

Foothills Food Summit Report

October 10, 2019

Overview

The Foothills Community Food Partnership planned and hosted the 2019 Foothills Food Summit in order to engage the community in a conversation about food access and the food landscape in the Foothills. The conversation themes will be used to update the Foothills [Food Action Plan](#), a comprehensive plan to improve food access in the Foothills.



On October 10, 2019, over 60 community partners and residents joined together at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center to learn about the current state of food access in the region as well as accomplishments since the previous summit in 2014.

This report summarizes the information shared at the Summit and the themes and ideas that emerged from participants' discussions.

The State of Food Access in East County

The Summit began with a presentation of the 2018-2019 East Whatcom County Food Landscape Assessment, which was conducted by the Whatcom County Health Department. The objective of this assessment was to examine food security and food access for East Whatcom County residents, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A similar assessment had been conducted in 2013, so we were also able to observe changes over time.

The primary questions this assessment answers were:

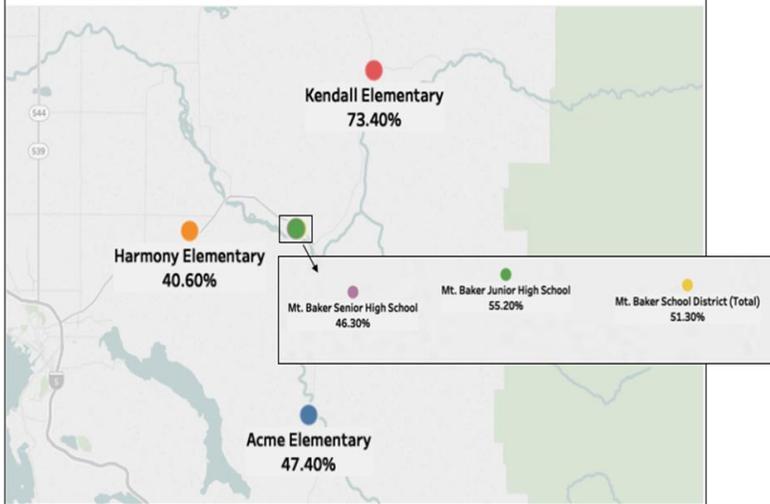
1. What are the characteristics and demographics of people who live in East Whatcom County?
2. What food is accessible to residents, how healthy is it, and how affordable is it?
3. Where are residents currently choosing to purchase food, and why?
4. What is the feasibility and realistic use of a grocery retailer opening in East Whatcom County?

Key Findings from the Assessment

- **East Whatcom County has higher proportions of populations that are vulnerable to food insecurity.**
- *Over 50% of Mt. Baker School District students were eligible for free and reduced lunches in the 2016-2017 school year, the highest proportion being at Kendall Elementary where 73% of students were eligible.*
- *11.2% of the population are veterans and 15.6% of people report living with a disability.*
- **East Whatcom County continued to be a food desert and residents struggle to access healthy, affordable food.**

Households, 2012-2016	Mt. Baker	Whatcom County
Number of Households	5,657	81,019
Households with Children (Under 18)	30.2%	27.3%
Speak a Language Other than English	9.4%	12.4%
Veterans Population	11.2%	8.2%
Population with a disability	15.6%	13.6%

Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch at Mt. Baker School District Schools, 2016-2017



- *East Whatcom County qualifies as a rural food desert, based on the United States Department of Agriculture definition of “low access” where at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract population resides more than ten miles from a supermarket or large grocery store, and are “low income,” where at least 20% of the population is at or below federal poverty level.*

- *Out of 302 community survey respondents, 75% said that food was not accessible, convenient, and affordable in their community and 61% said that they or their neighbors struggle to access healthy, affordable food.*

- *Focus group participants identified many barriers to accessing healthy, affordable food including transportation, lack of selection at local stores, higher local prices, and cumbersome county regulations preventing store expansion.*

- *Produce and other healthy items are available at East County convenience stores, however selection is limited and prices are higher than stores in Bellingham.*
- *While bus routes do exist, service is limited (especially on weekends) and leaves out some communities (Acme, Maple Falls, Glacier).*

➤ **Many residents are doing the majority of their grocery shopping in Bellingham, and several local grocers have gone out of business. There is community support for a new local grocer to serve the area.**

- *Most community survey respondents (84%) listed Bellingham as one of the top three locations they currently shop, but only 42% stated they would prefer to continue shopping in Bellingham if they had other, closer options.*
- *Residents prefer stores that offer affordable food and have a greater selection of food to meet their dietary and/or cultural needs.*
- *80% of survey respondents said they would shop at a new retail development in East County.*
- *Focus group participants identified the desire to support local retailers and farms.*
- *Focus group participants identified the county permitting system and other regulations as barriers to opening a new store or growing current retail.*
- *In both the focus groups and community survey, residents identified a need for other services in addition to a grocery store such as a pharmacy and medical clinic.*

Accomplishments and Outcomes since the 2014 Summit

Cheryl Thompson, Board President of the Foothills Food Bank, shared the outcomes from the 2014 Foothills Food Summit and the accomplishments and programs that have been implemented to date.

The Food Action Plan from 2014 included the following strategies:

- ❖ **The East Whatcom Regional Resource Center** is a hub of healthy food access activities, with community meals, gardening, and education.
- ❖ **Mobile services** deliver nutritious and fresh food to key community destinations.
- ❖ **Hunger prevention** services extend beyond the food bank.
- ❖ **Farm-to-school and farm-to-preschool** programs are well established in all schools and preschools.
- ❖ **Meal programs** gather people together to socialize and eat good food.

- ❖ **Educational programs** are offered throughout east Whatcom County, at the Nooksack Tribe, the libraries, the schools – at every place that food is being served or distributed.

Accomplishments Since 2014

- **Expanded Food Bank Infrastructure**

- Building 2 on the EWRRC Campus broke ground in summer 2019, projected opening in April of 2020. This will allow for added capacity for food bank including more storage/refrigeration, and additional distribution times.



- **Expanded Mobile Food Bank**

- Each month there 2 distributions at the EWRRC, 7,000 pounds of food distributed, 25 volunteers contribute almost 100 hours, and over 175 households are served

- **East Whatcom Community Meals**

- Monthly community meals open to everyone in the community
- Provides a space for community connection and enjoy a warm meal
- The program has served over 28 meals since it began in 2017
- Over 75 people on average attend each month

- **Summer Meals**

- MBSD and EWRRC Staff support summer meals programming in Kendall
- 8 weeks of meals
- Common Threads Farm's innovative Kids Cook Lunch Program
- 98 youth served during the 8-week program



- **Winter and Spring Pantry Program**

- Provides any MBSD students, Head Start through High School, with supplemental nutritious food to help prevent hunger over school breaks
- Over 350 students served in the Spring 2019 program
- 2019 Winter Pantry, we served 438 children from 159 families

- **Emergency Food Boxes**

- Whatcom County Fire District 14 Stations and the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center are stocked with boxes of non-perishable food for distribution in emergency situations

- **Twin Sisters Farmers Market**

- Weekly at the North Fork Library and Nugents Corner, June - October
- Bringing Fresh, Affordable produce to East County Residents



Summit Discussion

Using a facilitated 'World Café' format, participants addressed three questions, working in small groups. They captured their ideas on sticky notes and posted these on the wall. The focus questions were:

1. *What's going well, in regards to healthy and affordable food access in the Foothills Region?*
2. *When you look at our Food Access Plan today - where do you see opportunities to grow and change? What's missing?*
3. *What is something you, or a group you are associated with, would be excited to contribute to this community effort?*

1. What's going well, in regards to healthy and affordable food access in the Foothills Region?

- The Foothills Food Bank since 1986 has operated a weekly food distribution at St Peters Church and in recent years has expanded food access to include emergency food boxes and twice month Mobile Food Pantry in partnership with Food Lifeline and Opportunity Council.
- We have a vibrant local farm community which has supported the creation and sustainability of Twin Sisters Market which operates May through October.
- We have the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center campus expansion to include a permanent home for the Foothills Food Bank.
- The school garden and seed table food education program serves all three elementary schools thanks to local nonprofit and volunteer support.
- The community meals program brings neighbors together to share a nutritious meal provided by businesses and volunteers.
- The community has awareness of and care for local food access issues.
- There is a culture around for food education for all ages as evidenced by local resources and classes.
- Thanks to strong local government and nonprofit engagement the foothills region of Whatcom County has been able to assess opportunities as well as pursue implementation of needed programs and capital projects to improve food access.
- Due to diverse and broad government, nonprofit, and foundation the Foothills Food Bank has been able to increase and sustain food access in East Whatcom County.
- Our local stores offer fresh as well as convenient food.

2. When you look at our Food Access Plan today - where do you see opportunities to grow and change? What's missing?

- Connect with local tribes for culture and language and local indigenous foods.
- Expand outreach to other cultural groups and celebrate food culture, share recipes, meals, history, increase the availability of culturally preferred foods.
- Expand senior meal programs.
- Strong support for grocery store development, a coop model in particular.
- Desire for more locally grown foods and food to meet special dietary needs.
- More community gardens and garden space matchmaking programs.
- Development of mobile food distribution system: shuttle, pop ups, drone, delivery.
- Address transportation gaps to and from the Food Bank and other community resources.
- Expand geographic reach and capacity of the community meals program: frequency, consistency, and in conjunction with other community events.
- Support for creation of a gleaning program.
- Expand local food in school meal programs, incorporation of FFA in school meals, lunch recipe development.
- More food education in schools, including middle school.
- More nutrition education, skill sharing, meal planning, budgeting, and food prep resources/classes.
- Expand emergency food resources - hotline, etc.
- Expand Summer meal programs - pantry and summer meals.
- More centrally located food access information.
- Expand and support farmers markets and use as an opportunity for sharing information.
- Protect local farmland and environmental responsibility.
- Upgrade EWRRC kitchen space and provide opportunities for shared central kitchen use.
- Build community support for local grocers.
- Grow partnerships between medical care and access to affordable, healthy food.



3. What is something you, or a group you are associated with, would be excited to contribute to this community effort?

Participants identified which things they would like to work on, and this information was collected on the Summit Evaluation Form. Below are some examples:

- Starting and Maintaining a Seed Library/Bank
- Skill/Education Share: Cooking, Composting, Soil Blocking, Gardening
- Expand Community Meals
- Volunteer for Food Bank, Mobile Food Pantry Distribution
- Host a Community Meal
- Grow a Row for the Foothills Food Bank
- Fund Feasibility Study for Grocery Retail
- Assist with Spring and Winter Pantry Program
- Grant Research and Writing
- Help Close Summer Meal Gap
- Policy Advocacy

Conclusion

The 2019 Foothills Food Summit was a testimony to the deep caring our community has for our shared mission - that **all Foothills residents are fed, nourished, and have the resources to access the food they need.** The next step will be for the Foothills Community Food Partnership to update the Foothills Food Access Plan, and we will join together, reach out to engage more members of our community, and mobilize!

Food Summit Attendees

Phill Esau, *Wild Bird Charity*
 Mary Anderson, *WTA*
 Cheryl Thompson, *Foothills Food Bank*
 Tracy D. Whitehead, *CTK*
 Karen Reich, *MBSD Board*
 Carl McDaniel, *CV Water District Commissioner*
 Jeff Margolis, *SFVCA*
 Stephanie Ellis, *WSU*
 Marjorie Bell, *Local Food Works*
 Yvette Shelton
 Claire Milburn, *SeaMar*
 Terri Maik
 Rochelle Hollowell
 Kelly Uusitalo
 Linda Kerth
 Marie Valum, *St. Peter's Church*
 Jeff Voltz, *NABC*
 Abigail McKinley, *OC*
 Kelly Molaski, *WCHD*
 Alexa Andrews, *WCLS*
 Holly O'Neil, *Crossroads Consulting*

Lisa Wolfe, *PeaceHealth*
 Pat Rimbault
 Sam Martinez, *Whatcom Community Foundation*
 Maureen McCarthy, *WTA*
 Faith Whaley, *CTK*
 Richard Whitson, *Water District 13 Commissioner*
 Naomi Siegel, *OC*
 Matthew Thuney, *SFVCA*
 Krista Rome,
 Nancy Shelton
 Catherine Mahaffey
 Sean D'Agnolo
 Devin Connolly, *DVSAS*
 Mia Devine
 Robert King
 Wa'Lynn Sheridan, *MBCS*
 Galina Pilar
 Javier Flores, *OC*
 Kelly Meier, *MBSD*
 Aly Robinson, *WCHD*
 Jessica Bee, *OC*

Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt, *MBSD Board*
 Barry Buchanan, *County Council Member*
 Shorty Bjornstad, *Fire District 14 Commissioner*
 Mardi Solomon, *Whatcom Farm to School*
 Emily Edmonds, *Carolina Creative Works*
 Anna Morris, *Twin Sisters Farmers Market*
 Carmina Cisneros, *CCSWW*
 Jerry Perdue
 Laura Plaut, *Common Threads Farm*
 Rachel Lucy, *PeaceHealth*
 Maryann Welch, *MBSD*
 Katy Tiernan, *Common Threads Farm*
 Max Morange, *Bellingham Food Bank*
 Astrid Newell, *WCHD*
 Mike Riber, *DSHS*
 Leah Rapalee, *Food Lifeline*
 Ivy Little
 Ian Cassinos, *WCCOA*
 Debbie Ahl, *Mt. Baker Foundation*
 Ali Jensen, *WCHD*

The Foothills Community Food Partnership would like to thank you for attending the 2019 Foothills Food Summit!

