



[ FARMERS MARKET  
VENDORS SNAP UP  
OPPORTUNITY ]

## Fresh From the Farm: New Program Doubles Value of Benefits Used to Buy Produce



Rodger Bilbrey, right, of the Bilbrey Family Farm in Auburndale, helps Mary Ford as she buys herbs at his stand Saturday during the Downtown Lakeland Farmers Curb Market. Bilbrey brings fresh produce to the market every Saturday.

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## THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | A new Florida program that doubles the value of food stamps when used to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables makes its Lakeland debut Saturday at the Downtown Farmers Curb Market.

Putting more fresh, Florida-grown produce on the tables of low-income families is the aim of Fresh Access Bucks, a statewide program administered by the nonprofit Florida Certified Organic Growers and Consumers Inc.

The program now operates at 21 farmers markets around the state, including the Saturday morning market in downtown St. Petersburg and the Sweetwater Sunday Market in Tampa.

The Lakeland curb market is the only venue in Polk County approved for program.

It's held from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. each Saturday at the north end of Munn Park. A brief ceremony will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday to introduce customers to the program that's partially funded by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Those funds are limited, however, and it took a \$5,500 gift from Mosaic to bring Fresh Access Bucks to Lakeland, said Julie Townsend, executive director of the Lakeland Downtown Development Authority. The money is expected to draw another \$5,000 from the agriculture department to sustain the program.

Lakeland's Citrus Connection bus system will give food stamp recipients free transport to the farmers market for an unspecified length of time, she said. "It depends on how many folks use it."

Florida Southern College's Enactus chapter, a group dedicated to social entrepreneurship, has volunteered to assist the LDDA in marketing the bucks program, operating the EBT booth and attracting even more farmers to join the cause.

"This is a great way to help expand business while providing a sustainable avenue to help improve the health of our community," said Julie Gladish, president of FSC's Enactus club, in a news release. "We can't wait to see where this takes us

and the lasting difference we can make."

Approximately 25 vendors at the Saturday market qualify to accept food stamps, known more formally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Only about five vendors are eligible to participate in the bucks program but efforts are underway to attract others.

Rodger Bilbrey, an Auburndale grower of organic vegetables, said he jumped at the chance to participate in Fresh Access Bucks.

"For so long a lot of people have not had access to better produce," he said.

Bilbrey said the LDDA also streamlined the process for qualifying vendors to accept food stamps. "They eliminated the paperwork," he said, saving time and money.

Food stamp customers will use their electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards to withdraw special tokens that can be used to purchase produce at a two-for-one exchange. For instance, \$20 in food stamps will be traded for \$40 worth of produce tokens.

Customers may use their food stamps for any qualified purchases at the market, items such as bread or cheese, but the doubling applies only to produce, which often is prohibitively expensive.

"Lakeland is actually a unique circumstance; they were able to raise money locally" to implement the program, said Carmen Franz, who manages the program for the Gainesville-based Florida Organic Growers group. "That was really awesome, we're excited."

The organic growers group has applied for additional agricultural grant money to expand the program by another 30 farmers markets, Franz said. If granted, it would extend the program in Lakeland through 2017.

Jerry Francis, co-owner of My Farmers Market, an indoor market that opened in October in Jan Phyl Village near Winter Haven, said he was unaware of the Fresh Access Bucks initiative but will look into it.

"I think the idea would be great," he said, adding that food stamp recipients can now make purchases at his market, which is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

Only two of the 20 vendors at My Farmers Market sell produce, Francis said, but prices generally run less than those at most supermarkets.

He said he hopes to build a more robust clientele, which is necessary to attract a broader base of vendors selling goods with short shelf lives, such as bread, fruit and vegetables.

"It's hard to get them when you don't have enough customers," he said.

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