

## Under plan, farmers would aid inner cities

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In the inner cities of western Contra Costa County, where corner liquor stores far outnumber grocery stores, it's easier to buy a beer than a fresh apple.

That's according to a new PBS documentary series that explores the relationship between where people live and their health.

Now the county Board of Supervisors is taking steps to correct this problem by trying to link the vast agricultural fields of East County with the produce-scarce neighborhoods of West County.

Last week, the board voted to direct the county Health Services and Agriculture departments to begin working with nonprofit groups and farmers to increase food education and improve distribution methods in order to get East County produce into West County kitchens. The resolution ties in with the existing Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign.

"It gets to achieving two things," said county Supervisor John Gioia, who represents West County. "Getting more county residents access to fresh food at school and at home, (and) the second part of this is how it benefits our local farmers and improves their economic viability."

The board also declared June as Buy Fresh, Buy Local Food Awareness Month in Contra Costa County.

The leaders of county nonprofit groups tied to the effort are already planning ways to put the board's ideas in action.

Lindsay Johnson, program director at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties, said she envisions distributing surplus East County produce to children in inner-city schools through its Farm to Kids program, which is already in place at 15 schools in Pittsburg, Bay Point and Concord. There are 37 eligible schools in West County, Johnson said.

The food bank currently collects surplus produce from larger farms in San Joaquin County, so it has the resources to collect and transport the food. The key right now is opening communication lines, Johnson said.

Another component of the county plan includes more classroom education about produce and nutrition, and field trips that would take inner-city kids to see where their food is grown.

"Many kids in West County don't know that peas aren't grown from a can, that they're not grown in the frozen food section," said Supervisor Mary Piepho, whose district includes the county's 12,000 acres of protected agricultural core land.

Those education efforts could also extend to West County classrooms and community centers, said Jim Becker, director of development for the Richmond Children's Foundation. The nonprofit group founded the Richmond College Preparatory charter school in 2003 and works to create a safer and healthier community through school programs.

Outside of school meals, Becker said, many children in the surrounding neighborhoods eat food that is highly processed and comes exclusively from

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convenience stores. Becker said he envisions starting a community-supported agriculture program where families could pick up weekly produce baskets at low cost or in exchange for volunteer work. The program could also include nutrition education and cooking lessons for parents and kids, he said.

"It's one thing to get an eggplant; it's another thing to actually cook it and eat it," Becker said.

Kathryn Lyddan, chief executive of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust preservation organization, acknowledged there is still much work to be done on these plans but said she looks forward to linking with West County, as well as the economic boost this effort could give to local farmers.

"I think that it is a fantastic beginning of connecting a whole bunch of dots that are already there," Lyddan said.

The Board of Supervisors will hear a formal report in June on the next steps to take on these fronts.

The PBS documentary series "Unnatural Causes" began airing March 17 on Thursday evenings. For more information, visit <http://www.unnaturalcauses.org>.

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