

Westgate Farmers' Market Basket

By Jesse Kayan, Community Services Coordinator, Westgate Housing Inc.

The Westgate Farmers Market is a small, weekly farm-to-family program based at the Westgate Housing Community in Brattleboro, Vermont. Over the winter of 2008/2009 the Community Food Security Project, a local non-profit group, engaged with residents of Westgate to identify concerns and issues pertaining to their local food system and to help them put into action some ideas they may have to improve access to good, affordable food. The residents who got involved were excited about the movement for local food that exists in Southern Vermont, but were frustrated with how inaccessible local food continues to be to low and moderate-income folks. The group wanted to support local agriculture as an investment in their community, but found the food too expensive to access. Despite their interest a majority of residents were forced to buy conventional produce grown far away instead of organics from the neighbors they wanted to support because the food was just too expensive.

Together the groups developed an idea modeled after Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA's are an arrangement where consumers contract with a particular farm for one growing season to receive a weekly share of food. Traditionally the consumer pays a set price up front at the beginning of the year and in turn receives a wholesale price for their food. This benefits the farmer by giving them a predictable income at the beginning of the year when they are spending the most money. It benefits the consumer by providing first-rate food at a discount and by offering a direct connection to the people and land that grow their food. The problem is, that while consumers may get \$600 or \$700 worth of food for \$500, all of the money must be paid upfront. For people without a lot of savings, that can make traditional CSA's financially unfeasible. The Westgate Farmers Market found a young farmer looking to expand her market locally. The organizers offered to take care of much of the administrative details if she would offer a CSA-style program that was paid throughout the season rather than up front and accept reimbursements for food stamps. The Community Food Security Project would insure her against the possibility of customers who backed out mid-season and help find new customers. She agreed.



With the help of community organizers at Westgate, the market sold 13 shares, called 'market baskets' and brought fresh veggies to Westgate once a week. A price comparison was done to prove that the local, organic food was even more affordable than conventional alternatives at the grocery store. Recipes were provided exhibiting ideas for how to cook new and unfamiliar types of vegetables and samples were offered. The market became a weekly gathering spot, where some neighbors spent the whole hour sitting, talking to their farmer and their fellow residents, and gaining a new appreciation for local food. And perhaps most importantly, the farmer gained 13 new customers who could not have otherwise afforded to buy food from a local farm.

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