

Fresno auction ready to deal with new cards

## **Fruit, veggie vendors take EBTs from federal food stamp program.**

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee

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The Cherry Avenue Auction on Saturday will become the second outdoor swap-meet-style market in the nation to accept electronic balance transfer, or EBT, cards from the federal food stamp program.

The first to take the card, also known as the Golden State Advantage Card, was the Selma Flea Market, which began in December 2004 to allow use of the cards for purchases of food approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"It's working really great. The vendors love it, and the customers like it, too," said Michael Mikaelian, co-owner of the Selma Flea Market.

Jeremy Hofer, a hunger and nutrition project assistant with Fresno Metro Ministries, said the Selma market has EBT sales totaling about \$5,000 a month and that the larger Cherry Avenue market likely will exceed that amount because of its size.

Hofer said Cherry restructured its market to accommodate the EBT system, clustering its fruit and vegetable vendors into what is being called "Vegetable Row" rather than having them scattered among other vendors.

Neil Burson, who shares ownership of the Cherry auction with his brother Mitch, said produce sales for his vendors are about \$950,000 a year and a single vendor has previously had sales of as much as \$800 a day in food stamp purchases. The market is at 4640 S. Cherry Ave. north of the intersection of Cherry and American avenues in south Fresno.

"I don't know how the new system will play out," he said. However, he said he is confident after taking a close look at the Selma effort.

"We have a good relationship with our vendors and wanted to see a system that is viable," Burson said.

The Cherry auction will use a point-of-sale device provided by the state's Department of Social Services. A market staff employee will swipe a food stamp participant's EBT card — much as if it were a debit or credit card — and deduct a chosen amount from the participant's account. Customers will be issued market scrip in the form of wooden tokens equivalent to the deducted amount. Those tokens can then be used to purchase food items.

The produce vendors, which number between 60 and 80, were clustered for the first time on about 2 1/2 acres on the north side of the 15-acre sales grounds last Saturday and will be grouped again this Saturday.

Burson said some vendors questioned the grouping and relocation because their customers knew to look for them in a particular spot. "But 80% think it's good because our place is so large," he said.

Cherry Avenue Auction has about 500 vendors on Saturday, 300 to 350 on Tuesdays and about 100 on Sundays. In addition to food and produce, the market offers a wide range of materials from jewelry to clothing to live animals and pet supplies.

At the Selma market, Mikaelian said, EBT sales dip below \$5,000 monthly during the summer, perhaps because recipients are able to find work during that period.

Hofer, Mikaelian and Mikaelian's partner, Alan Borba, worked with USDA to find a way customers could use the EBT cards at a flea market setting for the first time. It meant forming a separate organization — Selma Farmers Market — comprising vendors of only fruits and vegetables. Similarly, the Cherry Avenue Farmers Market has been formed.

The EBT cards cannot be used for other flea market purchases, but Mikaelian said he thinks their use for buying produce enables flea market visitors to make additional purchases of other goods. "It may also help those who don't sell produce," he said.

"We don't make anything off it," Mikaelian said. "For us, it's a service that helps our vendors. People with food stamps can spend their benefits at our market."

The Selma market had to buy tokens and also had to staff the distribution of them, as well as oversee vendors trading in tokens for cash at the end of the market. The Selma market is held Sunday mornings.

"We just didn't want the flea market cut out of the technology. We didn't want to get passed up by technology," Mikaelian said.

In the past, many customers at the flea market would exchange traditional food stamps for fruits and vegetables. When the EBT cards appeared in 2003, that stopped because none of the vendors would accept them.

Mikaelian said sales by some vendors dropped as much as 60% when use of the traditional stamps stopped.

He said those buying produce at the market can get it cheaper than they would at many retailers. "The government is getting more for its money," he said.

USDA has long overseen the food stamp program as part of federal farm bills. EBT tokens can buy bread, cereal, tortillas, fruits and vegetables, meat and fish, poultry and eggs, dairy products such as milk and cheese, as well as seeds and plants that produce food.

EBT cards are used at between 30 and 40 sites that are exclusively farmers markets in California.

Mikaelian said he has taken precautions beyond those outlined by the federal government to be sure the program works smoothly. One person per vendor is designated as able to accept tokens and redeem at the end of the market day.

Each token — they come in 50-cent and \$1 denominations — is stamped Selma Farmers Market.

Mikaelian said he and his partner also own an Orosi flea market and they will likely add the EBT service there next spring.

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