

A little food and sympathy

Farmers
markets help
Oregon Trail
Card holders
stretch their
dollars on
local produce

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I remember going to the food stamp warehouse with my mother when I was just a child living in California. Back in those days, the mid-70s, it was white bread and 5-pound blocks of yellow cheese food-product — think Velveeta or Cheese-Whiz. I also recall that when my mother and I went grocery shopping she used actual stamps — paper stamps — to buy food.

There was often a slight amount of embarrassment that came along with using the stamps. For my mother it was simply a way to keep me fed, but often she felt that the clerks, as close as they probably were to being subsidized themselves, looked down on this “handout.”

How things have changed.

These days, although some may still view food assistance from the government with skepticism, food stamps, as they are still colloquially known, are quite acceptable and we now can go to our local farmers markets to buy local farm fresh healthy food. No packaged pre-made items; no cheese food-product; no food coloring.

On a nice Sunday morning in Northeast Portland, this is where change can really begin.

The Portland Farmers Market, and most all other area markets, accept the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system through the federal government’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. It’s accessed through the Oregon Trail Card which works like an average debit card.

Most notably the Sunday King farmers market, at Northeast Seventh Avenue and Wygant Street, has since 2009 had an EBT matching program. The program, run by the Foodshare Fund Northeast, created by the Northeast Coalition of Neighbors, enables Portland residents who use their EBT cards to receive a match of \$10, up from last year’s \$5. In other words, a person using \$10 from their SNAP allotment would be able to buy \$20 worth of food at the King market. Foodshare Fund NE (FFNE) seeks to bridge the gap in what has been called our “two tiered food system”; i.e., fresh local food for those who can afford it; not-so-fresh and processed food for those who cannot. According to FFNE, even with the support of government programs such as SNAP, many families still struggle to put food on the table. According to J.P. Morgan, which administers EBT programs for more than 20 states, 85 percent of SNAP funds are depleted within the first three days they are available. Understanding that fresh food from a farmers market can often seem cost prohibitive to many residents is what made the NECN decide to get more involved in the food availability in the area. According to a 2009 New York Times study, nearly 47 percent of SNAP users in Multnomah county are African American, but with just a moment of observation at the farmers market, one will notice that most shoppers are white. “We don’t want this to be what people call ‘yuppie chow,’” says David Sweet, co-chair of FFNE. “We want to represent the entire community and their needs for fresh healthy

food,” he said concerning the disparity.

The matching fund for the King Market started in 2009 with a \$3,000 grant from the Alberta Street Co-op and this year it gave the FFNE a \$1,000 sponsorship.

“Giving all members of our community access to fresh, healthy, nutritious, and locally-sourced food is a central value of Alberta Co-op,” said Anni Mackin, Marketing and Design Coordinator and Donations Coordinator for Alberta Street Co-op, who encourages other businesses to support the matching program as well.

The idea for the first Food Stamp Program is credited to various people, most notably Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace (1933-1940) and the program’s first administrator, Milo Perkins (both later became top officials in FDR’s secret war department). The Depression-era program operated by permitting people on relief to buy orange stamps equal to their normal food expenditures; for every \$1 worth of orange stamps purchased, 50 cents worth of blue stamps were received. The orange



stamps could be used to buy any food; blue stamps could only be used to buy food determined by the government to be surplus.

Over the course of nearly four years (1939-1943), the first food stamps reached approximately 20 million people in nearly half of the counties in the U.S. Peak participation in those four years was an estimated 4 million people.

Many changes took place in the food stamp program through the intervening years and successive administrations, most obviously the change from actual paper stamps to electronic funds.

Flash forward almost 70 years and by the end of 2008, 753 farmers markets were authorized to accept SNAP benefits nationwide, a 34 percent increase from 2007. While the percentage of redemptions is very little, the amount of funds going to small farmers has increased from about \$1 million in 2007 to \$2.7 million in 2008. Over 250 farmers’ markets were operating a scrip or token system nationwide.

Based on state information, Oregon expects to have 24 farmers markets accepting SNAP benefits for the 2009-2010 seasons. Twenty-three farmers markets will use wooden tokens and a central point-of-sale terminal or a debit card machine, one farmers’ market will use a central point-of-sale terminal without wooden tokens, and 21 will utilize a wireless terminal.



PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER JANSONS

Above, customers at the King’s Farmers Market use tokens (shown left) to buy produce from local farmers. The exchange has been good for farmers, along with families who need access to fresh produce.

Poverty hit an 11-year high in 2008, the same year in which a federal government report showed that more than 49 million Americans were at risk of going hungry. In Oregon that number is an estimated 11.9 percent of the population.

Right now, the FFNE matching fund is reaching peak load. The amount of people using the EBT matches are up to 5 percent of average shoppers at the market from 1 percent last year. This is good news because it means that more people are going to the farmers market and using their purchasing power to support local farms and buy healthy food, but it also means that the \$10 could go back down to \$5, or nothing at all.

“We could not make it through the rest of the season. The fund might run out of money by August unless we get more donations,” says FFNE’s Sweet.

“It our goal is that we can prove to a major funder the importance of this program and have dedicated resources for years to come. Currently, the funds are quickly depleting and we are looking for approximately \$10,000 to complete the 2010 season,” says Ann Forsthoefel, Portland Farmers Market executive director.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon the ripe berries are smelling delicious, the basil is scenting the air and the need for food is on everyone’s mind.

The Farm Bill also provided \$20 million in mandatory funding for a project to test point-of-purchase incentives for healthful foods and authorized appropriations for other similar projects.



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