

PUTTING FOOD ON THE TABLE

A CR-FAIR Strategic Plan and Project

INTRODUCTION TO CR-FAIR

CR-FAIR (the Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable) is a coalition of organizations in the Capital Region (Greater Victoria) concerned with food access and food supply in our region, from seed to dinner plate. Its volunteer Steering Committee includes representatives from the health authority, the provincial agriculture ministry, community kitchens, food retail, farmers' organizations, urban agriculture, youth projects, a learning centre, and the Community Social Planning Council.

The group has been active for almost a decade. It combined two existing groups, one that focused on bringing together farmers and community members interested in sustainable agriculture and another focused on creating opportunities for networks and partnerships around food access and health issues. From its ongoing commitment to improving our food system and involving a full spectrum of interested parties, CR-FAIR has developed a vision of:

A sustainable and secure local food and agriculture system that provides safe and nutritious food accessible to everyone in the Capital Region.

CR-FAIR's mission is:

To bring about positive change in the food and agriculture system within the Capital Region. This includes:

- *increasing the viability of farming;*
- *working with policy makers and community members to increase access to food for those living with hunger;*
- *increasing the supply, consumption and diversity of locally produced and processed food; and*
- *increasing our community's involvement with food and agriculture issues.*

This is a concept paper that provides the framework for CR-FAIR's proposed 2002-07 strategic plan, linked to specific desired outcomes.

OVERVIEW

This strategic plan is based on the importance of a locally oriented and appropriate food system for the Capital Region, where local decision making safeguards our long-term health, social, environmental and economic interests. At present it appears that our long-term food security (as defined in our mission statement) is low and that food as a key community issue is not part of local and regional decision making. We estimate that about five per cent or less of the food consumed in the region is produced here. Thousands in our region live with hunger and/or diets inadequate for their health. Many farmers in the region experience severe economic challenges.

There is a need to create a vehicle to support local food decision and to implement regional food policies.

Reclaiming a locally-oriented food system “from seed to dinner plate”

The first focus is to reorient our collective thinking about food to looking at as a *system*, from seed to dinner plate. All through this system, choices are made that are integral to the health, social, environmental and economic wellbeing of our communities. Except for farms, all the links in the dominant food system (from which we acquire about 95 per cent of our food), from farm inputs to wholesalers and retailers, are currently controlled by a handful of large multinational corporations (National Farmers' Union, 1999).

The international industrial agriculture and food system that has developed in the last 50 years has come at significant cost to farmers, their families and communities, to our health, and to the health of the environment (Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture, 2002). On Vancouver Island we are seeing the gradual loss of our agriculture and food infrastructure, with processors shutting down and commercial farmers struggling for economic survival. (A farm lost is many jobs lost - some estimates are that each job on the farm means 10 jobs in other parts of the food system, further along the chain.) Most of the food that is consumed in our homes, schools, hospitals and restaurants is being produced further and further from home and in ways over which we have little control. This situation affects our local economy, jobs and environment and also interferes with our choices on how best to manage our health through food.

From this understanding comes action, focused on revitalizing and restructuring local food systems. This trend is very much alive and growing in the Capital Region. It includes the Island Farmer's Alliance “Closer is Better” campaign; organic farms growing for home-delivered food boxes; chefs making a commitment to local foods and creating a regional cuisine that draws locals and tourists and supports farmers; Good Food Box programs that bulk-buy local fruits and vegetables to make up a monthly box for families on income assistance; and garden training and agri-food business entrepreneurship projects that are working to grow the knowledge base that we will need to produce more of our food locally.

By supporting a locally integrated food economy we have the opportunity to have control over an abundant and healthy food supply (Worldwatch Institute, 2002). Increasing our understanding of the relationships between our access to food, choices we make for our health, and healthy farm production and food processing methods will help us move closer to our vision.

Making healthier food choices available

The accessibility of food for individuals is related to economics, both personally and at a community level, in terms of both affordability and quality. Regional food and transportation infrastructure and knowledge and skills to support healthier food choices are some important factors we need to consider.

Access to safe and appropriate nutritious food is a basic requirement to support healthy growth and development of children and youth, and the overall health of the population. One in five

children under 18 is living in poverty in Canada. That number increases to one in four under the age of seven and one in two for children of Aboriginal descent. A study published by the Canadian Pediatric Society found that children that go hungry on a regular basis are at greater risk for long-term health problems (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2000). Poor children are also at disproportionate risk of being exposed to environmental contaminants (Child Poverty in Canada Report Card 2000).

Many chronic diseases are also strongly related to food choices. Over the last 10 years, the rise of obesity rates in BC has been 50% greater than the national average. The rising incidence of childhood obesity is particularly alarming. Those living in poverty are also at an increased risk of chronic disease, particularly cancer, given the limited access to nutritious food, especially fresh vegetables and fruit. If people's food choices are limited, their health cannot be as readily achieved. We need to make it a priority to support healthy food accessibility.

Fostering stronger planning and cooperation

In order to improve the overall health of the community, as well as support a robust local food system and economy, it is important to create a forum of local government, community members and individuals (consumers and producers, retailers, institutions) to acknowledge that food is an integral part of our community. We need to recognize the importance of food in relation to people living in hunger due to poverty; rising obesity in children and adults; emerging issues around chronic disease; farmers struggling to make farms pay; and to local community economic development.

Despite the fact that food is the basis of life and of community health (social, environmental and economic), there is a void in policy and planning for food at the regional and local levels of government. Given that these governments deal with the built environment, sewage, water and light as well as basic needs such as transportation and housing but not food, this framework will create the forum to acknowledge and address the integral role of food. The opportunities are here and the relationships built.

Putting Food on the Table – a multi-year project

CR-FAIR and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in our community have created a network of stakeholders integral to making this strategic plan a success. Given all the good work to date, it is time to realize that what is needed now is to build stronger, more cohesive relationships and an infrastructure for the stakeholders to work together to create a viable, locally owned food system that will support individuals to take control of their health and support a bright economic future in food and agriculture in our region.

CR-FAIR has a particular role in this community-wide effort of revitalizing our food system. For all of us to build it successfully, we need to share this image of the food system and the positive vision of the food system we are striving for. CR-FAIR, because of its membership, holistic approach to food systems and the links that it has made in the community, has chosen to champion a process that will result in cross-fertilization of ideas and actions as well as the development of an annual "state of the food system" report (or food security assessment). This

process will bring key groups and individuals together to discuss and problem solve around food system issues. A food security assessment will develop the tools necessary to establish a baseline of information that will measure where we are now and will promote progress towards our vision, “a sustainable and secure local food and agriculture system that provides safe and nutritious food accessible to everyone in the Capital Region,” that is, a healthier regional food system.

We believe that an inclusive process of developing a healthy food system indicators and building buy-in for the food security assessment will serve to further cultivate and promote relationships, partnerships and opportunities within our food system, as well as catch the interest of local and regional governments. Over a period of years we propose to introduce food planning into the Capital Region. This could take the form of a Food Advisory Committee or regional Food Council and a Food Charter. We also anticipate working with municipal governments in developing food advisories and policies.

Accordingly we have called our overall initiative “Putting Food on the Table,” referring to kitchen tables, boardroom tables and Council tables – where we hope to generate new and lively discussions about FOOD, where it comes from, who pays, who benefits, and how we can work together towards a healthier food system for everyone. This will be the major focus of CR-FAIR’s work for the foreseeable future.

The project is as much about process as it is about product. It can be conceived as a web of activities that support each other and are part of our strategic plan. The project will involve the following elements:

Food system forums. These forums will be based on specific aspects of the food system that need joint analysis, opportunities identification and problem solving, such as food and health, food access, food production, food distribution, etc. These focus areas as well as indicators to measure progress in each area will be determined collaboratively. In the forums, we will bring people together who need and want to participate.

Food system analysis and report. Periodically (probably on an annual basis) we will prepare a report informed by the forums and by other local initiatives. This “state of the food system” report or food security assessment will be distributed to all Municipal Councils, the CRD, and other appropriate bodies. A version of it will be published for public education purposes.

Liaison with local government decision makers and planners. We will begin by informing local Councils and the CRD about the project and educating ourselves about government planning and decision making processes. We will look at the best strategy to understand what they need and the challenges they face in terms of food and agriculture policy. We will identify someone(s) on each Council and the CRD to work with us on the development and implementation of do-able food policies, and on creating a Food Advisory Committee or Food Council, and a Food Charter.

Media and communications strategy. A strategy will be put in place that supports our goals and articulates our activities for private and public education.