

## Farmers markets across the state now take food stamp cards

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LAWRENCE — Move over Iron Chef and Barefoot Contessa.

At the Farmers Market, Julia Kehoe poured chopped green peppers, eggplants, sweet potatoes, summer squash, zucchini and tomatoes onto a frying pan as Scott Soares stirred them with a spatula Wednesday.

Soares and Kehoe, commissioners for the Department of Agricultural Resources and the Department of Transitional Assistance, respectively, held the cooking show to introduce a program, now being expanded statewide, that allows low-income people to buy fresh fruits and vegetables with the swipe of an Electronic Benefits Transfer card, similar to a debit card. The dual-agency supplemental nutritional assistance program benefits were formerly known as food stamps.

Although Lawrence has been taking part in the EBT program for two years, they chose to unveil the expanded program here, because Lawrence has the second largest sale of EBT cards in the state, topped only by Lynn, they said.

The cooking show, Soares said, was all part of the marketing blitz to spread word about the service.

"It's an educational opportunity to let people know how to prepare a meal with fresh fruit and vegetables," he said.

The stir-fry was passed out to the crowd at the market on Appleton Way, where three local farmers have been selling their wares on Wednesdays all summer long.

"We think it's important to know about the Farmers Market and for (people) to know that they can eat healthy and maximize their funds better," Kehoe said.

The market, which hosted a musical entertainer at lunchtime each week, wraps up its season Oct. 28.

Groundwork Lawrence, who has overseen the market since 2006, qualified to accept food stamps in 2007, said acting director Heather McMann. They rented a machine at first to process EBT sales at the market, however sales were so high, Project Bread gave them money to buy one.

McMann said Groundwork Lawrence saw an increase of 9 percent in EBT sales between 2007 and 2008. This past July and August, food stamp purchases jumped 170 percent.

"The market helps to increase access to affordable, fresh, local food in a city which suffers more of its fair share of health issues, many related to lack of nutrition and food," McMann said.