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FRIENDS OF THE FARMERS MARKET RECEIVES \$10K GRANT TO STUDY COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM
Study to analyze, improve accessibility of locally-produced food to low-income consumers

BLACKSBURG, Va - Despite the growing abundance of locally-grown foods in Montgomery County, many of our residents still do not have a seat at the table. In fact, more and more of our neighbors are struggling to feed themselves: Since 2006, the number of people receiving SNAP benefits (formerly FoodStamps) has increased by an alarming 130 percent (Va Department of Social Services). According to Ellen Stewart, the Blacksburg Farmers Market Coordinator, "The sad truth is that (the local produce is) failing to effectively reach most of the community members—largely rural—who are living below the poverty line."

The Friends of the Farmers Market (FFM), the non-profit that supports the operation of the Blacksburg Farmers Market, recently won a competitive \$10K grant from the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (SARE) to study the accessibility of locally-produced foods and the role local agriculture can play in increasing food security in Montgomery County.

The granting agency, SARE, was established in 1988 in order to provide competitive grants and education resources that support "agriculture that is profitable, environmentally sound, and good for communities" (<http://www.sare.org>). The program offers seven different grant programs within the Southern region, including that won by the FFM: The Sustainable Communities Innovation Grant.

This study will link the Blacksburg Farmers Market with a broad spectrum of community partners, including regional farmers, low-income consumers, Virginia Tech, social service agencies, hunger relief programs and churches. The coalition will assess the current situation, identify barriers to participation and work toward finding meaningful and sustainable solutions. Specifically, the survey will examine:

1. The availability of locally-produced foods in retail, institutional, and emergency food procurement routes,
2. the accessibility of such foods to county residents at a geographic or socioeconomic disadvantage and
3. the regional farmers' role in producing affordable, nutritious food profitably.

This is an extremely timely and critical study that will combine the efforts and knowledge of low-income consumers, farmers, Virginia Tech, social services and hunger relief agencies in finding the systemic reasons why so many in our county still go without nutritious, locally-produced food. The study will run from January 2013 until June 2014. Updates about the new study will be posted on the Farmers Market webpage: <http://www.blacksburgfarmersmarket.com>. The Friends of the Farmers Market strongly encourages citizens to get involved with this important project and invites them to contact the FFM at bbfarmersmarket@gmail.com or at any market.

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The Blacksburg Farmers Market is open year round on the corner of Draper Road and Roanoke Street. Currently, it operates Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. until April, when it will resume its Wednesday (2 p.m. to 7 p.m.) and Saturday (8 a.m. to 2 p.m.) schedule. The market accepts credit, debit, and SNAP/FoodStamps EBT cards. People using SNAP/FoodStamps at the market can currently get double the value for the amount that they swipe. The funds for this program are raised within the Blacksburg community.

The **Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education** program is an education and grant resource for farmers, ranchers, and communities seeking to advance sustainable agriculture practice within the United States and island protectorates. SARE has four regional offices and seven grant programs, which apply to endeavors such as renewable energies, rotational grazing, marketing, systems research and integrated pest management. Interested individuals, businesses and organizations can find more information about SARE and available grants in our region at <http://www.southernsare.org>.