

Sooke Region Food Community Health Initiative Society (Sooke Food CHI)

May 8, 2012

Juan de Fuca Economic Development Commission
C/O Capital Regional District
2 – 6868 West Coast Road
Sooke, B.C. V9Z 0S9

Dear Juan de Fuca EDC,

Thank you for providing the Sooke Region Farmer2Farmer Network with support for the 2011/2012 season.

Below is a summary of what our project accomplished this year thanks to support from strong organizations like yours.

We wanted to again share our success story as you've enabled us to make a noted difference in our community. A very warm thank you for your work in the community and supporting grassroots initiatives like ours

Sincerely,

Sooke Region Food CHI

Enclosed:
Final report
Appendix - Timeline

SOOKE REGION FOOD CHI

FARMER2FARMER NETWORK FINAL REPORT – APRIL 30, 2012

FOR PRESENTATION TO THE JUAN DE FUCA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Introduction

The Sooke Region Food CHI Society (Food CHI) believes that the agricultural sector in this region will be increasingly important in the future, in several ways. A strong local food system reinforces a strong local economy, through providing employment, retail opportunities, and the security of a reliable food supply. In order to ensure the agricultural industry in the Sooke region has a chance to flourish; this project has focused on supporting this sector's foundation: the farmers.

Background

The Farmer2Farmer Network (F2F) is intended to continue to support the transitioning and emerging farming community, by building on the network that has been developing through the ongoing efforts of Food CHI – from the Farm Forum of 2008 through to the good work of the New Farmer Mentorship program of 2009 and 2010.

Through these previous efforts, some key issues identified by participants include the need to improve connectivity between farmers, new and experienced, and to increase opportunities for knowledge sharing.

Food CHI has committed to long-term goals geared towards creating a resilient local food system. To use a phrase from the University of Victoria "Vancouver Island imports about 95% of its food supply. Let's hope nothing goes wrong." Here are some of the ways Food CHI has worked towards creating a collective voice for Sooke's agricultural sector.

Goals and Results of the Farmer2Farmer Network Project

Organizing farmer workshops/discussion events directly suited to farmers needs:

- January 29 - Information Session "Farm Insurance" – provided experienced panelist to respond to questions about the sorts of insurance required or suggested to produce food, have farm workers on site and to sell the farm products – signed up new F2F members
- March 27 - Information Session "Farmers & Government" – responded to questions and concerns about myriad government legislations and regulations that commercial farmers are required to contend with – panelists included a municipal planner, a regional planner, two federal food inspectors and a provincial agrologist – signed up new members
- After each information session, the questions and answers were transcribed and are now held in the Sooke Region Farmer2Farmer email list serve – available to all participants
- The list serve, email list and website were also used to provide announcements of important local events, for example: food safety or farming workshops happening elsewhere on Vancouver Island and the District of Sooke Agriculture Planning Open House

Connecting newer farmers with more experienced farmers, providing communication opportunities and building the list serve:

- Invited over 150 experienced and newer farmers, backyard gardeners, and local food advocates to each public event
- Signed up members to the F2F list serve at every event and meeting - membership grew by 25%

Ensuring local farms represented online, in community and within local government:

- Email and phone list grew by 50 people – for those people who prefer to receive announcements or information by phone or email vs list serve (in fact about 40 participants have no email access)
- Reached out to farming community at Seedy Saturday and Farm Film Night showing of “To Make a Farm” – presented purpose of F2F, and signed up new members to the list serve and phone list
- Communicated Farmer2Farmer Network goals and activities in CR-FAIR “Making Food Matter” newsletter and in the *Rural Observer*
- Networked extensively with other community and service groups, such as Sooke Region CHI’s new Volunteer Centre steering committee meetings, Transition Town meetings, Sooke Region Cultural Alliance meetings, Metchosin Farmer’s Institute
- Networked extensively with various levels and departments of government, including meetings with: 2 District of Sooke Councillors, meetings with 2 staff of the T’Sou-ke Nation, briefings to local MLA and Provincial Agriculture Critic, meetings with Regional Agrologist

Investigating a resurrection of a Farmer’s Institute or other formal organization for our area:

- Had discussions with current president of Metchosin Farmer’s Institute, with local farmers and with Ministry of Agriculture staff - ongoing

Researching a more appropriate space for the Sooke Country Market, in consultation with current Market Society board:

- Had extensive conversations with Sooke municipal councillors (x2) about possible locations for new market location
- Identified location requirements to meet goal of a destination market (running water, washroom facilities, electricity and adequate parking in an easy access, preferably high visibility location)
- Shared market goals at each networking opportunity and all community meetings
- Identified that ongoing work needed for long-term plan

Testimonials from Farmer2Farmer Network participants

“I find the network helpful, I have taken part in a workshop (insurance) and I would participate in another in the future. I find the announcements helpful for sure. I think this is a great way to support new and old farmers. I find the farmers in this community really informative and supportive when called upon. Thank you for everything that you do!!”

“We really like what you’re doing. It’s good to know that a lot of information that we need (and some that we didn’t know we needed) can be found in one, locally relevant place!”

“I have heard of Sooke Chi thru the Go Local Food Summit. You are doing excellent work for farming.”

“The announcements are great. Even if you can’t make it you can find out what’s happening.”

Conclusion

The long-term nature of building a local food system requires the exact sort of support provided by this project. The feedback has been very good and people in the farming community are asking for more. Food CHI plans to continue to support the Farmer2Farmer Network as a part of the plan to transition to a sustainable local food model.

Observations and Recommendations

Experienced farmers asked to be kept in the loop about activities, but did not engage very much. I believe we need to actively create more opportunities for knowledge transfer from the experienced farming community. To that end, I believe it is nearly time to run another **New Farmers Mentoring** project. This provides the opportunity for information sharing and re-skilling.

Recognizing that participation on F2F activities has been mostly from the newer farming community, **continue to support F2F Network** in the following ways:

- Organize 2 or 3 **information sessions** or workshops each year – in response to identified needs
- Contribute **Q&A articles** to the Sooke Mirror for publication in one paper per month – post same Q&A on our website
- Create an **information repository** that is available from the internet – not just from the list serve
- Create a **purchasing schedule** – encourage farmers to identify bulk purchase requirements well in advance and ensure organization of bulk purchases, deliveries and distribution
- Continue to encourage discussions about joining or forming a Farmers' Institute or co-operative – **demonstrate the benefits of incorporation**

Continue to support Sooke Country Market efforts to **establish a permanent farmers' market** in Sooke. The District of Sooke, as a municipality, has limited jurisdiction over agricultural activities. Aside from helping to create the Sooke Region Agriculture Plan, establishing a permanent farmer's market may be the most effective way of keeping Sooke engaged with the farming community.

It seems that there are many creative possible solutions to the issues around inaccessible farmable land in the Sooke Region. It may be worth **surveying experienced farmers** about their interest in succession planning for their farmland. With this information, we may be able to recognize opportunities as they arise.

Sooke Region Food CHI

Farmer2Farmer Network 2012

