

For the past eight months, I've developed a **Community Food Assessment** for Cottage Grove and the Southern Willamette Valley. The purpose of this food assessment is to document our local food resources and challenges, as well as identify different opportunities we have to overcome those challenges.

I would love to hear your input on this assessment. The following information was gathered from community members and provides background to a specific challenge in Cottage Grove. Your answers to the questions at the bottom of the page will help me identify opportunities to strengthen our food system and the food assessment.

Please send comments and feedback to me by the afternoon of next Friday, May 6<sup>th</sup>. You can email me at [rare.sustainablecg@gmail.com](mailto:rare.sustainablecg@gmail.com), drop off written notes at the Healing Matrix, or call me at **(541)623-0339**.

*Thank you! Jules Reynolds*

## **Community Education**

“Local food is superior in quality and freshness. People don’t understand that when you buy old produce [from supermarkets] that goes bad sooner, you’re actually paying more for it.”

As a state, Oregon undoubtedly surpasses much of the nation in support of local food. “We’re pretty far ahead of the rest of the country,” acknowledges one farmer, and says she’s seen growth of interest and support in buying local food since establishing her farm 15 years ago. “It’s been really cool to watch.” However, much of this support is located in urban areas, and less so in rural communities. Farmers interviewed for this community food assessment voiced over and over again that community education and support is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome in selling their product.

*Challenge:* In general, consumer purchasing of local product is the largest obstacle that rural retail outlets face in the Southern Willamette Valley. “We’re only scratching the surface,” says Scott of the Coast Fork Farm Stand, regarding the lack of consumer support for this local food market. He estimates that less than 10% of the Cottage Grove population has ever shopped at the Farm Stand. Many Cottage Grove residents prefer to shop at Safeway or even travel north to Eugene to get their weekly produce. Without customer support, the Coast Fork Farm Stand and other local markets will remain limited in their ability to buy from local farmers, purchase infrastructure, and provide healthy and local food to the Cottage Grove community.

*Opportunity:* “There’s a movement to become healthier in Cottage Grove – just look at Anytime Fitness, which moved to a bigger building earlier this year. How can we tap into that with food?” – South Valley farmer

*What can community-wide outreach and local food education look like in Cottage Grove? Why does this food system challenge and opportunity on Community Education speak to you?*

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## **Natural Resource Knowledge**

The diversity of soils, elevation, watersheds, and natural flora and fauna in the Southern Willamette Valley can be a unique advantage to local farmers—or a distinct challenge. The residents of the Southern Willamette Valley hold a wealth of knowledge about these natural resources, but that knowledge is rarely documented for public use.

*Challenge:* Efforts to attract more farmers to the area would benefit from a clear documentation of local natural resources. General knowledge already exists about the geographic areas that are conducive for farming, the watersheds, and the seasons, but that knowledge isn't easy to find for an outsider.

*Opportunity:* "Can we map the region by its limitations or opportunities for agriculture?" (Dave Downing, NRCS). By providing a public-use map of agricultural resources (soils, vegetation, zoning/farm use, etc), we can better share opportunities for land stewardship with prospective farmers and current land owners.

*How can we best document and communicate the natural resources offered by the Southern Willamette Valley?*

*Why does this food system challenge and opportunity on Natural Resource Knowledge speak to you?*

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## **Community Gardens**

Growing your own food increases awareness of healthy food, promotes individual and family food security, and often leads to a higher quality of life.

*Challenge:* When asked about growing their own food, many Creswell food pantry clients remarked that they don't have room for a home garden. Residents of low-income housing or apartment buildings often don't have backyards or space for planting. While community gardens may provide the space that apartments lack, transportation to these community gardens can also be an obstacle to growing one's own food.

*Opportunity:* Barrel gardens have been used successfully in the past by a few clients of South Lane Mental Health. Donated barrels can provide space for growing herbs or limited vegetables on porches or underneath windows.

*Opportunity:* Community gardens at local food pantries can increase access to food growing opportunities, especially because many low-income residents already have transportation to food pantries each month. A garden development plan should include hiring a manager in order to effectively organize and use resources and volunteers.

*Opportunity:* Selling high quality seeds all over the world, Territorial Seed Company is a valuable resource in Cottage Grove. Every year, the company donates seeds to schools and community organizations. Southern Willamette Valley schools, food pantries, or community garden organizations could capitalize on local connections to this donation program by coordinating efforts to write donation requests.

*Which opportunity is most feasible for Cottage Grove, and why or how? Is there another opportunity for community garden engagement? Why does this challenge speak to you?*

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### **Financial Obstacles to Healthy Food Access**

If local food is not affordable for all members of the community, then it is not truly accessible. The higher cost of healthy food prohibits some people from selecting it instead of cheaper processed foods. One way to encourage healthy food consumption in the Southern Willamette Valley is to maximize the use of resources that are already available to low-income community members, such as SNAP benefits.

*Challenge:* Many fixed-income community members identified affording food as a major challenge to eating healthfully, and cooking from scratch is often perceived as more expensive than buying pre-packaged or fast food. When clients at Creswell's food pantry were surveyed about challenges to cooking healthy food, over 60% thought healthy food is too expensive. This issue is compounded by the inequality of local food access: many Community Supported Agriculture programs and rural farmers' markets do not accept SNAP, often excluding low-income families from taking part in local food markets.

*Opportunity:* Accepting EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards at local food markets, including farmers markets and CSA memberships, is a huge step toward facilitating healthy food access for all members of the community. Local farmers can use Oregon-specific guides on accepting SNAP benefits for CSA's, which would allow them to market to a much wider section of the community. Other community food access programs allow low-income residents to trade work hours in a community garden or non-profit organization for fresh fruits and vegetables.

*Are there other opportunities to make healthy food more accessible for low-income community members? How can the cgFEAST movement reach out to our low-income population?*

*Why does this challenge and opportunity on Financial Obstacles to Healthy Food Access speak to you?*