Healthy Foods for Communities: Building Local Partnerships

On May 1st, together with the Kiama Council, the Healthy Built Environments Program of the University of NSW hosted a forum in Kiama that focused on how local councils can work with health agencies and members of the community to enhance access to healthy food. Invitations were sent out via the HBEP mailing list, via Health agencies on the South Coast (through NSW Health and the Healthy Cities Illawarra Region), to Kiama community members and local council invitations were sent through Kiama Council contacts. The forum was attended by more than 30 participants from diverse backgrounds.

Research, case studies and healthy food initiatives were presented by speakers. Mayor Sandra McCarthy spoke about the long history and commitment of Kiama to public health, the Council’s membership of the WHO Healthy Cities Program and the Council’s Public Health Plan – see: http://www.kiama.nsw.gov.au/environmental-services/kiama-public-health-plan.html. As well, Sandra provided an overview of key achievements in healthy food access in Kiama and gave a brief introduction to the local community garden.
The presentation by HBEP director Susan Thompson first covered general issues about healthy built environments, such as the importance of building partnerships with community members, health and built environment professionals. Susan then focused on how communities get access to healthy foods, bringing in the research evidence in relation to the health benefits of community gardens and issues to do with fast food advertising and location of food outlets. Issues regarding food security and environmental sustainability were also covered.

Karen Tavener-Smith from NSW Health and Jenny Norman from Healthy Cities Illawarra made a presentation on Food Fairness Illawarra (http://foodfairnessillawarra.org.au/). They provided an overview of the partnership and advocacy work to deliver healthy food sustainably and talked about lessons learnt about effective and sustainable partnerships.

Robyn Tindall from NSW Health and Jenny Norman then introduced the Stir It Up program, which promotes healthy eating and access to good food in local communities in the Illawarra region (http://www.healthyillawarra.org.au/healthypeople/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=101&Itemid=111). In the Stir It Up program volunteers receive training with a focus on healthy eating, practical food ideas, presentation skills, kitchen safety and food hygiene with the aim that they will then deliver healthy eating activities in their communities. Then, Katherine van Weerdenburg from Healthy Cities Illawarra presented on building key local partnerships within the Child Friendly by Design (CFbD) project. You can read more on the Healthy Cities website: (http://www.healthyillawarra.org.au/healthycities/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=80).

Vanessa then facilitated an interactive forum in which the participants discussed a draft for the Illawarra Regional Food Strategy and opportunities that they have to improve healthy food availability for their communities. The highlight of the forum was a visit to the Kiama Community Garden to see and hear how the project works.

All the food served at the forum (image at right) was prepared by Cathy Law, a local proprietor of the Little Blowhole Cafe in Tingira Crescent Kiama: www.littleblowholecafe.com. Cathy is passionate about using local regional produce. She is known in the area for promoting the development of the food industry on the South Coast. Cathy helped to establish the Hawkesbury Harvest South Coast Experience food trail. She was also one of the organisers on the South Coast team participating in the ‘100 Mile Challenge’ which was a competition to showcase the diversity and quality of culinary talent and produce in regional NSW: see the web site for more details - http://100milechallenge.com.au.

The visit to the Kiama Community Garden was the highlight of the Forum. The images below show workshop participants inspecting the Garden with local gardeners.

The results of the evaluation of the forum were very positive. Almost all participants stated that the forum was either completely or mostly relevant to their work and that they will be able to incorporate the skills and knowledge gained into their work.