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USING A SWOT ANALYSIS TO ANALYZE AND SET PRIORITIES FOR A COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

A focus group session consisting of community leaders, producers, vendors, educators, and interested citizens used a SWOT analysis approach to assess the local food system in Boundary County, Idaho. This process helped focus a 5.5-hour session on the topics of community strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O), and threats (T). A professional moderator was hired to facilitate this process. Electronic clickers were used to gather demographic information and initial opinions at the beginning of the session and then again at the end to evaluate its effectiveness. This process also served as a food system needs assessment for the county.

INTRODUCTION

Research in food system reform identifies local efforts as a major source of change in our national food system (Hinrichs, 2003; Ostrom, 2006). Around the country, farmers, entrepreneurs, community organizers, and activists are creating novel ways to rebuild food systems that are economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable (Selfa and Qazi, 2005; Hewitt, 2010; Ackerman-Leist and Madison, 2013). Direct marketing through farmers markets tends to be the basic building block for most communities. While farmers markets have been growing rapidly around the country, recently this structure has shown signs of struggle and these markets have been declining in some areas (USDA-NIFA, 2007; Helmer, 2019). Local food system development and the topic of food security need more comprehensive analysis in order to provide widespread access to nutritious food.

This focus group project was part of a larger statewide grant-funded effort to address local food system issues across Idaho. A \$25,000 Western USDA-SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education) grant entitled *Increasing Knowledge and Capacity for Transforming Local and Regional Food Systems in Idaho* used both a statewide conference and local workshops held throughout the state to examine this topic. A mini-grant process was used to solicit projects from University of Idaho (UI) Extension educators as well as other community organizations in partnership with UI Extension on the topic of enhancing the capacity of local food systems. The Boundary County project was one of five projects that were funded statewide.

METHODS

A 5.5-hour focus group approach used a SWOT analysis to examine the local food system in Boundary County, Idaho. Community leaders, producers, vendors, and interested citizens were recruited by personal invitation. This letter, addressed to concerned citizens in Boundary County, described the underlying issues, the purpose of the focus group, and the process that would be used during the session.

Based on responses to the letter, the initial focus group participants consisted of an estimated fifteen people, including the mayor, the director of the county's economic development council, and producers from the local farmers market and small farms in the county. On the day of the event, 26 people attended, and 24 individuals stayed for the entire workshop.

The acronym SWOT as used here stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This simple tool is used by organizations to examine internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) as a method for strategic planning. A four-quadrant matrix is typically used to illustrate this approach (Figure 1).

	Positive	Negative
Internal	Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Threats

Figure 1. A SWOT analysis examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which are classified as a combination of positive, negative, internal, and external factors.

A SWOT analysis serves as a simple tool to focus and support strategic planning by an organization. This technique has been used over the past fifty years for planning and decision making (Gurel and Tat, 2017). However, it can be a challenge to use qualitative data in decision making. In this project, a SWOT analysis is tailored to produce a community needs assessment, articulating overall goals and setting priorities within each area of the analysis. The process also serves as a method for building community relationships around this topic.

The agenda for this focus group event was structured to include introductions of local leaders in our food system, a description of the process by the professional moderator, a large-group session, a break-out session by topic, a report back to the whole group, and a next-steps wrap-up and planning discussion. In order to enhance the needs assessment portion and consensus building capacity of this workshop, the session started with a group solicitation process on the topic of goals for the day. Then, following the brainstorming portion for each SWOT topic area, a group prioritization process was solicited. This approach helped to create a prioritized set of needs for the community.

RESULTS

Digital response clickers were used to poll the audience at the beginning and end of the focus group. Turning Point Technologies® (<https://www.turningpointtechs.com/>) and a Microsoft® Powerpoint® presentation were used to develop and analyze these questions. The initial questions included a word scramble as an ice-breaker and demographic questions. In addition, participants were asked a number of questions regarding their produce purchasing habits and their thoughts on Boundary County's capacity for a high level of food security. The responses to these initial questions were displayed on a screen in an anonymous fashion. Please note that not all respondents answered each question, perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the electronic clicker system.

This focus group consisted of 26 participants, with 24 attending for the entire session. They were evenly represented by gender. According to clicker responses, two (10%) were 25 years old or younger, three (15%) were between 26 and 40, half were between 41 and 60, and five (25%) were over 60 years old. Ten respondents have lived in Boundary County for more than 10 years. Four respondents replied that they have lived here between 5 and 10 years, while another three said they have lived here less than two years. Just under half of the focus group participants (46%) described themselves as producers, four (17%) identified as concerned citizens, three (12%) were vendors, two (8%) were educators, and four (17%) identified as other. Four participants represented the community garden organization, one represented the food bank, and two represented local churches.

This particular group of citizens feels strongly that their county has the potential to develop a strong local food system. When asked to what level they agreed with the statement that Boundary County has the capacity to have a high level of food security for its residents, nine (45%) strongly agreed, eight (40%) agreed, one respondent (5%) said they somewhat agreed, and just two persons (10%) disagreed (Fig. 2).

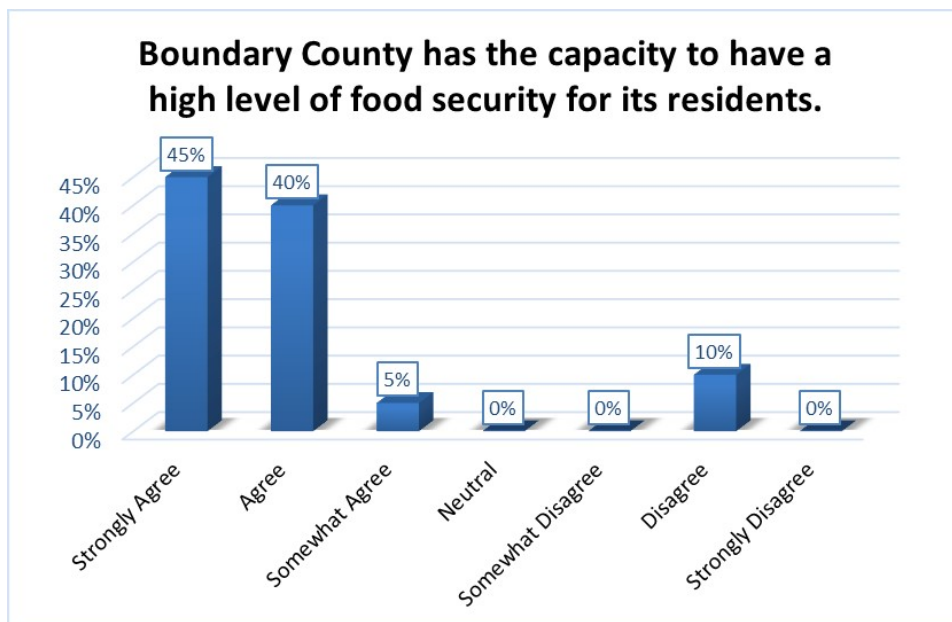


Figure 2. The majority of the focus group participants agreed with the statement that Boundary County has the potential to develop a strong local food system.

Many of the participants buy locally or produce much of the produce they consume. Three (13%) said that nearly all their produce was local, and three more (13%) said about 75% of what they consumed was local (Fig. 3). Seven respondents (29%) said about half their produce was local, and four more (17%) responded that about one quarter was local.

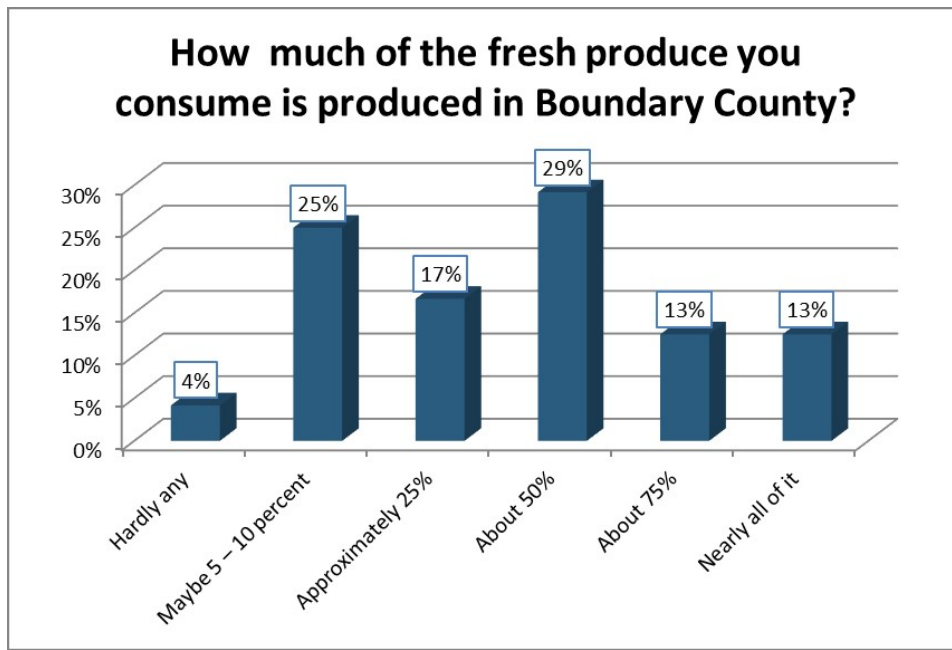


Figure 3. While 29% percent of participates purchase about half of their produce locally, nearly all produce was obtained locally for another 13%.

In terms of how often participants buy produce at the local farmers market, the responses were bimodal. Fourteen respondents (41%) said they bought produce 8 or more times per year at farmers markets, while eleven (32%) said they bought farmers market produce about once a year (Fig. 4). Another eight (24%) said they bought farmers market produce about 5 to 7 times per year, and one person (3%) said they bought it 2 to 4 times per year.

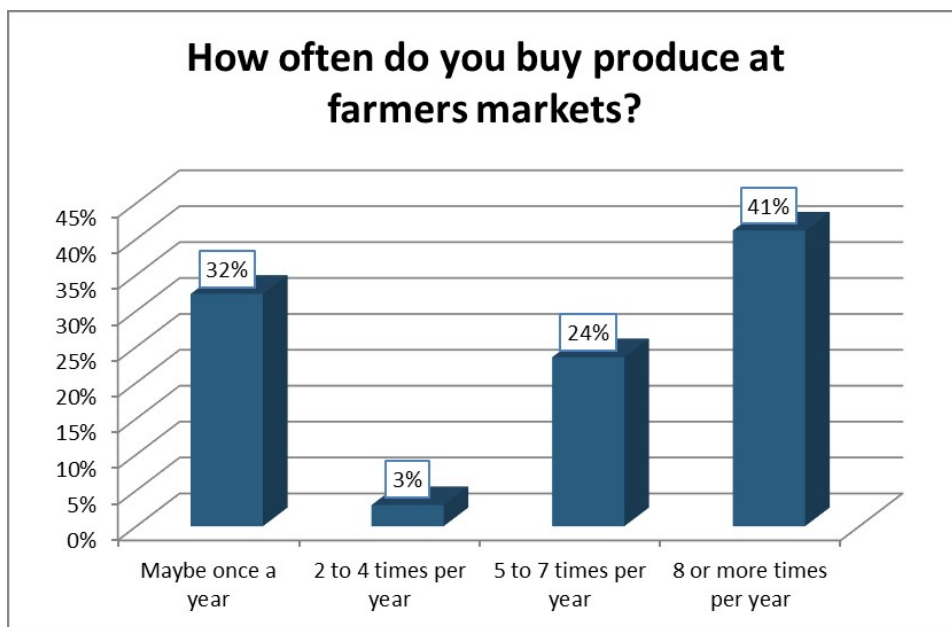


Figure 4. Responses to the question regarding how often produce is purchased at farmers markets were bimodal, with 32% purchasing farmers market produce about once a year and 41% purchasing it 8 or more times per year.

The final question in the initial survey questions asked participants what they felt was the biggest barrier to increased local production. Eleven respondents (48%) felt that the lack of consumers willing to pay higher prices for local produce was the most important obstacle (Fig. 5). Ten (43%) replied that a lack of marketing to connect buyers and sellers was the biggest problem. Just two (9%) felt that a lack of producers willing to grow riskier crops was the most important barrier.

What do you feel is the biggest barrier to increased local production in our county?

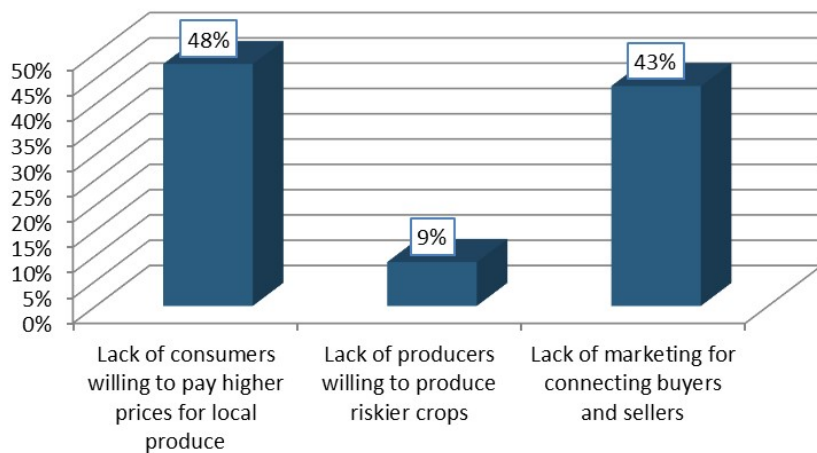


Figure 5. In terms of barriers to increased local production, the two main reasons were lack of consumers willing to pay higher prices for local produce and a lack of marketing for connecting buyers and sellers.

A final set of four questions at the end of the session were used to measure respondents' opinions on the effectiveness of this focus group session. Given the 5.5-hour length of this workshop, it is remarkable how positive respondents felt and how much was accomplished. Over 90% (21 out of 23 participants) strongly agreed or agreed that they enhanced their knowledge on local food systems at this workshop (Fig. 6). The remaining two participants (9%) said they somewhat agreed with this statement.

I enhanced my knowledge on our local food system at this workshop.

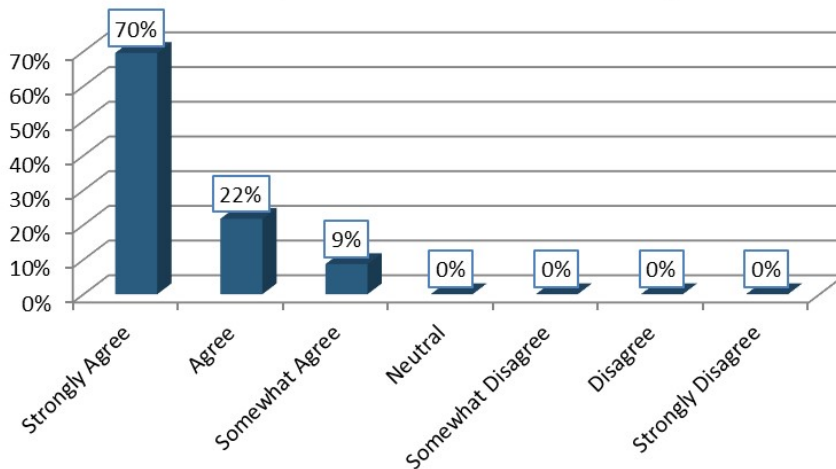


Figure 6. Participants at the focus group session all agreed, and most of them strongly, that they enhanced their knowledge of the local food system at this workshop.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "I learned new ideas to help improve our local food system today." Thirteen (57%) strongly agreed and another seven (30%) agreed with this statement, while the final three respondents (13%) said they somewhat agreed with the statement.

When asked if they met new people that they would like to work with on their local food system today, fourteen (61%) strongly agreed with this statement and another seven (30%) agreed with this statement, while one person (4%) said they somewhat agreed and another person (4%) was neutral.

Finally, when asked whether they learned new ways to help improve our local food system, eight respondents (36%) said they strongly agreed with this statement, 10 (45%) agreed, and three (14%) responded that they somewhat agreed. One person (5%) said they somewhat disagreed with this statement.

A summary of the focus group findings includes the following information. The goals of the session included increased self-sufficiency for the community, creating more opportunities for buying and selling local products, and educating the public, particularly youth, on the benefits of a local food system. There was a strong desire expressed for some kind of brick-and-mortar facility that could stock local products on a regular basis. The biggest **strengths** for this area included its prime growing region and a supportive culture. **Weaknesses** included the low income level of the population, geographic isolation, and lack of opportunities for young people. Identified **opportunities** included the fact that there is a lot more support for local food systems now than there has been previously. It was felt that there is potential for agritourism in this area, due to its natural beauty. There is already quite a variety of products being produced in

this region, from fresh peaches to dried cherries, fresh raw milk, honey, stoneground flour, and vegetables. There are a number of vacant facilities in the community. In addition, the community has many generous individuals and several land trusts. In terms of **threats**, the group felt that there was not enough skilled labor. Also, regulations and insurance could be threats to developing the local food system here. Logistics of this location and transportation were identified as additional threats. Competition from outside the community, such as from mail order suppliers, represents another threat. Plant diseases and pests were also identified as threats.

Participants in the focus group concluded that this region has great potential for agritourism. There is quite a bit of diversity in the region in terms of population, from a growing Mennonite community to a steady influx of newcomers who appreciate its natural beauty and relatively inexpensive real estate. Weaknesses include the prevailing monocropping system, focused on grain and hay; a relatively short growing season; a shortage of labor; and a lack of leadership and commitment on this topic. Stated opportunities included the potential for educating consumers on the topic of local food system development. Major threats were outside competition and navigating the organic certification process, both for feed suppliers and producers. Distribution issues were identified as another threat. At the end of the workshop, there was a discussion of resources available on local food systems and food security, including USDA resources, particularly value-added grants, the NRCS High Tunnel Initiative, and SARE, with grants and education on sustainable agriculture; the Boundary County Economic Development Council; and the Small Business Development Council in Hayden, ID.

To maintain the momentum developed with this group of committed individuals, a monthly community potluck and speaker series was initiated for the following winter. The first potluck was attended by 26 individuals. One of the participants in the focus group spoke on his work documenting old fruit trees around the county and how he is propagating these trees in his nursery. Three additional potlucks featured stories by local producers, including a cut flower producer, a fruit producer who adds value with dried fruit products and juice, and a long-time organic grower who sells produce, plants, seeds, herbs, and handcrafted woolen products at the farmers market and through Community Supported Agriculture subscriptions.

A steering committee consisting of four individuals who were part of this focus group meets regularly to continue this work on local food system development. This group includes a UI Extension educator, two producers who were involved with an early online marketing program that folded after several years, and a new producer who has just begun to sell produce at the farmers market. Since two producers who were involved in an early regional effort to market local products online felt strongly about resurrecting an improved online farmers market program, this topic was included in the application for the 2020 Idaho State SARE Professional Development Grant. Approximately 40% of the funding for this successful grant application is targeted for the development of a toolkit that will be an online add-in for farmers markets in Idaho and beyond.

Community development work can be a difficult assignment for Extension educators, especially if they are new to an area. A well-written and hand distributed invitation worked well to encourage widespread participation. The venue was appealing, located in a restaurant at the local casino that looks out over the Kootenai River. A taco bar lunch was provided free of charge to the participants, thanks to the \$2500 mini-grant from Idaho SARE funds. This community food system workshop was very successful due to good planning, an excellent professional moderator, and the dedication of the community members who participated.

DISCUSSION

When a community commits to working together to strengthen the local food system and enhance its food security, ideally a reasonable vision and set of goals will be developed. It is important to include a diverse group of citizens in the planning process in order to avoid the "local trap," which is the tendency for food activists and researchers to make assumptions about local production that may not be accurate (Born and Purcell, 2006). Local food is not necessarily better by definition, in terms of a number of factors including environmental impact, the quality and quantity of healthy produce, economic efficiency, and widespread access to food. Nonetheless, community organization around the topic of food, access to food, and local agriculture can be very satisfying in that it brings all types of people together over a common interest.

The focus group session held in Boundary County, Idaho, included a large and diverse group of interested citizens who were willing to work hard at this process for five and a half hours. Outcomes from this session included significant gains in knowledge and relationships at the session itself, as shown by the results of the evaluation. In addition, a small steering committee continues to work on these topics of interest, particularly an online add-on component for farmers markets. Community potlucks with invited speakers were held monthly from December through March following the focus group. Lively discussions and new relationships resulted from these community dinners. Further research was conducted using a Rapid Market Assessment at the local farmers market the following summer. Many of the attendees at the focus group session attended an annual Farm to Table Fundraiser for the local community garden, which is gaining additional followers every year. A closer relationship between the Boundary County Farmers Market and the UI Extension office has developed with these activities. Additional planned programming includes a workshop on the organic certification process.

Support for the local food system in this community is evident from the high attendance at the focus group session. Continued work on this topic with a dedicated group of individuals has been a critical outcome of this research in terms of moving forward on needs identified by the focus group. In order to create a local food system tailored to this community, a multi-faceted approach reaching different groups is necessary. An inclusive, sustainable food system will need to be continually evolving to reflect the goals and visions of the community it serves.

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