



An Interview....

GROWING THE FOOD BANK

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Understanding the Vision:

Why Our Community Needs a New Food Bank Building

By Suzanne Olson,
interviewing

Bob Morris, Food Bank Board Member

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I sat down with Bob Morris, who serves on both the Food Bank and OPAL Community Land Trust boards, to get his perspective from a career in food distribution services and better understand the rationale for the new food bank building.

How is the Food Bank projecting demand?

Bob: When we talk about the community's need for a new food bank building, we're really talking about two distinct types of demand that we're experiencing and anticipating.

First, there's the steady growth over time. This isn't speculation—it's what we've been experiencing year after year, driven primarily by the undeniable long-term trend of rising cost of living on our island. Housing costs lead the way, but it's across the board. It would be foolish to assume this trend will reverse. Just this past March, compared to March of the previous year, our demand was up 12%—and this was without any significant change in employment or other economic indicators.

Second, there's passive demand. Currently, more

than half of island residents qualify for food bank services, but only about 30% are using them. Why the gap? There are many reasons. People often say, "I don't want to take food away from somebody who really needs it." But they need it too. When they finally come—often encouraged by friends—they discover they like the experience, they appreciate the dignity of choice, and they come back.

In a way, we're creating our own demand by offering a better product and better service. People respond positively to the grocery store model. They appreciate the greater variety. And overwhelmingly, in every survey we've done—and this is consistent across the country—people want more fresh produce.

Unpacking the fresh produce question

Suzanne: I know there's been some criticism about the Food Bank's emphasis on fresh produce. I've heard on person say: "My elderly mother doesn't want fresh produce. She can't cook with it. Why spend money on expensive produce and farm goat cheese when processed cheese and canned soup would work just fine?"

Bob: Everybody, including elderly moms, should be able to get what they like to eat. And, at the same time, fresh produce and other basics are always available.

I spent many years in the food business before joining the Oregon Food Bank Network, which serves about 1,200 agencies (many of which are similar to Orcas). I was the food operations person for the Network. What we consistently observed—and this isn't a flash of insight, it's documented reality—is that people who come to food banks want to eat exactly the same things as the general population.

Think about it this way: many Food Bank customers shop at Island Market as often as possible. They buy what everyone else buys. But when they didn't quite make it to the end of the month—that's when they come to the food bank. They have the same needs, desires, preferences, and feelings about nutrition and wellness as anyone else. They want fresh produce. They want good protein.

This is a never-ending argument, and the Food Bank staff are happy to have this conversation with anyone. Food banks all over the country have very consistently increased their percentage of fresh produce over the last 15 to 20 years. We had one month recently where 48% of what we distributed was produce and perishable products like proteins. There are food banks in the country operating at 60-65% fresh and perishable.

And here's something important: alongside all that fresh produce, we always have ready-to-eat meals available in the freezer section, and yes, occasionally items like canned soup. Our approach is simple: **we respond to the preferences of our customers.** Period. Well, almost—if our customers want Coca-Cola, they're not getting Coca-Cola from the food bank. But when it comes to what they want and need in the way of actual food, we try to provide it.

If people come in and you say, "Here's what we have for you," that's a fundamentally different experience than saying, "Here are some choices available to you." One of our core beliefs is: **there is no dignity without choice.**

Suzanne: I was a food bank customer as a teen out on my own. I'd knock on a closed door in an alley behind

the church and they'd hand me a bag of food that I didn't want to eat. I ate it because I was hungry and I felt I had to, but canned government chicken, Velveeta cheese and dried beans I didn't know how to cook felt like tough love."

Bob: That's exactly what the "no dignity without choice" principle addresses. **Food bank customers are not beggars.** Just reverse the roles. How would you want to be treated?

There's a feeling in some quarters—certainly in places like Washington, D.C. these days—that people who go to food banks are somehow different from "us." That's not true. They have the same desire to live a good life as everyone else. They may be more limited in their ability to access those things, but the desires are the same.

How has the need for Food Banks evolved?

Bob: There's been a fundamental change in how we think about food banks. Years ago, the perception was that food banks existed to save people who were temporarily on the brink of starvation. Now we're in a situation where there's much more chronic need, particularly due to cost of living and an aging population. People don't come for three months, get "back on their feet," and never need to come again. That happens, but much more frequently, people need the food bank on a continuing basis.

For that reason, we really want to respond to the needs of clients effectively. For the majority of food bank customers, we're not providing 5% of their food once in a while—we're providing as much as 40% of their food on an ongoing basis. We want to help people access better nutrition and think differently about food. It's a change in thinking about what a food bank ought to be and how we ought to help people thrive.

What Research Supports the Vision for the Food Bank?

Bob: My experience in this field is extensive, but it was the network of my peers in the industry that provided the greatest resource in planning this building. After years in the food business, I worked for the Oregon Food Bank Network as their food operations person. One of my key initiatives was developing programs to partner with major grocery chains to donate food that was on the verge of expiring or otherwise unsaleable. This generated significant food for food banks. As a result, Feeding America—the national organization—hired me and a couple of colleagues to expand this program nationally. During that time, this source of food went from under 100 million pounds a year to a billion and a half pounds a year, becoming the largest source of food for food banks and keeping a billion and a half pounds out of landfills.

Those relationships and that experience became the foundation for my research when we started planning a new community food bank building. I reached out to people I'd worked with in Reno, Texas, Montana, and many other places. I asked: What are you doing? What have you learned? What do you regret not including?

For example, when our local group started talking about pallet spaces, I consulted with someone who had built several large food banks. He explained: "When a pallet comes in, it might weigh 1,500 pounds. You use it up, it goes to zero. So, think of each pallet space as averaging 750 pounds—that's realistic on a day-to-day basis." You multiply all your pallet spaces by 750, and that gives you a typical inventory on hand at any point in time. The new building is designed to stack up to three pallets high, keeping a smaller footprint for the storage

capacity we project, which saves costs and makes better use of limited available land.

There's complexity to this. Some items you might receive in large quantities, and they'll sit for a while—like number 10 cans of tomatoes that we'll eventually make into pizza sauce. Other items, like produce, turn over once or twice a week. Storage space requirements are different depending on the nature of the product. It's hard to just do aggregates, but our goal was to have the capacity to take care of regular customers for two months if something like COVID happens again.

Let me be clear about what that means: That storage capacity is to keep our current and projected food bank customers receiving food over an up-to-two-month disruption. It's not storage for the whole community in case of emergency. It's to ensure that the people who depend on the food bank for a significant portion of their food supply would not be disrupted.

We also visited food banks, including the Foothills Food Bank in eastern Whatcom County which was designed by the same architects we're using. I've been in several hundred food banks over my career and continue to learn from new projects as they emerge. What I was most interested in was people's experiences, particularly with current building projects, which is distinct post-COVID.

Here's something critical: **Every single person I talked to who built a building before COVID—every single one—said that it was now too small.** Even if they built it in 2019, by 2023-2024 when we were having these conversations, it was too small. That's 100% consistent feedback. This is particularly

relevant if you think we haven't seen the last COVID-like disruption or recession.

Can you start small and add more space later?

Bob: When we build the food bank on the Pea Patch campus, every bit of usable space on the property is going to go to some beneficial use. Much of the property is green space in wetlands and forest with density limited by the airport overlay. We're not going to have a piece of property where 20 years from now we can say, "Let's build another wing." We won't be able to do that.

Either build it now or we don't have it. And if we're going to make a mistake, I'd rather make a mistake by having a little more capacity than we need for a long time than not having enough. The current design provides about 20% more capacity for some growth within our footprint going forward.

What was the design process?

Bob: The building was designed based on this knowledge base and factors gathered from peers and from our experience here and elsewhere in the food bank sector. We started with the building of our dreams and then, over time, carved about 2,000 square feet out of the design. We want to build the best food bank we can—for today and tomorrow—and are lucky to have a great team of engineers and architects to help us.

Can you walk us through the space?

Bob: Yes—I'll walk through the functional spaces and why they matter, measured in efficiencies and capacity.

Storage: This is our foundation. These spaces (except for the kitchen) are what we call "fixed capacities." When the ferry doesn't run, if you don't have it on hand,

you're not getting it. The other spaces—the kitchen, the repack room, the distribution area—are more flexible. If we get hit with a real surge of need, we can run more shifts. We can multiply the throughput of each of these places. But we can't do that unless we have product in storage.

This isn't hypothetical. When COVID came, we thought we were a good food bank—some people thought we were a great food bank. Realistically, we were an adequate food bank that was well supported day-to-day by a group of dedicated volunteers. It was a couple of months into the pandemic before we could start to meet community needs effectively. We learned that we need day-one capacity to gear up more or less immediately to meet the need, whatever it is. But you can't do that unless you have the product in storage.

To be clear: if we sized the building even close to correct, we're not going to be using 100% of capacity in the first year. If we do, we built it too small. Maybe it's 10 years, maybe 20 years before we're using all that space all the time for day-to-day needs. In that interim, we're going to have space available for emergency stocks, for whatever the community needs. We talked to the County Department of Emergency Services to learn what they want in the way of emergency help. As much as anything, they look for space and capacity for distribution. As we're growing into our capacity, we'll have that margin for emergency use.

The Repack Room: This is an open space that gives us the ability to take bulk items—thousand-pound totes of carrots, onions, potatoes, whatever—and put them in food-bank-size, customer-size packages. We can't do any of that now. One of the great things about a repack room is it's a terrific volunteer experience. People like to volunteer at

the food bank to handle food. They want to deal with food. If you have a class of sixth-graders volunteer to pack apples, they love that. We can't do that now.

The Distribution Area: This is the “pantry” where customers shop in our grocery-store model.

Efficiency Gains: Today, we're unloading trucks by hand, a box at a time, moving those boxes one, two, three times depending on where they need to go. You're moving product 40 pounds at a time, one box at a time, with someone picking it up and carrying it. Forget about safety for a moment—think about efficiency. You might have three people show up Monday morning to unload a truck, spending two hours doing it. You could do the same work with one person in 15 minutes in the new building's warehouse space, using the loading dock and a forklift.

It's fundamentally about efficiency—but safety is also a key concern. Right now, you really can't volunteer for a lot of jobs at the food bank if you can't pick up 50 pounds. In the new building, nobody will have to worry about that. There will still be some lifting—unpacking pallets—but you're not going to move items six times up and down a steep dirt path.

How will the commercial kitchen serve the community?

Bob: There's been a lot of discussion about the kitchen. The kitchen is an expensive budget item. But here's what we're doing: **making better use of the product that comes to us.**

We can't order from Sysco and get exactly what we want. Sometimes we get stuff that comes in very inconvenient packages or in a form that most people might not want. But if

you have a kitchen, you can convert it into soup, into casseroles, into products people want to eat. You take cans of garbanzo beans and make them into hummus or falafel—products people want to eat.

Some people have questioned why we we're building a kitchen but no large gathering place for community meals. **The kitchen is primarily so the food bank can receive perishable donations and make use of bulk items.** We can take a number ten can of beans and turn them into soup. That soup will be available as ready-to-eat meals for people who don't have kitchens, for people who don't cook anymore, for people who need that option. When island orchards are full of surplus fruit, we can get the community involved in making applesauce – taking some home after the class.

This increases the food bank's capacity to receive donations—to not turn away fresh food—including from local growers—during harvest times when there's a lot of it—and turn it into food that many people can eat.

The kitchen is also where we teach people who don't know how to cook or don't have the capacity at home. They can come in and we can say, "We're going to teach you how to make a casserole out of four things you can get at the food bank today." They'll eat better. They'll have a greater sense of control over their lives because they're creating something that's fun and good. There's a better chance that everything we receive will get used because it's in an appealing form that people had a part in creating. It's also where we'll do basic nutrition classes, teaching lifelong healthy eating habits. This gives people the power to choose and provide for themselves.

The kitchen will have six stools for small-scale instruction.

But there's also a large lobby and some outdoor space that will provide flexibility for special events. We're not talking about a big space where people come twice a month for community meals—that's not an efficient use of square footage for the food bank. But we will be moving ready-to-eat meals out of that kitchen that people can take home or eat in the flex spaces on campus. We imagine offering classes that use the kitchen and the open space in the lobby after hours.

The food bank is designed for efficiency. Our main activity is distributing food. Other places have community meals, senior lunches, Meals on Wheels programs. Right now, it's not an efficient use of our limited resources. What if there was a monthly lunch from the commercial kitchen where food bank customers could have it for free and others could pay what they choose? There are many possibilities.

Can you address any misconceptions about the Food Bank building you've heard?

Bob: Yes. Let me address some specific concerns I've heard:

"This is taking money away from buying food for hungry people." This is not true. While we're building this building, there is and always will be money to buy food. This is a separate capital project to better deliver service to people. This is not diverting money meant for food into a building. Our customers live in the immediate present and we continue to maintain our food purchasing and distribution while building for the future.

"The building is too big." We're not building for what we have now. We're building for the future. We're building for growth we're already experiencing and growth

we anticipate. We're building for the capacity to handle disruptions. We're building for a 75-year horizon.

"Why not just make do with what we have?"

Because "making do" means we can't serve people with the dignity and efficiency they deserve. It means we turn away food donations we could use. It means we can't respond to emergencies. It means we're always playing catch-up instead of being prepared. The space limits the capacity for staff and volunteers that are already needed to serve the community.

How does this project measure up with national trends?

Bob: Everything we're doing follows national trends in food banking—and is informed by local experience. The grocery store model, the emphasis on fresh produce, the kitchen facilities—lots of food banks are doing this. We've done a good job of adapting these concepts to our community. But we're also using our experience operating a grocery-store model for a couple of years now. We know how much room people need to move through. We know what the flow pattern should look like. That's not hypothetical—we've experienced it.

We've seen these various spaces—the kitchen, the repack room—in other places. We've seen what people are doing. We're very much in line with what food banks across the country are doing or would like to do. Most importantly, we're building what our community needs.

What's your big picture vision for our Food bank—beyond bricks and mortar?

Bob: Food creates a lot of problems for our customers. They don't have the money to buy it. Many don't have the skills, background, imagination, facilities, or time to prepare it.

Food creates many issues for people. **We want to turn those issues into positive outcomes.**

We want to take away the cost barrier that prevents people from getting the food they really want. But we also want them to gain experience in what food can really be about—how great it can be, both in making it and consuming it. The cultural aspects—you can invite people over to dinner, you can have social activities you can't do now on your own. It allows people to live a fuller life.

It allows people to see themselves as part of the community on a long-term basis, not just day to day, month to month. People think differently about the community when they have support for housing and food—things that allow them to be confident about their ability to be here, to stay here, to raise their children here. **That's really what we're really building: a fundamental sense of security and wellbeing.**

Any last thoughts?

Bob: We live in a small community and there are going to be skeptics. I look forward to how people will feel about the Food Bank three years after it opens more than what they fear or imagine today. I'm confident that when the building is built and people are seeing the results, experiencing the results, nobody is going to say we did too much.

We're building for the future—to prepare for whatever comes. Every project is an imperfect process. I'm certain that at the grand opening, I'll see something I wish we had differently. That's normal. But I'm confident we're building something our community will be proud of—something that will serve people with dignity and efficiency for generations to come.