

# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

 **THINK  
LOCAL FIRST**

 **FOOD & FARMING**

 **TOWARD  
ZERO WASTE**

 **GREEN BUILDING &  
SMART GROWTH**

 **ENERGY EFFICIENCY &  
RENEWABLES**

WE CREATE  
**THRIVING  
COMMUNITIES**

T H R O U G H  
INNOVATIVE IDEAS,  
COLLABORATION,  
**AND ACTION**

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# STRONGER TOGETHER

COLLECTIVELY WE CAN ACHIEVE MORE TOGETHER

## SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIONS



Collaboration is at the core of our mission. We rely on the expertise and resources of many different organizations, businesses, government agencies, health care professionals, and community leaders. In every program, we solicit input and share ideas locally, nationally, and internationally. This year was no different.

We learned from each other on issues surrounding food security, housing, health, economic development, energy efficiency, equality, and more. Our participation in collaborative groups such as Whatcom Unified Command allowed us to meet (and exceed) the needs of our community during a global pandemic.

Working together has provided a stronger foundation for planning and thinking through risks and benefits to our community.

There are always struggles, but creating a meaningful impact in our community is important and we believe that collectively we can achieve more together. This all-encompassing approach to community development requires building on the foundational relationships we have been a part of for the last 18 years.

Our community has a new belief that we can address big challenges together. With hard work and collaboration, we will continue to work together to build thriving communities for all.

Derek Long  
Executive Director & Co-founder

# HISTORY

SINCE 2002, SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIONS HAS COLLABORATED WITH OUR COMMUNITY ON MANY PROJECTS

## Sustainable Connections IS BORN!

- First member event at Bellingham Cruise Terminal
- First membership directory included 87 members
- First sustainable practice introduced – Watershed Pledge



- First Annual Spring Business Conference
- Green Building Program started including first Low Impact Development tours and professional workshops
- Sustainable Connections partners on Whatcom County Farm Map
- Food & Farming Program started



- Busy Business Owners Handbook for Sustainable Practices published
- Green Power Community Challenge launch
- Study finds 69% brand recognition for Think Local First and 3 in 5 changed shopping behavior
- Whatcom County fast tracks green building permits
- First Chef Farm Tours



## 600

- Membership reaches 600+
- Sustainable Connections partners to promote Smart Trips
- Bellingham #1 in the Nation for increased bus ridership
- Guide to Eating Local introduced
- USDA Ag Census finds increase in direct marketing and sales to consumers by farmers with highest increases in Whatcom County
- First Annual Whatcom County Farm Tour



2002

2003

2004

2006

2008

2009



- Think Local First! Campaign launch
- First Buy Local Day – December 6th
- First Coupon Book published – “4th Corner Connector”
- First Imagine This! Home and Landscape Tour
- Food to Bank on Program launched with Community Food Co-op



2005

- First Green Building Conference
- Classes for LEED AP Prep offered
- City Ordinance passes – all new public buildings to meet LEED standards
- First Local Food Trade Meeting & Producer/Buyer Directory
- Buy Fresh Brand launched to promote locally grown and produced food
- First Eat Local Week



2007

- Bill McKibben speaks at the Future of Business Conference
- Toward Zero Waste Campaign launch
- Green Power Community Challenge concludes – over 12% green power purchased. Bellingham becomes #1 EPA Certified Green Power Community in the nation

2009

- Natural Resource Defense Council names Bellingham #1 Small City in the Nation for urban progress towards sustainability – Sustainable Connections and local business leadership noted as contributors
- Assisted the City of Bellingham with FIVE green building barriers over the course of 12 months (FIVE/12 initiative)
- Whatcom County Farm Map and Guide to Eating Local merge into Whatcom Food & Farm Finder
- Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) moves national headquarters to Bellingham



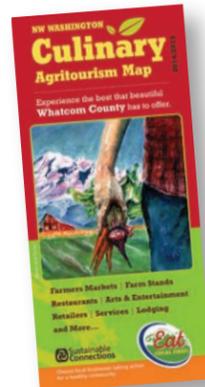
- Community Energy Challenge launch
- Bellingham and Sustainable Connections featured in episode of PBS Now titled *Fixing the Future*
- Bellingham earns ICLEI Sustainability Leadership Award
- Whatcom County #2 in the nation for vitality of small, locally owned retail businesses
- City of Bellingham fast tracks green building permits
- Ten in '10 initiative – 10 tasks built into City of Bellingham Green Team Strategic Plan including incentives and removal of barriers to green building

2010

- Sustainable Connections turns 10
- 80% of Sustainable Connections members say Think Local First has positive impact
- Farm tour partnership with Whatcom County Tourism
- Parklet installed on Railroad Ave.
- Bank Local First launched
- Member Connect Networking Breakfasts start



2012



- First NW Washington Culinary Agritourism Map
- Future of Business Speaker Series introduced
- Bellingham Top 10 best Downtowns in America
- Northwest Chef's Collective started
- Whatcom Water Fest debut



2014

- Solarize Whatcom completes 48 new solar projects and donates 48 solar panels to Bellingham Food Bank
- Kilowatt Kitty encourages energy savings with the Bellingham Energy Prize
- First Downtown Market Walk encourages shoppers to buy local groceries from local stores
- Toward Zero Waste makes strides in decreasing construction and food waste
- Economic development receives a boost with formation of Choose Whatcom
- Recipient of Bellingham Fête Fundraiser



2016

- Celebrated cultural diversity with over 2500 people at the Birchwood International Market
- Launched the Whatcom Housing Alliance with other key community organizations
- Provided over 13,781 meals to people in need through our Food Recovery Initiative - Squatch Food Waste!
- Helped over 50,000 people recycle at our local soccer park
- Launched a new online Food Atlas to help our community find local food
- Helped form Shift Zero, a Zero Net Carbon Building Alliance
- Debuted Bellingham's first ever Green Building Slam
- Introduced a new look for local campaigns such as Eat Local First



2018

2019

2020



2013



- Green Playhouse Competition
- Food & Farming Business Development Summit
- Health Care Info Summit with Chamber of Commerce
- Inaugural Wine and Spirits Fundraiser
- Eat Local Holiday Pledge launched
- Over 1200 Homes & 300 Businesses in the Community Energy Challenge create over \$13 million in local economic activity since inception



2015



- First annual KAPOW! place making competition
- Bellingham becomes finalist in Georgetown Energy Prize competition for \$5 million prize
- Commercial Street Night Market started
- First Field to Flame Fundraising Brunch

2017

- First Housing Week addresses issues of housing crisis in Whatcom County with 10 other partners
- Bellingham places 3rd in the nation for energy savings with the most creative and inclusive campaign - Bellingham Energy Prize
- Think Local First coupon book goes mobile with Chinook Book
- Whatcom County Farm Tour expands to 2 full days
- Planning started for a new Food Waste Initiative
- Launched new online business directory to connect the community with local businesses



Start Saving! Right Meow!

- Merged with Cloud Mountain Farm Center to provide even more support for beginning farmers
- Introduced the Think Local First Rock Hunt
- 2019 Washington State Recycler of the Year Award!
- Annual Farm To Table Trade Meeting contributed to over \$1 million in new sales
- Solarize your Business campaign resulted in \$937K to local contractors



- Eat Local First joins forces with other regional partners and launches an online Food and Farm Finder for the state of WA
- The Food Recovery Program expands during a pandemic to provide over 200K meals
- With the help of regional partners, the Think Local First Gift Card produced over \$250K in sales





**FOOD  
TO BANK ON**



**CLOUD MOUNTAIN  
FARM CENTER**  
community | education | sustainability

INCUBATOR PROGRAM:  
**4 FARMS**  
**17 EMPLOYEES**

FOOD DONATIONS  
**\$11,000**

FOOD TO BANK ON  
**12 FARMERS**



# INSPIRING FUTURES

A RECENT MERGER BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIONS AND CLOUD MOUNTAIN FARM CENTER PROMISES TO ENSURE OUR REGION HAS ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR BEGINNING FARMERS

Cloud Mountain started as a for-profit farm with an emphasis on educating the consumer as well as encouraging home growers. With the help of the Whatcom Community Foundation, founders Tom and Cheryl Thornton decided to turn the farm into a nonprofit education center in 2011. While this move did not signal a major shift in philosophy, it did allow the farm to create new programs to offer the community even more. In addition to producing food and nursery stock, Cloud Mountain offered educational workshops and advice to home gardeners and homesteaders.

In 2019, Cloud Mountain Farm Center merged with Sustainable Connections. The merger allows them to provide even more services to farmers.

Food To Bank On, for example, assists farmers with business planning workshops and marketing support while also connecting them with experienced mentors. In addition, the program pays farmers to deliver food to local food banks and shelters.

The Incubator Program provides the resources needed to start farming so beginning and expanding farmers can get a faster start for their farm business. Cloud Mountain offers land for lease, the use of equipment and infrastructure, and on-farm technical support. Starting a farm is a huge investment. Land, tractors, irrigation equipment, and greenhouses are all big costs. By offering many of the necessary components in one place, the incubator program makes it easier to get going without spending tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

These farmer education initiatives strengthen the commitment to education that has always been at the heart of Cloud Mountain. The mission has moved beyond educating the public about the importance of eating local food and into the realm of growing a new generation of farmers. With the average age of farmers in Washington State approaching 60, this work is more important than ever.

*photo: In her fourth year of farming and second year with the Cloud Mountain Farm Center Incubator Program, Savannah Flynn of Flynn Farms grows over 80 different certified organic crops on her one acre and participates in the Food To Bank On program.*



# EXPANDING MARKETS

WITH PARTNERS FROM ALL OVER WASHINGTON STATE, THE EAT LOCAL FIRST CAMPAIGN EXPANDS STATEWIDE TO INCLUDE 37 COUNTIES WITH MORE THAN 1,700 LISTINGS.

Eat Local First continues to grow as a shared call to action across our region and Washington State. First started in 2011, this collective marketing campaign engages every part of the supply chain to promote locally grown, raised, harvested, and made products with easily recognizable branding and consumer education.

Market disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic left many producers looking for new ways to reach customers and many households looking for new ways to source food and support their local community.

To help meet these community needs, six local and regional food systems organizations came together as the Eat Local First Collaborative to make it as easy as possible for consumers to connect with local and regional food and farm businesses across Washington. As part of this effort, the Food Atlas (originally created by Sustainable Connections in 2017) was expanded with the addition of local food maps and directories from

partner organizations and relaunched in November as the Washington Food & Farm Finder. Partners in this new regional tool include: Tilth Alliance, The Local Food Trust, Pierce County Fresh, WSU Clallam County, WSU Food Systems, and Sustainable Connections.

Now with more than 1,700 listings in 37 counties, the Washington Food & Farm Finder (at eatlocalfirst.org) was boosted out to the public via our first state-wide Eat Local First campaign: Eat Local Buy Local for the Holidays. Through this campaign, more than 200,000 people in Washington heard the shared messaging that encouraged holiday shoppers to source local food and farming gifts, including a holiday gift guide curated with the best locally produced goodness from around the state.

Averaging 25,000 visitors a month since launch, eatlocalfirst.org is rapidly becoming the go-to resource for anyone in Washington looking to eat local.

*"...The need for a campaign like this is certainly out there, and with such great partners, we think the Eat Local First campaign will be very effective at getting more locally grown food onto the plates of consumers."  
(Melissa Spear, Executive Director of Tilth Alliance)*



WEBSITE VISITORS  
**25K / MONTH**

WEBSITE LISTINGS  
**1700**

WA COUNTIES  
**37**



# NEW EFFICIENCIES

2020 SHOWED US MORE EFFICIENT WAYS TO DELIVER OUR SERVICES AND THAT TECHNOLOGY CAN MAKE OUR SERVICES MORE ACCESSIBLE—THESE ARE LESSONS WE PLAN TO CARRY FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE!

The Community Energy Challenge was created in the wake of a major economic recession in 2010, so helping small businesses weather a financial and societal storm is in our blueprint. When 2020 presented new challenges, we put on our PPE and found opportunities to overcome them. Providing low-cost energy audits, expert advice, and financial incentives to make it easy to say “yes” to energy efficiency upgrades are all tools that continued to be useful for businesses coping with COVID, much like they were during the Great Recession.

Throughout 2020, the requests that we received from our small business community were reassuringly familiar—one needed help comparing bids from different contractors, another wanted to utilize our free LED upgrade program while their restaurant was closed, another hoped to access rebates for a large heating system upgrade. However, the way we met these needs sometimes looked very different than they had during the past 10 years of the program.

In early April 2020, during a state mandated cessation of most commercial activity, Thrive Business Group moved into a new space and wanted to upgrade to an efficient heat pump. One of our Energy Advisors successfully administered a remote energy audit for

the first time and was able to gather the information needed to facilitate the upgrade. After that, we continued to provide many services remotely, such as rebates and project management services for a large HVAC, swimming pool heater, and boiler upgrade at Scatchet Head Community Club on Whidbey Island and were able to resume some in-person energy audits once we mastered our COVID-safety measures to keep clients and staff safe.

Although many aspects of the pandemic have been isolating, 2020 was a year that provided new ways to connect with our community. Our early morning networking gathering for energy efficiency professionals and enthusiasts, known as Energy Club, moved to Zoom and consistently experienced higher turnout than any previous meetings. As part of a small taskforce advocating for bringing C-PACER (a form of commercial energy efficiency financing) to our region, we were able to use technology to bring in experts from around the state to promote this program to local elected officials. From the City of Bellingham’s Climate Action Week to Sustainable Connection’s Green Building Slam to the Association of Energy Engineer’s West Coast Conference, the Community Energy Challenge stepped into the virtual sphere to reach a larger audience than ever in 2020.

THRIVE BUSINESS GROUP UPGRADED TO EFFICIENT LEDS WITH THE COMMUNITY ENERGY CHALLENGE’S FREE DIRECT INSTALL LIGHTING PROGRAM



## 2020 PROGRAM TOTALS

**GREEN HOUSE GAS SAVED**  
**651,609** LBS CO2

**MONEY SAVED**  
**\$67,333**

**PROGRAM INCENTIVES**  
**\$53,080**

**UTILITY INCENTIVES**  
**\$33,906**

**ECONOMIC IMPACT**  
**\$816,516**

**742,813 MILES**

GHG savings = 742,813 miles not driven by the average vehicle



FOOD RECOVERY VOLUNTEERS HELPING RECOVER FOOD FROM THE BELLINGHAM FARMERS MARKET FOR THE TIP THE SCALES FOR HUNGER RELIEF PROGRAM; OVER 12,000LBS OF FOOD WAS RECOVERED FROM THE MARKET DURING THE SUMMER OF 2020




**FOOD RECOVERY PROGRAM**

MEALS PROVIDED  
**200K**

LBS OF FOOD SAVED  
**255K**

NEIGHBORS HELPED  
**7,000**



# UNEXPECTED PATHS

OUR FOOD RECOVERY PROGRAM REDUCES FOOD INSECURITY AND ADDRESSES CLIMATE CHANGE BY REDISTRIBUTING NUTRITIOUS SURPLUS FOOD TO OUR NEIGHBORS EXPERIENCING HUNGER.

As the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality in our region it quickly became apparent that our Food Recovery Program was already uniquely situated to help address the pressing needs of our community. Prior to the pandemic our program was already taking food to the people rather than making people come to the food—this was key to avoid bringing large groups together to receive food aid. Our initial intent with this model was to overcome food access issues for those challenged by proximity, transportation, work schedules, or childcare. This model provided the necessary social distancing measures that would enable us to continue delivering food during the pandemic.

When other hunger relief agencies had to cease operations due to social distancing requirements, we were able to fill this void and continue to provide food to our neighbors experiencing hunger. Our work provided a much needed stop gap while other community partners retooled their efforts and operations so they could once again provide food to their patrons.

Through our work in 2020, we saved over 254,883 lbs. of food from going to waste as restaurants, schools, and other food providers had to cease business on short notice. Had we not had the expertise, staff,

volunteers, and partnerships in place, there is no doubt that many thousands of pounds of food would have gone to waste at a time when it was most in need by our community.

In one such instance, we worked with a local food producer, Hempler's Foods Group, which produces the "Mariners Dog" for Seattle Mariners home games at Safeco Stadium. With the suspension of the Major League Baseball season, Hempler's needed to re-home 2,985 lbs. of these dogs. We were able to get a team of our experienced volunteers to safely recover and redistribute this precious resource. During this time, many food banks had temporarily closed and the need for food aid was immediate and significant. The frozen "Mariners Hot Dogs" provided a protein source that families could easily store and use as needed.

Our work over the past year has taken on paths we never expected to trod. We leaned in and took over recovery and delivery routes from partner agencies, established new partnerships, and all in a fast-changing, unpredictable, and daunting landscape. Our work in 2020 expanded to recover food from 76 different donors and redistribute it to 12 hunger relief organizations who used it to serve over 200,000 meals to over 7,000 community members in need.



## CONNECTING CREATIVELY

LAUNCHING A CREATIVE CAMPAIGN WITH SASQUATCH WAS NO SMALL FEAT, BUT ALLOWED OUR COMMUNITY TO MAKE CONNECTIONS ON SO MANY LEVELS.

Local businesses are the heart and soul of our community. Many businesses are the landmarks that create a sense of culture and provide unique experiences that make locals proud to call the Pacific Northwest home. By providing resources and promotions for small businesses, we're supporting our community and creatively connecting neighbors together. When COVID-19 hit, local businesses needed our help. Throughout the year, we adapted to changes and reminded our community that local businesses need our support more than ever.

While many people were staying at home, social media proved to be a creative way to support local businesses. Promotions such as *Twenty Dollar Tuesday* and giveaways surrounding Valentine's Day, resulted in extra sales and appreciative business owners during a difficult time.

Summer marked the return of the second Think Local First Rock Hunt in July. By encouraging our community to get outside and hunt for custom painted rocks in local parks, not only were we promoting fresh air and exercise, but we were also promoting gift cards from local businesses as prizes. Participants discovered new parks AND new local businesses.

For the past 18 years, Sustainable Connections has brought together local businesses and community members in support of a vision to make Whatcom County a vibrant, creative, and thriving place where people want to live, work, and play. During the holiday season, supporting our friends and neighbors who own local businesses is one of our top priorities.

In November 2020, we launched our biggest holiday campaigns to date with an expanded gift guide and new digital gift card redeemable at over 230 local businesses. Working closely with Whatcom County Tourism and other business support organizations, launching the Whatcom Think Local First Gift Card on short notice was no small feat. Building upon relationships that were already established (as well as creating new ones), we were able to recruit local businesses for the new program and launch it before the holiday shopping season with a creative campaign featuring the Pacific Northwest's favorite mascot, Sasquatch. Working with local government agencies, COVID relief funding enabled us to also offer bonus gift cards that expired at the end of the year. With shoppers redeeming Think Local First Gift Cards (and bonus cards) at local stores and restaurants, our economy was stimulated and our community was making connections again.

## THINK LOCAL FIRST GIFT CARDS & GUIDE

VALUE OF GIFT CARDS SOLD  
**\$250K**

NUMBER OF GIFT CARDS SOLD  
**6,659**

IMPRESSIONS ON WEBSITE  
**54,739**

GIFT CARD BUSINESSES  
**230**

GIFT GUIDE BUSINESSES  
**430**





# FORMING ALLIANCES

AS THE BACKBONE AGENCY FOR THE WHATCOM HOUSING ALLIANCE, WE WORK ALONGSIDE 40 LOCAL BUSINESSES & ORGANIZATIONS TO CREATE DIVERSE HOUSING CHOICES IN ALL OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

HOUSING ALLIANCE MEMBERS

**44**

HOUSING WEEK ATTENDEES

**250**

BELLINGHAM FOR EVERYONE ALLIES

**216**

## MEMBERS

2 Roofs Real Estate  
 2020 Engineering  
 Bellingham Bay Builders  
 Bellingham Housing Authority  
 Bellingham Tenants Union  
 Catholic Housing Services  
 City of Bellingham  
 Habitat for Humanity  
 Keller Williams Western Realty  
 Kulshan Community Land Trust  
 Landmark Real Estate Mgmt  
 Lydia Place  
 Opportunity Council

Paul Schissler Associates  
 Port of Bellingham  
 RMC Architects  
 TC Legend Homes  
 Unity Care NW  
 Volonta Corporation  
 WC Association of Realtors  
 Whatcom Community Foundation  
 Whatcom County Health Dept  
 Whatcom County Housing Authority  
 Whatcom Transportation Authority  
 AVT Consulting  
 Builders Industry Association of WC

Chamber of Commerce  
 Dawson Construction  
 Downtown Bellingham Partnership  
 Madrona Community Development  
 Mercy Housing NW  
 NSEA  
 NW American Institute of Architects  
 RAM Construction  
 Riveters Collective  
 RJ Group  
 Western Washington University  
 Barkley Company  
 Interfaith Coalition

Sustainable Connections' Green Building & Smart Growth program promotes vibrant neighborhoods to improve quality of life in Whatcom County and has a fifteen year legacy of successful community building throughout the greater Bellingham region. Over the past three years, the Green Building and Smart Growth program has developed the Whatcom Housing Alliance. This broad-based coalition is focused on developing solutions that will provide more housing options within our existing neighborhoods to give everyone access to healthy, affordable housing.

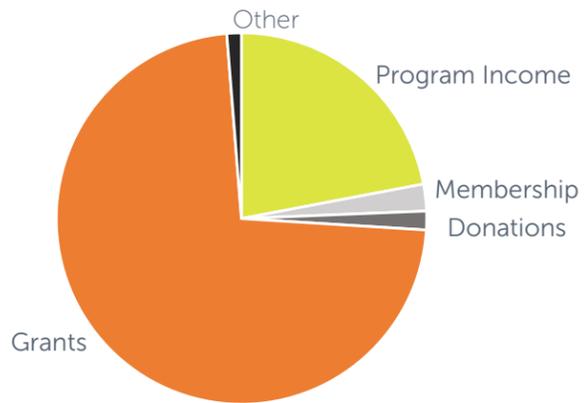
In 2020, the Whatcom Housing Alliance surpassed 40 diverse member organizations—each committed to advancing the goal and purposes of the alliance through community collaboration and education, technical assistance, and advocacy. Organizations represented include public health agencies, economic development groups, for-profit and non-profit housing developers, smart-growth professionals, environmental organizations, trade organizations, and others. In addition to their collective and varied knowledge of housing issues, the professional agencies involved in the WHA contain a wealth of experience, making the WHA an essential resource to solving our community's housing needs.

We know Bellingham residents want equitable, healthy, and affordable homes for everyone. But they need the knowledge and awareness of the issues in order to support the policy that can cultivate this vision. It became clear that in order to get good policy passed, we need to have underrepresented voices at the table and this takes public education and public engagement in the issues.

In response to this need, in 2020, the Whatcom Housing Alliance launched the Bellingham for Everyone Campaign. This is a public-facing education campaign to create an engaged community informed about the benefits of affordable housing and smart growth principles. The program creates a community dialogue and shared vision for an equitable housing future.

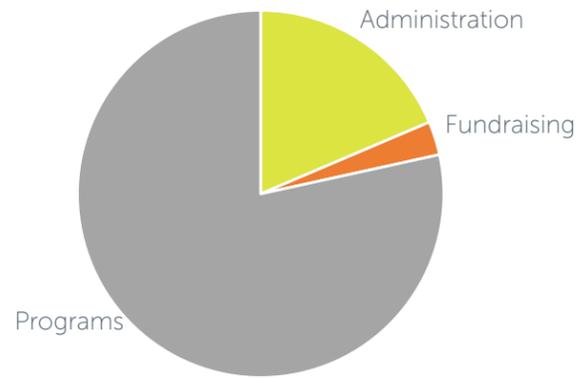
By using community engagement and story telling, we have lifted community voices to show how a mix of housing in our neighborhoods can enrich our lives. Through educational workshops, we are demystifying common misconceptions about both infill and homelessness to show how together we can build diverse neighborhoods that we are proud of. And by organizing housing allies, we are building the capacity to affect local policy to provide equitable, affordable housing for all.

# 2020 FINANCIALS



## INCOME

Program Income	\$517,802
Membership Donations	\$54,737
Grants	\$1,710,456
Other	\$29,905



## EXPENSES

### BY CATEGORY

Administration	\$428,155
Fundraising	\$67,976
Programs	\$1,804,506

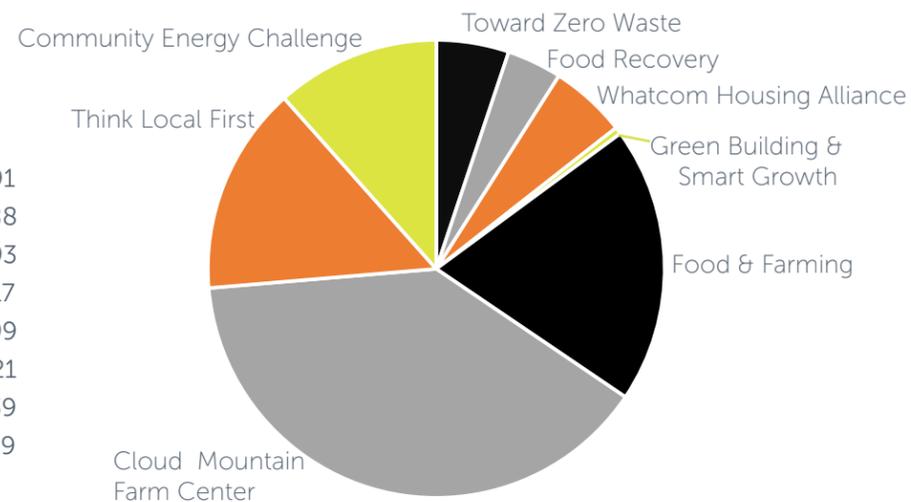
## EXPENSES BY PROGRAM

EXPENSES BROKEN DOWN INTO PROGRAM CATEGORIES

## EXPENSES

### BY PROGRAM

Toward Zero Waste	\$91,891
Food Recovery Program	\$69,288
Whatcom Housing Alliance	\$96,493
Green Building & Smart Growth	\$8,817
Food & Farming	\$348,799
Cloud Mountain Farm Center	\$699,921
Think Local First	\$263,039
Community Energy Challenge	\$207,199



# QUOTES FROM OUR COMMUNITY



## COMMUNITY ENERGY CHALLENGE

"Nearly three years ago, the Mullis Center reached out to Sustainable Connections in Bellingham to perform an Energy Audit. Since then, we have followed nearly all their recommended actions to help improve our energy footprint. The final piece is a solar panel installation project which will begin within the next month or two and will be completed just in time for us to take full advantage of the sunniest months of the year."



## FOOD & FARMING

"Such a great new tool for CSA farmers and members alike! I have needed this myself for so many years...and likely again this year. Nice work!"



## THINK LOCAL FIRST

"Thank you so much. I just printed out six gift certificates for \$70.00 each as a gift from the Board for our staff. It worked like a dream, especially for one not technically gifted. This support local gift card is the perfect gift."



## TOWARD ZERO WASTE

"Our customers love seeing how we're trying to reduce waste when to-go food is so necessary. We've been able to choose the best single-use compostable products for our customers and come up with creative (and health code approved!) reusable solutions with the help of Toward Zero Waste"

