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Let's take advantage of food stamps

Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2009

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Now that the stimulus bill has turned into law, let's look at funding for food stamps. No, I'm not interested in debating how much funding for food stamps -- or any of the other measures -- should be in this law. Democrats and Republicans already have argued over these points to exhaustion. I say it's time to move on -- and take as much advantage as we can of about \$20 billion allotted for food stamps.

When it comes to economic activity, food stamps offer a lot of bang for the buck. A \$1 increase in food-stamp payments boosts gross domestic product by \$1.73. That's what Mark Zandi, lead economist of Moody's Economy.com, told the House Committee on Small Business last year.

"People who receive these benefits are very hard-pressed and will spend any financial aid they receive within a few weeks," he testified in July. "These programs are also already operating, and a benefit increase can be quickly delivered to recipients."

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Using Zandi's benchmark, food-stamp benefits in the stimulus law could boost GDP by more than \$34 billion. And if recipients used this money to buy nutritious food, we could help address two problems at once: the stagnant economy and unhealthy diets that lead to higher health-care costs.

The federal government senses this opportunity. Under the 2008 food bill, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has more than \$20 million for pilot projects partly aimed at steering food-stamp recipients toward healthy food. Such a project would be ideal in the central San Joaquin Valley,

where fruits and vegetables are available year-round. So how can Valley leaders get some of the additional money?

The guidelines for project proposals should be available later this year, says Jean Daniel, director of public affairs for the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA. While we're waiting, I hope Valley leaders do research, starting with the Wholesome Wave Foundation (wholesome.wave.org).

Here is the foundation's simple, yet effective idea: People who use food stamps and Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers get extra money to spend on fruits and vegetables at farmers markets. "If someone comes in with an EBT card [for food stamps]

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and they swipe it for \$15, we give them \$30 in tokens," says Michel Nischan, president and CEO of Wholesome Wave. These tokens (or in some cases, vouchers), can buy only healthy food at that farmers market. Vendors who collect the tokens then redeem them for money.

The programs, which take place at farmers markets in San Diego, Massachusetts and Connecticut, "act as an indirect fruit-and-vegetable subsidy," Nischan says. "When you look at the health-care crisis, it's a good way to spend the money."

And people are responding. When the program started in Holyoke, Mass., so many low-income shoppers showed up that some farmers sold out by early afternoon -- for the first time in 14 years, Nischan says. At the City Heights farmers market in San Diego, he adds, redemption of food stamps jumped about 200%. Wholesome Wave intends to launch its program in other states, such as Rhode Island, Vermont and Michigan.

Here in the Valley, a project such as this would support farmers, boost healthy eating, stimulate the local economy and help poor families get more food.

Granted, food-stamp spending alone won't cure our economic ills by a long shot. But it is a start. And if coupled with more than \$20 million to support healthy eating, it is, frankly, the right thing to do.

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