

Whidbey Island Growers Association

October 9, 2017 Meeting Notes

6:30 – 8:30 p.m., Nordic Lodge, Coupeville

In attendance: Karen Bishop, Stephen Williams, Anza Muenchow, Kimberly Tiller, Chris Williams, Hal Jackson, Claire Lichtenfels, Caitlin Stanton, Michael Seraphinoff, Susan Prescott, John Burks, Loren Imes.

General Announcements

- Biochar and hot compost talks have been popular topics at SW Tilth talks – Prescott
- Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching class on Thursday nights at WSU Extension have been going well. Good turn out from Whidbey Island and video conferencing with Skagit County add up to nearly 30 people interested in starting a small farm business.

Island County Farm Worker Housing Update

We continued our discussion from last month's WIGA meeting regarding the need for affordable farm worker housing. Karen Bishop discussed ongoing meetings with the planning department and the Island County Planning department's housing survey - <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ICCommunityHousingSurvey>

Loren took the survey and shared his experience. The survey is for all Island County residents and is fairly general in nature with questions on affordability, commute time and distance, and quality of life. The survey does not specifically address the needs of farmers or other businesses for affordable worker housing and seasonal needs.

The group agrees that there is a lack of affordable housing. If new housing is built, how can we ensure that it is available to low-income farm workers? Solutions mentioned included:

- Tiny houses – cheap to build and could house a lot of people, but the county has concerns about increasing population density on rural lands and impact, such as increased traffic
- Shared living arrangements such as what the Organic Farm School is using at Aldermarsh, and the cabins and shared spaces at the Whidbey Institute

The survey will help guide the planning department as they update the County's Comprehensive Plan. Also to be addressed in the Plan will be updated rules on Rural Events.

We also discussed the Wright's Landing development and its impact on the farm community. People were encouraged to contact the county commissioners with their concerns.

Whidbey Island Grown Update

Copies of the list of WIG Week events were handed out and discussed. Lots of hard work by Sherrye Wyatt and good collaboration between farmers and other WIG members resulted in a good first effort upon which we can grow.

John Burks recounted his Kettle's Edge Farm collaboration with the Oystercatcher restaurant on the theme of Food Recollections. This sold out event also included Robbie Lobell of Cook on Clay who partnered with them and discussed her clay cookware.

Hal Jackson raised the topic of WIG growing into a way for farmers to distribute their products beyond Whidbey and specifically into Jefferson County. He thinks Jefferson County may be a better market for Whidbey growers than the crowded Seattle market and discussed how Hunter's Moon Farm is currently traveling to Jefferson County to deliver their blueberries to Chimacum Corner and the Port Townsend Food Coop where they receive a premium for their products making the ferry trip worthwhile. He would like to see WIG members partner to reduce their distribution costs, as current distributors such as Charlies and the Food Hub take too much from the farmer.

A question for Island farmers is "Are they wanting to sell more products off island or are they happy with their current marketing efforts?" Questions such as these need to be discussed at the next WIG steering committee meeting.

Other topics to be discussed at the upcoming WIG steering committee meeting (Monday 11/6 at 5:30, WSU Extension training room in Coupeville) are:

- whether to do another winter/spring kick off meeting like last year, where there was a large attendance
- discussion of next WIG Week event
- possible group structure changes
- 2018 membership drive
- Fundraising ideas

Prescott mentioned that SW Tilth will be at the Tilth Conference and is interested in sharing the cost of their table with WIG and having information available to conference goers. Karen will check with NABC to see if funds are available.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program

Karen Bishop discussed the Conservation District's involvement in the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. There are lots of resources available for farmers and ranchers with under 10 years of experience. They have partnered with several area organizations in a three year grant, and are specifically focusing on issues surrounding transitioning farmers - looking to help connect existing and retiring farmers who are looking for new farmers to farm their land.

Contact the Conservation District office for more information on assistance if you are:

- A new farmer seeking access to land for farming
- Farmer planning to transfer your land to another generation
- Farmland owner seeking new farmers to farm your land

Karen is also interested in having a panel discussion of young farmers who are farming larger parcels, share their experiences.