy	Ouellette	Kendall Elementary
Debbie	Paton	Opportunity Council
Russ	Pfeiffer-Hoyt	Mt. Baker School District
Laura	Plaut	Common Threads
Wendy	Porter	Whatcom County Health Department WIC
Karen	Reich	Foothills Food Bank Board
Pat	Rimbault	Echo Valley Farms
Katharine	Ryan	Food Lifeline

Carol	Simmer	Whatcom County Council on Aging
Helen	Solem	Sumas River Farm
Mardi	Solomon	Whatcom Farm to School
Becca	Taber	Sustainable Connections
Cheryl	Thompson	Foothills Food Bank Board
Kurt	Thompson	Foothills Resident
Dani	Turk	Food Lifeline
Kelly	Vogel	East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, AmeriCorps VISTA, OC
Jeff	Voltz	Northwest Agricultural Business Center
Sue	Webber	SWFC, Whatcom Community Foundation
Richard	Whitson	Whatcom County Water District #13
Erin	Wrightson	Common Threads
Vern	Yadon	Kendall Chapel

***Foothills Community Food Partnership Members:**

Cheryl Thompson – Foothills Food Bank Board

Melissa Morin – Whatcom County Health Department

Kelly Vogel – East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, AmeriCorps VISTA for Opportunity Council

Wendy Ouellette – Kendal Elementary Family Resource Coordinator

Marjie Bell – Local Food Works

Ryley Haveman – Whatcom County Health Department, AmeriCorps VISTA

Holly O’Neil – Representing both Whatcom Farm-to-School and the Bellingham Food Bank