

**Report on the Forum for a Food Charter
for Windsor-Essex County**



The Food Advisory Working Group

March 23, 2011

On March 10, 2011, the Food Advisory Working Group (FAWG) facilitated an open Forum to consider the development of a Food Charter for the Windsor-Essex County region. The Forum was held at the University of Windsor, and was open to the public and free. Over 50 people attended. FAWG sent invitations to community groups working on a diverse range of food-related issues such as anti-poverty, community gardens, food banks, the farmers' market, culinary tourism, urban hens, etc.

The event opened with a brief introduction about why the Forum was important at this time. The world is currently witnessing the highest food prices in history. It is more important than ever for communities to buffer themselves from the global food system on which we are currently dependent. Communities around the world are doing this by promoting more locally-controlled systems of food production and marketing. Secondly, though the local urban hen initiative recently experienced a set-back with a negative City Council vote, a high level of energy and support remains for urban hens – a symbol of an alternative food system. It is clear that many residents in Windsor-Essex County want a food system built on the principles of fairness, accessibility, and the right to eat fresh, nutritious food. For FAWG, the best way to have those principles come into effect is by having a more “sovereign” food system, with Food Charters potentially playing an important role in achieving food sovereignty in our region.

Forum participants also learned about the history of FAWG, which began as an extension of a course taught at the University of Windsor. Three FAWG members who took the course presented what they learned about “food deserts” in different parts of the region (Erika Stewin on LaSalle, Kenneth Moses on Windsor west of Crawford, and Megan Muller on the Casino area).

The remainder of the Forum was divided into two sets of discussions. In our first break-out session, participants shared the extensive accomplishments in the community on food-related issues in Windsor-Essex County (see Appendix 1). It was agreed by everyone that Windsor today is much more open to food alternatives than it was 10 years ago, and significant initiatives have been fought for and won. There has been considerable success in integrating food issues into social assistance and poverty frameworks. There have also been important food achievements for neighbourhoods (e.g., community gardens) and for the community/region as a whole (e.g., WindsorEats). These accomplishments were not attained without their challenges (also listed in Appendix 1), many of which we are still facing.

In our second break-out session, participants shared strategies for “moving forward”. We have grouped the various suggestions into three broad categories (Educate, Organize, and Take Action), strategies to undertake after some initial “first steps” thinking. The “first steps” require

coming to some consensus about our overall goal: is our goal “food security” (a term which can slip exclusively into social assistance issues and not necessarily generate broader interest in an alternative food system for all) or is it “food sovereignty” (within which food security could, in principle, be achieved)? The concept of food sovereignty refers to local management of healthy food production and consumption to ensure rights of all citizens to healthy food and the rights of farmers to a living wage.¹ The second component of “first steps” involves two tactics for meeting this larger goal. It was suggested that we should:

- decide on a few small, achievable, and “concrete” goals
- find allies who will support us to achieve these goals.

We view these as sound suggestions that should be considered in each of the three broader strategic categories identified by the Forum’s participants: educating, organizing, and taking action. These three categories, in practice, are interconnected but we distinguish them here for discussion purposes.

The strategy of *educating* reflects the limited knowledge in the community about food alternatives, including the lack of experience with growing, preserving, and cooking healthy food. This was identified as an important barrier to moving forward, and many participants identified educating the public and raising public awareness about food issues as a key strategy. The underlying assumption is that education is a way to engage the public and spread passion for an alternative food system. Education can also play an important role in expanding our numbers.

The strategy of *organizing* refers both to effecting greater collaboration across the different “silos” of food-related activities in Windsor-Essex County, and to undertaking more extensive outreach to groups in Windsor-Essex County which, to date, are not participating in our food initiatives. Two particular groups were identified: people from different ethnic/minority groups who could educate *us* about the diversity of culturally desired food in our community, and farmers who may be interested in converting their conventional farming practices (or who need more support to become involved with farmers’ markets). The outreach strategies for working with these groups are not straightforward, and require further discussion.

¹ La Vía Campesina, the international farmers’ organization credited with coining the term, views food sovereignty as a set of rights, including: the right of people to eat fresh, healthy food (no GMOs); the right of nations to produce their own food; the right of farmers to be remunerated fairly; the right of people to define their own food and agricultural policies, and the right of biodiversity (plant and human diversity). See A. Desmarais’s *La Vía Campesina*. Halifax: Fernwood (2007).

The *taking action* category suggests specific, concrete suggestions for future work. One such suggestion speaks to the strategy of both *educating* and *organizing*: hold a Spring Fair, open to the community, with information about having a more localized, sustainable, and affordable food system; plant and soil demonstrations; food made by vendors committed to local and healthy food, etc. There was general agreement that a Spring Fair was a good next step. FAWG also agreed to play a role in improving communication between different groups and organizations by setting up a Google Docs site that would make available information, reports, and the network of contacts.

We note that discussion did not favour developing a food charter at this time. There was no opposition to a food charter, but participants argued that more concrete organizing and educational steps, including more of the community and institutional allies, must take place first. We suggest that perhaps a food charter is best thought of as an educational/organizing tool rather than as an endpoint: the idea of a food charter can play a role in generating interest and bridging across differences of opinion. If we think of a Food Charter as a way to “keep the conversation going” – as a way of gauging how knowledgeable and united we are as a community about alternative food issues – it may help us to maintain focus after forums such as these.

One key question remains: given our diverse interests, *how* should we work together? The forms and mechanisms of collaboration and organization can be worked out as we proceed (rather than being fully formed in advance), but it is an issue that we will have to address as we move forward. For example, do we want more regular Forums like this to deliberate strategies together, or do we want some kind of Food Council with representatives from different groups? It is important to determine our process for collectively moving forward before we all head off in different directions and then wonder where our energy went.

FAWG agreed to circulate the suggested strategies discussed at the Forum, which this summary report provides, so that next steps can be decided upon. Please feel free to comment.

Appendix 1

Food Accomplishments and Challenges in Windsor-Essex County, March 2011

Our Successes	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Downtown Windsor Farmer’s Market• Food Blogs• Windsor-Essex County Food Banks Association• Pathway to Potential and focus on food accessibility; Training and workshops, e.g. community organizing• Do the Math Challenge – awareness on how difficult it is to eat food from a food bank• City Council Presentation – putting forward and getting support for initiatives like Double Up Bucks & engagement with local food retailers• Food Matters Forum• Maps that show where food initiatives are taking place• Cooperative Farms; WECSA• Local Food Box• More organic/natural foods are available• Windsor Guerrilla Gardening Collective (sustainable once-a-day diet campaign; twitter feed #sustainablediet)• Youth Volunteer Challenge – initiative to match High School students involved in community projects to support local community gardens• Statistics – resources can be found at the U Windsor library• FedUp Windsor, FedUp scheduling• Support from allied organizations: Work in Progress/WWAC, CEA, WECEC, CCGP, STAG, Herb	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Budgeting/funding for programs that need to be implemented• Municipal barriers; lack of city council buy-in• Lack of collaboration of the “silos”• Provincial standards (or lack thereof)• Accessibility for all (e.g., ethnic groups not involved); outreach difficulties• Lack of available fresh food at food banks (processed foods)• Overcoming stigma and awareness about the importance of local food• Reconnecting the city and farm (incorporating the county)• Maintaining focus and networks after forums• Student turnover• Food Bank infrastructure• Difficulty with securing community gardens (need more public awareness to those who aren’t directly involved)• Poaching, Pests• Local abattoir crisis• More aid expectations placed on the community, due to less participation from community/religious institutions• Limited resources for starting projects• Lack of knowledge about food: different methods of planting, preserving, canning• Problem in the continuity of projects• Language barriers• Institutional barriers (university/community)

<p>Gardens, Ten Thousand Villages, Engineers without borders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Bank Database • Community gardens (University; Sandwich, and others / Urban Agriculture • Unemployed Help Center Garden • Engagement of large numbers of students in community gardens • Energy from the Urban Chicken Debate • WindsorEats (developing Culinary Tourism) • Colour of poverty (access to food & raising awareness with minorities and newcomers to combat food insecurity) • Education; passing of resolutions • Food Courses; encouraging students • Community Kitchens • FAWG • Leamington Youth Family Resource Network • Food Animator (United Way) approved for 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rising Cost of Food • Lack of broader engagement – too few individuals on too many issues/ organizational burn-out/can't find volunteers/coordinators • International Border (challenge for sharing knowledge/experiences)
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STRATEGIES

for developing a localized, sustainable, affordable, healthy food system

First Steps (goal and strategies):

- Define what it is we are working toward – definitions of food-security/sovereignty and ultimately what goals need to be achieved within the community
- Decide on some small, concrete, achievable goals –and outline the leg-work behind them
- Find allies to support and resource these goals - from city council/ provincial/ federal/ high-profile individuals

Educate/Raise Public Awareness:

- Educate about planting, composting, harvesting, preserving
- Educate about the role of fuel in the economic and environmental costs associated with the transport of food-related items (“food miles”)
- Educate the public about food alternatives
- Educate/Raise awareness to find more volunteers & youth involvement

Organize:

- Build networks, engage citizens (but prevent overlaps)
- Organize as a community, building bridges – our community is in a sense ‘fractured’; we need to keep in mind our diverse populations – food transcends these barriers
- Take lessons from other events – and learn methods that could allow us to achieve our goals (to get the support/numbers)
- Reach out to commercial agricultural producers regarding our commonalities

Take Action:

- Organize a Spring Fair, a community event that would demonstrate food issues/information; hold it somewhere where we could possibly plant edibles
- Rehabilitate the soil – encourage Land Trusts – redistribute land for organic food use
- Promote heritage seeds & a major downtown farmer’s market
- Create more links/direct organization with high school students who need to achieve 40 hours of community service to graduate
- Find more funding for community gardens
- Create a Google docs for information access and network maintenance
- Create Food Co-ops
- Create a delivery service for food, where transportation is less of a factor for accessibility (Grocery Gateway); supporting and expanding Steve Green’s local good food box?
- Think ahead to the next election; set up questions/framework to engage city council around food issues during election