



**Report on the Greater Washington Region
Food Policy Council Meeting
Wednesday, September 25th from 9 am to noon
Washington, D.C.**

Summary

On Wednesday, September 25, 2013, 34 food policy council members, policy experts, and advocates, joined with 13 funders for a first-ever convening of food policy councils and coalitions in the Greater Washington region. The purpose of the gathering was to meet and learn from food policy council expert, Mark Winne, as well as other participants. The event was convened by the Washington Regional Convergence Partnership (WRCP),¹ a group of private, community, and family funders committed to building an equitable food system in the region. The event included an introduction to the WRCP and each of the seven councils or coalitions participating from Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. Mark Winne gave an interactive presentation which provided a basic introduction to food policy councils; touching upon models, organizational development concerns, and examples of policy achievements. This was followed by small and large group discussions. Evaluation of the event by participants was very favorable with near universal agreement that networking with peers and learning about policy successes were amongst the most valuable parts of the meeting. Most expressed great interest in participating in a future regional gathering. Similarly, WRCP members would like to bring the group together again in the spring of 2014.

¹ Subsequent to the creation of this report, the Washington Regional Convergence Partnership changed its name to the Washington Regional Food Funders. The group's original name appears in the text of this report, however, the group's are one and the same.



Introduction

In early August of 2013, the Washington Regional Convergence Partnership (WRCP) invited area food policy councils and coalitions to participate in a learning and networking event with national food policy expert Mark Winne.² Mark provided an introductory presentation for all participants - councils and funders – and offered technical advice on questions and concerns raised during the event. His presentation also provided a forum for participants to share policy successes and challenges. Seven of eight invited councils participated, including: the DC Healthy and Affordable Food For All Coalition (DC HAFA), Montgomery County Food Council, Northern Virginia Food Coalition, Partnership for a Healthier Fairfax, Prince George's County Food Equity Council, Southern Maryland Food Council, Virginia Food System Council.³ Councils and coalitions sent between 3 and 5 members to the event who serve in a voluntary capacity, generally as representatives of non-profit organizations, local government, or the private sector. In addition to these council representatives, WRCP members and other funders, several other organizations participated. These included the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, DC Hunger Solutions, ROC-United DC, Prevention Institute, and the Institute for Public Health Innovation.

Event Overview

The event was held at the Pepco Edison Gallery Place in downtown Washington, D.C. near the Gallery Place metro station. Participants arrived starting at 8:30 am for breakfast and many stayed following the event to talk with one another and with Mark. The event began at 9 am with a welcome from Pepco, a funder member of the WRCP, and a brief introductory presentation from the WRCP. Each food policy council and coalition introduced themselves prior to Mark's hour long presentation. To help frame his presentation, he also asked participants to share examples of achievements and challenges related to their organizational development and goals for local policy change. Mark drew on his own experience, as well as those from other councils he has worked with throughout North America, to provide additional examples of the power these groups have to affect positive policy change in the local food system. Participants also provided local examples of successful collaboration to change food policy.

² From 1979 to 2003, Mark Winne was the Executive Director of the Hartford Food System, a Connecticut nonprofit food organization. He is the co-founder of the Community Food Security Coalition where he worked as the Food Policy Council Program Director from 2005 to 2012. He was a Kellogg Foundation Food and Society Fellow, a Johns Hopkins School of Public Health Visiting Scholar, and a member of the U.S. Delegation to the 2000 Rome Conference on Food Security. He is the author of two books *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* and *Food Rebels, Guerrilla Gardeners, and Smart Cookin' Mamas*. Through his own firm, Mark Winne Associates, Mark speaks, trains, and writes on topics related to community food systems, food policy, and food security. He also serves as Senior Advisor to the Center for a Livable Future at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.

³ A representative from the Chesapeake Food Leadership Council was unable to participate.



Introductions ran longer than anticipated, so instead of having small table discussions following Mark's presentation, participants chose between a large group discussion with Mark Winne and his colleague at the Center for a Livable Future, Anne Palmer, or a small group discussion facilitated by representatives from DC Hunger Solutions and ROC United-DC. Highlights from the small and large group discussion were shared with all participants prior to concluding remarks provided by another member of the WRCP.

All meeting participants received a copy of Mark's presentation along with a participant list from the event. In addition, participants were invited to bring copies of any announcements that they wanted to share.



Left: Mark Winne leads a large group discussion with convening participants following his presentation. Right: Food policy councils, coalitions, and advocates gather for a small group discussion

Event Highlights: Stories of Success, Major Questions and Themes

Several stories of successful policy change were shared at the meeting. A favorite example noted by participants came from Christine Bergmark, the Director of the Southern Maryland Agricultural Commission (SMADC) and a member of the Southern Maryland Food Council. When SMADC began to establish programs with local farmers markets so that low income community members could purchase more fresh local food with their federal nutrition benefits (i.e. SNAP), a food council member from the Charles County government identified a need for public transportation. With the food council's support, he worked with colleagues to implement a bus route change which allowed more community members to get to the market in Waldorf, MD.

A central message of Mark's presentation was that food policy councils can have the most power when they work on policy change rather than try to do programming. He shared the example of working to start one community garden versus working to change zoning to allow for many gardens



or urban farming. Christine's story highlighted a key question raised by participants during the meeting with respect to this issue however: how do councils and coalitions always discern between working on a project versus policy for the most impact?

They noted that sometimes a project or program leads to broader policy and programming changes at the local level. In the case of Southern MD and other local jurisdictions, one bus route change might be needed before broader policy changes can be implemented.

Additional achievements that participants noted at the event included establishing organizational structure and community leadership for their councils. At the same time, other participants indicated that both of these were a challenge, particularly for councils in their formative stages of development and in the midst of determining what types of entities they should be. Although many of the food policy councils and coalitions present were independent and considering the possibility of becoming their own 501c3s – something that Mark indicated as not particularly common for food policy councils based on national surveys – organizational structure and approach for systems change was diverse amongst participating groups.

Yet other achievements mentioned included the hiring of a staff person for the VA Food System Council and the annual Farm to Table Conference the Council helps to host. A few of the challenges remarked upon included sustaining participation, funding, and the means by which the good ideas that surfaced in councils and coalitions could be implemented.

In the discussions following Mark's presentation, participants indicated that they were impressed by the depth of and breadth of food systems work happening around them. They said that they felt encouraged by this, along with the WRCP's interest in systems change. Other questions and observations they raised in large and small group conversations included:

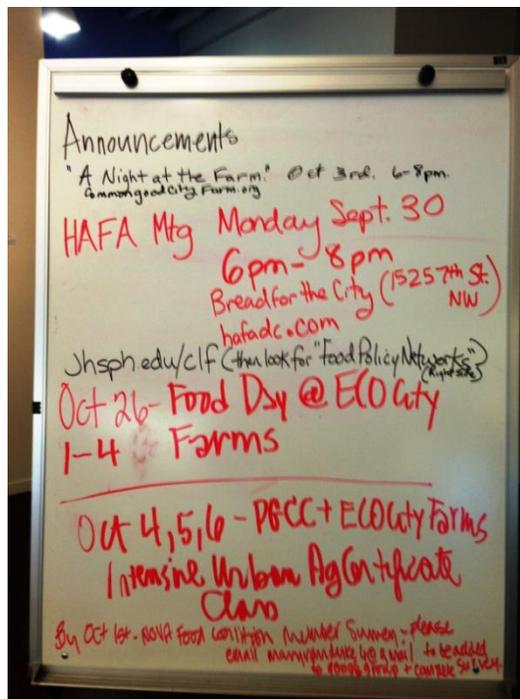
- Appropriate levels of action: local, county, or regional level
- Having an independent organization versus a government sanctioned one and what each implies in terms of legitimacy and membership
- Appreciation for the DC HAFA model of engagement for involving those most affected by food injustice in community change
- The need for government and local community partnership for policy change
- How to deal with conflict of interest
- Not wanting to duplicate others' work
- Securing funding for the work of councils, including for working with communities these organizations need to hear from "who aren't doing this work professionally"
- The need to specifically address race and racism when talking about equity in the local food system
- A desire to hear more from foundations about their interest in funding food policy council work



Evaluation and Follow-Up

An online survey was sent to all participants one week following the event. This was accompanied by a list of announcements shared by participants at the event, and a recommendation to join the *DC Food For All* listserv as a way to share future announcements with one another and a broader audience interested in food policy change in the region. Some of the stories shared at the event were also included in [a blog post in the Daily WRAG](#).⁴

Eighteen of the meeting's 48 participants completed the survey for a response rate of 37.5%. The majority of the survey's respondents were food policy council or coalition members. When asked to rate the convening on overall quality in terms of topics covered, presentations, and networking opportunities, survey respondents gave the event an average score of 3.89 on a 5 point scale.



Above: Announcements shared by participants at the convening

To the question of convening highlights and how the event would impact participants' work, the predominant theme was the value of meeting colleagues from around the region and learning about policy priorities, challenges, and successes. Here's a selection of responses from funders and a group that represented a broad spectrum of councils in terms of their age and level of organizational development:

"Learning what a food policy council actually does, and about all the different models underway in our region."

"Really interesting to hear what all the FPCs are doing, focusing on, and what barriers they are encountering with their work. This info will help us plan activities for our new project."

"I liked the attention pointed to the need to address policy. I also liked the reminder that there are some things that probably shouldn't be tackled up front. It was a good reminder to choose wisely since resources like time and money are scarce."

⁴ The Daily WRAG is a daily news blog from the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers (WRAG). The Washington Regional Convergence Partnership – now the Washington Regional Food Funders – is a Working Group of WRAG and a regional convergence group of the (national) [Convergence Partnership](#).



“The highlight was hearing what others were doing and thinking. In addition I was able to meet a few new people and put a face to some others that I had corresponded with via internet. This networking is always helpful. In addition I walked away with a sense of camaraderie and a good energy to go back and accomplish more.”

The survey also asked participants if they would like to see a future convening of the group. Sixteen people responded to this question, almost all clearly indicating that they would like to gather again. Recommendations for topics for future meetings included discussing regional policy goals, attracting funding, building organizational capacity, and considering specific themes for learning and potential collaboration (i.e. school food, food hubs). On what to do differently in the future to improve the meeting, the consensus was to provide more time for networking and small group discussion.

The survey also asked the following: with respect to the role that food policy councils or coalitions can play, are there additional barriers or opportunities that you see for building a more equitable food system in the Greater Washington region that were not discussed at the convening? Here is a sample of the diverse set of responses provided:

“Finding meaningful ways to work together across jurisdictions and political boundaries.”

“I would like to see more information on evaluating the policies and/or projects food councils implement. Also, more talk of strategies for promoting community involvement and engagement as well as ways to start discussions of some of the more sensitive topics tied to food insecurity and food systems like race and class.”

“Lack of money for capacity building (funding coordinator positions that consistently develop network).”

“Yes. I think there are interesting balances of power and interests on Food Policy Councils and Coalitions - including whether or not formalized structure and whether or not directly convened or partnered with city or county government...”

Next Steps

The evaluation confirmed that the food policy councils and coalitions are interested in coming together again for another regional gathering. The members of the WRCP have an affirmed an interest in this as well. To that end, planning for a second convening will begin soon with input from prospective participants.