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Sustainable Solano discusses how to increase availability of local food



Elena Karoulina, Executive Director of Sustainable Solano speaks with local and county government officials Wednesday about policies and forming partnerships needed to make more local food more available in the county. (Joel Rosenbaum — The Reporter)

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Solano County has an abundance of farms, yet much of the foods that residents consume in grocery stores, schools and hospitals come from outside the county and much of it is processed.

Trying to establish an environmentally sustainable and economically viable local food system has been a goal of Sustainable Solano's Local Food System Alliance, which hosted a pair of listening sessions at Be Love Farm to hold an open dialogue on how

In 2017, the Benicia-based nonprofit Sustainable Solano began exploring the idea of establishing a local food system to diversify the county's local healthy food economy that would preserve its farmland and biodiversity and providing easier access to such foods throughout the county. As part of this process, the Local Food System Alliance was formed to help create such a food system. Its first official meeting was held in August, and two listening sessions — sponsored through a grant from Solano County Public Health in partnership with the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation — were held Tuesday and Wednesday at Be Love Farm on Bucktown Lane.

The farm's owners — Matthew and Terces Engelhart — provided a breakfast featuring ingredients from their garden, including a frittata with butternut squash, onions and kale; an apple bake, yogurt and a rye bread made from a starter that the Engelharts had purchased from the St. Peter's Abbey bakery in Salzburg, Austria. The bread itself could be paired with a spicy olive oil featuring chilies and garlic.

The breakfast was well attended by several Alliance stakeholders including representatives of Solano Small Business Development Center, Solano County Public Health, Solano Economic Development Corporation and several local school districts and food co-operatives. There were also elected officials, including Supervisors Erin Hannigan and Monica Brown, Suisun City Councilman Anthony Adams, Fairfield Mayor Harry Price and Benicia Mayor Elizabeth Patterson.

Hannigan said she first became involved with Sustainable Solano after working with then-Supervisor Linda Seifert on an event in 2016 to address the county's food deserts, which are areas where high-quality foods are not easily accessible.

"Many families in our community do not know what it is to eat healthy foods and to purchase foods that are locally grown," she said.

Hannigan said the challenge was that processed foods were cheap, easily attainable forms of sustenance but had a detrimental impact on people's health.

One positive impact has been a partnership with the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, which has worked to promote healthier food options in the county. One way it has done so is through makeovers of liquor and convenience stores throughout the county by showcasing healthier options at the front.

"That relationship has been very beneficial in bringing fresh fruit, fresh produce to people in our community who live in poverty and may not consider that as an option for them," she said.

From there began a series of suggestions by attendees about ways to achieve healthy food accessibility. The alliance is working on a "5 by 25" initiative to substitute 5 percent of food spending in the county at all levels with local food by 2025.

Marilyn Bardet, the president of Sustainable Solano's board, said it was important to educate Solano youth on where their food comes from. She told a story of when she was a head teacher of a daycare in San Francisco's Mission District and took her kids on a field trip to a ranch in Sonoma County.

"The kids who were leaving their community to go up there had never been to such an area and also didn't know where food came from," she said. "They didn't know that carrots weren't just something wrapped up in cellophane at the supermarket."

Bardet said it was important for students to do agriculture-related projects at their schools.

Hannigan said schools did a good job on educating students and felt that parents should also inform their kids about eating healthy.

"What you learn in the school doesn't necessarily translate to changing life trajectories in terms of the food that you eat," she said. "We can put kale in front of the kids — or spinach or butternut squash — but until they see it prepared at home and actually consumed by their family around them, I don't believe you get that hook that succeeds long-term."

Jennifer Leonard, a public information officer with Solano County Office of Education, said that Vacaville Unified School District has been making progress in recent years by purchasing a culinary lab for Willis Jepson Middle School and by hiring Juan Cordon as the district's director of child nutrition.

"He's a great resource because they went fresh and scratch for at least 50 percent of their menu items, and their sales have exponentially grown," he said. "he has figured out how to make it appealing to kids."

Leonard said the county had a lot of great resources and programs, and it was important for parents to know about them.

Other ideas brought up included more community gardens, more restaurant options including vegan restaurants, providing workshops on how to prepare food and exploring a mandatory health program.

Patterson said it was important to have a hub where the public can learn more about how to help make Sustainable Solano's goal

Paula Schneese, the board president of Benicia's Cultivate Community Food Co-op, said the listening sessions were a good way to begin the conversation.

"This is where it starts: making connections and talking," she said. "The first thing is awareness. You can't make change without awareness."

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