

Whatcom Farm Incubator Project



Phase I – Feasibility Report

Prepared by Ann Russell



PROJECT SUMMARY

As Whatcom County faces the challenges of a growing future the need to maintain a safe, sustainable and economically viable agricultural foundation becomes increasingly clear. As our County grows though, so do the economic and social challenges of building and maintaining our agricultural foundation. Sustainable Connections and Kulshan Community Land Trust (KulshanCLT) are teaming up to explore the idea of creating a land-based farm incubator project in Whatcom County. A Whatcom Farm Incubator Project (WFIP) has great potential to expand markets and opportunities for local farmers while raising awareness for protection of agricultural lands. This project will strengthen community among farmers and work to raise awareness for food justice and food shed issues. This report marks the completion of the Phase I feasibility study for the WFIP.

The WFIP is modeled after other programs around the country that not only support and help economically viable and sustainable farm based enterprises but also work with communities on issues of food and social justice and natural resource protection. Some of the models we have turned to for ideas, guidance and advice include:

- Intervale- Burlington, VT. (www.intervale.org)
- FarmStart- Guelph, Ontario (www.farmstart.ca)
- ALBA (Agricultural and Land-Based Training Association)- Salinas, CA (www.albafarmers.org)

Whatcom County is at a unique place in our agricultural history. Whatcom County's Comprehensive Plan calls for maintaining a minimum of 100,000 acres in agricultural. Currently there are only 88,000 acres zoned for agricultural use in Whatcom County. In addition, valuable farmland is constantly under threat of development due to sprawl. It is generally agreed that protection of agricultural land is a priority. In addition, farmer's markets continue to expand throughout the county.

The agricultural economy in Whatcom County is dominated by large-scale, conventional dairy and raspberry production, which makes up more than 70% of the farm gate value. Margins are low, prices are volatile, and many farmers are nearing retirement with the average age of 53. At the same time, thousands of people seek to move here partly due to the number of national magazines that have ranked Bellingham/Whatcom County as a "top ten" place for retiring, relocating a business, outdoor recreation, etc. in the past several years. New strategies are needed to make farming in Whatcom County more economically viable, diverse and environmentally sensitive.

Sustainable Connections' Food & Farming Program has gained considerable experience working with both farms and buyers (grocers, restaurants, institutional buyers) over the past four years. Sustainable Connections has four seasons of experience working with 14 new farmers, 5 mentor farmers and 5 food banks through the Food to Bank On (FTBO) project. FTBO invests donations from individuals, natural food companies and area food retailers and restaurants to help establish the next generation of Whatcom County farmers who value sustainable farm practices including biodiversity, organic production, community giving and nurturing local markets for their products. As part of the program, farmers receive technical assistance and much needed revenue, learning the business of farming while delivering to area food banks according to a predetermined crop schedule with quality control.

In addition to the FTBO project, Sustainable Connections has invested in market development activities for the past two seasons, including leveraging the popularity and appeal of the 'Think Local First' campaign to promote local food.

KulshanCLT has been operating in Whatcom County for 7 years. KulshanCLT employs the community land trust strategy to create permanently affordable homeownership for people of modest means. Sixty-five households have partnered with KulshanCLT to achieve homeownership. Creating affordable access to farmland in Whatcom County is part of KulshanCLT's strategic plan. Many CLT's throughout the country work in their service areas to protect farmland and support farm businesses.

Developing the WFIP gives our community the opportunity to more effectively support and ensure the success of the next generation of farmers in Whatcom County. This next generation will take over for retiring farmers, convert some of the state's best farmland to organic and diverse production, and provide more of our community's food needs. It is time for our community to make more strategic investments in strengthening and diversifying the agricultural economy and the farm community.

WFIP HOPES AND DREAMS

While the WFIP will be similar to some of the organizations listed above it will also be specific to the needs of the citizens of Whatcom County. Through reviewing the surveys of current and past participants in Sustainable Connections Food to Bank On (FTBO) program and in speaking directly with some of those farmers and others with interests in agriculture it is clear that the most common barriers to success are: 1) Access to affordable and available organic farmland, 2) Access to affordable infrastructure like tractors, greenhouses, irrigation equipment, etc. 3) Opportunity to spend more time in proximity with peers to share ideas and learn production, marketing and other best practices from one another.

The basic structure of a WFIP would address these first three needs. WFIP would be located within Whatcom County. We anticipate the need for a minimum of 100 acres of land (see the site selection section below). The center would be farmed by several semi-permanent mentor farms with ample land left to be used for new farmer training. By keeping farmers in a more concentrated area the sharing of equipment and ideas becomes much easier. In addition, a more formal support and education program could be operated on-site to allow for additional access to a wider range of resources.

Many ideas and needs beyond the three listed above came out in conversations with interested parties and in the research of other models and market trends in Whatcom County. These fall into 5 major categories, Infrastructure and Facilities; Farm Community Support; Sense of History; Social and Food Justice; Public Access. It is not clear now if we will be able to incorporate all of these ideas and needs into the center but certainly all are worth consideration.

Infrastructure and Facilities:

- Access to processing, storage (cold and otherwise) and cleaning facilities
- CSA Distribution Center
- Retail facility
- Prep Kitchen/Community Kitchen
- Delivery Vans
- Administrative offices for the center should be located on-site.

Farm Community Support:

- Membership of off site, non-graduated farmers, these farmers might have access to infrastructure and facilities.
- A brand and/or label that identifies the product from farm members of the WFIP
- Technical assistance and farmer education programs

History:

- The project should have a sense of history of the land and of farming in Whatcom County. If the WFIP is rooted in who we were and who we are it will have broader appeal and be more honest. This might include stories of Native American, Sikh, Latino, Norwegian and other farm communities. This could also be tied to the specific history of the land on which the WFIP will sit.

Social and Food Justice:

- This project needs to be constantly striving for training, education, production, processing and distribution that are both socially just and environmentally responsible.
- We should include a diverse population of farmers and other stakeholders in the formation of this project from the beginning in a fair and equitable way.
- There should be social justice and organic standards incorporated from the beginning including addressing farm workers rights. New farmers may not need workers in the beginning but hopefully they will grow to a place where they need help. Farmers should be taught how to respectfully approach hiring, housing and supporting farm workers.
- Support for or working toward a real, local, organic standard including social justice guidelines for food production working with and/or toward a local fair trade standard/label.
- A focus on food system and food shed issues and concerns and a creation of a new food culture that is rooted in equality and history.
- A perpetuation of the idea that eating and growing food are not just commercial acts or exchanges but they serve a community need and are a cultural act.

Public access:

- There could be a farm education center on-site open to the public.
- Public tours and other events could happen at the center.
- A bike/walking path through the farms.
- Community garden

Natural Resource Protection:

- Farmers should employ sustainable organic practices
- Efforts should be made to protect and restore sensitive areas and habitat including wetlands, streams and rivers.
- Green built practices should be used in the construction and/or renovation of buildings at the center.
- The center should work to generate alternative energy through solar, wind, water and/or methane power.

WFIP POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Along with the many wonderful things WFIP could accomplish in Whatcom County there are some real and a few glaring challenges and concerns. Some of these concerns are universal and we can look to the models such as Intervale and ALBA for guidance. Some will be specific to Whatcom County and will need to be addressed. The challenges and concerns fall into four main categories: Competition and Subsidization, Cost and Administrative Issues, and Cultural Challenges.

Competition and Subsidization Issues

- This project will exacerbate competition between small organic farmers. It will “flood” the market with new farmers and “subsidize” their “new farmer needs” instead of supporting the farmers that are out there and helping them to grow and succeed.
- There needs to be a clear set of goals for graduating farmers; a “cut-off” point for the hand-up.

Cost and Administrative Issues

- How will the project afford the land? Who will own the land?
- This project is very administratively heavy and needs to be sustainable. How will those administrative costs be covered? Will the project have a for-profit aspect that raises money for the rest of the functions?
- Who will run the project will it be a KulshanCLT project, or a Sustainable Connections project or a new project/organization?
- How will the farmers that graduate be able to find affordable land to farm on if they move off the site?

Cultural Challenges

- The WFIP needs to be more than an extension of Sustainable Connections existing FTBO program.
- The WFIP needs to affect change in the food system and push the community on issues of food justice, food shed, community investment in agriculture, and the needs different farming cultures.
- The project needs to push beyond the current farm business structure and work to create a new food culture in Whatcom County based on fairness and justice.
- Will/should affordable housing for farmers and farm workers be part of the project?

ADDRESSING CONCERNS AND MOVING FORWARDThe WFIP Steering Committee

The above concerns and ideas come from various conversations with various interested parties. In the next phase of the WFIP we will be putting together a Steering Committee of diverse individuals to address these and other concerns. We will form a core Steering Committee in support of the WFIP that will likely consist of the following: FTBO Mentor Farmer and Graduate Farmer, Farmer’s Market board or staff representative, WSU Cooperative Extension, Depot Market Fund Raising Committee member, City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, Community 2 Community, Heifer International, and representatives from local buyers including a chef and produce manager. The success of the WFIP will largely depend on the quality and commitment of the Steering Committee we pull together. Our early conversations with potential partners show a lot of promise. This Steering Committee will be made up of 8-10 people. Steering Committee related activities would include:

- Gathering additional thoughts on the needs and opportunities to be addressed by the WFIP
- Working toward consensus on purpose statement
- Helping with site criteria and selection
- Providing contacts for project funding

Other possible Steering Committee members may include representatives from the Washington Department of Agriculture, Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network and other organizations we may find have a strategic reason to get involved. Sustainable Connections and KulshanCLT have reputations of accomplishing the goals they set for themselves. This will be valuable in gaining the commitment of the target Steering Committee members.

Local Partners and Funding Prospects

In addition to the Steering Committee the WFIP will involve collaboration and contact with numerous local partners. Moving forward this project has the ability to bring together the various individuals, organizations and agencies working on agricultural preservation, conservation, and social justice in Whatcom County. Representatives from some organizations have been contacted about their interest in the WFIP.

Henry Bierlink from the Ag Preservation Committee was supportive of the WFIP idea and indicated that while the APC probably does not see the project as integral to what they do he would like to hear how the project progresses. The Whatcom Land Trust (WLT) holds the conservation easements on all of the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) properties. The PDR program is funded by Whatcom County and the USDA. Gordon Scott felt that WLT would not want to be intimately involved with the project at this juncture. However, WLT would like us to keep them posted on how the WFIP progresses. Community 2 Community (C2C) is working on development of several projects in the Latino farming community of Whatcom County. The C2C projects have great potential to intersect with the WFIP. Rosalinda Guillen at C2C offered to assist in the early stages of the project and help develop the social and food justice aspects of the WFIP.

Other possible partners to provide various levels of assistance might include but are certainly not limited to:

- Growing Washington
- WSU Extension Office
- Whatcom County (including planning, parks, council and the executive)
- Cities of Ferndale, Bellingham
- WA Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Whatcom Coalition for Healthy Communities/Leadership Whatcom
- WA State Department of Natural Resources
- Lummi Tribe
- Nooksack Tribe
- Heifer International
- WA Sustainable Food and Farming Network
- American Farmland Trust
- Trust for Public Land
- WA Office of Farmland Preservation
- USDA

WFIP CENTER LOCATION AND FUNDING

Location

As stated above one of the most significant challenges to protection of farmland and farm businesses in Whatcom County is the high cost of suitable farmland. While several organizations and agencies are working to protect farmland these efforts have been only

scattered and have had little to no effect on the high costs of farmland. The WFIP is a unique project that can serve as a catalyst to bring together partners and funding sources to create a climate of collaborative action and creativity to farmland protection and food shed issues in Whatcom County. In addition, the WFIP will connect the public to farmland and farmers in a way that will work to cultivate a new vision of agriculture.

The WFIP Steering Committee will help determine the location of the center. Some of the factors that should be considered when choosing a site for the WFIP are:

- Land Cost
- Water rights
- Land condition (including soil condition, access to water etc.)
- Proximity to urban areas
- Ability to have public access
- Presence of farm buildings or ability to build infrastructure
- Significant, contiguous acreage

A few areas have been identified as possible locations for the WFIP. These locations must be evaluated but offer some promise:

- Mixture of DNR and privately owned land at the intersections of Bakerview Rd., Hannegan and SR 542 within the City of Bellingham limits and the City of Bellingham UGA.
- Private land off of Y Road and in the Squalicum Lake area within the City of Bellingham UGA and Whatcom County
- WA State Department of Fish and Wildlife Land in the Silver Creek and Nooksack Delta areas. This is south of the Tenant Lake/Hovander Complex
- Whatcom County Parks and WA Department of Fish and Wildlife lands within the Tenant Lake/Hovander Complex

Additional sites may be identified through conversations with the partners listed above. Another possible avenue for site identification could be speaking with private land owners who have gone through or are waiting to go through the PDR program. Many factors will affect final site selection and it is quite possible that many sites will be evaluated before final site selection is complete.

List of Possible Funding Prospects and/or Development Prospects

There are many avenues available for funding the WFIP. This list below could include many of the organizations, agencies, tribes or individuals listed above. In addition, the WFIP could receive support and/or funding from the following:

- WA State Department of Trade & Economic Development
- Local business partners and private donors
- Local, regional and national banks
- WA FarmLink
- Real estate agents
- Farmers/landowners with whom Sustainable Connections and/or KulshanCLT have established relationships
- Farm implement & farm supply companies
- WA State Recreation and Conservation Office (formerly Washington Interagency for Recreation)

NEXT STEPS

In order for the WFIP to be successful we need to move forward in a strategic, inclusive and hopeful way. What has prevented Whatcom County from moving forward to protect agricultural land and diversify its agricultural base is not a lack of willingness in the public or a lack of resources. There are resources out there we can tap into, there is room in the market for more organic farmers, there is a passion in the people to protect farmland and support local farm businesses. What may be missing is a catalyst, a project to bring all the various facets of this issue together. That project could be the WFIP. The next steps in moving this project forward are outlined below.

- **Continue to make contact with interested parties and solicit feedback and ideas**
- **Form and convene the Steering Committee**
- **Develop Business Plan**
 - The business plan would include details on Purpose/Need, Target Audience, Services Provided, Operational Details including staffing needs, 3-year budget, and a Fund Raising Plan
- **Complete a Sample Site Plan and Evaluate Site Locations**
 - The sample site plan would account for program needs for buildings, equipment, farmland, etc. It will be created for a yet to be identified site and used to help evaluate promising locations.
- **Secure Agreements from Development Partners**
 - These partners would help secure land and design and develop all capital/infrastructure needs for the project. We will use Letters of Understanding to define commitments from Development Partners.