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Farmers markets seek federal funds

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By EMILY BATTLE

Spotsylvania County was one of the first localities in the state to bring technology to its farmers market that allows people on food stamps to spend their benefits on fresh food from local farmers, and to double their money at the local produce market, within limits.

Thanks to help from the Wholesome Wave Foundation, two other markets--Fredericksburg and King George County--have rolled out that service this year.

Now, those three markets have banded together with a regional planning agency to seek federal funds to help them sustain the program for years to come, and to better market it to those who need it.

The loosely organized Fredericksburg Regional Farmers Market Association is working with the George Washington Regional Commission to seek a two-year, \$75,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's farmers market promotion program.

Part of the criteria that make this region eligible for this money is a fact that may surprise many--the federal government estimates that nearly 10,000 people in GWRC's service area don't have adequate access to fresh, healthy, affordable food.

About one-third of those people meet the government's definition of "low-income."

The GWRC service area includes Fredericksburg and Stafford, Spotsylvania, Caroline and King George counties.

These people live in what the government calls "food deserts," a term for low-income communities where at least one-third of the community's residents live more than a mile from a supermarket or large grocery store, or 10 miles for rural areas.

The "food desert" designation is made by census tract, and it applies to all of southern Spotsylvania County, most of the city of Fredericksburg, and single tracts within Stafford and Caroline counties.

"We were really surprised when we went to the food desert map and realized we have quite a few in our community," said Elizabeth Borst, manager of the Spotsylvania County farmers market. "It made us stop and say, 'What are we going to do to address this?'"

The USDA sees farmers markets as a way to reach some of these underserved communities with fresh, healthy food, while supporting local farmers at the same time.

Borst said the local group will try to build up its food stamp benefit program if it wins the grant funds.

That's just one of several ways these markets hope to collaborate more in the future. The three markets have already established a joint website at thefarmersmarket.co, and they want to work with GWRC and area local governments to establish a regional food systems council that could coordinate efforts on the local food front that have an impact on



obesity, affordability, public health and other areas.

"We think there's a longer-term, bigger opportunity to dig deeper into hunger in our area with this," Borst said.

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