

Because People Matter

Urban Farmstands: Bringing fresh produce to low-income residents

By Rachel Iskow

Cecilia's mom lives in a Sacramento inner-city neighborhood lacking a major grocery store. She can't afford a car, and many months, she lacks the money for a bus pass to get her to a retail center in another neighborhood where produce is sold. The local mom and pop stores a couple of blocks away from her apartment carry bananas, mostly aging, a few apples, and perhaps wilting lettuce—this is on a good day. The cost of this produce in that small shop is double the price found in conventional grocery stores.

Cecilia has heard accusations in the media that low-income moms are not feeding enough fruits and vegetables to their kids. They don't mention the access issue.

Residents of Sacramento's aging neighborhoods have always had a problem getting ready access to fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables. Last year, Alchemist Community Development Corporation (ACDC) and Sacramento Mutual Housing Association (SMHA) partnered to bring Sacramento's first urban farm stand to the community of Alkali Flat. The year prior, residents of Alkali Flat had mourned the loss of their neighborhood grocery store. Access to fresh produce became an issue of concern. Leaders of ACDC came up with the urban farmstand concept as a means of providing that access.

In Alkali Flat, as in other poor and aging neighborhoods, farmers perceive there is an insufficient market to justify bringing their produce out for a farmers market. This is where urban farmstands come in. ACDC and SMHA proved that

the concept could work in Sacramento. The farm stands fulfill two goals. They provide access to fresh and affordable produce and because of the way these two nonprofits designed the program, the farm stands build community. They encourage resident interaction by bringing in local musicians, by utilizing volunteers, and offering children's activities and community organization booths.

Unlike farmers markets in which farmers come to the people, urban farmstands require an intermediary to bring the farmers' produce to the customers. In their urban farmstands, the two sponsoring nonprofits purchase organic and conventional produce directly from area farmers and turn around and sell the produce weekly at farm stands located in public areas. These are typically public parks or mutual housing communities with large open spaces.

Volunteers staff the stands, with one paid ACDC employee coordinating the operations. Through a grant from The California Wellness Foundation, SMHA provides stipends to neighborhood young people who intern in the farmstands. These youth get training on the differences between conventional and organic produce. They also get customer service skills and benefit from positive interaction with adults in their neighborhood.

This year, the SMHA and ACDC farm stands are located in both Alkali Flat and Oak Park. The Oak Park farmstand is produced in collaboration with the Oak Park and Curtis Park Neighborhood Associations. Most farmers markets are cash only.

To make the produce more accessible to low-income households, the Sacramento farmstands accept electronic benefit transfers, EBT—commonly known as food stamps.

Soil Born Farms is also operating farmstands in several local neighborhoods, including North Highlands and Del Paso Heights.

To further expand the program, it is critical that advocates push for policy changes that clear present road blocks. One successful change was state legislation sponsored by local Assemblymember Dave Jones. AB 2168, signed into law this year, made it legal for farmstands to purchase directly from farmers. Prior to passage of the bill, farmers took the risk of breaking the law when they sold to the farmstand operators, and even to restaurants that needed access to fresh, organic produce. The legislation also relaxed restrictive industry regulations on packing, labeling and grading produce, while still ensuring quality and safety of food. The new law helps sustain small farms by providing access to a larger customer base.

Other laws that have yet to be addressed are those that restrict sales to the public, even of fresh produce, to places that are zoned for commercial use. This prevents the farmstands from being held at community gathering spaces like churches, parks, and community centers. The city of Sacramento is a welcome exception. In the city, unlike in the unincorporated county, farmstands can be held in most public locations and outside apartment communities.

BPM readers are invited to use the coupon in this issue to get a discount on produce at the Oak Park farmstand in McClatchy Park (3500 5th Avenue) every Saturday between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., or in the Alkali Flat farmstand held in J. Neely Johnson Park at F and 11th Streets every Tuesday evening from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Both are community-gathering events, often with music, face painting, and health and nutrition information.

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Sacramento Mutual Housing Association develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development.

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