

SNAPshots: Farmers Market SNAP Success

A Taste of Tacoma: Increasing Food Access Builds Community, Partnership, and Local Businesses

Tacoma Farmers Market Tacoma, Washington

Authors: Stacy and Shawn Carkonen, Tacoma Farmers Market

Introduction of Market

Tacoma is a city of 200,000 located about 30 miles south of Seattle. It's the feisty and fiercely-proud blue-collar cousin to the better-known and more cosmopolitan Seattle. It's a very economically diverse city and has programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI), Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) and Women, Infants and Children Farmers Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP) which play an essential role to market success. Formed in 1990 with a single location in downtown Tacoma, the Tacoma Farmers Market (TFM) now operates five markets per week. The flagship downtown location occupies an entire block that is transformed into a vibrant market each Thursday. This location features more than 80 vendors and provides an average of 4,000-5,000 shoppers per week access to fresh, locally-grown foods in addition to select food processors, artists, craftspeople, and hot food vendors.

The City of Tacoma and Chamber of Commerce credit the market with playing a significant role in the economic revitalization of Tacoma over the past 27 years. And thanks to the success of the downtown market, TFM expanded to four other locations in the past decade including the largest food desert in our county and a pop-up market at MultiCare hospital downtown. The markets continue to grow at a meaningful pace each year. As of 2016, TFM vendors earned annual revenue just shy of \$1 million.

Partnerships in Farmers Market

It takes a village to run a successful farmers market. Thanks to our many partners locally and statewide, our markets and programs are growing and thriving. After running a successful SNAP program for many years, we introduced our Fresh Bucks SNAP matching program in 2014 with a \$5,000 pilot grant from the Taco Time Northwest Foundation.

Customers who use their SNAP benefits at our markets are matched with extra dollars they can use to buy more fruits and vegetables. In 2015, we expanded our Fresh Bucks matching program with the help of MultiCare Health Systems and the Washington State Department of Health, which applied for and received, a USDA FINI grant, and will continue at our markets through 2018. The FINI grant made it easier for SNAP clients to access fresh, local food.



Local shopper getting her vegetables from the Farmer Market



Carl Mastberg and Billy Brown, two SNAP Ambassadors

In 2015, the FINI Fresh Bucks expansion generated a 64% increase in number of SNAP transactions and 189% increase in SNAP basket sales to farmers (SNAP + Fresh Bucks). In 2014, we introduced the Senior Farm Share, a matching program for Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) recipients. The response was overwhelming.

Within six weeks, the funding for our matching program was exhausted (as was the staff) and calls were coming in from every corner of the county inquiring about our programs. Clearly, we were serving a community in need. These extra benefits are a critical lifeline because low-income seniors on fixed incomes are especially vulnerable to hunger issues, and having seniors slip through cracks in the system simply wasn't an option. Once again, generous local funders continue to step in to fill the gap. Since 2014, the Senior Farm Share has provided \$85,000 to eligible seniors to purchase fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, plant starts, and honey.

Community Response

The response to these programs continues to grow every year. Each week, at every market, new shoppers come to the booth who have never used SNAP benefits at a farmers market before. They walk up nervous and skeptical about this "EBT machine thing," as many customers call it, but walk away with a smile on their face and tokens and Fresh Bucks in their hands. We are proud to say SNAP shoppers are repeat customers to our markets. There is strong camaraderie among market vendors and shoppers. Walk the markets and you'll see laughter and a lot of hugging as shoppers of all income levels browse side by side, buying their weekly

groceries. It's hard to find another place in our community where this kind of diversity exists and thrives. This is community in action.

According to Katie Green and her husband Mark, who run Wild Hare Organic farm just a few miles from the markets they serve,

"The Fresh Bucks and Senior Farm Share programs give our farm a meaningful financial boost throughout the growing season, allowing me to put fresh fruits and vegetables into the homes of people who genuinely appreciate the opportunity to eat local, healthy food more affordably. Folks return to my market stand week after week to share that they'd prepared a delicious meal or that they'd preserved a bit of produce to enjoy during the winter months — those are the moments I live for as a farmer!"

Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

As our programs grew so did the barriers and challenges we faced. We needed to expand our circle of partners to help spread the word about our programs. With support from the SNAP-Ed program (the nutrition education and obesity prevention component of SNAP), the Washington State Farmers Market Association Regional Leads stepped in to help us build relationships between markets, community service organizations, and local SNAP-Ed agencies. SNAP-Ed supported other local markets with resources and training to help get them authorized for SNAP and FMNP. This year, the program provided EBT signage to over 70 farmers markets across Washington and distributed more than 60,000 rack cards to educate SNAP and FMNP clients about shopping at farmers markets.

As these relationships flourished, we realized there was a critical voice missing from the table: SNAP clients themselves. The best advocates for the Fresh Bucks programs were those using and benefiting from the program itself. And with that, the SNAP Ambassador program was born. SNAP Ambassadors are current or former SNAP users who spread the word about our programs through social media, peer-

to-peer networking, and farmers market tours. They also provide critical translation services to our very diverse population in Tacoma.

A growing partnership between Washington State University (WSU) Extension—one of Washington’s SNAP-Ed Implementing Agencies, Tacoma Housing Authority (THA), and THA resident—has taken our market tours to new heights. Weekly vans from THA pick up residents and drive them to the markets. SNAP Ambassadors and WSU Extension staff meet them at the market, explain the programs and walk them through using EBT cards for the first time. The appreciation expressed from residents, especially our seniors, for these tours is truly touching!

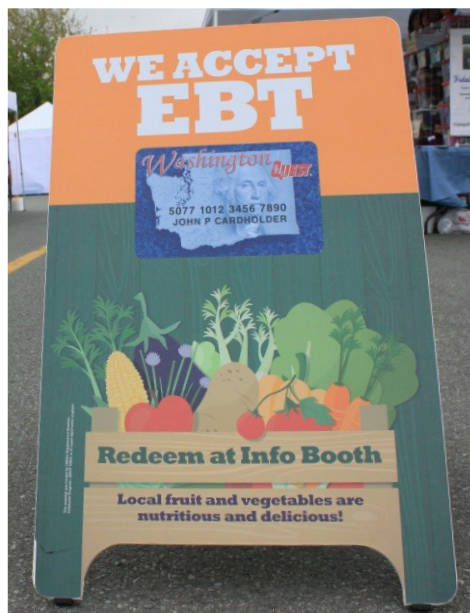
Future Plans of the Market

Our goals for the future are to diversify our funding streams to ensure we can continue these vital programs. This includes building and expanding our local, state, and national partnerships. We also intend to expand the SNAP Ambassador and market tour program – a Fresh Express Bus is definitely in our future!

Recommendations for other Markets

Three actionable takeaways or tips that we’ve learned:

1. Include SNAP users in every aspect of your program. They are the experts — let them shine!
2. Listen and learn from your SNAP customers and farmers about how to make the program better.
3. Partner, partner, partner. It takes many resources to run these programs. Work to build sustainable partnership to help carry the load.



We Accept EBT Signage at Washington State Farmer Market

Testimony from SNAP participant

“I was grasping for resources to help me support my daughter and myself after illness and divorce stripped me of everything but motherhood. I was put on a strict diet and was struggling to afford the produce needed to sustain me. I learned about the Fresh Bucks Program at the Tacoma Farmers Markets and it changed my life.

Now we have access to fresh, local produce with our EBT card and they match up to \$10 at each participating market. That’s up to \$40 each week! This program has allowed me to take control of my health and my budget, as well as given us a great sense of belonging in our community. As a SNAP Ambassador and Community Food Advocate, I love telling people about the Fresh Bucks EBT matching program because they are always amazed. It is so much more than just free food for people who need it. For many of us, it means food security.”

***April Anne Henson,
SNAP Ambassador
Community Food Advocate
Tacoma Market Board Member***