

FEAST program provides food for thought

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

About 25 people attended the Grand Ronde FEAST program held at the Tribal Education building on Saturday, Feb. 21.

FEAST stands for Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together.

The program was organized by Lexi Stickel, an AmeriCorps member who works as Community Food System coordinator for Marion-Polk Food Share, operators of the new Grand Ronde Food Bank.

Stickel said that the object of this and other similar meetings throughout the area was to help communities put together grassroots food programs.

"Connections made are the biggest part," she said.

The group included speakers describing efforts and challenges for growing organic foods and getting it to the people in the community who need it.

Discussions ran the gamut from local agriculture to healthy eating to setting up and running local agricultural businesses to food choices made by Spirit Mountain Casino.

Nurse Practitioner Victoria Wright, who works at Grand Ronde Health and Wellness, talked about how the number of diabetics in the United States, already unprecedented, is expected to grow by 50 percent in the coming years.

Wright said that turning around the diabetes health crisis, worse for Native Americans than any other ethnic group, can be accomplished with increased water intake, better food choices and smaller portions.

Wright said that many who alter



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

William Beaver adds his food system vision idea to other ideas during the Grand Ronde FEAST event held at the Tribe's Adult Education building on Saturday, Feb. 21. FEAST stands for Food, Education, Agriculture, Solutions, Together and is a form of community organizing that focuses on food.

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Tribal Elder Patti LaClaire, Grand Ronde Community Garden coordinator, tells attendees about the garden during the Grand Ronde FEAST event held on Saturday, Feb. 21.

their diets are able to reduce or eliminate many of the medications they take.

In some countries, where fresh food is the norm, she said, "They don't know what diabetes is. We have the power to change and this is the time to make the change."

Sharon Thornberry, Community Food Systems manager for the Oregon Food Bank, emphasized that food has to be culturally appropriate. For Native Americans that also means supporting "food sovereignty."

She described community efforts across the state to give the Grand

Ronde community a model and ideas for developing local programs. In Tillamook, for example, financial institutions match community food business sales. There are also community food programs targeting veterans. Other counties teach fishing and clamming.

She asked for the group's vision for community food security. On large sticky notes, participants' suggestions ranged from replacing junk food with fresh fruit, "adopting" farmers for a share of the harvest, growing and preserving foods, continuing and expanding training and education, increasing availability and access to fresh food, and bringing it to the community on food carts.

Perri McDaniel reminded the group of the esteem that Native Americans have always had for their food.

Patti LeClaire, coordinator of the Grand Ronde Community Garden, described the development of the Community Garden. Last year, she said, the garden harvest exceeded 3,000 pounds. Most went to the local food pantry while portions also went to Elders and preschoolers. This year, the garden will grow 4,200 plants.

"Our goal is to feed the community." It will take volunteers, LeClaire added.

There was discussion about whether genetically modified foods are the problem or the solution to growing food enough for those who need it.

Michele Volz, Senior Administrative Assistant for Natural Resources and a member of the event's Steering Committee, described how Tribal hunters harvest deer and elk to provide meat for Tribal ceremo-

nies. This, too, is part of the local food effort.

Kristy DeLoe, another Steering Committee member and the Tribe's Nutrition Program manager, said that interest in the event and the visions of food security in the area "gives us more reasons to go ahead with our food projects. This is why we need it: the community is asking for it."

Spirit Mountain Casino Chef Richard Burr described his personal efforts to grow locally and to preserve and prepare his family's food. He makes six loaves of bread a week, he said, and prepares all of the family's dinners.

At the casino, he said, "We're all about making the best use of food. We try to be good stewards of our food."

For the food providers in the group, both small and large scale, Burr said that the casino regularly buys from local farmers and other food producers.

"It's not very hard to work with us." He mentioned fresh herbs, eggs and tons of pork among just about any foods the casino uses, while noting that the casino has opened up lines with Native fishers on the Columbia River, but said that delivery problems have stalled that opportunity.

Literally tons of food go through the casino on a daily basis, he said, making the casino facilities an ideal buyer for local food businesses.

Tribal Council member Denise Harvey, in a breakout group on education around food choices, discussed incorporating gardening and healthy eating into the Tribe's education process for Tribal youth.

Among the ideas was for the Community Garden to work with the pre-school that has a little garden of its own to help young children learn about healthy eating.

Also, with seeds needing to be planted, Harvey suggested reaching out to students at the Tribe's afterschool program to encourage them to help. "The idea," she said, "is so they feel like they are participating."

Tribal Council member Chris Mercier, who says he has always been "kind of a food guy," raised some of the issues blocking good food practices at the Tribe.

"There's not a lot of grocery shopping options out here," Mercier said. "A lot of people shop at convenience stores and they're not getting nutritious food; a lot of people have transportation issues."

"I like the fact that there's food revolution in the country and I think it was just a matter of time before it started filtering into Tribal communities."

Stickel has organized similar workshops in Portland and Eugene, and more locally in Silverton, Independence, Monmouth and Dallas, and she said she is hoping to do one in Woodburn, and maybe Stayton.

With all the talk about healthy eating and lifestyle choices, there seemed something fundamentally wrong about sitting in a conference room all day while the sun was shining, so the group worked through lunch and ended the session early. ■

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