



Community Dialogue #2: Opportunities - BACKGROUND PAPER

I. INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This paper will provide an overview of the Plan to Farm process, summarize Community Dialogue #1 and, most importantly, outline your homework for Community Dialogue #2 to be held on Saturday, February 17, 2007.

Plan to Farm Process

Plan to Farm: Setting the Table for Food & Agriculture on Salt Spring is an area farm planning process initiated by the Islands Farmers Institute and the Island Natural Growers in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, and Islands Trust. Additional funding has been provided by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of British Columbia, and the Capital Regional District.

Plan to Farm's Steering Committee has identified two primary goals for the process:

- Re-establish agriculture as a social, cultural and economic priority on the island; and
- Facilitate the growth of associated farming activities.

Community Dialogues

Community participation is an important foundation on which Salt Spring Island's area farm plan will be built and implemented. Three linked community dialogues have been organized to start the planning process. The purpose of the dialogues is to establish a common base of knowledge and understanding of the issues facing farming on our island. Participants have an opportunity to discuss agriculture on Salt Spring and collectively articulate a vision for the future of food and agriculture on the island. The three community dialogues have been structured to build on each other.

Approximately 120 people from a wide variety of backgrounds attended the first community dialogue session held at the Gulf Islands Secondary School on the afternoon of Saturday January 20th, 2007. Those in attendance spent over an hour in small groups identifying issues and assets for farming on Salt Spring Island. In addition, participants were asked to comment on the identified goals of the *Plan to Farm* process.

Community Dialogue Session #1: Issues	Saturday, January 20, 2007
Community Dialogue Session #2: Opportunities	Saturday, February 17, 2007 Gulf Islands' Secondary School 1:30 - 4:30pm
Community Dialogue Session #3: Vision	Saturday, March 10, 2007

Registration

Everyone - including participants of Community Dialogue #1 - is asked to register for Community Dialogue #2 in order to help us with event coordination and planning.

To register please contact: Anne Macey, *Plan to Farm* Project Manager
(250) 537.5511 or email: macey@saltspring.com

By **Monday, February 12, 2007**

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE #2: OPPORTUNITIES

Purpose

The purpose of Community Dialogue #2 is to identify opportunities for local action that maintain, improve and re-establish agriculture as a priority on Salt Spring Island. The session will focus on developing strategies that address specific issues or challenges - a strategy can be an activity, a program, a project, a network, a policy, a regulation, an initiative or another form of action. Community Dialogue Session #2 is your opportunity to suggest strategies that address the identified challenges and that also take advantage of the local assets.

Question for discussion

Given the challenges and assets that were identified in Community Dialogue #1, what strategies can be implemented by residents, community organizations and local government that would better support agriculture on Salt Spring Island?

Your homework

We ask that you do the following to prepare for Community Dialogue #2:

1. Review the list of challenges and assets in Section IV and V.
2. Using the Worksheet (page 7 and 8), suggest some specific strategies that will help solve some of the challenges. If possible, provide examples, websites, articles or stories of where these strategies are happening on the ground.
3. In the Worksheet, try to identify the challenges that each strategy addresses and the assets it builds upon.

For this dialogue session - **be creative!** We want you to focus on what *could* or *should* be done - not on *how* or *who* will do it.

Helpful information

As you think about some possible strategies, please consider the following:

- A strategy can be an activity, program, project, network, policy, regulation or initiative - it is an action to solve a specific problem(s);
- Consider new ideas as well as existing activities that could be improved upon or expanded;
- A strategy should try to solve a specific problem (challenge)- keep the list of challenges in mind as you work;
- An effective strategy will take advantage of a community's strengths (assets) - again, keep the list of assets in mind; and
- A strategy is most effective when it addresses multiple challenges and takes advantage of multiple assets at the same time.

To assist participants in their preparation for the second Community Dialogue we have provided a summary of the first dialogue session (see section III and IV of this paper). This list of challenges and assets identified during Community Dialogue #1 has not been prioritized. As the *Plan to Farm* process unfolds it is expected that new challenges and assets will be identified. This initial summary is a starting point that will help guide our discussion on the opportunities that exist for agriculture on Salt Spring Island.

An unedited version of the notes from Community Dialogue #1 is available on request.

II. IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Not listed in order of priority.

1. Availability of Water

The availability of good quality water throughout the growing season is a constraint for many Salt Spring Island farm operations. There is a limited (and possibly diminishing) supply of quality groundwater and growing competition from non-farming uses. Other issues include the acquisition and distribution of water, and water collection and retention.

2. Conflicts with New Neighbours

As non-farmers and other new residents move into farming areas, there is an increased potential for conflict between farmers and residential property owners over such issues as noise, water use, water quality and smells. The NIMBY principle (not in my back yard) is expanding.

3. Critical Infrastructure Gaps

A number of important agriculture-supporting infrastructure elements are not available or in short supply on Salt Spring Island. These include: on-island meat processing and storage facilities; long-term cold storage facilities; adequate food processing facilities; and certain farm equipment and technology. Some of these gaps are a direct result of problematic provincial and federal government regulations. However, local government bylaws and lack of coordination or cooperation amongst producers and processors may also be contributing factors.

4. Environmental Impacts of Farming

There is a wide range of farming practices occurring on Salt Spring. While a large percentage of farmers and food producers are interested in organic or ecological practices there are concerns about the continued use of pesticides and fertilizers on the island and the potential for unintended consequences such as ground and water system contamination, introduction or use of genetically modified organisms, and negative environmental and health effects. Additional environmental concerns include the introduction of disease and release of invasive plants, pollution of watersheds by livestock and overgrazing, aquaculture operations, the excessive use of water, and waste disposal.

5. Farmland Not Being Farmed

As a consequence of increased development pressure, there is a feeling that increasingly farm properties are being bought and developed as residential estates and not being farmed. Retiring farmers have few options if they want to sell their land as “farmland”. While lease arrangements are possible, various roadblocks exist including landowner perceptions of a loss of control over their property, and regulatory restrictions on multiple lease arrangements within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Local government is pressured to consider the siting of community service facilities on ALR land without an offer of compensation or local replacement for the ALR land lost.

6. High Cost of Land

The beauty and climate of the West Coast and Salt Spring Island coupled with a strong real estate market is resulting in an increasing demand for residential island properties. The interest in island living has resulted in substantial increases in the price of all island properties, including farmland. As a result, the price of agricultural land is prohibitive for new farmers.

7. Inability to Achieve Local Food Security

Salt Spring Island farmers are currently unable to produce and process enough food on the Island to achieve a reasonable level of local food security. There is a general feeling that

farmland is not being used to its full agricultural potential. There is also concern that environmental issues, limited water availability during the growing season, soil fertility issues and a declining number of farms and farmers will not allow Salt Spring Island to achieve food security for its current population.

8. Labour & Housing Shortages

Salt Spring farmers struggle to find consistent, reliable, affordably priced skilled and unskilled labour. This challenge is compounded by the lack of affordable housing for farm labourers and new farmers. Current land use regulations that limit the construction of permanent, on-farm housing and prevent farmers from offering permanent, good quality housing to farm labourers. As a consequence, farmers are unable to offer affordable on-site housing to recruit potential farm workers.

9. Lack of New Farmers

There appears not to be enough younger farmers to replace farmers who are retiring or leaving. Younger people are not interested in farming due to the high cost of land, the poor financial outlook, the lack of training opportunities and the lack of interest in the farming lifestyle.

10. Lack of Skills Training

Currently there are not enough local formal opportunities for people to learn the skills and knowledge necessary for farming. There are very limited training opportunities for young farmers or educational support for existing farmers. Educational programs in schools and educational opportunities elsewhere about the importance and challenges of local food production are either not present or extremely limited. Farming is no longer promoted as a viable or attractive vocation. Local residents lack courses to learn basic skills such as food preserving or gardening.

11. Lack of Profitability

There is an overwhelming agreement that farming on Salt Spring is generally no longer a financially profitable business. Many reasons for this were provided including: higher input and operating costs - directly a result of increased transportation costs; the high cost for labour and lack of housing on Salt Spring; higher capital costs and resulting debt loads. These costs make it difficult to compete with off-Island producers that have lower costs and/or supportive subsidies. The retail price for local food on Salt Spring often does not reflect the true cost of production. There may be a reluctance or lack of understanding or reluctance amongst local consumers to pay the higher prices necessary to give Salt Island farmers an adequate return for their services and products.

12. Lack of Provincial & Federal Support for Small Farms

Federal and provincial agriculture and food policy is perceived to be unsupportive of the small-scale farming operations typical on Salt Spring Island. The focus of federal and provincial agricultural policy and financial subsidies is visibly centered on the demands and interests of large-scale agri-business.

13. Loss of Farming Culture

Even with a rich and understood agricultural history, Salt Spring Island is having difficulty maintaining a true farming culture - one that continues the wisdom and knowledge passed down from previous generations of farmers. There are very few multigenerational farm families remaining on the island that can see their children continuing to farm. This lack of continuity and connection with the land and with farms is a significant issue, as the associated knowledge required to properly steward these farms cannot be maintained. The result is new farmers and farm practices that are often not in harmony with the land.

14. *Poor Understanding of Local Farming & Food Production Issues*

The public at-large may not have a sufficient understanding of many of the issues associated with farming and local food production. This includes such aspects as people not recognizing the true cost of producing food locally, customers' unwillingness to pay more for local food, a lack of understanding of the economic plight of small farms, the public not appreciating the multiple benefits (social, community, environmental) of local food production, consumer buying habits and expectations of all foodstuffs being available year-round, and lack of concern about how global environmental and economic changes may impact local systems.

15. *Restrictive Local Government Regulations & Policies*

There is a general feeling that smaller-scale agriculture and the production of local food are not high priority issues amongst local governments. This is reflected in policies and specific regulations that are not always sensitive to the challenges faced by island farmers who are trying to maintain local, smaller-scale farm and processing operations. Regulations and policies that are problematic for small farmers include: restrictions on such activities as the construction of on-farm buildings; the pursuit of community agriculture activities within publicly-owned lands; food processing regulations; the structure of current zoning bylaws; and local tax policies. Island farmers and food producers feel they do not have a way to effectively air their concerns about these regulations and policies, and that existing agricultural organizations are not working or not being heard. There may also not be enough assistance provided by local government to help them comply with these rules and regulations.

III. RECOGNIZED ASSETS

Not listed in order of priority.

1. *Environmental & Social Values*

As a population, Salt Spring Islanders have strong environmental and social values. There is significant local expertise in sustainability, with interest and awareness on a broad range of associated issues that include affordable housing, energy, water, agriculture and local food production. There is a strong and growing demand for local, organic and natural foods causing many to refer to Salt Spring Island as the unofficial "organic capital of Canada".

2. *Existing Community Financial Support*

Salt Spring Island's "financially secure" segment of the population is growing and can be generous and ethical in their capital investments, and support of local foundations and charities. The Salt Spring Island Monetary Foundation and the Salt Spring Island Farmland Trust initiative are existing community-based financial organizations.

3. *Farming History & Expertise*

Salt Spring Island has a strong agricultural history. This history has resulted in a diversity and wealth of farming knowledge and skill that exists with current and retired farmers and their families and is visibly expressed through the many remaining heritage farms, fruit orchards and nut trees. There are a number of on-island initiatives that are focused on maintaining agricultural heritage and traditions including a seed sanctuary, apple, fibre and garlic festivals and historical archives. The annual Fall Fair at the Islands Farmers Institute grounds is the seminal community event on the island. Salt Spring Island's history and involvement in agriculture extends into the broader community and is expressed through the local passion and knowledge of food, and the tradition of community groups taking an active role researching important food and agriculture issues.

4. High Quality Land Base

Salt Spring Island has an excellent land base for agriculture and food production. It has healthy, high quality soils, a mild climate that provides year-round growing opportunities, a diversity of microclimates that allow for the production of a wide range of products, and reasonable water availability in many areas. A significant portion of Salt Spring Island is in the Agriculture Land Reserve and many agricultural opportunities exist outside the ALR due to the relatively Island's relatively rural character. Many residents actively maintain home gardens that have a high potential for food production.

5. Living on an Island

Being an "Islander" is a source of pride for Salt Spring residents and helps build a strong sense of community. Salt Spring's island situation forces the community to consider local options first. As an island community interested in reducing its dependency on off-island inputs, Salt Spring could become an important model for sustainability.

6. Social Capital

Salt Spring Islanders are a passionate, diverse, committed, informed, strong-willed, well-educated and creative group of people who are actively involved in their community. This innovative and cooperative spirit extends into the farming community and fosters a willingness to work together to find solutions to community problems. There is also a strong activist and politically orientated tradition amongst many Islanders.

7. Strong Local Markets for Local Food

Local farmers and food producers have no difficulty selling their products. Island residents are often willing to pay more for high quality, locally produced food. The summer Saturday and Tuesday farmer's markets, Thrifty Foods, Ganges Village Market, Natureworks, farm gate sales, Island B&Bs and restaurants currently provide opportunities for selling agricultural products on island. The proximity to the large markets of the Lower Mainland and southern Vancouver Island also represent an important marketing opportunity.

8. Salt Spring Island Brand

"Salt Spring Island" is a well-known brand used to market a range of high quality farm-produced specialty food items. Salt Spring products are easily recognized and command top prices. The brand invokes images of health, wholesomeness, sustainability and craftsmanship.

9. Supportive Local Institutions

There is a diversity of community organizations and local institutions working on issues related to agriculture and local food production on Salt Spring. They include the Islands Farmers' Institute, Island Natural Growers, Salt Spring Island EcoVillage Education and Development Society, Salt Spring Island Monetary Foundation, The Land Conservancy, and the Salt Spring Island Community Energy Strategy, and the Local Trust Council's Agricultural Advisory Committee. Youth are connected to food and agriculture through the local 4-H Club, the Gulf Islands Secondary School's cooking programs, and the Fernwood Garden. Government agencies such as the Islands Trust, the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and the Agricultural Land Commission also provide important guidance and support.

10. Tourism

Salt Spring Island is a popular tourist destination. The farming tradition and scenic agrarian landscapes are an important aspect of Salt Spring Island's rural character. Visitors and seasonal residents effectively double the Island's population during the summer and escalate the already high demand for local farm products. There is growing interest in agri-tourism, which already has become economically important activity for a number of Island farms.

WORKSHEET

Suggested Strategies to Better Support Agriculture on Salt Spring Island

1. Review the list of challenges and assets in Section III and IV. Please feel free to add additional ones that weren't described.
2. Think about some specific strategies that will help address some of the challenges. Note these below. If possible, provide examples, websites, articles or stories of where these strategies are happening on the ground. See the examples provided below.
3. In the Worksheet, identify the challenges that each strategy addresses and the assets it builds upon.

Given the challenges & assets that were identified in Community Dialogue #1, what strategies can be implemented by residents, community organizations & local government that would better support agriculture on Salt Spring Island?

Suggested Strategy		Challenges Addressed	Assets Utilized
<i>Strategy: Provide a brief description that outlines your suggested strategy.</i>			
<i>Case Study: If possible, list an example community, website, article, etc.</i>		<i>What key challenge(s) does the strategy address? (Please refer to Section III)</i>	<i>What key asset(s) does this strategy utilize (Please refer to Section IV)</i>
EXAMPLE 1: Farmland trust - community-owned land leased to farmers under various arrangements. Certain conditions or farm practices can be required of the lessee. Case Study: Indian Line Farm, MA - www.smallisbeautiful.org/cts/indian.html		Lack of profitability High cost of land Farmland not being farmed Aging farmers	Environmental & social ethic Supportive local institutions Existing financial institutions
EXAMPLE 2: On-farm apprentice training program for young farmers. Case Study: A successful Ontario program - www.craftontario.ca/		Aging farmers Lack of skills training Loss of farming culture	Farming history/expertise Social capital Supportive local institutions
EXAMPLE 3: Institutional buying policy for Islands Trust office - policy to buy and serve locally grown food products in their local office and at their meetings. Case Study: Woodbury, IA - www.woodburyiowa.com/departments/economicdevelopment/organic.asp		Lack of profitability Farmland not being farmed Poor understanding of local farming & food production issues	Strong local markets for food Supportive local institutions Environmental & social ethic
EXAMPLE 4: Local farm practices code - a well-defined set of practices and principles - either voluntary or regulated - which local farmers commit to. Case Study: California Wine Institute - www.wineinstitute.org/programs/swp/		Environmental impacts Poor public understanding Conflict with new neighbours	Salt Spring Island Brand Environmental & social ethic Tourism Farming history & expertise Supportive local institutions

YOUR TURN...

Suggested Strategy		Challenges Addressed	Assets Utilized
<p>Strategy: <i>Provide a one-sentence description that describes the principle feature of the strategy.</i></p> <p>Case Study: <i>If possible, list an example community, website, article, etc.</i></p>	<p>List the key challenges this strategy addresses. (Please refer to Section III)</p>	<p>List the key assets this strategy utilizes. (Please refer to Section IV)</p>	
<p>YOUR SUGGESTED STRATEGY:</p> <p>Case Study:</p>			
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