

Vancouver Economic Development Commission

## **Local Food Industry Roundtable**

July 29, 2009, 10:00 – 12:00 p.m.

Nu Restaurant, Vancouver, BC

### *Summary/key points*

- Vancouver has major opportunities to improve the presence of local food in the local market, with local food enjoying growing customer and business support
- The content and conclusions of Chris Hild's report prepared for VEDC were widely supported among the participants
- Demand-side initiatives in the region are well underway, and further work needs to be done to facilitate an easy interface for local procurement
  - VEDC will organize a follow-up meeting to help build local procurement linkages, and investigate the most effective way of creating a "one-stop shop" for buyers
- Supply-side initiatives have been slower to emerge, and will require investment in infrastructure and a focused effort to achieve greater penetration of local food among transport and warehousing intermediaries
  - Local Food First initiative has an initiative underway to begin creating this infrastructure in the form of a local food "hub"
  - Past experiences have shown that suppliers will respond to new market opportunities

### **Attendees:**

Elaine Arrowsmith, Whole Foods  
Herb Barbolet, Simon Fraser University\*  
Robert Clark, Executive Chef, Nu, C & Rain City Grill Restaurants  
Liz Green, VanCity Community Foundation  
Shelley Harris, Fraserland Farms  
Chris Hild, Centre for Sustainability and Social Innovation  
Jonathan Kassian, VEDC  
Joe Kennedy, Whole Foods  
Andre LaRiviere, Green Table Network\*  
Kevin McCarty, Reeve Consulting  
Tara MacDonald, Your Local Farmers' Market Society\*  
Bonita Magee, FarmFolk/CityFolk Society\*  
Annie Moss, Discovery Organics  
Patrick Murphy, Vista Doro Farms  
Erin Nichols, Tarragon Foods\*  
Heather O'Hara, Potluck Cafe  
Andrew Parr, UBC Food Services

Andrew Pollard, Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre  
Andrea Reimer, Vancouver City Council  
John Tylee, VEDC  
James Tansey, Centre for Sustainability and Social Innovation & Offsetters  
Gunta Vitins, Pro Organics  
Kristina Welch, Centre for Sustainability and Social Innovation  
Ian Wind, Vancouver School Board

\* - Member, Local Food First

### **Proceedings:**

John Tylee opened the meeting at 10:15 a.m. and thanked the participants for their attendance and their assistance in compiling the report. After introductions, Councillor Andrea Reimer noted that the session was important and timely, since Council's 3 priorities for their term – addressing homelessness, becoming the greenest city in the world, and implementing an economic development strategy to ensure Vancouver's future prosperity – all have a strong connection to the local food system.

Jonathan Kassian discussed the goals of the project, noting that improving the local food landscape had the potential to raise local incomes and improve the productivity of Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) lands. Chris Hild summarized some key findings from his project to set the context for the meeting:

- People are the foundation of the local food system, and building connections among industry players was a big motivation for holding the roundtable
- These connections are crucial in creating new business opportunities in a region where business-as-usual practices often prevail
- Increasing local business helps to make the case for more infrastructure, which is the biggest requirement for taking the local industry to the next level

Hild noted that the local food system is at an early-intermediate stage, where the industry needs to begin scaling up production. Institutional buying and restaurant-supported agriculture (RSA) provide opportunities to begin scaling up, but better intermediaries are still needed to make this process easy for both buyers and suppliers.

### ***Institutional Buying***

Andrew Pollard (Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre) discussed the VCEC's local sourcing policy, which dates back to the mid-1990s. The rationale for focusing on local food and wine in their facility is that many conference attendees only experience BC through their time at the VCEC. Because meal planning generally only occurs with a 2-3 week lead time, it is difficult to make long-term supply arrangements in advance, which leads to local product supply disconnects. The easiest system from VCEC's perspective would be a single point of contact for sales and sourcing of local food.

A participant added that although the model at their large institution was quite different, with regular and predictable demand, he was equally supportive of an easy point of contact for sourcing local food. It was noted that there was a need to work with distributors to make end users aware of what was in season locally to match demand with what could be supplied locally. A database would be an important tool in these efforts, but would have to be assembled by an impartial third party to mitigate competition among industry participants. The City of Vancouver may have a role to play here, though a number of other efforts to this end were also being discussed.

Long-term contracts were identified as crucial to successful institutional sourcing or RSA arrangements, though sometimes difficult from a restaurant's perspective. These contracts allow new lands to come into production at lower risk of being undercut in future years by low-cost US production, and left without any revenue for a given year's crop. It was noted that Canadian Food Inspection Agency regulations forbid retailers from labeling food as 'local' because no standard definition exists.

The discussion around improving mechanisms for institutional sourcing of local food and RSA's was energetic, and it was agreed that a meeting would be held in the fall to deal with that topic specifically. Many participants indicated they would be interested in attending.

### ***Distribution***

Herb Barbolet (Simon Fraser University) was very complementary of the report. He noted that the previous discussion showed that significant good work was underway on the demand side of the local food equation, but that more work was still needed on the supply side. If a major buyer like VCEC were to shift its sourcing entirely to local food, it would take up the entire local supply that can be readily sourced.

Better distribution, cold storage and warehousing linkages were critical to aggregating sellers' supply to meet buyers' needs and build resiliency in the local food system; local processing can be an outlet for excess supply. Local Food First members discussed their plans for a future hub and permanent farmers' market location that would include all of these functions. Participants were very supportive of the concept, and suggested expanding it to include other compatible functions like training for restaurateurs and the culinary arts.

A participant noted that on-farm storage was also a key, though better infrastructure could result in more profits to reinvest in equipment. It was also noted that current opportunities existed with the vacant Save-On-Meats Building to create a neighborhood-level hub. A dispersed model was important to future resiliency, although the Province is currently pursuing a centralized strategy.

### ***Farmers' Markets***

Tara MacDonald (Your Local Farmers' Market Society) shared her experiences with the farmers' markets, noting that creating opportunities for farmers will pay dividends. She noted that summer markets were now over capacity ("if you build it, they will come"),

and that the winter market is becoming a growing source of off-season revenue to farmers who have changed their production to meet winter demand.

The discussion finished by noting that the City of Vancouver has a large population that requires food and produces tax revenues, but has little agricultural land. Other municipalities prefer up-zoning agricultural land to receive greater tax revenue from lands that currently provide little municipal revenue. This reinforces a longer-term need for regional cooperation and dialogue around economic growth.

*Next Steps*

The minutes from the meeting and final report will be mounted on VEDC's website. VEDC will organize another roundtable meeting in the fall to focus specifically on the issue of improving mechanisms for local food procurement. Further collaboration among the participants will continue, in particular around the issue of creating a permanent "hub" for local food in Vancouver.

The meeting was adjourned at 12 p.m.