

Op-Ed: Will Allen, Walmart, Winter, What Next?

Eddie Hill, October 11th, 2011



Eddie Hill, Farms Program Manager, Seattle Tilth, local food systems advocate and student of Will Allen's Growing Power training programs, gave us his thoughts in response to [Chicago, Walmart, Growing Power, and Cabrini-Green – What does it mean?](#) Will Walmart co-opt Growing Power for its own interests? Will Walmart use programs like these to lock in local contract suppliers for their stores? Will the company squeeze the very farmers it says it supports to keep their prices low?

I was talking to a fellow farm manager last week at the **Urban Agriculture Business Forum** hosted by Seattle City Council President **Richard Conlin** and his staff, **Phyllis Schulman** and **Eva Ringstrom**. It was a general presentation of what City services are in place to support the development or expansion of small business as it relates to the "new" local food movement.

Changes in land use codes, cottage industry allowances, small business development, small animal husbandry, fruit tree gleanings for fees, regional training and education programs, and use of City and County lands for public-benefit in the form of allowing small farm or food production programs to generate revenue, were some of the items covered by a small panel of City and Washington State University employees in an informative and social environment.

The farm manager (a staff member at **Lettuce Link**), had recently attended the **2011 Growing Food Growing Justice Initiative Conference** in Milwaukee this past August and commented on some of the good things that came from the experience. He praised the opportunity as one that he found helpful, educational, and all around great for networking and getting a different perspective on the Good Food Movement, the *Good Food Revolution*, as it is described regularly by **Will Allen**, founder of **Growing Power**, himself.

We quickly arrived at the subject of the day: Did you hear that **Allen accepted \$1.01 million dollars as a donation from the Walmart Corporation?**

Yes he had. I had also. For him, the manager, it was actually announced at the **GFGJI Conference** in Milwaukee. "We had heard about it around the room, then they (Growing Power staff) made it formal as an announcement." It was a bit of a surprise for him.

For me, it was friends on Facebook who were closer to the news than I, and then from searching the interwebs for **Grist** responses, **Community Food Security Coalition** editorials, and blog conversations from writers in the "movement" about what this may or may not mean for the collective "we" in the food justice stream.

I did not ask how it was received at the conference because it wasn't important at the time to me, in the moment. We continued to talk about people who had sent their "hellos and greetings" that knew me back at Growing Power, his training around racism in the food system that sounded really informative for him, and how we were going to locally address continuing challenges of urban agriculture and the never ending tasks running a farm program.

Now, I have had some time to read, review, and reflect on the litany of articles across the Internet, including a recent one by Heather Day and Nicole Dade from the **Community Alliance for Global Justice** stating clearly that Allen's move to accept the money and attempt to guide corporate dollars to direct community needs and services being provided by Growing Power is counter to mitigating corporate power. Dade and Day say that, "...this movement is about creating new food pathways, not enhancing corporate domination of the food and agricultural industries. We're afraid that Walmart's power is enhanced by their links to Growing Power, not distributed as some may hope."

So, I will ask it formally now.

What does all of this mean to the actual **Food Revolution**? Does it mean anything at all? Is this a sign of the Apocalypse? Or is it a non-issue? Move along, nothing to see here, these are not the droids we're looking for!

Patterns of history and human behavior show that there is the chance that this is a "sell-out to corporate cash" move on Growing Power's account. And we must factor into this some very real issues with Walmart around workers' rights, gender wage parity, unions, benefits, and putting local business in a sleeper hold. Or this might be a miscalculation on Allen's part that making nice with Walmart, the White House, and the Politicos (as Will calls them) will provide the extremely needed capital spark and power to take the food revolution to the next level... a radical shift in corporate food system application of their revenue profits in communities as grant investments to build urban and suburban food production farms and facilities that we all say we need now.

This is a shift that could potentially provide immediate jobs and employment in land and water restoration, farm building, facility construction jobs, farm and greenhouse workers, processors, educators, researchers, and training program connections for local vocational, trade, and higher learning centers. Linked combinations of appropriately scaled stores that sell the locally secured produce grown by the local community with nearly guaranteed sales to a network of regional store sites. All of this with a consortium of corporate, government, and funder dollars building an actual "food infrastructure" that provides an appropriate percentage to local and regional products on all of the shelves of stores from corner mom-and-pops to megachurch-sized Walmarts in suburban fringes.

Food security improves, mass marketing spreads healthier messages, increased organic production, inclusion of local producers on shelves in local stores, all of these things could manifest and benefit the commons-at-large. It could be a balanced revolution where corporate concessions and agreements empower local economies and shift mega-business practices globally. It *could* happen.

Who is to argue with Will about taking money at a scale that he has been trying to get from the government or public entities for decades? These folks say they believe in what he is doing. Yet, through a combination of factors this level of commitment had not been rewarded. Until now.

Let's all understand that Will Allen is unique as a former corporate executive (Proctor & Gamble and Kentucky Fried Chicken) and a business man with fiscal needs that are not being met by the current slow-trickle of public and donor money to his ideas, as well as an inability to reach a balanced internal operation that creates training, grows food for market, and delivers it at a scale to generate sustainable revenue.

Growing Power as an organization is at a cross-roads. Will is the leader, father, and founder of Growing Power. Will traveled to the White House last year to talk to First Lady **Michele Obama** and Walmart to start this path, and came to Seattle to bless our **Year of Urban Agriculture**, sparking an already on-fire push to change local regulations and policy.

Growing Power has been around for nearly 20 years and is making its move, with or without the "authority" of the Food Movement keepers and zealots. Taking this money, Will knew that he would be openly challenged and in response he told us to generally shut-up and get to work (in a very nice way).

They need the money. The question is will they use it to fix their machine? Regardless of how we might feel about the viability of many of the projects that Allen is going to be funding with the Walmart money; a six-story urban vertical farm with solar power, a grocery store, and training center at his current 2.5 acres site in Milwaukee or the proposed string of community-based grocery stores promoting Growing Power products with other local growers in the area of Milwaukee and Chicago, I get the sense that I should generally keep my thoughts to myself and wait and see. What do I know?

Growing Power's Chicago operations, under the leadership of his daughter Erika, are growing exponentially since the 2011 opening of the **Iron Street Project**, **Chicago Avenue City Lights Farm** expansion, and programs with **Chicago Housing Authority** and **Chicago Parks Department**. Connected with her recent power-capturing installation as one of newly elected **Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's** food systems team, Growing Power as an entity is poised to move in a way that is making liberal, anti-corporate partner/money advocates cringe and attempt to find ways to not scream "sell-out."

Will is a down-to-earth African-American male, a rare leader in the environmental/food movement who is of color and actually listened to and respected by the majority population with a fairly dynamic operation under his control that has proven itself as capable as any other non-minority owned and operated organization doing similar work.

What does it mean for our expectations or perceptions of this person? For those that know of him, they might be mildly to extremely miffed or put-off because of his act of accepting a large sum of money from Walmart. Many feel that this company is a direct threat to workers' rights, fair and equitable wages, gender equity in pay, health and prosperity benefits for workers, community economy, and that Walmart operates counter to current best-practice concepts of ecologically and socially sustainable consumption.

Articles by food advocates and food leaders range from hesitant support with a hint of "money is money, as long as he does the right thing" to "Hell no, Growing Power and Will are off my list for Christmas presents forever!"

Grist writer **Michelle Simon's** September 19th posting, [*Did Wal-Mart Buy Urban Agriculture Groups Silence*](#) as well as others, including a [*forecasting article in the Nation*](#) preparing us for the eventual marriage of corporate ability and non-profit or community-based organization's needs.

As someone who worked with Will and listened regularly to his philosophies about corporate money, the rigors of public funding, the failure for the "public interest" (code-word for what Will calls the "Politicos") to fund and invest in the food system as a critical infrastructure, etc., etc., this move is not a surprise, and sends a clear signal that, as my great-grandmother echoed down the halls regularly, "Things they are always changing, don't be surprised, change with them, but don't be a fool."

Calls for the rich to pay a bit more into the common good, for Wall Street to help us like we helped them, continue to exist, and demands for a redistribution in a fair, equitable and just manner, we may be observing the first in a new delivery of much needed funds.

Possibly we should all take a moment and reflect. The Phillip Morris Company was sued to pay for the Truth.com campaign that promoted staged protests of corporate entities who provided death-sticks for us to consume more responsibly. Okay, so now Walmart is taking a cue and not waiting until it is sued. Somebody is getting smarter. Are we? Or is our need to be "righteous" going to kick us in the socks?

I don't know and I am too busy to care much really. I know that regionally Growing Power does not have much influence directly. It is good to have speakers, keynotes, and national/international advocates come to town and spark the crowd in a manner of speaking, however the WORK of building our regional food system is OUR WORK.

What are we going to do in the Northwest, in King County, in the four county region where we grow, move, sell, and consume food? What investments are we looking for to make this happen?

The City and County, oh, include the State in that, are generally broke. They are looking to the private sector and non-profits to provide solutions. Those entities are looking to grantors, funders, and eco-investors to direct their money. That money comes from donations from private and corporate entities. Aren't we all using each other's resources and revenue anyway? The actual "Revolution" maybe at our fingertips and we are refusing to accept its existence.

Regionally we have more than most of the country, we are a blessed and well-placed location on Planet Earth. Our municipal governments have material resources; trucks, tractors, chippers, tools, and empty buildings and land on which to provide public assets for public benefits.

Our well-educated employed professionals have money, the existing corporate and private investors in this area are starting to better understand whole systems and environmental sustainability and generally are willing to be involved in more green solutions that present Triple Bottom Line coverage.

Funders are beginning to understand how environment, food, economy, health, and education intertwine and offer opportunities for broader impacts. We have immigrants and refugees and veterans ready to work on farms, in food centers, in local processing, at mini-portable grocery stores, and – yes – at mega-stores that provide fair wages and benefits.

What is our answer to the challenge? If we are not to "give-in" what is the alternative that provides real change? Changes not limited to short impact volunteerism, give-aways that often create more problems, photo ops and marginal deliverables, but what about real game changing, economy building, capacity improving, meaningfully sustainable, significantly equitable deliveries?

That is a real question. Answer it with your next action.

About Eddie Hill, Farms Program Manager, Farm Incubator, Seattle Tilth



Eddie Hill, Seattle Tilth



Eddie Hill is an urban planning generalist, with a background in housing development, food systems, small plot farm infrastructure development, project management, resident/community engagement, community outreach and education, visual design, healthy community assessment and youth-based program development, all with a focus on considering social/economic justice, using best-practices, and building sustainability.

His background and continuing education includes urban planning, whole systems assessment, program and impact evaluation, performance enhancements, urban agriculture, and alternative youth development programs.

Eddie is Farms Program Manager for Seattle Tilth as they transition the "BURST Immigrant & Refugee Farm Incubator" to the "Organic Farms Incubator Program" in conjunction with the King County CPPW Fund. Duties include farm site development and planning, design and permits, site management, infrastructure design, community engagement, recruitment, and outreach.

For more information about these programs, go to [Seattle Tilth](#).

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