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Organizations look to improve valley's food system

FEAST workshops aimed at helping community build healthier, more nutritious and more abundant food supply

ACCESS Inc. and area food banks have long been known for their efforts in distributing food to needy families. Now they're taking their mission several steps further by attempting to develop a plan that coordinates all the players in the local food system, from farmers to food banks and retailers to consumers.



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By JOHN DARLING

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ACCESS Inc. and area food banks have long been known for their efforts in distributing food to needy families. Now they're taking their mission several steps further by attempting to develop a plan that coordinates all the players in the local food system, from farmers to food banks and retailers to consumers.

The idea is to create a food supply that's nutritious, abundant, sustainable and available — and one that supports local farmers. It's not just about having enough food to distribute, it's about having the right kind of food and about creating a culture of self-sufficiency, both for families and the region.

As part of a yearlong community food system planning process, organizers will hold several FEAST workshops (Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together) in area communities to hear people's vision and to create a plan for turning the vision into reality.

"The mission," said Philip Yates, ACCESS Nutrition Programs director, "is to create a better, more efficient food system, increase food production, to create more healthy and organic food, to get it to markets and food banks and to support economic development."

The effort is being funded by a \$50,000 Meyer Memorial Trust grant to ACCESS, The Rogue Initiative for a Vital Economy, or THRIVE, and the Josephine County Food Bank.

The foundation awarded the grant, said Yates, in large part because so much progress has already been made here, from a Farmer Incubator Program that trains new farmers, to a THRIVE website that promotes local foods and existing local partnerships among providers and growers.

While area food donation organizations, such as ACCESS and the Food Project, are involved in the community food system planning, the project will address the entire food process and not just charitable efforts.

The idea of developing a comprehensive plan was also triggered by the identification last year of several "food deserts" in Jackson County. Food deserts are areas in which entire neighborhoods have access only to overpriced, inorganic and packaged food, with no fresh produce — and often only after they travel long distances to get it, said Yates. The move was also prompted by declining donations of food from markets, he said.

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Thursday, July 23, 2015



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The Jefferson Founders Forum, a coalition of up to 20 regional foundations, is backing the planning process and looking for ways to "go upstream" beyond food pantries for the hungry, said Kathy Bryon, executive director of the Gordon Elwood Foundation, one of the grantors.

"We're excited to see how we can impact the economy positively, the jobs potential in agriculture and to get healthy foods on the table, no matter what your income," said Bryon. "It's about training more farmers, getting nurses out from the university, teaching nutrition in local schools, reducing chronic illnesses and increasing employment."

John Javna, creator of the Ashland Food Project — which has branched out to include Medford and several other cities — said the new system will help eliminate inefficiencies, duplicated efforts and wasted resources that nonprofits often face, "especially at a time when resources are so precious."

"It's great that all the stakeholders are taking on the task of seeing that their neighbors are fed, and doing this by joining forces," Javna said. "It's an enormous shock to most people to hear the percentage of food-insecure people in Jackson County who are children — and we owe it to them to give our best efforts."

The community food system planning process will include seven FEAST workshops, as well as smaller meetings in less-populated areas. The first workshop will be from 1 to 6 p.m. March 11 in the Applegate River Ranch House.

Eventually, planners want to combine in a "summit" that merges the efforts of Jackson and Josephine counties, Yates noted.

"The goal is also to teach people to grow food," said Yates. "They can do it at the ACCESS Community Food Share Gardens, which produced 60,000 pounds of food last year. We encourage people to work there if they get Food Share boxes, instead of them being overwhelmed, going from scratch."

That focus on local, nutritious produce is at the core of the effort, Yates stressed.

"There's still a big gap (in food supplies) and local produce has a high value to us and the people we serve," he said.

John Darling is a freelance writer living in Ashland. E-mail him at jdarling@jeffnet.org.

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Belle Fiore Winery



UNDER THE SUN TOUR: Sugar Ray / 6:30 pm

Better Than Ezra / Uncle Kracker

/ Eve 6

The Britt Festival

Men's Barbershop Singing: 7:00 pm

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