

## **Grocery Store Interviews**

### ***Summary***

We learned from our survey of low-income residents and from our ten focus group discussions, that a significant number of people living in Waushara County travel outside of the county for their food shopping needs. We also learned that food prices and quality produce were reasons why people shopped where they did for food. Additionally, residents stated a strong desire to support both their local grocery stores and their local farmers.

The first three interview questions (#2: Where do you get the food products you sell?, #3: Do you use more than one wholesale distributor?, and #4: How does the wholesale distribution system that you use work?) target the issue of food prices, and stem from a recommendation made by both a steering committee member and a focus group participant. The suggestion was to explore the possibility of local grocery stores buying wholesale products together in bulk quantities at better rates and passing the resulting cost savings onto the customer. This way the local grocery stores could better compete with the larger chain stores located out of the county and attract more local customers, while local residents could travel shorter distances to purchase food items at cheaper prices, and support their local grocery stores.

Although 80% of the grocery store owners were open to learning more about this idea, and how specifically it would work for their stores, it does not appear that this is a promising strategy for lowering food prices, given the fact that the grocery stores have different wholesale distributors and several of them have computerized, automatic ordering based on available inventory.

Questions number five through number nine all address Waushara County residents' desire to buy high quality produce and to support their local producers. [#5: Do you have flexibility in purchasing products from local producers and/or other vendors?, #6: Do you buy products from local producers? Why or why not? (Approximately what percent?), #7: Are there guidelines that address sales of specialty items produced by local businesses? (Honey, cheeses, meats...) What kind of guidelines? Health and safety?, #8: Do requirements differ for sale of locally grown fresh produce raised by homeowners and those raised by a business? If yes, in what ways? (Liability, food safety, etc.), and #9: If you currently do not buy products from local producers, would you be interested in learning more about opportunities for buying locally?].

Responses from these questions suggest that, for the most part, grocery store owners like the idea of buying local food products and have flexibility to do so, as long as the producers and processors meet their health and safety guidelines (i.e. insurance, Health Department approval, USDA guidelines, and/or retail licenses, etc.). It appears that all the stores buy some local products, but only on a limited basis. Though liability issues are a concern for a few of the grocery stores, the main reservation in buying more local products stems from the perception of unreliability i.e. local producers not having the volume and/or quality of products available on a consistent basis to meet the needs of their grocery store. It should be noted here that this concern could be addressed if local producers came together in some form to aggregate their products.

## *Appendix C1: Summary*

Questions #11 and #12 address the need, stated by both the county food pantry and by local residents, for more food to be available through the local food pantries. [#11: What currently happens with your day old bakery and expired food items? (returned to wholesaler; donated to food pantry/second harvest, sold to discount grocery stores?...)] and question #12: Is it possible to donate or re-distribute such items to others in the community? What are potential barriers? (liability, time, expense, depends on food item, don't know who to give it to, etc.).]

Our interview results show that the grocery stores currently donate some items to the local food pantries. Also, a few grocery stores either mark down or offer “value baskets” for items that are nearing their expiration date.

All of the grocery store owners mentioned that they return their expired or about-to-be expired items to their distributors or wholesalers for credit. One of these owners stated that once returned, the food items are then either sold or given to the food banks, and that nothing gets wasted. Liability was a concern and the reason why they are unable to donate or re-distribute food items within the community.

Waushara Food Connections is pleased to learn how supportive our county grocery stores are of the local food pantries. We wonder if it might also be feasible for these grocery stores to consider donating to the local food pantries, the items that they are currently sending back to their wholesaler for credit. (Perhaps they could receive a tax-deduction for their donation to offset some of what they currently save through these food credits.)

The grocery store owners interviewed stated three things that are needed to allow them to continue to successfully operate their stores in the county. The first is more local advertising, the second is a stronger local economy (i.e. more people, more jobs, and more money to spend), and the third is local support in the form of more local customers. They appear open to receiving any help, related to these needs, that Waushara Food Connections might be able to offer.