



# Food System Committee

Tuesday, July 23rd, 2024

4:30-6:00 PM

Hybrid: In-person at 509 Girard St, Admin Conference Room and via Zoom

## Minutes

### **Members Present:**

Name	Sector	Present
Margaret Gerard	Local Sales Farming	
Nikki Oleson	Processing/Distribution	X
Sierra Crook	Food Access	X
Noelle Beecroft	Nutrition/ Public Health	X
Sean Hopps	Labor	X
Trevor Gearhart	Natural Resources	X
Rhys-Thorvald Hansen	Whatcom Food Network	X
Vacant	Fishing	
Rob Dhaliwal	Export Sales Farming	

**Others Present:** Trever Mullins, Louise Trapp, Elli Haron, Laura Ridenour,

**Call to order:** Rhys-Thorvald Hansen started the meeting at 4:34pm.

### **Land Acknowledgement**

### **Determination of Quorum**

Quorum met

### **Approval of minutes**

Noelle motioned at 4:38pm to approve June 25<sup>th</sup> minutes. Trevor seconded at 4:38. All approved.

### **Public Comment**

- Elli Haron, a member from Agricultural committee, wanted to reiterate that our two committees should collaborate on working towards mutual goals within the respective plans.
- Rhys got in touch with their contact over at Planning for an update on the timeline surrounding the Comprehensive Plan. We will likely hear back in September. Rhys to keep folks in the loop.
- Rhys and Ali were invited to meet with those at the City of Bellingham that are working on the city's Comprehensive Plan. They are eager to outline some overlapping causes, goals and opportunities for future collaboration.
- Laura wanted to pass on the message that Ali is available if any backend support is needed.
- Whatcom Food Network has a new grant to support engagement and technical support in developing the market match program and some emergent items

### **Task Force Reports**

The task forces were created for each goal area and has a FSC member as lead.

- Task Force 1 - Equity: Rhys & Sean have been touching base informally to set an August meeting.
- Task Force 2 - Land and Waterways: Trevor and the task force did not meet this month, they are still working on building momentum with members.
- Task force 3 - Economy: Rhys has tried yet another round of attempting to find a time when everyone is available to meet but has been unsuccessful and is trying again.
- Task force 4 - Food Access: Chris Elder, Ali, Laura, and Noelle had been drafting a budget request to county for unlimited market match but are going to look for an alternative funding source. The hope is to have funding for unlimited market match for Bellingham Farmers Market, Twin Sisters and Everson. Previous years market match programs have been funded through ARPA and Peace Health, which have since ended. Chris and Louise will discuss options more.
  - The taskforce met on July 11<sup>th</sup> and shared some emerging issues, things to celebrate around food access, and opportunities for networking. North Fork Freedgedge will be launching in the next few months.
  - Whatcom County Food Bank Network was invited to present to county council for their dual funding request with Twin Sisters Market, since they have both have also lost their ARPA dollars that have helped support their programs and staff.
    - Councilmember Scanlon will be working with Mike Cohen on how to proceed.
  - The task force also discussed how to invite folks in and will be drafting a letter to send out to community members that may want to join.
  - Working on logistics like tracking, reporting data and best ways to communicate.
  - Rhys provided kudos to the food access task force for jumping in full force to their work and that they are setting a great example for the other task forces.
- Task Force 5 - Climate Resilience: shares the same members as task force 2, thus did not meet.

Rhys has received inquiries as to the process of elevating letters of support, endorsements, comments, initiatives, and the like that come to committee members.

- Ideally those things would first go to task force for discussion and decide if it should be brought to the committee for endorsement or not or how the taskforce is leaning.

### **Debrief of Discussion with Director Erika Lautenbach re: Budget Request**

- Laura and Louise and Rhys met with Erika and learned that while she is supportive of the work in spirit, the department has no way to backfill roll Ali's previous position and will not support an internal department request. Thus, the committee must look for funds to support the food specialist position directly from county council or other sources.
- Laura noted that the support for implementation and this position has been going on for years and community members want to ensure the Food Systems Plan doesn't just sit on the shelf.
  - This momentum to support the committee and Food Systems work has coincided with Ali's position being changed and the lack of funding for a dedicated specialist.
  - The county has approved and agreed with the Food Systems Plan but what will be their actual commitment to the ordinance and realization of the plan.
  - Chris Elder, who now in works in Public Works but previously Planning and food systems planning before that, has been able to step in and provide support in ways Louise's position doesn't allow, which has been greatly appreciated.
- Sierra asked what are people's perspectives on the shift at the county level wherein there was previously high investment but now there isn't. Is there any specific cause?
  - Louise detailed that there have been some rough times with the county budget. The sales tax projections didn't meet predictions and ARPA dollars that have supported so many

- positions are no longer available. The county now needs to find budget within the general fund for these necessary positions, that don't have another source of funding.
- Erika is looking at long range strategic work that Health and Community Services needs to prioritize and encouraged the committee to not give up on their work and advocacy.
  - This is just a speed bump in the years long process and keeping the enthusiasm and relationships with county leadership will be key. There could be a time when there will be capacity/budget for the position and other support/staffing.
  - Chris Elder has a lot of passion and knowledge for this work and will be working with Louise to discuss ideas for state or federal funding for the dedicated position. She is also asking for any comments, questions, or support that committee members may have.
- Noelle agrees about continuing to advocate with county leadership as well as looking for alternate ways to still have a Food Specialist working on the County Food Systems Plan
    - Kitsap county is doing food systems work through AmeriCorps but they don't often have the best pay and other issues that come with it. There is a need to think of other creative ways to fund this vital role.
      - Rhys and Laura stated that the position needs be held as a county position because it is part of the Food Systems Plan to have a county staff member as a specialist to track funds and data across departments and that role cannot be reasonably passed to someone else.
      - It is the county's responsibility to follow through with what they approved, this role and the need for policy integration.
    - Partnerships are absolutely still important in this process but there is a clear need to implement a county level plan with a dedicated county FTE. Health will be the one to administer funds for market match and track the data that can be included in the annual reporting cycle and tracked alongside other plans.
  - Sierra wanted to know that given this shift on the county level does that translate to us shifting our focus at the committee level? Do we prioritize advocacy? Does it change our strategy and priorities given these budget restrictions?
    - Rhys is scheduling a meeting with Councilmember Galloway and will be presenting to the Health and Public Works Committee on August 6<sup>th</sup> on how this divestment will significantly slow if not stop years of community engagement and advocacy.
    - The committee has to think of what it can responsibly engage with and take on within this new reality and climate as mostly volunteers without the weight of the health department behind it.
  - Sean detailed that essential farm and food worker priorities and collaborations won't be affected. This divestment is an articulation of the county's priorities and it could be an opportunity to educate constituents and community members and find more support.
  - Again, there is an incredible value in this position being a county employee due to the amount of cross departmental, committee, and commission collaboration it will require.
  - There has been steady encouragement from Director Lautenbach, Louise, Councilmember Scanlon, and Ali to keep advocating as if there is a budget to request from because there could easily be a time when funding becomes available. It has happened in the past with previous requests for market match programs.

### **Debrief of Discussion with Jon Scanlon**

- Councilmember Scanlon was disappointed but not surprised of the divestment of the Food Specialist position for this biennium budget and suggested looking for creative solutions while keeping an ear to the ground and continually reminding the county of its obligation. He cares a lot about the accessibility of the public process and recognizes that this is over 5-10 years of community organizing and advocacy work being held up due to budget restraints.

- Laura reminded us that right now we are in a reactionary period of processing this news but once we settle in and learn more we will get a bit more creative with problem solving.
  - For instance: market match programs in Seattle are funded through the city's sweetened beverage tax. We need county-wide spanning systems and infrastructure rather than program level solutions from community members and non-profits. Some municipalities even have a public utility district dedicated to their food infrastructure.
- Rhys inquired if committee members should spend more time advocating or turn the focus towards other funding resources.
  - Noelle wants to take a double prong approach. The committee should see what other municipalities are doing in an operationalized way to meet their comprehensive and food system goals and so as to avoid that year to year fight for budget.
  - Sean noted that we should invite community partners into these convos and uplift their voices to ensure that the county is held accountable for what was agreed upon.
- Sierra wanted to know others opinion on where we could best put our energy within our advocacy. Should we focus on reminding the county of their accountability or connecting with other initiatives that the county is prioritizing in this and future budgets?
  - Rhys noted that the committee did have a goal to move to quarterly reports and should ask for 10-15 minutes of time in September to remind council of our presence, goals, the information we have to share and how we are contributing to county-wide goals.
  - Research will also be done into other ways the committee can tag alongside and support other county priorities while still working towards our goals.
- This month and the next conversations may be circling back around and we will learn more about other departments concerning budgets and we will have a bit more clarity as to funding priorities.

### **Next Steps**

- The previously established work plan was to meet in September to talk about the plan for 2025.
  - The committee should keep in mind that as part of that we wanted to solicit public engagement and feedback so that we can use it to prioritize what the committee should be looking at, what to elevate to leadership and the resources that may be needed.
- Rhys is taking any comments or requests to collaborate/co-present from committee members for the presentation to the Health and Public Works Committee
- Rhys is also taking any comments or questions to bring up with Councilmember Galloway and will do their best to keep folks in the loop.
- Research on alternate funding sources and how other municipalities have implemented a food specialist position can be focused within taskforces while looking for overlap with the others.
- Reach out to those that haven't been able to attend the last meetings to attend the next one so everyone can have input on plans and solutions given the lack of funding from the county.
- The committee has been unable to focus on replacing the vacant fisheries seat due to the budget news.

### **Wrap Up**

Next meeting is August, 23rd at 4:30pm. Meeting adjourned at 5:50 pm.