

Farmers Markets Break Healthy Food Barriers

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match up to \$5 weekly to spend on eligible products through the Fresh Exchange program.

"We decided that providing a financial incentive would encourage families to try the Farmer's market for the first time," said David Sweet, volunteer and co-founder of Fresh Exchange. "An initial concern was that farmer's markets would not be accessible to everyone in the community, and we felt really strongly that it should be."

Created in 2009 by community volunteers, the local nutrition incentive program Fresh Exchange was designed to help Portland families gain access to nutrient rich options, which are often expensive at health food stores.

After the success of the exchange program at King's market in northeast Portland, Sweet said community members decided to replicate the incentive project at Buckman Market in southeast, combining the two markets under the same match program as a way to further strengthen the local economy and create a healthier community.

"This year is the first year we have them together under the same title," he said.

The Fresh exchange program, along with the SNAP program, attempts to bridge the gap for people who earn too little to meet their basic nutrition needs and reduce the barriers between low income families and healthy local food.

According to Oregon's Department of Human Services, a total of 770,413 Oregonians received SNAP benefits in the month of April, which is an increase of 10 percent from one year ago.

Portland Farmer's Market, which stands as the permit holder for the vendors, accepts Oregon Trail cards in exchange for tokens, said Anna Curtin, the Education and Outreach Specialist for Portland Farmer's Market. The tokens then go to the customers who can spend them anywhere in the market to purchase SNAP eligible products.

"We started accepting SNAP, previously known as food stamps, in 2005," she said. Anyone can go to the majority of the markets in the metro area, including their six locations, and use their government assisted benefits to buy farm anything but ornamental plants, alcohol and hot ready to eat food.

Although several matching programs, which are funded by government or individual donors, exist throughout the Portland area, Sweet explained Fresh Exchange is unique amongst them because the program survives on funding from vendor fees and a small percentage of money from sponsors and other contributors.

"It is the community helping it-



Just picked produce from the Winter Green Farm proves a popular choice for healthy eating at the King Farmers Market in northeast Portland.

PHOTO BY GUEST PHOTOGRAPHER

self," he said. "The program has significantly increased the participation of low income families with the market, which puts the freshest local fruits and vegetables on the table of their families."

Curtin said, although often perceived as more expensive, the market is a place where it makes the most sense to spend your money. "You are doing more than purchasing you food," she said. "You are supporting local growers and the local economy, and you are also supporting the true quest of food."

She explained the produce bought at grocery food stores have a lot of hidden costs that often a customer doesn't see when looking at the product on shelves.

The price tag on the farmer's bunch of carrots, however, is the true cost of what it takes to grow food.

"We promote eating in season, and when we eat at the height of the season you get the highest quality, most nutritious and freshest produce, which can sometimes be less expensive or even a better deal than at a grocery store," Curtin said.

According to the Federal Department of Health and Human Services, a diet poor in fruits and vegetables increases the risk of healthy weight, diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other illnesses, and of the lack of access to healthy foods can have adverse effect on an individuals' health.

"This is a significant public health issue," said Sweet, who explained the worst food to consume is presented as the cheapest.

Curtin explained that within the United States there is a two tier food system. "If you have money than you can eat well, but if you don't,

then you get empty calories."

This program, she said, is a way to address this gap.

Sweet said addressing the barriers and being proactive to eliminate them is imperative. "We need to acknowledge that it's more expensive and difficult to eat a healthy diet, and it takes times and energy to prepare meals with whole foods," he said. "The program is part of a much larger effort to increase food access within this country."

He explained, however, the response to the nutrition incentive program has been huge.

In 2009 at King Market, \$15,000 worth of fresh produce went out into the community. In 2010, however, \$55,000 worth of fresh local fruits and vegetables went to low income families once the program was put into action. "This is also \$55,000 in extra revenue for small farmers," he said.

Currently, volunteers and organizers of the Fresh Exchange pro-

gram have created a tool kit in hopes other markets will follow their lead and implement more community match programs at more Portland Farmer's markets.

Both Curtin and Sweets encourage everyone to visit a market nearby. "Come and experience new flavor at the market," she said.

"The market is more than access to food," he said. "It is a weekly community celebration, which should draw people from all over the community."

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