

Healthy Food

continued **▲** from front

port each business will receive. The maximum amount, said Banks, is \$4,500.

"We have about a 30-day turn-around, and we review grants every month," she said.

With the rising rate of obesity throughout the city, the program is targeted to boost the viability of local stores, while simultaneously providing the community with healthy options.

"We want to address obesity, which is a problem within our community," Banks said. "And putting prevention to work is to develop and implement policies that make healthy options easier in the places we live, work, study, worship and play."

The effort follows several other programs that focused on how to reduce the rising rates of obesity within the city.

Several people from the local community have asked for healthy options in the retail environment,

she said.

"Parents also told us we should look around the schools and examine the food environment to make sure there were healthy options in the neighborhoods."

According to Banks, over half of Multnomah County adults are overweight or obese. The U.S. Surgeon General predicted that the current generation of children, if we keep going at the rate we are going, will be the first to live shorter lives than their parents.

"We are focusing on areas of our city that have low food access," said Banks. "We want to make sure people have equitable access to culturally relevant and healthy food in their neighborhood."

There are several components to the initiative, she said, that provides grants to entrepreneurs to help them both implement and promote healthy options at neighborhood corner stores, often serving as "community spaces."

"We ask people to carry a certain amount of healthy products,



Customers are reminded about the healthy choices in the foods they consider for purchase in a new "Healthy Options Start Here" campaign by Multnomah County.

and then they get to choose what those are based on their customer's need and culturally appropriate," she said.

A list of healthy products is provided to those who participate within the Initiative.

"We don't go in and tell them

what to sell," she said. "But we have a list of options in categories based on federal recommendations."

The options as to how these food items can be sold are flexible. Fruits and vegetables could be fresh, canned with no sugar added, dried, or frozen, said Banks.

"We have a lot of different goals and a lot of different ways to do them," she said. "But all of the stores we work with have increased the fruits and vegetables they offer, and some have done low-fat curry, whole wheat and grains, brown rice, wheat flour or whole grain bread."

In some of the participating stores, customers will see products, such as apples, canned fruit, grains, eggs and milks labeled with the "Healthy Options Start Here" sticker. But several other products labeled with the signage are questionably healthy.

Lays Baked Potato chips and Nutrigrain bars, for example, are displayed behind the county placards within Selam Market.

At the Alberta Street Market in northeast Portland, the healthy sticker is labeled right on its front doors, but once inside, there are very few "healthy" products to be found.

Owner Chris Chun said he has yet to apply for a grant as part of the county program. Inside his market, there is only one product labeled as healthy: bottled water.

He said people don't really visit his store looking for healthy products, calling the goal of providing healthier foods, "easier said than done."

Chun said he is considering applying for a grant in the future because healthier food is always a "good thing," and he could also use a new freezer.

Berhane Sebhatu, the owner of Selam Market, agreed.

It's good to have healthy food, he said.

Banks said the initiative would be considered successful if people consumed more fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and if they consumed less sugary drinks.

She said another element is to provide assistance and education for the businesses, including pro-bono consultations, tool kits and videos based on information they said they want or need.

"There have been a lot of great people coming together to provide assistance to stores for things like creating business plans," she said. "For example, food handling training, and teaching them how to handle produce and make it look cool to have maximum shelf life."

She said they are also getting ready to offer food merchandising and product placement workshops to inform businesses on how to organize inventory, so more people will buy the healthy products.

"I am excited about the initiative. It is a great example of local government responding to community needs," she said. "By community, that includes residents, those who helped with the planning efforts, the retailers, and the public-private partnerships that have come out to support retailers."

For more information on how to become involved, visit multco-itstartshere.org.

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