

It's fruitful - and multiplying

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, November 6, 2014 5:00 am

BENTON HARBOR - Be Healthy Berrien's mobile farm market, operated with Andrews University, had a fruitful first season and will continue to grow, the Berrien County Board of Health heard Wednesday.

Nicki Britten, director of community health planning, reported that 60 percent of survey respondents said they were eating more vegetables as a result of shopping at the mobile market.

The project was launched last summer to sell produce grown at Andrews' student gardens and orchards. The mobile market made stops in low-income neighborhoods in Benton Harbor, Benton Township, Buchanan, Niles and Berrien Springs, where residents have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

The health department and Andrews "consider this a very successful pilot year of this program," Britten said.

But the program has a long way to go toward being self-supporting, she said. The mobile market had about \$4,000 in revenue, and cost about \$40,000 to operate, mostly from grant funding.

The market further needs to do a better job reaching residents receiving government food assistance, Britten said. Only about \$300, or 7 percent of revenue, came from Bridge card holders.

This was partly due to a vacancy in the marketing staff, a situation that has been resolved and will not be repeated in 2015, Britten said.

Members of the Be Healthy Berrien coalition, including the health department, and Andrews officials agreed that it will take time to fully establish the mobile market and to change shopping and eating habits.

There are many encouraging signs. About half of customers on a given day were repeat customers, and more than 80 percent lived within a mile of the market stops. About half heard about the market through word of mouth from neighbors.

Customers liked the variety offered at the market, which sold 34 types of vegetables, seven kinds of



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herbs and seven varieties of fruit.

Customers asked for more fruit, which the market managers provided by buying produce from the Benton Harbor Wholesale Fruit Market to supplement the items grown at the university.

A survey will be conducted in Benton Harbor to determine what kinds of fruits and vegetables customers prefer.

The project deserves continuing support, as evidenced by the financial assistance provided to sustain and expand offerings, Britten said.

The health department will contract with Andrews to operate the mobile market in 2015, with \$43,000 from a Michigan Health and Wellness grant. That amount is up a bit from last year's \$36,000.

Andrews and the health department are expanding their offerings with a Community-Supported Agriculture program that will allow low-income participants to buy produce that will be delivered to their homes.

That effort is being backed by a \$100,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Community Health. The county health department will use part of the funds to contract with Lakeland Healthcare to provide cooking classes, nutrition education videos and recipes aimed at encouraging greater consumption of nutritious foods.

The Berrien Community Foundation has awarded the health department a \$5,000 grant to continue its cooking demonstrations at the Benton Harbor farmers market.

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