

made available to low-income consumers in a variety of ways, such as being subsidized by public and private assistance programs. Recipients of federal and state Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) assistance, for example, can purchase fresh fruit and vegetables directly from farmers through farmers markets, roadside markets and other

outlets equipped to handle such transactions. Moulton also cited Share the Bounty, a program founded in 2002 by Jonathan Hankin (who is Zheutlin's husband) and is now affiliated with Berkshire Grown. Shares of local farm products are purchased by that program, and are distributed to low-income families through food pantries

and other outlets. "That provides local food to families with lower incomes, while helping farmers get paid for providing food to the community," she said.

She pointed to one example of such an initiative.

"Lee Bank has been very supportive of what we're doing, and has made a commitment to local farmers," she said. "We've been working with them on a program in which the bank will give \$100 'farmers' coins' tokens to their employees as Christmas presents (see boxed story on this page). The employees can spend these at farmers' markets. This will introduce them to the benefits of having relationships with local farms. Hopefully, many of them will continue after they have spent the initial tokens." ♦

Bank's employees get home-grown perk for holidays

BY JOHN TOWNES

Lee Bank has launched a project in collaboration with Berkshire Grown that is intended to provide an additional perk to its employees while also supporting regional farmers and food producers.

The bank has purchased \$9,000 worth of wooden tokens from Berkshire Grown, which it will distribute to its employees.

The employees can use the tokens to buy \$100 worth of food and other products at the November and December Holiday Farmers Markets in Great Barrington and Williamstown.

Berkshire Grown is producing the tokens and setting up arrangements to enable vendors at the markets to convert them into cash reimbursements for purchases.

In addition, bank employees will be given another \$100 in value, which they can choose to receive either as additional market tokens or as BerkShares, the local currency that can be used as cash at participating businesses in the Berkshires.

The idea was spearheaded by Charles "Chuck" Leach, president of Lee Bank, and Susie Brown, vice president of administration.

"We were looking for something different to do for our employees that would be out of the box, and would also support the local economy," said Brown. "We were recently voted the Best Employer in Berkshire County, and we're very proud of that. This is one way we want to build on that."

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She added that the bank's initiative is a variation of a basic concept that some other businesses have used.

"Actually, we were inspired to do this by Zogics (a Lenox-based supplier of products to fitness centers and other businesses), which has come up with some creative ideas to give rewards to employees that also have other benefits," she said.

Brown said the specific concept of farmers market tokens also arose from the bank's relationship with Berkshire Grown, and its support for local farmers and food producers. "We're really excited about this, because it will accomplish several things," said Brown.

One goal, she said, is to introduce more people to local food products and the experience of shopping at farmers markets.

"Many of our employees may already shop at farmers markets, and this gives them additional money to spend there," said Brown. "But there are also many employees who may have never been to a farmers market. This can encourage them to try it, and experience the fun of shopping there, as well as the advantages of buying fresh healthy food from local producers. Hopefully, that may encourage them to continue doing that in the future."

She noted that the additional choice of an extra \$100 in tokens or receiving it in BerkShares offers employees the option of either spending the entire \$200 at the Holiday Farmers Markets or buying other items in stores while still benefitting the local economy.

Brown said the bank's enthusiasm for such activities to support local farms and food was recently bolstered by a separate, but related, initiative.

She explained that the bank offered employees free tickets to the annual Berkshire Grown Harvest Supper held on Sept. 24.

"We didn't know whether anyone would take us up on it, and would want to go to an event like that," she said. "But we had 25 requests for tickets, and people came back the next day and were very enthusiastic about it."

Brown added that the bank will continue to explore similar initiatives, including those that support other aspects of the Berkshire economy. ♦

"It's important to increase consumers' awareness of the benefits of local food and having a more direct relationship to local farms," Moulton said. "One way to do that is to encourage people to experience those connections and the quality of local food."

One aspect of that involves education, according to Moulton. "It's important to increase consumers' awareness of the benefits of local food and having a more direct relationship to local farms," she said. "One way to do that is to encourage people to experience those connections and the quality of local food."

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