

Produce pipeline running from farms to inner city

West County Times

http://www.contracostatimes.com/search/ci_12471894?IADID=Search-www.contracostatimes.com-www.contracostatimes.com

Posted: 05/28/2009 04:45:50 PM PDT

Updated: 05/28/2009 05:51:50 PM PDT

Fruits and vegetables are being trucked from Brentwood's farm fields to Richmond's urban center under a new initiative aimed at making it easier for Richmond residents, especially the poor, to get fresh produce instead of processed foods.

"It's easier to buy a bottle of beer than a fresh apple" in West Contra Costa, said county Supervisor John Gioia, who represents the area. "We want to change that."

The county's new Farm 2 Table program also creates a customer base for Brentwood farmers at a time when the economic downturn and other forces are pummeling the local agricultural industry. Brentwood farmers will truck seasonal produce 50 miles to EcoVillage, a 7-acre farm in Richmond, which will add its own crops and assemble boxes of produce for families to pick up at any of three sites.

Participants will pay \$25 to receive a produce box twice a month. Five dollars of what they pay will subsidize boxes for low-income families, who will pay \$5 to \$15 per box depending on their annual income. The nonprofit Richmond Children's Foundation, which is partnering with LISC Americorp, is chipping in \$60,000 to help cover the cost of the subsidized boxes. LISC Americorp is a national collaborative group that works to revitalize communities.

Thirty nonsubsidized and 40 subsidized households receive boxes of food now after the program launched a test run in April, said Jim Becker, director of development at the Richmond Children's Foundation. The group hopes to have 100 nonsubsidized and 100 subsidized households on board this year.

The number of households Farm 2 Table eventually could reach is limitless, Gioia said.

"If we get more families paying market-rate, it helps subsidize more families who are not paying market-rate," he said.

The concept of residents bypassing supermarkets and buying produce directly from farms for pickup or delivery is far from new. But this is the first such effort in Contra Costa — and the first that allows low-income families to get subsidized food, Gioia said.

In East County, which boasts 12,000 acres of sprawling agricultural land, challenges from the recession to the globalization of agriculture are making it difficult for local

farmers to survive, said Kathryn Lyddan of Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and Supervisor Mary Piepho, who represents East County.

Three farmers are participating in Farm 2 Table, but Lyddan said she hopes that number will grow.

Supporters picked plums at Dwelley Farms in Brentwood on Thursday morning and helped pack boxes bound for Richmond. Owner Mark Dwelley, whose family has farmed in the area since the 1920s, said providing food for West County families through the program gives him a sense of pride.

"Growing stuff does," Dwelley said, "and that's an equal-opportunity thing. Everybody's got to eat."

In the afternoon, Tana Monteiro picked up a box of produce from the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center in Richmond and watched her son pluck a plum from the assortment of green beans, squash, asparagus, cherries and peaches. She pays \$15 per box, which feeds her family of six for about a week and a half.

"You don't really know what you're going to get," said Monteiro, whose children tried roasted beets for the first time because the box contained fresh beets. "Normally, I just get salad and broccoli from the store. Now, we're more adventurous."

Staff writer Jonathan Lockett contributed to this report. Reach Katherine Tam at 510-262-2787 or ktam@bayareanewsgroup.com.

— Katherine Tam

About Farm 2 Table

Where to pick up an enrollment form:

- El Cerrito: County Supervisor John Gioia's Office, 11780 San Pablo Ave.
- Point Richmond: Richmond Children's Foundation, 125 Park Place, Suite 230.

Where to download a form online:

- Go to www.richmondchildren.org. Find the form under the "Programs" tab
- Go to www.co.co.ntra-costa.ca.us/depart/dis1. Click on the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" tab.

Where to pick up produce boxes:

- El Cerrito: Gioia's Office, 11780 San Pablo Ave.
- Point Richmond: Richmond Children's Foundation, 125 Park Place, Suite 230.
- Richmond: MLK Center, 360 Harbour Way South