

SWOT approach helps focus group analyze the local food system in Bonners Ferry

AT A GLANCE

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis examines internal and external factors facing a community, a business, or an organization.

The Situation

What are the critical issues facing our community's local food system, according to community leaders and major players? A focus group approach served as a needs assessment for Bonners Ferry on this topic. This 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 sponsored both a statewide conference and a series of smaller studies across the state on this topic. The Boundary County project was one of five projects funded statewide.

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. A diverse group of citizens needs to be included in order to be representative of the entire community. While local food is not necessarily better by definition, 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.



Katherine Dentzman facilitates a focus group that uses a SWOT analysis to analyze the local food system in Bonners Ferry, ID.

Our Response

We sent out personal invitations to community leaders, producers, vendors, and interested citizens to participate in a 5.5-hour focus group session focusing on our local food system. The focus group was held on August 8, 2018, and included 26 community members. It included introductions by each attendee, a large group session, break-out sessions by topic, and a next-steps and planning session.

Program Outcomes

Digital response clickers were used to gather demographics and poll the audience at the beginning and end of the focus group. Initial questions focused on produce purchasing habits and opinions on the local level of food security. Participants were evenly

split by gender. Two participants were 25 years old or younger, three were between 26 and 40, half were between 41 and 60, and five were over 60 years old. 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. 1).

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. Seven respondents (29%) said about half their produce was local, and four more (17%) responded that about one quarter was local.

When asked what they felt was the biggest barrier to increased local production, 48% felt that the lack of consumers willing to pay higher prices for local produce was the most important obstacle. Another 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.

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.

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

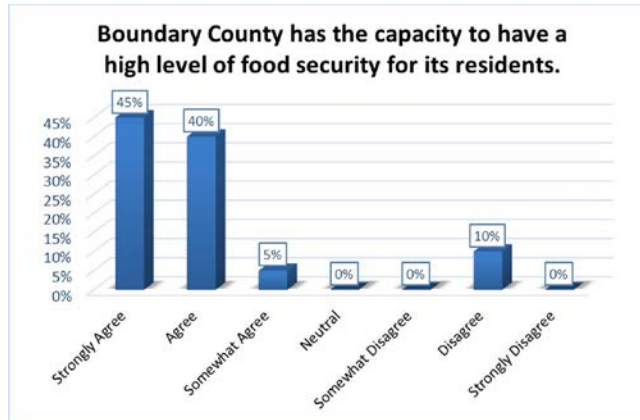


Figure 1. The majority of the focus group participants agreed with the statement that Boundary County has the potential to develop a strong local food system.

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.

To maintain the momentum developed with this group of committed individuals, a monthly community potluck and speaker series was initiated for the following winter. 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. 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.