5 York City stores to receive grants for fresh food

Sean Philip Cotter, 505-5437/@SPCotterYD 3:02 p.m. EDT May 1, 2016

Five York City corner stores will be receiving grants they'll use to make more fresh produce and other healthy fare available to residents.

The city's bureau of health will administer the Healthy Corner Store Initiative, giving "microgrants" of $1,000 to the stores in a pilot program that's meant to combat the dearth of healthy food easily available around town, according to Craig Walt, community health services supervisor at the bureau. The money comes from the state Department of Health's preventative health and health services block grant, Walt said, so this money is not from the city's general fund.
Pak's Food Market, 750 E. Princess St., is one of the five corner stores in talks with the city to receive a grant to help provide better access to healthy food. (Photo: Sean Cotter / The York Dispatch)

The city wants to take a relatively holistic approach to the project, which York City Mayor Kim Bracey announced in her annual State of the City address Wednesday night. Some of the money is meant to help the stores buy healthier food, but just as important is the presentation of the wares, Walt said.

After all, the big signs in the windows of stores and then inside them usually tout the most sugary and preservative-laden of offerings, he said; one of the goals of this project is to work with businesses to better display and promote the healthier goods. Much of the money will be used for those means, he said, and the city will work with each of the places individually to do that better.

However, Walt said this issue isn't as simple as merely telling people they have to eat healthier.

"If they don't have access to it, they can't do it," he said. "It's really about making the healthy choice the easier choice."

Walt said the agreements with the five stores are not yet finalized, so he didn't want to release the names at this point. He said the city will likely begin the project in June and may provide further money to the stores if they meet certain benchmarks after receiving the grants.

Stores: One of the stores the city is in discussion with is Pak's Food Market at 750 E. Princess St. The store in the east end of town already sells some produce, said owner Benny Wang. He said someone from the city came in a little while ago and talked to him about the possibility of his store receiving the grant, but they'd have to adjust the setup to work in his store.

"I must put it all in one place to display," he said of the fresh food.

Wang said he was happy to do so; the produce is popular, and people often use WIC benefits to buy some, he said.

An array of produce sits at Brogue Hydroponics Friday, April 29, 2016, at New Eastern Market. Amanda J. Cain photo (Photo: The York Dispatch)

Both WIC and SNAP — food stamps — have vouchers geared toward buying healthier foods, and Walt said there's a way for the city to track where those vouchers are being used, so they can see if there's an uptick in use at the stores with the grants. The city also plans to work with the stores to see how business is going, and the city plans on conducting customer surveys to see if this changes people's buying habits, he said.

He said the city believes this will help business at these stores.

In Bracey's State of the City address, she cited Bev's Grocery at the corner of East Princess and South Belvidere streets as one of her favorite stores around town and one candidate she thinks would be a good fit for the grant. She said after the address that the west-end store has a broad porch that could look great with some stands of apples or bananas on it.

Right now, a couple of soda machines take up that space.

Bev's Grocery is shown at the intersection of West Princess Street and Belvidere Avenue in York City, Thursday, April 28, 2016. Mayor C. Kim Bracey recently listed the store as one of about eight recipients to receive a grant to add fresh produce to their shelves. Dawn J. Sagert photo (Photo: The York Dispatch)

Expansion: If everything goes well, and the city believes it has a process in place that seems like it can be applied to helping more stores in the area, it will apply for more funding to expand the project, Walt said.

He rattled off a few stats about why this issue of healthy food access is important. For the county as a whole, 68 percent of people are overweight or obese and 38 percent have high blood pressure, according to an assessment commissioned last year by the Healthy York County Coalition.

Only 4 percent of people in the county eat the three servings of vegetables a day they’re supposed to get, he said.

And, Walt said, of the 16 census tracts in the city, only two aren’t considered “food deserts” by the new USDA definition of the term, which refers to a low-income area with poor access to a grocery store. The administration used to say that a food desert was any place with no grocery store within a mile, but it recently has shortened that to a half mile, Walt said. Which makes sense, he said, because many city residents don’t own cars.

Brogue Hydroponics employee Bridget Woltman, of Red Lion, helps Harl Hughes, Glenville, with his purchase Friday, April 29, 2016, at New Eastern Market Co. Amanda J. Cain photo (Photo: The York Dispatch)

"When you have low vehicle access, half a mile is a long walk when you're trying to carry a bunch of groceries," he said.

The food desert label isn't the be-all and end-all of the discussion — it's just one metric of many to consider when talking about this issue, he said — but Walt added it's clear many parts of the city don't have consistent access to healthy food, a fact he hopes this program can combat.

"I think it's going to bring about some great changes to all of York and really help some of these neighborhoods that are suffering the most from lack of access to healthy foods," he said.

— Reach Sean Cotter at scotter@yorkdispatch.com.