

The Austin Zero Food Waste Forum – The Forum Went Local, Sought to Inspire and Connect Solutions to End Food Waste and, Thanks to Many, it Delivered!

By Jordan Figueiredo, Forum Co-Coordinator

Before I recap the Austin Zero Food Waste Forum, which took place on Friday, June 19, 2015, I want to thank those that made it happen. Firstly, [Austin Resource Recovery](#) and the [Office of Sustainability](#) at the City of Austin had many staff working to making the amazing day possible. It was truly inspiring to see a City that really “gets it” when it comes to a sustainable food system that *includes* food waste prevention, food recovery, and post-consumer food management. Secondly, I would like to thank the [U.S. Zero Waste Business Council](#) for the coordination of logistics and administration for the event. Last but not least, to all of the [amazing speakers](#) and 90 attendees at the Forum, who all had an important role in making it a special day, spreading the word about the event and contributing to a better food system for Austin!

The Night Before

While the Austin Zero Food Waste Forum officially started on June 19, 2015, the inspirational unofficial beginning was the night before when we screened the wonderfully humorous and engaging documentary [Just Eat It](#) for the first time in Texas. We had a solid crowd of about 40 attendees consisting of Forum organizers, speakers, sponsors, local community members and amazing [Keep Austin Fed](#) volunteers. All ticket proceeds and donations went to Keep Austin Fed and, in addition to being inspired by the movie, all attendees engaged in a great question and answer session following the movie. Susan Nakunst (Executive Director of Keep Austin Fed), Gena McKinley (Environmental Conservation Program Manager of Austin Resource Recovery), Edwin Marty (Food Policy Manager of Austin’s Office of Sustainability), and myself were thrilled to see so many folks inspired and inquisitive for a full 45 minutes after the film. We were pumped for the next day to say the least.

The Forum Kicks Off

Bright and early Friday morning, the City and I kicked off the Zero Food Waste Forum. Edwin Marty (shown below and who was also one of my amazing Co-Organizers for the Forum) gave a brief overview of all the amazing things the City is doing around building a sustainable food system, including a [report](#) that is that start of something really special and innovative for a U.S. city. Not only does Austin see a link between food surplus management to mitigate hunger and post-consume food management but they are actively working on both at the



same time. The [State of the Food System report](#), which Edwin spoke about, segmented the food system into four very simple, yet complicated categories of growing, selling, eating, and recovering. Edwin pointed out that the economic impact of the Austin food system was \$4.1 billion dollars in 2014 and that, despite so much surplus food, too much of it is going to waste as \$208 million dollars of food is estimated to be wasted each year. On top of that, Edwin spoke of the high levels of food insecurity in Austin and need to take action as 18% of all residents and 25% of children are food insecure.

For my “outsider, food waste geek” this is how I see the Zero Food Waste Movement, I briefly covered shocking statistics surrounding the issue and the movement’s high points and influencers over the last 5-10 years. Things that worked to elevate the conversation beyond just composting and anaerobic digestion as the solution to the almost half of all food that is wasted in the U.S. Things like Jonathan Bloom’s [American Wasteland](#) Dana Gunders work with the NRDC. I also touched on governmental policies like organics mandates in San Francisco, Seattle, and the Northeast. Last but not least, there were a key number of grassroots or pop-culture efforts that were key in the movement such as Feeding the 5000, NPR’s expansive coverage of food waste and ugly produce, and MSNBC showing the documentary Just Eat It on Earth Day. Lastly, I touched on the first [Zero Food Waste Forum](#), what it was all about, who was there and what made it so special that we were attempting it at a local level in Austin.

Panel One – Food Waste Prevention

With the table being set, we launched right into our esteemed first panel, representing the top of the food recovery hierarchy on prevention. Our first speaker was Woody Raine of Austin Resource Recovery who further set the table for the day with scientific data and humor as he noted, among other things, that 18% of methane emissions come from organics and food rotting in landfills. Next up, food waste prevention guru and [LeanPath](#) CEO and Founder Andrew Shakman (shown below) explained how the act of measurement changes culture which can in-turn solve the problem of wasted food. Andrew also briefly explained LeanPath’s phenomenal software that helps food service businesses prevent waste and save money.



After Andrew came Tom Wright, a consultant who has done a lot of impressive work with [Whole Foods Market](#) over the years including right-sizing purchasing, working to utilize produce that is still usable but no longer shelf-ready, as well as helping many stores reach 90% diversion and higher. After Tom, was Joshua Blaine, the Store Manager of the local boutique zero waste grocer [in.gredients](#). At in.gredients, Joshua explained, “they have no food waste” and with flexibility on sell-by dates, not always fully-stocked

shelves (which can be a problem with revenue but they're working on it), and mostly local products, the store is nearing zero waste at 99.7% diversion. Last, but not least, Thomas Vinson of the [Zero Waste Network](#) rounded out the panel with his work, through E.P.A. grants, to engage the community (and most notable large hospitality industry food service) through trainings to prevent food waste.

Panel Two – Food Recovery

For the second panel of the day, we focused one step down the hierarchy at food recovery (also known as food rescue). With the lovely local environmental superhero Brandi Clark-Burton as the moderator, the panel had it's perfect guide as Brandi was instrumental in getting 2014 declared the Year Against Food Waste in Austin and thus putting food recovery on the agenda for city government. The first panelist was food donation legal expert (and attorney/professor) Nicole Civita of the [University of Arkansas](#) (shown below). In addition to clearing up some miss-conceptions around food



donation law, Nicole also noted that the only thing that is regulated to have an expiration date in Texas was shellfish. Ms. Civita brought up the concept that, judging by current laws and many discussions she's had, it seems that food recovery/rescue organizations should be able to charge a fee for picking up food for donation to charities without it altering the

transaction in any other way. To me, this was great to hear as I often explain the situation, whereby only 10% of surplus food is recovered in the U.S. will never get much better until we pay food recovery/rescue workers their worth. We pay to landfill food, we pay to compost food, why not pay to provide a much better service to the environment and community that is donation of wholesome edible, but surplus, food?

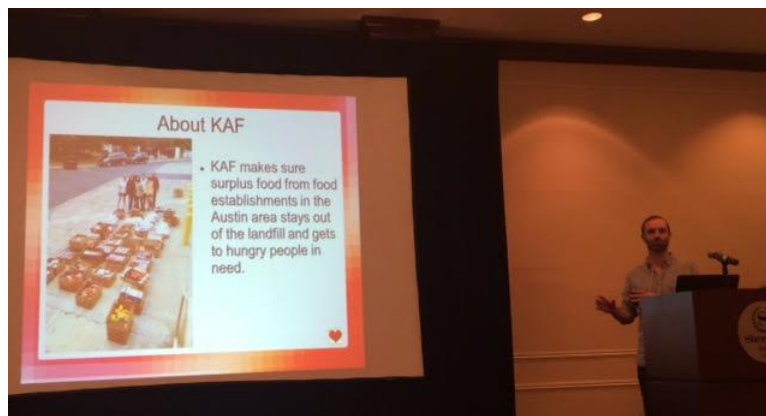
The next speaker of the Food Recovery Panel was Vince Delisi of the [Environmental Health Services Division](#) (the Health Department). Vince was great at explaining the health precautions that need to be taken when donating food (and that volunteers helping with recovery must know them) as well as the number one being washing hands. Following Vince was Bethany Carney (shown below) of the [Capital Area Food](#)



[Bank of Texas](#), a gigantic 21-county organization that serves 300 partner agencies and 46,000 clients a year. In addition to their day-to-day shelf-stable food donation work, Bethany also spoke of their fresh food rescue program that

represents about half of all their donation and their plans for expansion to a new facility that will also have a commercial kitchen to prevent more waste (with creating cooking and processing) and feed more folks in need.

After Bethany was Russell Cavin of Keep Austin Fed (shown below) who spoke about what it's like to volunteer for the phenomenal all-volunteer food recovery group. Russell explained how Keep Austin Fed does not dumpster dive or let donations sit in the heat but follows all health and safety guidelines. All K.A.F. volunteers have to receive a food handlers' certificate and read the lengthy detailed Keep Austin Fed handbook. The



The organization has a number of key community partnerships such as with Snap Kitchen that lets K.A.F. recover tons of food each month. Last, but not least on the food recovery panel, was Steven Sturdivant of [E.P.A. Region 5](#) who spoke about the [E.P.A. Food Recovery Challenge](#) that works with businesses, schools and institutions by offering connections, case studies and assistance (for free) to recover good surplus food for those in need.

Lunch Keynote – FallingFruit.org

For lunch, Ethan Welty of [FallingFruit.org](#) (shown below) gave a wonderful keynote.



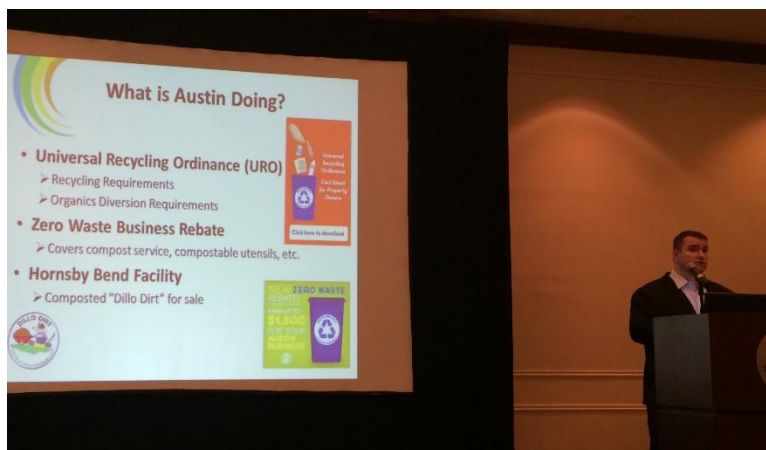
The open-source website and mobile app FallinFruit.org was developed by Ethan and Caleb Phillips, who both live in Boulder, Colorado, to provide urban tree fruit inventories for folks all around the globe (or so it seems on the surface). The story of FallingFruit actually goes much deeper than that, as Ethan explained, in that it's really a “different story for cities....redefining what urban spaces can provide us” and

mostly notably that “we could, if we wanted, cover our cities in fruit-bearing plants.” Getting a glimpse of the Beta version of the FallingFruit mobile app the day prior, when Ethan and I went out foraging a bit, I was incredibly excited to see its potential live, and in action.

And while it was June, and not much was ready for eating (with found that out with woody peapods and literally sour grapes), the massive amount of pecan trees we found followed by loquats, grapes, pomegranates and more all around City buildings and even the University of Texas football stadium was very inspiring. So, where does [FallingFruit](#) gather all this urban tree (and plant) data so that they have over 700,000 sites listed around the world? They scan the web for City tree inventories, they also receive them from cities like Austin (which worked with FallingFruit before) and submissions from industrious folks like yourself.

Panel Three – Post-Consumer Food Management

For our last panel of the day, we focused on post-consumer food management, in other words composting, feeding to chickens, and anything else that's done with food that has no chance of being eaten by a person. The panel was moderated by Gena McKinley of Austin Resource Recovery who was instrumental in bringing the Forum to Austin since she attended the first Forum in Berkeley (we started the conversation for an Austin version shortly thereafter). Our first panelist was Aiden Cohen from Austin Resource Recovery (shown below and also very instrumental in making the day happen), who



spoke about the City's [Universal Recycling Ordinance](#). Guided by a Zero Waste by 2040 goal, the City has some impressive programs to roll out, including mandatory organics for residents in 2016 and businesses in 2018 and Aiden explained how the City plans to support program implementation at businesses. What was most impressive though was, throughout his

presentation, he spoke about compost as the solution only after they work with businesses on food waste prevention and food surplus recovery. After Aiden was Edwin Marty touched on the importance and practice of urban agriculture and composting in Austin.

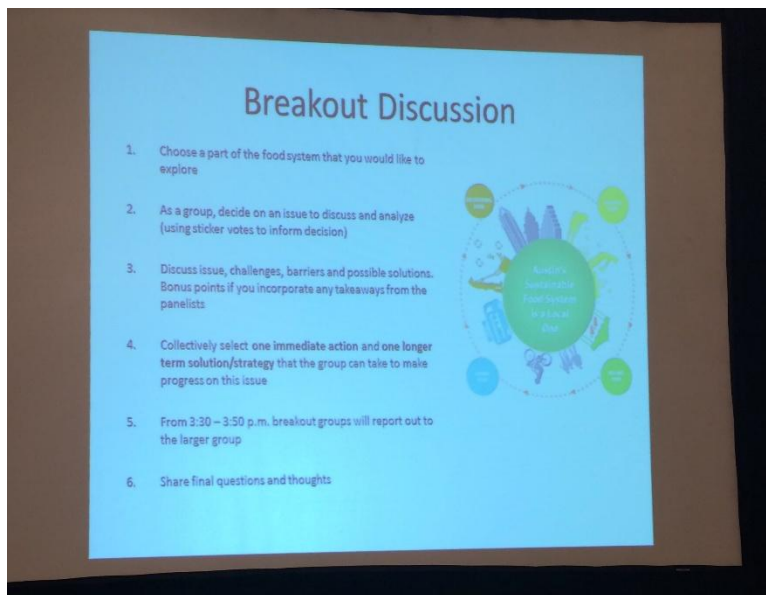
Next up was Michelle Hernandez of the [Urban Poultry Association of Texas](#). Michelle brought some very interesting and humorous practices and ideas to the panel by explaining the contribution that chickens make to reducing food waste in Austin. For example, with her "Chicken Math" as she coyly put it, a chicken can eat 7 pounds of food scraps a month and in Austin there is 3,100 households with chickens. With those 3,100 households resides approximately 24,000 chickens which have the capacity to divert (eat) 2 million pounds a year! The chickens also provide "products" from all of that "diverting" as well and who knew that chicken do a lot of pooping in the night so it's easier to capture said product?

Last on the compost panel was the energetic young [Compost Pedallers](#) CEO and Founder Dustin Fedako (shown below). Dustin schooled the crowd on the benefits of urban composting as “not all compost is created equal” explaining the efficiencies with urban composting that you just can’t get with traditional curbside programs. Compost Pedallers takes organics scraps from Austinites and Austin businesses, by bicycle, and turns it into “black gold” as Dustin said, with the help of 25 urban farms and gardens.



Breakout Discussion

To round of the entire day of inspiration was our breakout session to organize some action to end food waste in Austin. With organization provided by the Austin Office of Sustainability and Amanda Rohlich in particular (who also was instrumental in making the day a success), we broke the audience into 4 self-selected food-based groups around Growing, Selling, Eating, and Recovering. Each group was to work on the main

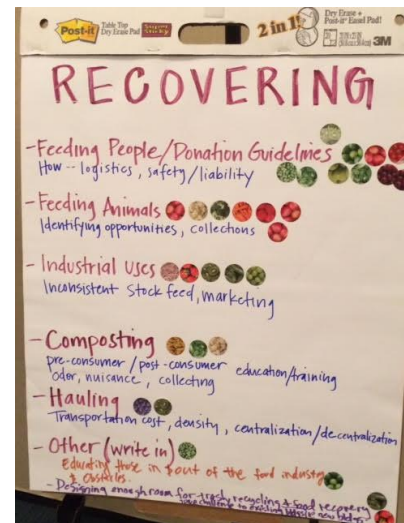


issue (as chosen by the dot-selection method throughout the day up to that point). From the issue, each group was to come to a consensus on barriers/challenges and actions to overcome those barriers/challenges.

For the Growing group, the main issue was materials management and demand for those materials (or lack thereof). The barriers for this issue was what kind of what it is and where it’s coming from. Some of the actions to take by the

Growing group were: find out where food desserts are and address them and also to organize a farmers forum to connect. For the Selling group, the main issue was education on expiration dates. The barrier for this issue was lack of information on packaging and the actions to address the barrier was to educate customers more, to change the packaging and to employ barcodes that provide date information to retailers but not customers.

With the Eating group, the main issue selected was portion sizing. The barriers to address focused around beef portions (beef being the biggest offender to climate change). The actions to address this were offering less up front with the option to receive more later in the meal (an example was given of this), smaller portions, and changing the culture around food so it's seen as not okay to waste. The final group, Recovering, wanted to address the issue of donation guidelines for recovering food for those in need. The barriers to this issue was seen as awareness of legal protections and funding for food recovery costs. The actions selected to address the issue were education on guidelines through an expanded FAQ sheet and free info sessions for the community on food donation.



Thanks again to everyone involved and here's to a better food system in Austin and beyond thanks to your hard work and commitment!

Jordan