

Wahiawa Farmers Market adds EBT payment option

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The Wahiawa Farmers Market will officially start accepting EBT cards, formerly known as food stamps, Thursday as part of a growing trend in mutually beneficial local sustainability efforts.

The weekly market is open from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Thursdays at the Wahiawa Hongwanji at 1067 California Ave.

"This market sells the types of products that would appeal to this community," said Dan Naka-sone, who has been assisting with publicity. "The prices are super-reasonable," and all the vegetables, fruits and eggs sold at the market come from farms in Wahiawa and on the North Shore.

The market provides an in-community fundraising venue for the Leilehua High School agriculture program and Wahiawa-based Honda Tofu, among others.

The Wahiawa Community Based Development Organization sponsors the market and has partnered with the GreenWheel Food Hub to allow EBT/SNAP recipients to use their benefits toward the purchase of low-cost, healthy, locally grown food. Kaiser Permanente and Kanu Hawaii helped GreenWheel cover startup costs.

The Wahiawa market is the first farmers market that GreenWheel has helped with EBT/SNAP approvals through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the food assistance program. The USDA ran a test of EBT/SNAP acceptance at the Hilo Farmers Market in 1999.

"We are looking forward to seeing how EBT access can transform local farmers markets, increasing access to locally grown foods for all communities, while providing a new source of income for local farmers," said Lisa Asagi, an egg farmer and co-founder of GreenWheel Food Hub, in a statement. "We hope to see a real change in Hawaii's local food system by providing this link between local communities and local farmers to support each other."

GreenWheel plans to get four other Oahu farmers markets up and running with EBT/SNAP access by the end of the year.

The Wahiawa market is not the first on Oahu to accept EBT/SNAP payments.

The Waianae Farmers Market was the first, said Alicia Higa, project manager at the Wai-anae Coast Comprehensive Health Center, which stages that and two other markets, which also accept EBT/SNAP.

Despite Waianae Comp Center's efforts, one form of payment that is not yet accepted at Oahu's many farmers markets is a WIC coupon, from the USDA-run Women Infants & Children program. It also subsidizes purchases of fresh produce, dairy products and other healthy food items, but no funding was allocated for farmers market purchases in Hawaii this year, according to the WIC website.

The People's Open Markets operated by the City and County of Hono-lulu require vendors to accept EBT/SNAP payments. However, most, if not all, vendors do not have the electronic devices that read benefit cards, so enrollees must fill out a form to make a purchase using their benefits.

Of the dozens of other farmers markets on Oahu, TheBuzz could find only one at which some vendors accept EBT/SNAP payments, and that was at the Kaiser High School market operated by the school's Parent Teacher Student Association from 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesdays. PTSA member David Klein knows of at least three

EBT/SNAP-accepting vendors at the market, two selling produce and another selling Thai foods, he said.

Aloun Farms is "working on applications," said Michael Moefu, marketing and events coordinator. Aloun hosts markets in Wai-pio, Kapolei and at Dole Cannery.

Organizers of the Saturday market in Hawaii Kai, Saturday and Tuesday markets at Ala Moana Center and the Tuesday market in Wai-mea (formerly in Hale-iwa), also are "working on it," according to a spokes-man.

Windward Mall also is getting approval for vendors' acceptance of EBT/SNAP payments as well as a program to benefit seniors, said Wendy Gady. Its farmers market is from 2:30 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays.

The Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation is "looking at a pilot proposal for the Hono-lulu market, but details haven't been ironed out yet," said Joy Gold, interim executive director. "We just want to be sure that it does benefit our consumers as well as our vendors, and that it works without impacting the farm bureau's operations."

The federation's markets are twice weekly at Kapiolani Community College and once a week in Hono-lulu, Kailua and Mililani.

On Hawaii island the Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation's Kino-ole and Kona markets recently began accepting EBT payments.

Waimanalo-based Mahiku Farms stages six Oahu farmers markets, including its newest at 5105 Iroquois Ave. in Ewa Beach from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sundays, as well as at Benjamin Parker Elementary School and Kailua Elementary School on the Windward side, the International Market Place and King's Village Shopping Center in Waikiki and Kunia Shopping Center in Central Oahu. Telephone and email queries about EBT/SNAP payments at those markets went unanswered.

The 10 other independent farmers markets on Oahu either do not accept EBT/SNAP payments or did not respond to queries. Two coordinators, however, expressed a desire to learn more about the process of accepting the payments to provide better service to people in their neighborhoods.

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