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East Whatcom County
Food Landscape Assessment:
Qualitative Update



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Introduction

Working in partnership with the Whatcom County Health Department, I conducted eighteen key informant interviews and administered twenty-five open-ended surveys in East Whatcom County (EWC) from August to October of 2013. The primary purpose of these surveys and key informant interviews was to assess the community's sense of food security, the barriers EWC residents face in accessing food, and to develop an understanding of how EWC would like address food insecurity moving forward.

From these key informant interviews, I have broken findings into two main categories: (1) Barriers to Access Food, and (2) Community Assets. Within **barriers to accessing food**, key informants identified poverty, lack of transportation, cost of food, distance to grocery stores, and lack of healthy food options as the primary barriers facing EWC residents. Interviewees' **primary areas for concern** were young children, youth, the elderly, single-parent families, and the Peaceful Valley and Paradise neighborhoods specifically. These groups were all uniformly identified as the populations facing the greatest food insecurity.

The second theme identified, **community assets**, will be crucial to take into account when moving forward to increase food security. The EWC neighborhoods have a strong sense of community. While each neighborhood has its own identity and its own characteristics, being neighborly, knowing the people in your community, and giving your time to help others were common themes identified by interviewees in each neighborhood.

Barriers to Accessing Food

Nearly all interviewees stated that many EWC residents are food insecure. However, most interviewees did not feel that as a whole the EWC *community* is food insecure. The prevailing sentiment among interviewees was that as a community, EWC has a relatively healthy food system. Because many EWC residents travel to Bellingham and other County towns on a regular basis, interviewees felt that the EWC community has access to food. However, despite sufficient community-level access to food, many *individuals* and *families* remain food insecure. The root of this food insecurity for many interviewees is economical. Interviewees shared many personal stories of struggles with living on limited incomes, and the struggle to keep their families fed. Interviewees also shared personal stories from their friends and neighbors; people that they have seen and who they continue to see struggle to make ends meet. Although a small handful of interviewees did not find community *or* individual food security to be an issue, the majority of interviewees did feel that without current state and federal financial assistance, and without community programs, many EWC residents would not have sufficient food. Youth, elderly, and single-parent families were identified as the populations facing the greatest barriers in accessing food. The Peaceful Valley and Paradise neighborhoods were identified as the geographic pockets that face the most significant barriers to food, and the greatest food insecurity. The following

barriers were all identified by interviewees as the primary factors that cause a *family* or *individual* EWC resident to be food insecure.

Poverty | Economy | Employment | Lack of Finances

Many EWC residents struggle financially. There are very few jobs in EWC, and many lower income families move to EWC in search of lower rent and lower cost of living. Poverty, unemployment, and the poor economy were the most prevalent themes throughout all key informant interviews. The financial strain of making ends meet, and having to prioritize between gas money, utilities bills, rent and food is something that every key informant recognized as a struggle for many EWC residents.

Most interviewees also specified that economically stable families and individuals in EWC have adequate to good access to food.

“I feel like a person like me, a fairly average resident of the East Whatcom County, that I pretty much have easy access to food. But, I’m right above the barrier line. Once you start dropping economically, it gets really, really, really hard.”

For lower-income families in EWC, most interviewees felt that there were sufficient government financial aid and social support systems to keep food on the shelves.

“There is a lot of financial support through government programs, and families are all well aware of what resources are available.”

Federal SNAP benefits, the Foothills Food Bank, Saturday Bread Giveaway at the Maple Falls Baptist Church, the Sunday breakfast at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC), the Thursday lunch at the Mosquito Lake Senior Center, and the summer lunch program at Kendall Elementary were all highlighted as strong examples of local resources for families facing food insecurity. In each interview it was very difficult to separate economics and poverty from any discussion of food access.

“If you can afford food, there is plenty of access to it. If you can afford it, it’s a pretty healthy food system... but if you’re low income it’s a totally different game”

This sentiment was also clearly expressed in the community survey. Community members were asked to rate their sense of personal food security from one to ten. Community members were then asked to write *why* they selected their specific rating. Community members who rated their sense of food security high, uniformly expressed ‘because I can easily drive to the grocery store’ and ‘because I can afford it.’ Many of these same members also wrote additional comments expressing that their sense of food security would not be nearly as high if they were lower-

income. Community members who rated their sense of food security low, uniformly expressed ‘because food is too expensive.’

It is essential to understand that EWC residents view economics, unemployment, and poverty as the primary barriers to accessing food. Because lack of finances is perceived as the primary barrier to food for many families, any efforts to reduce food insecurity will have to take this into account. For example, if lack of finances is the primary barrier to food, a new grocery store in EWC would not necessarily decrease the community’s sense of food insecurity. When working with EWC residents to reduce food insecurity, the Whatcom County Health Department will have to consider how to address this significant concern.

Grocery Stores | Cost of Stores | Cost of Food | Distance to Stores

For EWC residents, the cost of food and the cost of local grocery stores is a much larger burden than physically accessing and physically reaching the stores. While there is no one large grocery store located in EWC, interviewees continually expressed the sentiment that while they could easily reach the broader Whatcom County grocery stores, the prices were too high.

“The sales at Bromley’s are pretty good, but as a rule they’re more expensive.”

The grocery stores in Everson and Sumas are considered more expensive than Bellingham food stores, and the local grocers are also considered too expensive for regular purchases. While interviewees acknowledged that driving into Bellingham was also expensive, it is clear that many EWC residents are making this calculation and still choosing to make the drive to shop ‘in town.’

“Shopping in Everson or Sumas is more expensive, shopping locally here at the Crossroads or the Fuelies or the Starvin’ Sam’s is expensive. I actually don’t shop in Everson or Sumas. I just find that the stores are smaller, they’re more expensive. They tend to not carry what I’m looking for, and if they do carry it it’s again more expensive. In the 20 minutes it would take me to drive to Everson, I just drive the 40 minutes to Bellingham and then it’s a sure thing that I can find what I’m looking for.”

In addition to overall higher prices, interviewees also highlighted the high cost of meats and dairy products that are sold at the smaller EWC convenience stores. Unfortunately, many EWC convenience stores and Whatcom County grocery stores have higher prices because they do not have enough shoppers to keep prices low. Many interviewees expressed significant concern that a grocery store would not be viable in EWC.

“We need a large grocery store but this is impractical because the money’s not there.”

“The location of the grocery store is very difficult. Even if someone wanted to open a store, it is very hard to make it profitable. It’s such a risk. It’s a lot of commitment to invest in a lower income community.”

However, despite recognizing that the community may not be able to support a full grocery store, and despite the fact that many interviewees felt there is sufficient access to food in EWC if you have sufficient income, each interviewee expressed a strong interest in seeing a full grocery store developed in EWC. Most interviewees would rather not have to drive in to town, and recognize that many EWC residents are living in the area because of low housing costs. Interviewees felt that an affordable grocer in the community would decrease the need to spend such a significant portion of income on gas and transportation, particularly for the EWC residents that do not commute to Bellingham on a regular basis.

“Personally, I would pay a little more and just go get it at Bromley’s because I hate driving in to town.”

“Even if you have the money, you have to drive to Bellingham to buy any sort of food... it would be lovely to have a place to shop here that was real.”

“Maple Falls is a long ways from any good supply of food. The convenience stores are there, a few little grocery stores, but it’s not enough.”

Additionally, increased supply of groceries in the community could improve the quantity of food distributed at the Foothills Food Bank. Currently, the lack of grocery stores in EWC means less food collected through grocery rescue for the County food banks. In addition to increasing physical access to a reliable food store, a grocery store could support the EWC community in many ways; increased food into the community food bank, increased foot traffic in the community, a focal point for the EWC neighborhoods and an increased sense of community cohesion, as well as a handful of local jobs.

Transportation Cost | Transportation Method

Interviewees identified three primary factors influencing mobility: 1) Most EWC residents are mobile and have their own cars; 2) It is expensive and time consuming to drive in to Bellingham; 3) Public transportation is minimal despite the fact that many EWC residents rely on it.

Each interviewee stressed that it is impossible to live in EWC without transportation. However, **most interviewees felt that the majority of EWC residents have a reliable mode of transportation.** There are a significant number of individuals who are single-drivers and commute regularly in to Bellingham. There are also a number of individuals who both carpool to town for work, as well as arrange weekly or monthly shopping carpools to Bellingham. Additionally, several interviewees identified the Slavic community as having greater access to private transportation than the English-speaking community.

“A lot of people who live in Peaceful have reliable transportation.”

“I’m sure some people don’t have transportation, but of the Slavic community I don’t think I know anyone who doesn’t have transportation.”

Ride-shares and community support around transportation were also mentioned as ways that the community ensures everyone is mobile.

“I can only think of one family where the wife doesn’t drive, but the husband drives. Once when the husband was sick, the community helped to drive them.”

“A lot of times I would give people rides to the Food Bank who didn’t have their own transportation.”

Despite access to cars, it is expensive to make the 30 mile trip in to town. Not all EWC residents can afford to regularly make the drive. EWC residents on limited income struggle to afford gas:

“I had very limited income. Going to Bellingham was tough, gas-wise, time-wise.”

Additionally, many interviewees mentioned that the vehicles EWC residents drive tend to be older and less fuel-efficient. Lower-income individuals and families are unable to invest in vehicles that are newer and less expensive to drive.

“The people living out here are not driving nice little cars that get good mileage. The cost to filling up a tank is huge.”

The final issue repeatedly discussed by interviewees is the fact that **public transportation in EWC is minimal**. The lack of public transportation places a significant burden on individuals that either (a) do *not* have reliable transportation, or (b) cannot afford to drive. The public transportation system in EWC is difficult for several reasons. First, there is no route connecting EWC to the rest of Whatcom County. Many interviewees pointed to this, stating that there are many County services that are being underutilized because there is no public transportation connecting them.

“There needs to be a County bus route. There are a lot of services out in the County that are difficult for people to use because there is no transportation route taking people there.”

Second, the time that it takes to ride the bus in to Bellingham, transfer, ride the bus to a grocery store, shop, and then repeat, makes it impossible for EWC residents to utilize the bus for

shopping trips. Although Dodson's IGA is along the bus route and relatively close to EWC, interviewees still felt that the current public transportation system is insufficient

“The bus is impossible. It is not feasible to take into town to buy groceries. It's a two hour ride, you have to transfer, and it's impossible to carry your groceries – particularly if you have children.”

The lack of public transportation extending up to Maple Falls was the third barrier identified for EWC residents relying on public transportation. While some interviewees thought there may be a call-a-ride system, no one was clear as to whether any public transportation options existed for residents living East of Kendall. The lack of transportation to Maple Falls was highlighted as both a barrier to Maple Falls and Glacier residents wishing to take the bus in to town, as well as for Peaceful and Paradise residents who could potentially have much stronger local food options if there were transportation available up to the Crossroads and Maple Fuels grocers.

“Many people in Paradise can't get up to Maple Falls because the bus doesn't go in that direction. This seriously limits the local food options for folks in Peaceful and Paradise.”

Despite these challenges, and the fact that many EWC residents do have their own reliable transportation, all interviewees felt that public transportation to EWC needs improvement. Interviewees felt that a number of residents rely on public transportation, and the current system is not meeting the needs of EWC. Interviewees felt that more direct routes to either County or Bellingham grocery stores, as well as increased storage area for shopping bags, could help increase the feasibility of grocery shopping by bus.

Community Assets

EWC is a vibrant community. EWC residents are interested in being good neighbors, and working to improving food security.

Gardening | Produce | Healthy Foods

The community gardens located at the EWRRC and in Maple Falls, as well as the vegetable starts that the Foothills Food Bank distribute in the spring, have community leaders thinking about produce and how to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for EWC residents.

Produce, gardening, and healthy food options were a common theme in all of the key informant interviews. The primary concerns for interviewees around these issues are: (a) the quality of food served in schools is poor, (b) the Peaceful and Paradise neighborhoods are largely treed and do not allow for home-gardening, (c) the soil quality in EWC is poor and makes it difficult for families to garden, (d) there are few farm stands and few sources of fresh produce in EWC, and (e) families wishing to eat fresh produce on a regular basis need to drive much more frequently

to shop at the Bellingham grocery stores. While this is a significant list of concerns, the overall tone of the interviewees is that the EWC community is currently on a positive track to increasing the availability of fresh produce and healthy food options.

“People’s perceptions of food are important, and that’s where the community gardens come in and help.”

Gardening and healthy food choices are two areas in which EWC residents are eager to coalesce. Given the fact that this issue has already caught on in the EWC community, it could potentially be a strong platform for community leaders, the Foothills Food Access Group, and the Whatcom County Health Department. However, because community gardening and healthy food options are often associated with organic, natural, or local food, it is often conflated with high prices. Many EWC residents may feel becoming involved in community gardens or increasing the availability of healthy food will come at a financial cost.

“I just feel like the people that I know of aren’t so much concerned with organic, they just feel like for a lot of them it’s the price that’s important.”

Despite this potential hesitancy, while only a small sample of residents is currently involved in community gardening efforts, interviewees were clear that there is a broad community-wide interest in fresh produce and gardening.

“People in Peaceful Valley do a lot of home cooking. This is the major preference. People prefer to not purchase prepared food. Fresh food is preferred in the Russian community.”

I believe that it is both this cultural interest in fresh food, as well as community advocacy around gardening and healthy food options, that has fostered a positive food retail environment in the EWC convenience stores. In EWC there is a demand and a market for fresh food.

Community | Culture | East Whatcom Regional Resource Center

EWC is a tightly knit, strong, and proud community. Each key informant I spoke with mentioned the importance of being neighborly, the way that neighbors are able to call on one another for support and help, and the positive experiences of living in a community where people know who you are.

“The community is a really lovely community, the people are really wonderful. It’s a wonderful feeling to pop in to the store our here in the County and everyone knows you. I like to draw on the close knit aspect of the small community to help facilitate change that’s going to make life better for everyone.”

There is a strong community of volunteers in EWC, and many individuals give their time to support others. The significant number of volunteer hours in the community is evidenced by an exhaustive list of community programs and community activities.

“There are a lot of individuals who want to make a difference, and want to make a positive change.”

Although many of these volunteers are exhausting themselves by the number of hours they are giving to the community, there are many individuals from different walks of life and different backgrounds working together to support one another and influence change.

“Everyone is flavored a little differently, but we’re all involved.”

EWC is a community that knows each other. The Slavic community has built itself around the Russian church. Through the Russian church the Slavic community has built a strong, cohesive network. The English-speaking community also has strong ties to the several churches in EWC, including the Mount Baker Baptist Church and Christ the King. It is also important to note that there *is* a large portion of the EWC community that lives in the County out of choice and not purely for a cheaper cost of living.

This quote perfectly captures the ‘good neighbor’ culture in EWC:

“Out here people help the people they know, and the people they don’t know. People are aware of their neighbors and are a good help to each other.”

While EWC does have a strong neighborly community, interviewees also mentioned that with the majority of EWC residents working and spending their days in Bellingham, it is hard to build new networks and rally community members. Though individuals are tied to their immediate neighborhoods, it is difficult to obtain broad commitment to community building. One additional barrier to community-building that interviewees identified, is that a fair portion of the EWC population are “in hiding” or are not interested in engaging with the broader community.

“People like being private. People want the help, but don’t want to give you any of their information or get to know you for some fear I don’t understand.”

Additionally, a few interviewees mentioned that EWC residents tend to move frequently within the east county, and that it can be hard to know where people are living. This can pose a barrier to community building, as it can be difficult to know which community or neighborhood to engage people through.

However, Interviewees felt that with increased development and community growth, a town center could help focus the community and build residents’ commitment to building EWC.

Key Stakeholders

The final question I asked in each interview was “Who are the key players in EWC—both individuals and groups—who should be involved in working to increase food security.” This question always prompted on a long list of public and private groups, organizations, and individuals. The EWC has a significant number of individuals and groups working to support, grow, and improve the community. While the Whatcom County Health Department and the EWC community will have to be careful to not draw too much from the same people, there are a handful of strategic partnerships identified by interviewees that will be key to increasing food security (see Appendix A for complete list).

Partnerships between the EWC Community Council, the Whatcom County Council, the Whatcom County Health Department, and the Nooksack Tribe were repeatedly mentioned as some of the primary relationships needed to support increased food security. Kendall Watch, the Kendall Fire Department, the Kendall Library, and the local churches were named as the primary local partnerships that need to be built to develop community support for any new projects or initiatives. Local businesses and ‘Big Food’ businesses were mentioned as an area that has not been included in conversations thus far. These businesses need to join the table before any significant work can be done. Interviewees also discussed the tendency among Whatcom County food advocates to only include organic and ‘green’ farms and food. Interviewees felt that failing to invite non-organic and large scale farms and food producers to the table would limit the scale and any potential effect future work could have on increasing food security.

The Whatcom County Health Department is already partnering with many of these groups and organizations listed by interviewees. Additionally, the Whatcom County Health Department was identified by many of the interviewees as a key leader on food security issues in EWC. Interviewees felt that the WCHD is well respected in the community, and “is making it appropriate for us to focus on health.” This is an important take away from these interviews. The WCHD is in a unique position of having the community support and trust, as well as having a stake in the broader big-picture work around community health.

Conclusion

East Whatcom County is a strong community that faces great *individual* food insecurity. Interviewees and community members uniformly felt that as a *community*, East Whatcom County has a healthy access to food. However, unemployment and limited or fixed incomes mean a significant number of EWC residents are unable to afford food. Interviewees felt that a new grocery store in EWC could help improve food security, but were concerned that community members would not be able to afford the food and would not generate a sufficient profit for the grocery store.

Appendix A

All 'key players' listed by interviewees.

Grouped by type, and listed in order of overall influence and importance as perceived by interviewees.

Broad and Local Key Players
Groups, Organizations, Programs, and Individuals
Public / Governmental / Political
Whatcom County Health Department
Whatcom County Department of Planning and Services
Whatcom County Council
Whatcom County Elected Officials
Whatcom County Executive
Whatcom County Chamber of Commerce
East Whatcom County Community Council
Whatcom County Police Department
Kendall Fire Department
Glacier Fire Department
Nooksack Tribe
Lummi Tribe
Mount Baker School District
Nooksack Valley School District
Private / Business
Large food retailers: Cosco, Haggen
Food producers: Farms, fisheries, dairies, include non-organic and non-'green'
Truckers / food transporters
'Big Food': Bellingham Cold Storage, NaturePath Cereal, TransOceans Seafood, Radar Raspberry Farms
Local Business Alliance
Religious
The Russian Church
Christ the King
Mount Baker Baptist Church
Community Groups and Community Members
Kendall Watch
Peaceful Valley community
East Whatcom County residents
East County Coalition for Safe and Healthy Communities
Transportation Choices Coalition
The Grocers Network
South Fork Valley Community Association
Kendall Elementary School principal & teachers
Non-Profits

The Opportunity Council
East Whatcom Regional Resource Center
Readiness to Learn
Foothills Food Bank
Sumas Food Bank
Everson Food Bank
Farm to School
Sustainable Connections
Community Food Co-op
Three Rivers Co-op