



SUSTAINABLE FOOD POLICY BOARD

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April 16, 2012

Honorable Lee Leffingwell, Mayor
Austin City Council
301 West Second Street
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Mayor and Council Members:

The Sustainable Food Policy Board (SFPB) has been studying the issue of enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or "food stamps") in the Austin/Travis County area. It is estimated that only 53% of the SNAP-eligible population in Travis County receives SNAP benefits.

SNAP provides critical food assistance to our most vulnerable citizens. In fact, the majority of SNAP recipients are children and the elderly. SNAP has also been credited with being the most responsive federal program providing additional assistance during economic downturns. As you are aware, many of our citizens are still suffering the effects of the recent recession and are struggling to put food on the table.

SNAP benefits are spent in local communities at retailers and grocers. It is estimated that every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity. With only 53% of the SNAP-eligible population receiving benefits, Travis County businesses are losing \$349,052,961 in economic return.

Therefore, the SFPB recommends that the Austin City Council create a citywide outreach campaign to increase SNAP enrollment, including providing a variety of technical assistance options for the SNAP-eligible population. It is also recommended that this campaign be led by a trusted bilingual public official and that it be disseminated using media and social services outreach methods.

The SFPB also recommends that the City of Austin research possible grants or other sources of funding to increase the value of SNAP dollars spent locally at farmers markets and other retailers for fresh produce. Currently, the Sustainable Food Center is doubling the value of SNAP dollars with a match of up to \$10 weekly at one of its farmers market locations in East Austin. The city can measure the economic and access benefits of this effort as well as resources allocated to similar incentive programs in such cities as Chicago, Boston and New York with proven results. Such benchmarks can help justify resource allocation and support for additional incentive opportunities throughout the city. Increased enrollment in SNAP can also help offset the cost investment made by smaller retailers to participate in the program—such as equipment and paperwork.

The SFPB recommends that the city council take action by asking city staff to implement an effective outreach and assistance effort to increase participation in the SNAP program as well as expand SNAP benefits at local farmers markets, thereby greatly benefitting our local economy. The SFPB will support city staff and its partners in these efforts.

Attached is a report from the SNAP working group as well as a list of cities with best practices on SNAP outreach, enrollment, and incentive programs.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can answer questions or be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Paula J. McDermott

Chairperson

Austin/Travis County Sustainable Food Policy Board

Enclosures:

SNAP Working Group Report

List of Cities with Best-Practices for SNAP Outreach and Enrollment

cc: Marc A. Ott, City Manager
H. G. (Bert) Lumbreras, Assistant City Manager
Carlos Rivera, Director, HHSD, Public Health
Philip Huang, Executive Liaison
Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer
Sherri Fleming, Executive Manager, Travis County HHS & Veteran Services
Travis County Commissioners