

FoodLink, Fresno food banks consider merging

Some express concern over FoodLink negotiations with Fresno County group

<http://www.visaliatimesdelta.com/article/20140308/NEWS01/303080021/FoodLink-Fresno-food-banks-consider-merging>

Mar. 7, 2014 |

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FoodLink for Tulare County, Inc., is preparing for a big change later this year with a planned move from its current Visalia warehouse and headquarters to another warehouse in Exeter.

But its board of directors is considering an even bigger change — a merger with the Community Food Bank [in Fresno](#).

“We have made no decision. We are, shall we say, negotiating,” Allen Broslovsky, president of the FoodLink board, told a group comprised of fellow board members and representatives from agencies with ties to the organization Thursday morning.

They included representatives from UC Davis Cooperative Extension, Kaweah Delta Healthcare District, Pixley-based Be Healthy Tulare and United Way of Tulare County.

They gathered for a meeting called by FoodLink officials to discuss the merger proposal and to get input about it.

Broslovsky said the proposal came from Feeding America, a Chicago-based nonprofit that arranges for large food manufacturers to donate goods to food [banks](#) around the country.

Both FoodLink and the Community Food Bank are members of the Feed America Network, and the nonprofit suggested the two food banks serving Tulare and Fresno counties become one.

Sandy Beals, [executive director](#) of FoodLink, said members of both boards of directors had one informal meeting in Selma last week and decided to consider the proposal. Broslovsky told the group on Thursday that another meeting with the Fresno board members is scheduled for next week and more may follow.

Allen said at the start of Thursday’s meeting that, if a merger does happen, one of the FoodLink board’s goals is to maintain the organization’s core program, the most visible of which is to provide food to to needy people in Tulare County as well as to organizations that deliver food to the needy.

It's estimated that FoodLink fed more than 102,000 people last year, and Beals said the demand likely will be higher this year as many jobs — particularly in agriculture — are likely to be lost because of California's current drought.

If the Tulare and Fresno programs were to merge, Allen asked, "Who's to say maybe we can do it better and maybe even expand?"

"We do feel we have to be responsible and look at it."

But Allen and others noted that nutrition education — from **teaching** kids how to make good food choices to teaching families to cook healthier — is a major part of the program here, but not for the Community Food Bank.

Some in attendance shared anecdotes about children and adults who have learned to eat more nutritiously and provide better food for their families because of FoodLink programs.

Among them was Lucia Vazquez, a member of the Visalia Unified **School** Board, who told the FoodLink officials, "You are so much bigger than food."

She wondered what a merger would **cost** the program here, and some in the group echoed those concerns.

"I guess one of my fears is there is an inherent distrust of Fresno," and if the merged food bank were based there, then Tulare County's needs might be ignored, said Cathi Lamp, a nutrition, family and consumer sciences educator for UC Cooperative Extension, as well as a former FoodLink board member.

Allen stressed during Thursday's meeting that no plans have been made on how a merged program would work, and FoodLink officials will look to serve the best interests of Tulare County in the discussions.

In addition, he noted that a merger may allow FoodLink staff here to help develop nutrition-education programs in Fresno County, which would help more people.

Calls to Community Food Bank officials in Fresno were not returned on Friday.