



Banking on more space

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by Franny White | Skagit Valley Herald

SEDRO-WOOLLEY — The concept is fairly straightforward: The more storage space food banks have, the more food they can get.

Following this and the example of a number of other communities throughout the state, Skagit County purchased an old Sedro-Woolley meat locker in 2006. The idea was to open a central facility to distribute food to the county's 13 food banks.

The Skagit County Food Bank Distribution Center opened in January with the Skagit County Community Action Agency acting as a coordinator.

Now a handful of volunteers from area food banks meet a semitrailer at the center at 6:30 a.m. every Monday.

This past Monday, pallets of everything from fresh bell peppers and grapes to instant oatmeal and chocolate were unloaded from a truck operated by Food Lifeline, the Western Washington affiliate of America's Second Harvest. After jovially greeting their colleagues from Hamilton, Clear Lake and beyond, the volunteers quickly put on their work gloves and began dividing the pallets' contents amongst themselves.

It was clear and sunny this Monday, but volunteers said they appreciated having a roof-covered loading dock. Before the distribution center opened, food banks had to contend with rainy and inclement weather at the edge of a Burlington grocery store parking lot.

Once, a food bank couldn't meet the truck, said Jill Watson of Food Lifeline. And since there was no place to store the requested food, the Food Lifeline driver had to take it back with him to Seattle. And in Skagit County, where 19.5 percent of households received food bank assistance in 2005, missing out on a week's worth of food could have serious consequences for a food bank's clients.

But without a food distribution center, Community Action says area food banks have been missing out on plenty.

In neighboring Snohomish County, where the Volunteers of America operate that county's distribution center, the average food bank client received 94.52 pounds of food per year in 2006. And with the Bellingham Food Bank running a distribution center, the average Whatcom County client received even more — 139.97 pounds of food. That's more than twice the amount of food Skagit County clients received — just 54.14 pounds.

Missing opportunities

"We've been missing out on opportunities," said Arielle Stein, coordinator of the new distribution center for Community Action. "We're not set up to receive that kind of quantity."

To increase the amount of food Skagit's hungry residents receive, Community Action plans to expand the new distribution center, which houses a walk-in refrigerator and freezer, a loading dock, and a small receiving area.

With more space to store dry goods, Community Action predicts the center could receive, and therefore distribute, more food. The extra space could also eliminate the need for area food banks to individually travel to Seattle to pick up food from another



food bank supplier, Northwest Harvest, which has agreed to deliver to the Sedro-Woolley facility once it's expanded.

Though the center has been open since January, Community Action and others acknowledge it is very much a work in progress. First they need to raise \$1.05 million to reimburse the county for the building and build the addition.

Then the agency wants to formalize an original partnership with Skagitonians to Protect Farmland and North Coast Credit Union. The partnership, called the Skagit Food Share Alliance, would pay small- to medium-sized farms in Skagit County for their produce, which in turn would be distributed to area food banks, thereby enriching their clients' diets.

Though most food banks have informal arrangements with backyard gardeners and farmers to receive extra crops, Tracy Wilking, executive director of the Washington Food Coalition, said she doesn't know of any formal alliance in the state like the one being formed here.

"The work that is happening in Skagit is extremely unique, and I hope it will be a model" for others, Wilking said.

Sue Norton, outgoing president of the Skagit County Food Bank Association, is enthusiastic about the central distribution center. She says Viewcrest Assembly of God Church's Heart Prints Food Pantry, which Norton coordinates, spends about \$1,000 a month on truck rental and gas to pick up food in Seattle.

"There's a huge need," Norton said. "If we can work together ..."

Collaborative effort

Working together may be another obstacle, however. Historically, food banks have been autonomous, loosely organized operations run by volunteers. Until now, Skagit County's 13 food banks have run fairly independently of each other.

A 2003 feasibility report showed that while all food banks agreed they would benefit from a distribution facility in Skagit County, there was a difference of opinion as to how it should be run. Some worried that a distribution center might not treat all food banks fairly and impartially.

Norton and Stein acknowledged that some have resisted the idea. On Monday, one food bank volunteer expressed his unhappiness about the distribution center's organization, but declined to be quoted.

Such was the situation in Snohomish County 25 years ago when Volunteers of America of Western Washington started a food distribution center there, said Debbie Jordan, communications manager for the VOA in Everett. A kind of turf war started between some food banks and the VOA, Jordan said.

Individual food banks were concerned that valuable community donations to their own banks would decline if the new distribution center got the credit for feeding the hungry.

But instead of discrediting those concerns, the VOA got together with all the county's food banks and set up a coalition, which collectively decided how the distribution center would run. By actively involving all parties, Jordan said the Snohomish distribution center was able to succeed. In 2006, Snohomish food banks distributed 7.96 million pounds of food, millions more than Skagit's 2.44.

That's a lesson that Bill Shuler, executive director of Community Action, seems to take to heart.

"We're taking a lead role, but we certainly expect as time goes on (it will become) a shared responsibility," Shuler said. "We hope all the communities in the county will take some ownership."

At the end of the day, those leading the project say a collaborative effort could make Skagit County's food bank system more efficient, thereby benefiting the county's hungry. Stein said the center has already received an extra 35,000 pounds of unsolicited donations.

"Ultimately, it isn't about the food bank," Jordan said. "It's about the people who are hungry in the community."

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