

A moveable feast

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, February 18, 2014 5:00 am

BENTON HARBOR - If the people can't get to the farm, bring the farm to the people.

That's the philosophy behind a new partnership between the Berrien County Health Department and Andrews University's student garden to operate a mobile farmers' market this year.

Garth Woodruff, an Andrews horticulture instructor who oversees the garden project, said it is unbelievable that there are people in Berrien County who can't get freshly grown produce.

"It is shocking to me that in this county, where 90 percent of the land is used for agriculture, where you can't find better vegetable growing land in the region, and probably the United States, you would have food deserts in areas such as Berrien Springs, Benton Harbor and Niles," Woodruff said.

Food deserts describe places where residents do not live near stores that sell fresh food. This lack of access is linked to numerous health conditions, including obesity. Berrien County has one of Michigan's highest obesity rates.

The Berrien County Health Department has tried to close that food gap by managing the Benton Harbor farmers market. Andrews' students sell the fruits, vegetables and herbs they grow at their own seasonal market, and through Consumer-Supported Agriculture subscriptions, in which consumers sign up for a portion of the annual yield.

Woodruff has been interested in the possibility of a mobile market for several years, but has been unable to get the effort on the road.

The health department's proposal fit in with the university's mission of community service for students, Woodruff said, as well as their dedication to reaching the public.

Funding will come from the health department, through a grant from Gov. Rick Snyder's 4x4 initiative to promote a healthy lifestyle.

The mobile market will be on the road four days a week, making eight to 10 regular stops.

Nicki Britten, the health department's director of community health planning, said likely stops include Benton Harbor, Benton Township, Buchanan, Niles and Niles Township.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission will help target neighborhoods where the need for fresh food is greatest, Britten said.

The market will be geared to serve low-income residents with limited access to fresh food. Produce will be sold at 10 percent above wholesale prices. The market has applied to be able to accept Bridge

cards used by residents receiving food assistance.

"I'm glad we're serving a large part of the county. We know it's not enough, but we're trying to do more," Britten recently reported to the Board of Health.

There is a lot of bounty to share. Last year, the Andrews' garden produced around 30 tons of produce, not counting its apple crop, Woodruff said.

The university maintains 10 acres for vegetables, three acres of Gala apples, four acres of peaches, along with patches for raspberries and blackberries, and three greenhouses.

What are some of the barriers to getting healthier food to low-income residents?

"Some of it is cost, some of it is time," Woodruff suggested. "People work hard at their jobs, with probably low wages. They come home tired, and you don't feel like chopping vegetables."

Few people are advocating the benefits of buying local food, he added, noting that even a lot of food pantries distribute processed, packaged goods.

Another part of the effort is education, Woodruff said. The market is working with Lakeland HealthCare to include cooking demonstrations to introduce buyers to new foods and quick and easy recipes. The student garden website, augardens.com, also posts recipes.

The health department has applied for a grant from the Conservation Fund to provide cooking demonstrations at the Benton Harbor market.

Along with promoting a healthier diet for residents, the garden operation has many benefits for students, Woodruff said.

About 20 students participate throughout the growing season, and another 30 volunteer to work 10 hours on the farm during the semester.

With the farm stand and the CSA operation, the students gain the experience of running a business, and earn money for tuition, Woodruff said. Internships also are available.

They get to work outside and take some of the vegetables home, he added.

In a blog entry, Woodruff tells of students going out to the fields before dawn to pick and sort the produce, and the happy chaos in the warehouse as the food is packed and shipped out.

"The smells, sounds, sights, touches and even tastes of 101 minutes in that place were more positive and energizing than anyone could describe and it truly took my breath away," Woodruff wrote.

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