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**Austin Farmers' Market to Accept Food Stamp Benefits**  
**New Initiative to Bridge Gap Between**  
**Food Stamp Users and Local Farmers**

AUSTIN – In keeping with its mission to improve access to fresh, healthy, and local foods for all people, Sustainable Food Center (SFC) will launch its Farmers' Market Food Stamp Initiative October 21 at the Austin Farmers' Market downtown. The Austin Farmers' Market is a producer-only market that hosts Central Texas farmers and other regional food producers who sell what they grow or produce. Through this SFC initiative, recipients of food stamp benefits can now use their Lone Star cards to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables directly from the farmers who grow them, and can also buy other fresh, healthy, locally produced foods at the Austin Farmers' Market.

The Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system of dispensing food stamp benefits is now the standard used by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the USDA. That system presented challenges for outdoor farmers' markets around the country to accepting food stamps. Most market sites lack availability of telephone lines and electricity required for reading EBT cards, and most farmers and other vendors view the expense of the wireless equipment as a substantial barrier. Sustainable Food Center is addressing these issues by utilizing wireless technology and rechargeable battery power, and by setting up a central EBT processing station.

SFC created this initiative following months of research and after seeking input from food stamp officials. Through a partnership with Steps to a Healthier Austin, SFC purchased the wireless EBT equipment and will launch an outreach campaign to notify food stamp users that they can now shop at the Austin Farmers' Market weekly. Capital Area Food Bank of Texas has also partnered with SFC to assist with the outreach efforts.

The new system allows food stamp users to swipe their Lone Star cards and EBT cards issued from other states at the information booth in the downtown markets. The food stamp users are issued wooden coins that can be used to purchase produce and other allowable foods from farmers and vendors just like cash. Food stamp users can redeem unused coins for credit on their cards, or can hold them for following weeks, and farmers redeem spent coins for payment through SFC.

This initiative will benefit food stamp users by allowing them to purchase fresh, local, and healthy foods for their families. It will also add to the customer base of the Austin Farmers' Market, which will contribute to the financial sustainability of farmers and their farms.