

## Stories from the Field: FMPP

*Collaboration and creativity cultivate returns: Regional network of farmers markets expands access, increases income for 65 farmers*

### **2011 Farmers Market Promotion Program Grantee:** **George Washington Regional Commission** Spotsylvania, VA / \$88,400

Fredericksburg City and adjacent Spotsylvania and King George Counties represent 88,953 acres of farmland and are home to over 19,000 residents participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For Elizabeth Borst, Market Manager of the Spotsylvania Farmers Market, it was clear that expanding access to the market for SNAP customers would be a win-win for their farmers and for families struggling in the slow economy. Noticing steady increases in SNAP/Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) sales after implementing a market token program in 2009, there was clear potential for regional impact if SNAP access was expanded to other nearby farmers markets.

Awarded a Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) grant in 2011, Borst led a partnership with the Fredericksburg and King George Farmers Markets called The Farmers Market.co, to allow SNAP participants to use their EBT cards to shop at all three farmers markets with \$1 market tokens. “As a partner in Wholesome Wave’s Double Value Coupon Program, and past peer reviewer

for the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), we saw that building a regional network could increase access and increase sales for farmers. *By operating as a team, the region’s markets demonstrate greater impact on agricultural producers,”* says Borst. The grant allowed The Farmers Market.co to expand income opportunities for regional farmers, and, as part of a new partnership, open a fourth market at the Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center.

Through the project, these four regional markets now work col-

laboratively, gaining efficiencies through common marketing, token system, outreach, bookkeeping, and reporting. All four markets operate The Farmers Market.co Market Token Program, promoting affordable local food access and generating revenue for producers through a centralized wireless card reader. Market shoppers can also use their debit cards to acquire \$5 market tokens, which are used like cash with all producers at the markets.

In supporting the development of the Farmers Market.co, Borst says that having the FMPP grant helped



*USDA Under Secretary Ed Avalos visits Spotsylvania Farmers Market in July 2012 to highlight successful FMPP projects.*

leverage state and private foundation funding to maximize impact. With this additional funding, the markets established a Nutrition Incentive Program, matching the first \$10 of SNAP purchases dollar-for-dollar to increase the buying power of low-income families. Doubling the value of federal benefit dollars translates to increased incomes for local farmers and helps put fresh fruits and vegetables within reach for more families. According to a young mother participating in the program, “In addition to the monthly SNAP credit, the extra \$10 matching program at the farmers market really helps me with my quest to eat healthy—it’s like having an extra \$40 a month for groceries, and double the vegetables.” In a survey of customers in 2012, over two-thirds of the markets’ SNAP shoppers said that the nutrition incentives were very important to their decision to spend their benefits at the farmers market instead of elsewhere.

Making SNAP customers in the region aware of this opportunity is critical to the program’s success, and FMPP’s support for the partnership allowed for region-wide marketing and outreach efforts. According to DeLaura Padovan, the Market Manager at King George Farmers Market, The Farmers Market.Co provided critical support for the market as it was just getting started, helping “give us wider visibility and build our professionalism,” says Padovan. “Working collaboratively with larger markets in our region

definitely helped us get our feet on the ground. Being accessible to SNAP customers was crucial to the viability of our young market.” The Farmers Market.co has also established partnerships with Social Services, Community Health, feeding agencies, and faith-based organizations to more effectively reach out to low-income families.

Together, the four markets have seen more than 60% growth in redeemed SNAP benefits between 2011 and 2012. Between April and December 2012, \$20,542 in SNAP benefits was matched by \$13,782 in nutrition incentives, attracting 411 new SNAP shoppers. Combined with more than \$96,000 in credit card sales, the token program increased revenues for the more than 65 local producers participating at the markets.

Success with EBT has led to other local food initiatives and opportunities. While not in their original FMPP proposal, The Farmers Market.co opened a new weekday market at the Spotsylvania Regional Hospital Center in May 2012. With strengthened capacity from FMPP’s initial investment, the organization had flexibility to take advantage of such new unexpected opportunities. “Vegucation Station,” a market-based seasonal and regional food education program, was also developed in partnership with Virginia Cooperative Extension and other healthy food advocates. Vegucation Station offers weekly food demonstrations, sampling, and recipes using fresh fruits and vegetables provided by



*Top: Market Manager Elizabeth Borst explains to a shopper how to use her EBT tokens at the Spotsylvania Farmers Market.*

*Bottom: A basket of produce at the Spotsylvania Farmers Market shows SNAP shoppers what is seasonally available.*

the markets’ producers. The Farmers Market.Co also partnered with Master Gardeners to provide an on site “ask the expert” booth to answer customer questions about plants and gardening. In partnership with the Central Rappahannock Regional Library, customers can also visit a mini mobile library at the market, viewing and even checking out gardening, cooking, and other food-related books.

These four Virginia farmers markets offer evidence that farmers markets can increase their regional impacts exponentially by collaborating with diverse allies and forming creative partnerships.