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Welcome

Welcome to the Re-launch meeting of the Marin Food Policy Council. Thank you so much for lending some of your important time to this effort. If this Council fulfills its potential, we will all think that the time we spend here is valuable and worthwhile. We understand that everyone here has other duties and demands on their time. Our aim is to make your presence here count, and to have the results of your work here contribute to your other duties in ways that make that work easier, better supported, more effective, and sustainable.

The overarching purpose of any food policy council is to develop policies that increase community food security for all residents. Community food security is often defined as: **All residents at all times receiving a nutritionally adequate, culturally appropriate, diet from sustainable, non-emergency, sources.**

There are other ways of describing an optimum state of food security. Our friend, Jeannette Armstrong, a Wisdom Keeper from the Okanagan Tribe in British Columbia, defines it this way: **"When the people are feeding themselves, within a pattern that can be repeated, from generation to generation."**

Thinking about this meeting, and about what is possible, if there were a tagline for this group, it would be "Marin Food Policy Council, The Place Where Dreams Come True. " That's because Policy Development is about identifying obstacles and barriers to progress, and developing policies that remove those obstacles and barriers. The result can seem almost magical when the policies you develop actually result in positive change you recognize in your life, and the lives of your friends and neighbors.

Our success as a Council depends on our ability to work together to accomplish big goals that none of us could realize alone. The constitution of this Council creates a framework for action for the County on matters affecting food access and nutritional health for all Marin residents. Within that framework, we will propose policy recommendations for adoption by the County that alleviate food insecurity and promote a vibrant local food system that serves everyone.

First, allow me to acknowledge that this room is full of people who, through this work, have learned some of the ironies and secrets of life—that realizing one's true purpose lies in becoming a part of something bigger than oneself, that to work from a systems perspective requires increasing one's tolerance for no results, and that greatness lies in doing work one knows will not be completed in one's lifetime.

Today is an opportunity to shape and endorse a vision for the future: a shared vision and a shared language for aligning and connecting our work, increasing our resources and our allies, and accelerating our results.

This gathering is noteworthy exactly because of the diversity of perspectives, disciplines, and resources represented. We believe that nothing less than this multifaceted array of skills and viewpoints is sufficient to undertake systemic reform. Wherever we look now, we are seeing new configurations of agencies, backgrounds, disciplines, and expertise, coming together to mount a response to a diet-related national health crisis.

As an example, at the annual Ecological Farming Conference in Asilomar, CA, the largest yearly gathering of organic and sustainable farmers on this continent, the last speaker on the last day of the conference was Dr. Alan Greene, head of the Organic Center at Stanford Medical Research Institute. I didn't even know there WAS an organic center, so imagine my surprise. He began his talk by asking if all of us farmers would "think together," that's how he phrased it, "think together," with the researchers at the Stanford Organic Center for the next 5 to 10 years about a problem he thought they might be seeing that begins in agricultural practices and progresses to a human health condition on a grand scale.

The problem they saw was that higher concentrations of synthetic nitrogen fertilizer tended to cause a condition in plants that results in an impaired ability to process glycogen, a simple sugar. What these researchers were noticing, and what they were wondering, is if this condition in plants...this reaction to over-nitrogenation, could be passed along to humans who ate the plants, and result in a human condition of inability to process simple sugars that we call diabetes.

I thought at that moment that we might finally be coming into sight of what Wendell Berry, in his essay, "Solving for Pattern," calls, "the solution that causes a ramifying set of solutions." Here is a pediatrician, asking for a long-term relationship with 3,000 organic farmers, about understanding the connections between soil, growing practices, plant health, diet, and human health. What was exciting was the proposal to examine root causes of diet-related disorders, all the way back to the farm, and perhaps get ahead of the problems for once, rather than continue to focus on treatment of individual conditions, or what might be termed mounting a downstream response to symptoms of an upstream problem. It seemed that day that we had a sufficient diversity of perspectives and skillsets present to begin that kind of work in earnest.

You can see that today is a very similar kind of opportunity to the one at the farming conference. The range of disciplines and the array of skills and resources represented by the partners in this room make clear that we have everything we need to succeed. We do not need to look outside ourselves for leaders. We know what we need to do.

As partners in this effort, we can begin to build a shared language and a shared vision of health and sustainability for our communities and their future. We can accept today, an invitation to think together for the next few years about the problems we're seeing in soil fertility, sustainable food production and distribution, impacts on living systems, human health, and quality of life, and about solutions, in Wendell Berry's words, "that solve more than one problem without creating new ones."

Closing

"It is not easy to cross boundaries to adopt a whole-systems approach to health. It means leaving the areas we know well and venturing into fields where we have to depend on the expertise of others. It means learning unfamiliar concepts and mastering new tools to engage complexity. It means asking people to take health into account in making decisions that usually depend on other considerations. It may provoke controversy. It may make people we approach uneasy and even angry. It requires patience, imagination, courage, integrity, and a sense of humor.

Hegel warned that the truth is the whole. Of course we cannot really see "The Whole." But, we can recognize that a problem has to be posed big enough to accommodate an answer. If we fail to define the problem big enough, then many important impacts will be perceived as coming from outside the domain of the problem and be treated as "random" or "error." Contrary to common sense, big problems are often more soluble than small ones."