

Food Security Action Initiative Report - Executive Summary

Sponsored by:
Sunshine Coast Community Services
and
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Facilitated by Nancy Baker,
Faciliator/Mediator/Consultant
nbaker@dccnet.com
604-908-0889

Executive Summary

Sunshine Coast Food Security Action Initiative

The Sunshine Coast is located northwest of Greater Vancouver. It is accessible only by sea, air or a six day expert hike from Squamish! The region lives up to its name with an annual total of between 1,400 and 2,400 hours of sunshine. It's a visitor's paradise with marinas, mountains, fishing, beaches and hiking trails.

The Sunshine Coast benefits from a rain shadow cast by the Vancouver Island Mountains, which catch most of the moisture coming in off the Pacific Ocean. This makes the growing conditions ideal for year-round vegetable farming and gardening.

The population of the Sunshine Coast continues to grow as more lower mainland people discover the easy ferry commute to work in Vancouver. The population is increasing at almost three times the B.C. rate. However, the median household income is below the BC average with a higher than the provincial average reliance on part-time employment (tourism, construction, logging).

There are a number of interesting factors impacting the food security of Sunshine Coast residents.: 19% of the population is over 65 compared to the provincial average of 14%. 4.9% of the residents are aboriginal while the rest are predominantly of European ethnic origin. The median household income is \$39,969 as compared to the BC median of \$46,802. The paradox is that food security exists alongside individual food insecurity. Vulnerable people are unable to meet their food needs without compromising other basic needs. With the migration of retirees and resident commuters elevating property costs, many families are challenged to find enough money after rent or plump mortgages to buy nourishing food.

Transportation has a significant affect on available foods. According to Farm Folk / City Folk, local residents, because of the water dividing them from the rest of the lower mainland, may have less access or increased costs for B.C. foods. And, in an emergency, the community only has enough food on hand for two or three days. As transportation costs increase, the availability of some foods and goods may also increase. Higher shipping costs would mean swelling food costs or less readily available choices. Another complication is that all local farm products must be graded for retail sale and need to be transported to the lower mainland for grading.

All residents of the Sunshine Coast have access to various community and church driven food emergency programs, but on a limited basis. The Sechelt Food Bank (one of three emergency food banks on the Sunshine Coast) served 7,610 individuals in 2005 including 2,858 children. And, the food made available through the free food programs is not always nutritious. Donors need some guidance on more appropriate offerings. Gleaned food needs to be moved more efficiently or preserved.

The Sechelt Indian Band has a half-time Nutritionist who has identified food security as a significant challenge. A Good Food Box program, as well as a community garden, have been running for three years. There is also an emergency shelf for clients on social assistance.

There are no food policies yet on the Sunshine Coast although the school district has a new regulation for implementing the provincial Food and Beverage Guidelines for Sales in BC. Schools two years earlier than the rest of the province for elementary schools and a year earlier for secondary. A district-wide Breakfast for Kids program is available for all students in School District #46 but some funding concerns have surfaced.

The community food security consultations connected with a number of Sunshine Coast residents with differing backgrounds and interests. Common issues and themes that appeared included a need for more access to fresh food with more farmer's markets and more local and affordable organic produce and seafood in the grocery stores. Food sustainability was addressed by the desired emphasis for public gardening spaces, the promotion of organic farms, a community commercial kitchen, more fruit tree projects, food coops, Plant-a-Row, Grow -a - Row projects and garden sharing schemes. Knowledge or education was a recurring theme with a significant gap in the area of garden mentoring, gardening skills, seed saving, healthy eating on a budget information & skills, community kitchens, cooking and food preservation skills, Public Awareness topics that emerged suggested more networking opportunities be created, involving the media. The issues around production and access brought out many comments as did the topics of cost and availability of foods.

It was also clear from the comments that many residents recognize a need for advocacy on a number of points: breastfeeding, funding for food for emergency programs, tax breaks for farmers, a policy on pesticides, support for small gardeners and provision for more local produce stalls at farmer's markets.

Food security is a complex, multifaceted issue that can only be fully addressed through the active cooperation of all actors A Sunshine Coast action plan has emerged: For the first year, it became apparent that a Food Policy Council needs to be formed with an emphasis on social economy. To drive the recommendations, the group needs to broaden it's membership and participation from many more residents, including seniors, SIB, local government, youth and those marginalized to seriously look at advocacy opportunities for a food secure Sunshine Coast.

A food security coordinator needs to be hired to chair the council, support the recommendations and steer the need for further actions. It is an immediate priority to support the existing fruit tree project which has identified a need for assistance in organizing the movement of fruit to those who are hungry as well as to help preserve the excess fruit .A forth priority project would be to extend a grant to a local food author ("Gardening for the Faint of Heart"), who submitted an outline for "The Faint Hearted Food Security Handbook" for a broad target audience.

Identified actions for the next years are to partner with the school district to help to support a school food coordinator, to help to publish " A Food Secure Household", to explore establishing community gardens and community kitchens in priority communities, to support garden mentoring and to drive education and public relations events.

The final vision to surface from the community consultations are that by 2009 the Sunshine Coast will have community kitchens in all interested and vulnerable communities from Egmont to Langdale and each community will have a designated community garden area as well as a regular local farmer's markets. The community will have simple access and exposure to garden mentors food growing workshops and local resources. Schools will have fresh healthy food available for all school children. Local governments will have frameworks and policies regarding pesticide use, protection of local land for farming and grants for local farmers.

In all, every resident would have access to healthy nutritious food.