

# MEMORANDUM



Date: September 12, 2023  
To: City Council  
From: Michael Matlock, Community Development Director

## Addressing Food Insecurity and Access to Food

The City Council has requested time at a work session to discuss the capacity in the community to address food insecurity, and how the City can support and foster activities that more efficiently promote access to food in the community.

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### Background

Similar to housing, access to food is a fundamental human right.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service, food insecurity can be understood as the lack of access to or the limited availability of nutritionally adequate foods that prevents all household members from leading active and healthy lives.

According to the USDA, food security is defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” According to the statistics of the USDA Economic Research Service, 10.2 percent of households in the United States were food insecure at some time in 2021.<sup>1</sup> While the prevalence of food insecurity in Washington is below the United States average at slightly below eight percent, it is still an issue.<sup>2</sup> The Urban Institute issued a report in March 2023 that based on their surveys from December 2021 and December 2022 the number of adults reporting food insecurity in the last year increased from 20 percent to 24.6 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Food-insecure households are not necessarily food insecure all the time, but food insecurity is reflected in the choices households sometimes need to make between meeting basic needs such as housing, health and child care, and purchasing nutritionally adequate foods.

While financial stability and economic empowerment remain the necessary conditions to ensure that everyone in the community can meet their food and nutrition needs, multiple approaches have been undertaken to address food insecurity throughout the country. These approaches include a wide range of actions, for example, federal and state food benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program, senior and school meal programs, community support for food delivery services, food banks, mobile food pantries, community-based food distribution, and community gardens and agricultural programs.

## Supporting Access to Food

### **Effective Ways to Access Food**

One way to address food insecurity is to focus on supporting ways to access food more effectively. Effective ways of accessing food use formal and informal networks to ensure food is available, easy to get to, and supports healthy, nutritional options for everyone in the community.

This considers everything from wholesalers, retailers, restaurants, coops, and farmers markets to the charitable food sector. Looking at how to access food more effectively can also consider the role of local and community-based agriculture activities, such as community gardens and local producers and processors.

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<sup>1</sup> “Household Food Security in the United States in 2021”, Economic Research Report No. (ERR-309)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/#map>

<sup>3</sup> “As Inflation Squeezed Family Budgets, Food Insecurity Increased between 2021 and 2022: Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey”, Urban Institute, March 2023.

## What the City Currently Does

Food sharing and resources for assistance with housing, food, and utilities are promoted using multiple platforms for outreach, including the City website, social media channels, Tumwater on Tap eNews, utility inserts, and flyers. Information is available to staff to assist with inquiries from residents.

The City provides in-kind support, financial contributions, and community grant opportunities to non-profit and community organizations that provide food assistance to youth, adults, and seniors through these programs:

- FRESH Farm at Isabella Bush Park (Together! and Tumwater School District)
- Garden Raised Bounty (GRuB)
- Senior Services for South Sound
- Summer Youth Employment Program
- Tumwater Community Garden Grant Program
- Tumwater School District Summer Lunch Program
- Tumwater Youth Summer Camp
- Thurston County Food Bank (satellite operations)
  - Old Town Center
  - Tumwater Fire Station
- United Way of Thurston County (employee fund drive)

## Community Food Assistance Programs

Some of the community organizations that provide food assistance for Tumwater residents include the following:

### Emergency Food Assistance

- Adventist Community Service Center
  - Bread & Roses Community Kitchen
  - Bread Basket Ministries
  - Capital Christian PEACE Center
  - Church of Living Water
  - Churches from Catholic Charities
  - City Gates & Street Lights Ministries
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- Evergreen Christian Community

### **Food Banks, Food Pantries, and Community Kitchens**

- Old Town Center (provided by Thurston County Food Bank)
- Olympia Union Gospel Mission – Emergency Outreach Program
- Sacred Heart Catholic Church
- Salvation Army Community Kitchen
- St Vincent de Paul
- The Community Kitchen (CCSSW)
- Tumwater Fire Station (provided by Thurston County Food Bank)

### **Food Assistance for Seniors**

- Meals on Wheels - Senior Services for South Sound
- Providence Sound Home Care
- Senior Nutrition Program Meal Sites
- State Department of Social and Human Services Tumwater Office
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Thurston County Public Health & Social Services

### **Other Community Resources**

- Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason, Thurston Counties
- First Steps Maternity Services
- Garden Raised Bounty (GRuB)
- SeaMar Community Health Center
- South Puget Sound Intertribal Planning Agency
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Thurston County Health Department
- Veterans Assistance Fund
- Women, Infants, Children (WIC) Program

### **Other Food-Related Activities**

The City currently allows the following food-related activities in the City:

- **Agriculture Up to 30 Acres in Size** in all single-family areas and the lowest-density multifamily areas (18.42.070)
- **Agriculture with No Size Limit** in light industrial areas
- **Breweries, Wineries, and Distilleries** in specific commercial and industrial areas
- **Community Gardens** in almost all residential, commercial, and industrial areas
- **Farmers Markets** in all commercial and industrial areas
- **Food Banks, Mobile Food Pantries, and Community-based Food Distributions Centers** in areas of the City where similar uses like those above are allowed or as an accessory use to a church or community center
- **Food Processing** in all industrial areas
- **Food Trucks or Trailers**, individually or in courts, in all commercial and industrial areas
- **Restaurants** in most commercial and industrial areas
- **Retail Sale of Food** in all commercial and some industrial areas
- **Retail Sale of Food Processed on Site** in most industrial areas

## Food Sharing

One approach to accessing food for those who are in need is through food-sharing programs. Councilmember Jefferson provided a 2011 article “Policies for a Shareable Community” that focused on food-sharing programs to councilmembers last month to review in advance of the work session. The article described ways in which city policies can support the community’s ability to share in the access to food. The article contained a number of good suggestions that the City is currently allowing or supporting.

Based on staff research, since the 2011 article was published, many jurisdictions are taking a more holistic approach to how to address food insecurity. One approach to doing this is to create a food action or system plan.

## Food Action/System Plans

Food action or system plans take a holistic approach in looking at how a jurisdiction could work with its community partners to support all the steps in the food system from growing food to putting food on the table.

## Spokane Regional Food Action Plan 2022

The City of Spokane adopted the [Spokane Food Policy Council’s Regional Food Action Plan](#) in May 2022 to create a framework for regional food system stakeholders and partners to use when building a more resilient food system in the Spokane area. The Plan was intended to

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promote a healthy and equitable food system that is advantageous to the local economy and protective of the environment.

The Spokane Food Policy Council's Regional Food Action Plan was intended to enhance community health through the following actions:

- Preserving farmland and recruiting new farmers increasing local food production and adding to our local economy.
- Advocating for policies that enable residents and businesses to make and process their food locally.
- Providing broader access to high-quality food and disseminating better food and nutrition education to empower people to make healthier choices for themselves and their families.
- Reducing food waste through gleaning, redistribution, and composting to support food security and the environment.

The Plan's focus on supporting the desire for healthy food for all included looking at the following actions with a large list of community partners:

- Creating opportunities for people to grow and share their own food, including the following:
    - Promoting existing and emerging educational programs for home and community gardening, cooking, and food preservation.
    - Increasing land availability for community gardens.
    - Supporting sustainable food systems and urban agriculture education.
  - Support and grow equitable food access, including the following:
    - Identifying and reducing barriers to accessing food.
    - Expanding community-supported agriculture (CSA) offerings to SNAP-eligible populations.
    - Promoting expansion of food distribution routes to low-resource areas.
    - Assessing service capacity needs of food pantries and identifying opportunities for shared resources.
    - Advancing equity in the food system.
  - Supporting programs and policies that help children, adults and seniors get healthy food, including the following:
    - Increasing enrollment of eligible people into SNAP, WIC, school meals and other government nutrition programs.
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- Advocating for public and private food assistance programs.

## Whatcom County Food System Plan 2023

Whatcom County Council adopted the [Whatcom County Food System Plan](#) in June 2023. The intent of the plan was to create a more equitable and sustainable food system in Whatcom County over ten years.

The focus of the plan is broad and includes five separate goals:

*Goal 1: Cultivate equity and justice in our food system*

*Goal 2: Protect and regenerate our soil, water, and land*

*Goal 3: Build a resilient and vibrant local food economy*

*Goal 4: Ensure access to healthy food for all*

*Goal 5: Mitigate emissions from food system activities and adapt the food system to a changing climate*

Focusing on addressing food insecurity and access, Goal 4 of the Whatcom County Food System Plan includes a number of objectives and specific actions on a local level, including:

*4.1 Build and design our communities to ensure food access and eliminate food deserts*

*4.2 Create and promote opportunities for people to grow, prepare, and share their own food*

*4.3 Invest in programs that make healthy food more affordable*

*4.4 Scale up food recovery efforts in Whatcom County*

Each of these objectives includes actions that range from specific policy or regulatory actions undertaken by the County to collaborative and educational actions with the community.

## Staff Recommendation

If the City Council determines that it would like staff to address this issue in more detail, then staff recommends the development of a Food System Plan for the City be added to the 2024 long-range planning work program. Staff would suggest that the Plan focus holistically on how to provide healthy food for all members of the community, reduce food waste, and support local food processing.

The Food System Plan should focus on determining which activities have the most impact in addressing the core food insecurity issues identified by the City Council. The Plan would identify

how to eliminate barriers, address gaps in the current system, and come up with appropriately scaled solutions that the City could work with its community partners to implement in the City. Some form of monitoring should also be considered.

The Plan could also include identifying how the City will maintain and update resource materials through its jurisdictional and community partners.