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Local agency envisions hub to help area farmers

By Peter Tokofsky

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As the warm summer months unfold, farmers markets across the Bay Area are flourishing. On almost any day — including Wednesdays in Pacifica, Thursdays in Pescadero and Saturdays in Half Moon Bay — shoppers have opportunities to take home a variety of locally grown produce and meats while soaking up the sights and aromas of the bounty from San Mateo County and beyond.

Although the markets provide a valued opportunity for small farmers and ranchers to avoid middlemen and meet face-to-face with their customers, participating in the markets comes at substantial cost and effort that can strain smaller operations. “It’s expensive to go to a farmers market,” said Adria Arko, director of advancement for the San Mateo Resource Conservation District.

Bringing produce to markets involves expenses such as operating a truck and maintaining supplies for setting up stands. Labor is required to prepare the produce for delivery, selling at the markets and packing back up at the end of the day.

In part to address the challenges faced by farmers who maintain direct sales operations, the local resource conservation district convened a meeting for the agricultural community last year to discuss ways small farms in the county could share efforts and resources. RCD is but one organization in a collaboration of partners that includes TomKat Ranch, Kitchen Table Advisors and Brisa Ranch as well as the county Farm Bureau and The Mixing Bowl.

Participants agreed on the need and opportunity for working collectively.

“We can see the potential very clearly,” said Verónica Mazariegos-Anastassiou, co-owner of Brisa Ranch, who participated in the meeting. But she acknowledged that some in the group expressed skepticism because they have seen ideas come and go over the years without any real results.

The initial meeting led to the formation of an Agricultural Markets Working Group. Those discussions continued through the fall and winter. The working group included farmers and ranchers from different parts of the county who operate various types of farms. They identified shared challenges and proposed some possible solutions.

They acknowledged, for example, that two farms driving half-full trucks to the same farmers market could explore ways to partner. The group also discussed how collaboration could help farmers meet requirements for supplying restaurants and stores when they cannot reach these customers alone.

The idea of developing “food hubs” that allow small farmers to share resources has been getting increasing attention in recent years. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that the number of food hubs in the U.S. grew by 288 percent between 2007 and 2014. The agency defines a food hub as “a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.”

Arko said the next step for creating a food hub serving San Mateo County is to develop a business plan to work through the details and study how to make aggregation financially feasible. The plan should offer flexibility, she emphasized, because “not every farm is going to utilize every feature.” The group is waiting on the outcome of a grant proposal to the USDA to support this effort.

Arko believes that shared marketing that promotes the diversity of crops, sustainable farming practices and the beauty of San Mateo County could also become the task of a shared agricultural agreement.

Founded in 1939, the San Mateo RCD was the first conservation district in California. Originally formed to combat soil erosion after the era of the Dust Bowl, the agency and 94 others throughout the state now support resource conservation and agriculture in various ways.

Mazariegos-Anastassiou believes that there is a lot of interest in the area for buying local produce and the farm hub discussion is “a very exciting development.” She said people also recognize the role producers play as employers and stewards of the land, but there are currently limitations that can make it difficult for buyers to work with small local farms.

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