

U.S. “Food Fight” Comes to Westport By Ed Kiersh

Activists hoping to change U.S. farm and food policy met today at the Westport Country Playhouse to discuss pending federal legislation that impacts \$25 billion in annual farm subsidies.

Westport’s Dressing Room chef/owner Michel Nischan, who helped establish the town’s twice-weekly Farmers Market, urged the almost 100 persons in attendance to “bring healthy food into your life. Vote with your fork.”

Nischan said the current “food fight” is a battle between large agribusiness in commodity food-producing states where wheat, soybeans and rice predominate, and small, family farms growing sustainable fruits and vegetables.

“Right now the majority of all subsidies go to less than 25 percent of all farmers, and the average subsidy payment to a farm is \$365,000 a year,” he said.

“I guarantee you that’s not a farm that grows heirloom beans, tomatoes or lettuces. There are farmers who get upwards of \$1 million a year so we can eat cheap Cheetos and cheap Doritos.”

His sense of outrage was echoed by Daniel Imhoff, the author of “Food Fight: The Citizen’s Guide to a Food and Farm Bill.”

Imhoff called attention to the Farm Bill’s traditional “narrow focus” in giving huge subsidies to the producers of corn, wheat, cotton, rice and soybeans.

Imhoff said support of commodity crops, to the exclusion of the small farmer producing healthier organics, has led to a “high-caloric processed food diet, produced by mega farms and mega feedlots.”

Instead of calling it the Farm Bill, it ought to be called the “Fat Bill,” he said.

The panel discussion also included Gus Schumacher, undersecretary of farm and agricultural services during the Clinton Administration, and Annie Farrell, manager of Wilton’s organic Millstone farm.

U.S. Rep. Rosa De Lauro, D-3, the chair of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, opened the discussion by detailing her attempts to curb subsidy program abuses, to expand subsidies for local farmers markets (currently \$10 million), and to enhance the nutritional value of school lunch programs.

“Instead of cheap Cheetos, I’m interested in seeing people in Bridgeport get heirloom tomatoes for less than \$2 a pound, ripe picked tomatoes, picked locally after they’ve ripened and offer the maximum nutrients,” said Nischan.

“So when these people eat the food, it fills them and sustains them, gives them nutrients to lead a healthy life.”

Nischan said there needs to be a subsidy shift to the small producers so they can build greenhouses to extend their season, or can have money for refrigerated trucks.

“We also want to see changes in the system so that there are incentives in the food stamp program to spend money on locally grown food,” he said.

“I’m hopeful. I see farmers markets as the giant produce section of a community. Farmers markets show there is an alternative, and are the future.”