Cultivating Connections: Alberta Regional Food Systems Forum 2017 Proceedings and Alberta’s Future of Food Story

(Sessions and Keynote transcript link is available at end of these proceedings)
On Feb 3-5 2017 Alberta Food Matters and FLEdGE – Food Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged – hosted a very successful Cultivating Connections 2017 Forum about Alberta Regional Food Systems. The purpose of this Forum was: 1) to bring together individuals and representatives from public, private and non-profit sectors in Alberta to share information about innovative initiatives; 2) to identify opportunities; and 3) to collaborate in building socially just, economically viable and ecologically sound and sustainable local/regional food systems in the province. The Forum provided a venue for those interested in forming partnerships, coalitions and action-oriented working groups toward this end. It was a gathering to talk about our Alberta regional food system. By taking part in this Forum 2017 participants would:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the interconnections between the present food system, the environment, health, community and issues of access/affordability.
- Gain a deeper understanding of the economic, social and environmental benefits of supporting and strengthening local/regional food systems in Alberta from field to table to waste.
- Examine existing assets and gaps in the local/regional food systems in Alberta.
- Examine existing government (municipal, regional, provincial) policies and programs relevant to the development of sustainable ecologically sound localized food systems, and compare with other jurisdictions and best practices.
- Join with other participants in knowledge and experience sharing, collaborative evidence-based problem solving and identification of opportunities to build sustainable ecologically sound localized food systems.

Three Hundred and forty-two people took advantage of the Forum in some way. Two hundred and thirty people attended the entire Forum from Friday to Sunday. The Forum brought together delegates from across Alberta, who talked, shared and explored the future for Alberta’s vibrant food system. The participants discussed pressing food-related issues, charted the direction for the future and celebrated Alberta’s lively food culture. What a wonderful mix of people we had: chefs, farmers, researchers, teachers, educators, health practitioners, decision makers, economists, waste warriors, students and lots members of the public!

The Forum kicked-off with an invigorating “Let’s Talk About Food” panel discussion at City Hall, featuring Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson, Chief Billy Morin of Enoch Cree Nation, Mayor Lisa Holmes of Morinville, and Mayor Tom Flynn of Sturgeon County. The event was successfully catered by Kids in the Hall with locally sourced food; locally sourced beer and wine were also part of the fun event. The entire event was hosted by the Edmonton Food Council. WOW!

Throughout the forum, participants had a chance to talk, question and share a dynamic line-up of over 74 presenters, hosted by 24 well-informed session moderators. Of
those 98 speakers and moderators only 4 were from out-of-province. Remarkable! The topics that were explored included: the role of local businesses in shaping food systems, citizen engagement and social justice for food system change, the business of farming, harnessing big food buying power, food waste as a resource, and the role of food policy. The Forum also featured keynote speaker, Dr. Wayne Roberts, celebrated author of The No Nonsense Guide to World Food and Food for City Building. Dr. Roberts brought his experiences with the Toronto Food Policy Council to us to help us create a vision for Alberta’s regional food system and to answer the key questions of “What key values should it hold, can it be sustainable and how do we get there together?”

A celebratory evening, the Taste and Sound of Alberta was held at NAIT’s Hokanson Centre for Culinary Arts on Saturday Feb 4th. We had tours of NAIT’s state of the art kitchens, sample food and drink from local vendors, Alberta musicians and a Crafters’ Market showcasing local artists. We were honoured at this event to pay tribute to Gail Hall, Edmonton’s good food Champion and we were pleased to welcome her husband Jon who also attended the Forum.

Throughout the Forum a comfortable and open Cultivating Conversation space was available for participants to dig deeper and further explore, in smaller groups, their thoughts and answers to the key questions. At the conclusion of the Forum the skilled Cultivating Conversation facilitators lead the Forum Delegates in an Open Space activity where delegates gathered in small topic-specific groups to discuss the next steps needed to further the Alberta Regional Food System. Topics and actions that were discussed were those that would ensure the sustainability of our region and province as a prosperous, resilient, growing place, where and local and regional food systems thrive! The 8 topics are:
1. Get Youth Involved
2. Utilize Food Wastes
3. Skill Development: Preserving, Holistic Techniques for Production, etcetera
4. Educate Consumers
5. Food Hubs-Distribution Centres-Improve Access, Integrate
6. Listen-Think-Collaborate to Change Mindsets
7. Protect the Environment
8. Involve Policy-Makers so we invest wisely

By all reports and seeing the excitement we all felt, the Forum 2017 inspired the participants to learn more about Alberta food and to continue to work together to strive toward the Three Goals of the Forum: 1) to bring together individuals and representatives from public, private and non-profit sectors in Alberta to share information about innovative initiatives; 2) to identify opportunities; and 3) to collaborate in building socially just, economically viable and ecologically sound and sustainable local/regional food systems in the province. An evaluation survey was emailed to each Forum participant and presenter within 72 hours of the Forum’s ending. We have had a 44% response from 281 surveys sent by email. We hope to share the results by mid March 2017. The evaluation results, now in the interpretation stage, will tell the full tale. Stay tuned!
The Cultivating Connections Co-hosts Alberta Food Matters and FLEdGE and planning Team would like to thank the 15 sponsors for making the Forum a reality! A BIG THANKS to the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Food Council and NAIT for their strong show of support for Forum 2017. A very special thanks to Jon Hall, Gail Hall’s Husband for sharing Gail’s memory with us through his generous gifts of books from Gail’s library that were presented to each speaker and moderator. Each of the 98 books is monogrammed with a photo of Chef Gail. A Memorial Chef Gail fund is now open for donations through the Edmonton Community Foundation.

Cultivating Connections Forum 2017 by the numbers: 231 participants generated $33,379.80 in registration fees, sponsors generated $36,075.00, as well as $25,000 in-kind dollars and $10,850.00 for 51 bursaries for speakers, students and others for a total of $80,804.80. Revenue over expense turned out to be $17,285.55. AFM will look to use the funds to move forward with the momentum - as Wayne Roberts said ‘no one funds the connections that we need’.

WE all had fun! Everyone felt welcomed and space was there for great discussions to happen and plans to be made! Thanks to everyone - students, volunteers, our sponsors, organizing team, forum attendees, presenters, moderators, Chris our audiovisual recorder, and especially those of you who are willing, keen and going to take this on and make it happen!

The Forum Keynote and presenters’ slides, resources and summary notes are being posted https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B5OA4HypS6zdWjNXRmQ0UTRZNU?usp=sharing

THANKS EVERYONE! THIS WAS A MEMORABLE and LIFE CHANGING WEEK!
So here is Alberta’s Future of Food Story (by Annand Ollivierre - CC Forum 2017 Facilitator)

Imagine its 2027 and as you wake up and turn on your lights you have the thought that “you can’t actually remember the last time you’ve had to pay for electricity”. As you are making your breakfast you are struck by how confident and knowledgeable you are about the food, the people and the companies who produced it. You check your calendar and notice that this Saturday is the office trip to the CSA farm you and your colleagues support. On the radio the news is reporting that there are significant decreases in vulnerability and food insecurity and that there is significant increase in the health and wellbeing of Canadians and we are more connected to our neighbours. You really are present to how much has shifted because the kids in your life are talking about soil as our most precious resource and how their school garden is providing fresh produce to the neighbouring long-term care facility.

As you start your day at your job at the Alberta Grown Food Entrepreneur Hub, you are preparing for leading a meeting between farmers, food processors, distributors and urban residents on how to increase local food consumption from the current 30% to 40%. Just before you head off to that meeting, your colleague stops by to drop off the latest Canadian Food Policy report card and it is clear that the actions being taken from the policy are making an impact in every region of the country.

Later that day, just before quitting time, you get an email from the Texas government and they are asking you to give a talk next month on how Alberta diversified its economy through a focus on food (you’ll save this work until tomorrow!)

Tonight is the best day of the week because you are going to your community kitchen to share, learn about, cook and eat a cross-cultural meal with your neighbours. Just before you go to dinner you remember you need to pick up some beer and its going to take a while to make a decision...choosing between the 200 different local beers is always a challenge!