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Mount Vernon Farmers Market committed to opening access for Latinos

Summary

Within the city of Mount Vernon, one in three residents is Latino. However, many Latinos in our community do not have broad access to healthy foods because of cultural, language, financial or social barriers. Although the Mount Vernon Farmers Market is an economical resource for produce, offering community members an additional \$10 in produce when they use their WIC or EBT benefits there, many Latinos didn't shop there because they didn't feel that the market was for them. To help improve cultural and linguistic access to the Mount Vernon farmers market, Sea Mar and the Skagit REACH project worked with the Mount Vernon Farmers Market Board to create an event styled after the Mexican and Central American street markets Latino community members are familiar with – a Tianguis. On Saturday, September 13, 2014, Skagit REACH and the Farmers Market celebrated Latin American Cultural Day to help area Latinos and indigenous communities feel more comfortable there.

Challenge

Despite Skagit County's high cultural diversity, there is little interaction between Latinos and non-Latinos. Oaxacan indigenous farmworkers are further culturally and linguistically isolated, so there are actually three communities living side by side in relative isolation of each other.

Though the county is famous for its agricultural products and healthy produce is abundant, three in four Skagit residents do not eat enough fresh fruits and vegetables. Though the Farmers Market offers healthy and reasonably priced produce, many Latinos won't shop there because they don't feel that the market is for them. Surveys of local Latinos show that a little less than half (46%) visit a Skagit farmers market. Of those who do not shop at farmers markets, 50% said they don't know where it is or even what it is. Others say they don't feel comfortable or that it is too expensive.

Get involved!!

The Mount Vernon Farmers Market is eager to build upon this Tianguis event to continue to create an atmosphere in which Latinos and indigenous feel comfortable. It is their goal to ensure ALL in our community feel welcome and a part of it. They welcome applications from all vendors to participate. The Board is also actively soliciting Latino or Latina members to join the Farmers Market. Contact the Farmers Market coordinator, Mouse Bird (360 - 540 - 4066), if you are interested in learning more.

An additional concern is that many do not know they can use their EBT and WIC benefits at the market. Though many Skagit Latinos have moved here from countries where outdoor markets and produce stands are common, because of these cultural and linguistic challenges many area Latinos miss out on the health and community benefits our local farmers markets can provide.

"...farmers markets more than other places, except schools, are places where different ethnic groups and different incomes can come together... and this was pronounced at the Tianguis."

Farmers Market Coordinator, Mouse Bird



Solution

In order to help Skagit's Latino population feel more comfortable at the farmers market, Skagit REACH (a program of Sea Mar Community Health Centers, funded by the CDC) partnered with the market board to host a Latin American Cultural Day at the Farmers Market. The goal of the event was to make the market a welcoming, culturally and language accessible environment for Latino community members, opening up a new source of healthy food to them. In focus groups with the local Latino population, participants said that more Latin American atmosphere and elements at the farmers market would help Latino people feel more comfortable.

Skagit REACH contacted the market board to work together to dedicate a full market day to celebrating our region's Latin American heritage, drawing more Latinos to the market and increasing awareness of this important part of Skagit culture among non-Latino market-goers.

The event – called Tianguis, an Aztec name describing the outdoor markets of Mexico and Central America – featured Latin American artisans and crafts, historical artifacts, folkloric and indigenous dance performances, music by local Latino performers, and Latin American foods.



"...it was like lightning came and struck the farmer's market. The culture was like... 'wow, in your face.' No way to avoid it... I think the event served to introduce a lot of new people to the market..."

Farmers Market Coordinator, Mouse Bird



Results

Market manager Mouse Bird commented afterwards that more Latinos attended the market on this day than any day in her previous years as manager. Official attendance numbers could not be taken because of the informal nature of the event, but market staff and community members agreed that there had never been so many Latinos at the Mount Vernon Farmers Market. Market-goers – Latino and non-Latino – asked each other with excitement, “Will this happen next Saturday too?” Some regular Latino vendors even remarked, “This feels just like home!”

In the weeks following the event, Ms. Bird did notice a small increase in the numbers of Latinos at the market. Latino artisans who had never before sold products at the market began to make connections with

market staff and community members that may lead to more opportunities to bring a Latino presence into the market.

The Market Manager Ms. Bird commented how this event could not have happened without the help of REACH staff and community volunteers. Her role as manager leaves little time for special events. By taking on most of the work of planning, vendor recruitment and communications, REACH staff and volunteers were able to create a successful event without over-burdening market staff.

Sustaining Success

By partnering on this project, Sea Mar and the Market Board can continue to work together to improve the health and well-being of Skagit Latinos. Currently, the market board is continuing their efforts to improve the market experience for Latinos. Several of the Latino and indigenous vendors who participated in the Tianguis event have already reached out to the market coordinator regarding participating next year. Community leaders from a nearby Whatcom County town expressed interest in modeling a Latino cultural day at their farmer's market after this one. The Latino and indigenous communities already feel more welcome.

