Introduction

Currently, 1 in 5 farmers' markets "report accepting payment via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps"[1], which allows people who would not normally be able to afford visits to the farmers' market to purchase fresh, local produce. This is not only a benefit for the consumer, but also the vendors. "This is more money coming into their pockets," said Dru Montri, director of the Michigan Farmers Market Association. "To support them and Michigan's economy"[2]. This program, however, is relatively new - only 30 markets accepted SNAP benefits in 2009[3] and the transition has resulted in some information barriers between the markets and the consumers concerning these new benefits.

We propose to develop a product which encourages and allows for easier knowledge of products that can be sold to consumers within certain benefit programs at farmers' markets. The end result will be something that closes the information gap and allows buyers and sellers to identify goods which qualify for benefits. This is an opportunity to allow everyone to have easy access to healthy and local produce as well as provide an easy way for farmers to supply their food to everyone throughout the community and will help sustain a local food community.

The Goals

Two parties are involved in sustaining a local food community - the growers and the consumers. Both of these parties contribute differently, and therefore have different obstacles which need to be addressed.

For The Growers, our system should provide two things: 1) information about which goods qualify for benefit and 2) how to receive money from the benefits.

For The Consumers, our system should provide three things: 1) information on goods provided by local vendors 2) information on qualifying goods and 3) where benefits are accepted.

Current Scenario and Obstacles

Two main problems have been found which can hinder the local food community:

1) Product Qualification Confusion - *Who accepts benefits and what is accepted?*

This issue affects both parties. **Growers** are the ones who must know which goods qualify for certain benefits. This includes tracking exactly where the product originated from because for some programs, only Michigan produce qualifies, and requires vendor knowledge of the various different benefits (SNAP, WIC, TEFAP). This also involves informing the consumers of the qualifying benefits and that they do in fact accept benefits. According to management at the Meridian Township Farmers' Market, this was confusing to the vendors at the beginning and it took awhile for them to feel comfortable with it.

This raises a couple of concerns: 1) *Given 4 in 5 farmers' markets do not yet accept benefits, how can we make this transition easier for them?* and 2) *How can we make it easier for benefit accepting vendors to identify qualifying items?*

By addressing these concerns, there will be less of a reason for vendors and farmers' markets to not accept benefits. The more markets that accept benefits, the more consumers will be able to purchase this local food and sustain the community.

However, **consumers** need to know which products qualify and if going to a market will be worth the trip. Currently, at the markets it is difficult to identify which products qualify, and there is no way of knowing what produce and qualifying goods will be at the market ahead of time. This can hinder the consumer's decision to go to a farmers' market and result in a visit to a supermarket where the uncertainty is taken away. As a result, local farmers lose out. So, *how can we provide information to the consumers about the products being offered at the markets?*