

## Summary of November 1, 2005 SBI Roundtable on Natural and Organic Foods

On November 1, 2005 representatives from across the natural and organic foods industry met for a roundtable discussion on how to grow and support the local industry. Sponsored by Mayor Kitty Piercy's Sustainable Business Initiative, participants included retailers, manufacturers, distributors, farmers, and technical consultants from the local community.

Bob Doppelt began the meeting with a discussion of preliminary findings on practitioners' visions and suggestions for growing the industry. This was followed by a presentation by David Lively and Natalie White from Organically Grown Company (OGC), a locally owned produce distribution company with wholesale customers throughout the Northwest. Ms. White was recently hired to help the company address the issue of sustainability throughout the company's operations. A summary of their comments follows:

- OGC accomplished original mission (organic certification); time to develop a new mission statement to position OGC to go beyond organic and be a leading sustainability organization.
- OGC sponsored a Sustainability Summit in spring 2005 involving about 150 representatives from the retail and organic trades to establish a common base of understanding
- OGC considering drafting a set of principles of sustainability for vendors to display and commit to working toward collaboratively
- OGC recognized that labeling and marketing of labels was already occurring in other areas and wanted to coordinate those labeling efforts

Mr. Lively and Ms. White answered questions.

- Regarding the social equity element of OGC's efforts, summit participants identified labor as an important and controversial issue due to poorly defined standards and international fair trade issues.
- Healthcare benefits for farmers, farm labor and others in organic industry remains a challenge. Adding additional cost of sustainability efforts to organic food could make this even more difficult.
- Summit attendees agreed consumer edu was essential to growing organic foods market.

After the OGC presentation, roundtable participants discussed these and other issues; the main topics and ideas follow:

- Consumer education is essential to growing the industry; organic food still *appears* more expensive because unsustainable practices of non-organic industry are not fully accounted for in conventional grocer's retail prices.
- Not just a local issue – regional and national influences are strong on local organic economy.
- Support for industry-wide professional promotional/marketing/education campaign
- No existing community food distribution network exists.
- Public school system and curriculum could be valuable partner in consumer education.
- Initial support for green business park or incubator space; difficult for existing growing businesses to expand; availability of land is one issue.
- Funding support for business expansion or start-ups can be difficult.
- Healthcare availability for farmers, farm-labor and non-farm employees is a major issue

- addresses social equity element of sustainability.
- Increasing organic farm acreage is an important issue, but beyond the scope of most Eugene businesses since little organic farmland exists within city boundaries.
- It's difficult for start-ups to increase economies of scale for long-term survival due to influence of national distributors, equipment purchase costs and more.
- Broader based distribution of local products conflicts with issue of sustainability.
- Need to clarify goals - are we attempting to address local food security or large-scale growth of the local natural foods economy?
- Organic and natural foods are the only segment of the national food industry that continues to grow market-share annually.

#### Suggestions:

- Reiterate that consumer education is critical, from top to bottom:
  - Establish link between sustainability and a local organic and natural foods industry.
  - Education can be through curriculum or the use of natural foods products.
  - Can take place in K-12 schools, higher education, or at community events, and public meetings, e.g. City Club, Chamber of Commerce, City Council
  - City support for incorporating the use of local natural foods products in institutional settings, e.g. hospitals, K-12 schools, higher education cafeterias, large businesses.
    - Expand current farm to school partnerships and look at Alice Water's work with the Berkeley, CA schools to encourage the use of organic food
  - Shift the conversation: it's not about paying more, it's about "paying different" by accounting for the true, full costs of food. Organics is about frontloading costs, making them visible and reducing "back-end" costs, e.g. environmental degradation.
- Consider the model established in Denmark for education in the schools, which goes from student to parent
- School districts could hire an education coordinator to go into the schools and discuss the importance of organic and natural foods, similar to effort at BRING Recycling
- City use of local natural and organic foods at public meetings, events, etc.; this helps establish the City as a partner in growing the industry – this could help attract other like-minded businesses who might be considering relocating here.
- City could include non-retail natural foods companies in business attraction, economic development efforts.
- Subject of a "green CD" was discussed in another roundtable that could be of benefit to the above-mentioned efforts.
- Establish a central database with grower information to let retailers and consumers know what is available in regard to organic products
- Promote direct link between consumer and farmer through expansion of the Farmer's Market and/or CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture.)
- Quantify the importance and impact of the local natural foods economy.
- City support for a Green Business Park, incubator space for start-up companies; improved land inventory and/or incentives to support industry expansion.
- Economic development incentives for small business equipment purchasing.

Next Steps:

- Re-establish the former Lane County Natural Foods Association (or something like it) to continue to develop and collaborate on these ideas.
  - Several participants took on responsibility to further contact those involved in the industry and organize a follow-up meeting(s).
- Possibly establish a 501(c)(6) as a collaborative effort to purchase affordable, group purchase of healthcare benefits.