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Now in its 11th year, the Spotsylvania County farmers market at the Gordon Road commuter lot has a waiting list for produce vendors.

Mushroom grower Ken Crider sells out by 10 a.m. on many Saturdays. Market manager Andy Fraser grows more herb and tomato plants every year for his booth, and every year, he sells out.



Now, a small group of people brought together by that market wants to help farmers capitalize on this momentum and try to connect the region's local food resources with more consumers, restaurants and other institutions.

At the center of these efforts is a drive to start a Fredericksburg-area chapter of Buy Fresh, Buy Local, a national program created by the nonprofit FoodRoutes Network that has been adopted by groups all over the country to better promote local farms and food.

In Virginia, chapters exist in Charlottesville, Richmond, Lou-doun County, the Shenandoah Valley and the Northern Piedmont region, which includes Orange, Culpeper and Fauquier counties.

Elizabeth Borst thought that left a gaping hole in the Fredericksburg area. Borst, who has been working at the Gordon Road market this summer for King George County-based Artisan Bread, is leading the effort to start a chapter here.

She and the steering committee she has brought together got certification this week for the local chapter, called George Washington Region Buy Fresh, Buy Local. It will include Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, Stafford, King George and Caroline counties.

Westmoreland County might be asked to join once things get going, since many Westmoreland farmers sell at area markets.

"It's about as grassroots as you can get," said Kevin Leahy, a member of Spotsylvania's Economic Development Authority. Leahy loves to cook, and he's recently started to seek out local sources for what he uses in his own kitchen.

Buying directly from local food producers is a growing trend, according to Matt Benson, an agricultural economist in the Virginia Cooperative Extension's Warrenton office.

Benson recently wrote an article showing that direct farm-to-table marketing in Virginia grew from a \$17 million industry in 2002 to a \$29 million industry in 2007. The average sales volume per farm grew 51 percent in that period, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture.

To try to tap into that momentum, the local Buy Fresh, Buy Local group's first task will be producing a guide that will list all local farmers and their products, along with farmers market information and other local food resources.

But everyone involved hopes this can be the jumping-off point for more detailed talks about integrating local food resources into the area's economy and social services infrastructure.

Kevin Byrnes, a regional planner with the George Washington Regional Commission, has been involved in early talks about the group.

He hopes to organize a working group, maybe as early as this fall, including local health department directors, extension agents, social services representatives and others to talk about where these groups could cooperate.

As an example, Byrnes points out that at the end of every farmers market, there's a certain amount of produce left over that farmers may not want to haul home.

Byrnes said if farmers could take a write-off to donate the produce, and if another group could get it to local homeless shelters, or even run it through Caroline County's struggling cannery to store it at food banks, "we could stock the pantries of shelters for months to come."

Byrnes also said he thinks there could be a lot of grant opportunities for that kind of collaboration.

Borst has already secured one that will help low-income families to buy fresh produce at the Gordon Road market.

She's now working on logistics to make use of a grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation, which will allow recipients of SNAP benefits, or food stamps, to use their EBT cards at the market to buy fresh foods. The grant would provide matching funds to double the value of those benefits, up to \$10.

"That is a cutting-edge program that is being piloted in only [a limited number of] farmers markets around the United States," said Benson.

He said the other areas that have started Buy Fresh, Buy Local chapters have followed that up with workshops for farmers on how to better market their products, pilot programs for building community gardens and other efforts.

"It's really bringing the conversation to the area, and it's the starting place for a local food system," he said. "It's one piece, but it's not the only piece."

Melissa Wiley, who manages three Virginia Buy Fresh, Buy Local chapters through the Piedmont Environmental Council, said the program also provides a ready-made and recognizable branding tool for local food systems.

Charlottesville's BFBL logo was featured this summer in Southern Living magazine, along with a story profiling some of that area's farmers.

"As a general marketing campaign, it's very effective at raising awareness among consumers," Wiley said.

Restaurants and shops that sell local farm products can use the logos in their own publicity, she said. All Virginia chapters' members are listed on the statewide Web site, [buylocalvirginia.org](http://buylocalvirginia.org).

Borst said plans are in the works for a Web site for the regional chapter. She's also seeking sponsors to cover the cost of the guides and the annual dues for the program.

Borst said the whole effort is about spreading awareness of all of the farmers and food producers in the area.

"If people know about them and take advantage of them, it helps everybody," she said.

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To learn more about the George Washington Region Buy Fresh, Buy Local chapter, or to get involved, e-mail [gwregionbfbl@gmail.com](mailto:gwregionbfbl@gmail.com).

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