

Eastport Healthy Main Streets

Eastport Healthy Main Streets (EP HMS) has established a fundamental component to the Vision of improving the health and wellness of our community. Expanding the local Farmer's Market and improving access to all community members, including those receiving food subsidies, has been deemed essential in achieving that Vision. In 2012, the Eastport Farmer's Market (EP FM) moved from an indoor location to the amphitheater on Water Street. The number of participating vendors decreased significantly. Meg Keay spearheaded an aggressive strategy to build the EP FM during the 2013 season, from 5 participating vendors to 20. She also facilitated a conversation with the vendors, to accept subsidy vouchers (SNAP) from community members who receive them, and to share recipes so folks would know how to prepare the food they purchased. The hope to accept SNAP vouchers has had a slow start, primarily because of technology challenges.

Recognizing the value of access to local foods, the HMS Wellness Committee established a goal to establish an indoor location for the EP FM during the off season. Several members of the Committee have been exploring indoor options. Concomitantly, the Committee established a plan to take a road trip to the Skowhegan Farmers Market (SFM) to discern their successes in their indoor FM. During the week of November 18, 2013, EP HMS member Meg Keay and two other community members visited the SFM. Meg has reported their visit was 'outstanding'! They gleaned significant support for innovative ideas for the EP FM, including: combining the EP FM with an existing Local Food Co-op (Eat Local Eastport) a win-win for both entities; considering enhancements (ie: music); setting up the EP FM in a circle which logistically will bring people in; and potentially locating the EP FM more centrally thus tying the EP FM to the robust plethora of activities occurring on Water Street (ie: consider a building location which may facilitate the EP FM to be more likely a year round presence); finally, a plan to actively explore incentive programs through grants for EBT/SNAP users, (a truly valued learning from the SFM visit reflecting information about grant programs that will supplement EBT/SNAP by as much as 50%). Meg noted in the Eastport community, 'where there are so many users of EBT/SNAP, this could make a HUGE difference in the number of people using/buying from our farmers'. Meg also echoed her dream to involving these same people in cooking classes, vendors sharing their recipes and cooking expertise. By adding all these new EBT/SNAP users to the Eastport Farmers' Market, we could possibly "save" our market. We are currently in jeopardy of losing it, the way things stand now: the 5 produce suppliers have advised they do not want to make the trip to Eastport, because to date, it has not cost been effective. With new information gleaned about the community grant assistance programs during the site visit to Skowhegan, we are hopeful this could be the answer to saving and enhancing our Eastport Farmers' Market.

The value of connecting with another highly successful Farmer's Market, facilitated generative thinking and spawned some excellent ideas for EP HMS Wellness Committee to consider. The HMS initiative brings the improving health and wellness bright spots from around Maine to a common table for sharing successes and lessons learned. The EP HMS project anticipates being able to incorporate some of the excellent strategies learned from partners (like SFM) all around the state.