Herb Barbolet and The New City Market: Pushing the Envelope on Food

by Don Alexander, MCIP, RPP

Vancouver activist Herb Barbolet has been involved in social change work for all his adult life. This work has involved community organizing, community development, and ten years of organizing housing co-ops. But the work he is best known for is his advocacy for democratic and health food systems.

This work started thirty-five years ago when he helped establish the Farmland Defense League in B.C. in the mid-1970s. He also helped launch Farm Folk City Folk in the Lower Mainland, one of the first to link farmers with urban consumers and to encourage the consumption of local food. In addition, he has combined organizational and policy work with practice by working as an organic farmer for ten years from the mid-80s to mid-90s. His farm, Glorious Salad, introduced the now ubiquitous exotic salad into Canada, and he was the second producer to do so in North America. This gave him an even deeper insight into the challenges faced by small food producers.

In the last decade he helped set up the Vancouver Food Policy Council, and has worked with Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Sustainable Community Development and the University’s Dialogue Centre on food-related research and education projects.

At the core of his vision is the notion of food production and consumption as an integrated system, rather than as a collection of separate silos, such as organic certification or farmers’ markets or facilitating access by people of all income groups to healthy food. In 2006, Herb helped establish Local Food First in the Lower Mainland of B.C. to “initiate, organize and analyze extensive discussions between growers, processors, distributors, restaurants, and grocers,” amongst others about ways of strengthening the local food system.² What emerged was the need to enhance storage, processing, and distribution capacity so that local consumers could buy local products year-round and area farmers could extend their growing season beyond summer/autumn farmers’ markets, thereby assisting a large number of small producers to better hold their own against their global competitors.

The institution that suggested itself was a food hub. A food hub would combine a retail market, a wholesale market, a storage facility, and processing facilities to make use of leftovers to create value-added products. The Market could also feature demonstration kitchens, restaurants and cafés, office space for profit and non-profit food-related organizations, and places for farmers to store equipment for their stalls.

In contrast with the current alienation of consumers from their food and from those who produce it, the New City Market would serve as a venue for connection, networking, and community-building and would represent a critical step in making the region more food self-reliant. As the organizers envision it, the New City Market would also have a productive relationship with a number of local neighbourhood food hubs that are developing in various parts of the City, and which are seeking to replicate on a small scale—using community centres and neighbourhood houses—what the Market is attempting to do on a city-wide scale.

The organizers were able to enlist powerful allies, and currently the main drivers of the project are the City of Vancouver, VanCity Credit Union, and the Vancouver Farmers’ Market Society. The turning-point occurred in January 2010 when a visioning session involving over 100 different stakeholders occurred that lent much more flesh to the idea, and provided a launching pad for subsequent fundraising and business plan development.

Currently, the City is prepared to provide land and VanCity is prepared to provide capital. When the Market idea was being gestated, it was virtually the only food hub proposal in North America. Today, a number of others have emerged.

Despite the backing of the City, there have been procedural bottlenecks. The City wanted a completed business plan before allocating land. The funders wanted a site before allocating money for a business plan. Despite this hurdle, the organizers were able to get money for two stages of business plan development. The final elaboration of the business plan will be twinned with extensive consultation with future users of the facility to make sure the final design meets their needs.

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meantime, the City has been examining a number of pieces of land, and conducting due diligence on the most likely one on the False Creek Flats, not far from an original “City Market” established in 1908, that similarly featured a farmers’ market, storage area, and café.

In Herb’s view, the New City Market, once realized, will be a “game changer.” It will greatly rationalize the system of local production, enabling consumers and restaurateurs to access local food year-round, which will add enormously to the vitality of existing farm operations and will encourage new entrants into the field. Originally, it was hoped that ground would be broken by 2013, but with the delays already mentioned that now seems unlikely. Nonetheless, once this project is realized it will be an enormous leap forward for local and regional food systems and may provide a model for other parts of North America and the world.

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