

CROWD GREETES RETURN OF FARMERS MARKET

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Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News Shoppers browse plant options at the Steele's Greenhouse booth at the Beloit Farmers Market on Saturday, the opening weekend for the warm weather event series.

BELOIT - Saturday marked the opening bell for the Beloit Farmers Market, and thousands came out in support of one of the city's most popular spring and summer events.

The first market drew more than 60 vendors with produce just hitting stands while flowers, baked goods and handmade items were in full supply.

Downtown Beloit Association (DBA) Promotions Coordinator Crystal Cribbs said the start of the season couldn't have come soon enough after some late winter weather in March and April.

"Everyone was looking forward to the break in the weather and this is a celebration of that," Cribbs said.

"We've skipped spring and have gone straight to summer. This is really awesome because sales are up, people are excited to be outside and we love it."

New additions to this year's market included a phone charging station and the market being certified as dementia friendly, with an event planned in June to recognize the accessibility shift. Downtown Beloit Association staff and market volunteers were trained earlier this year on how to spot the signs of someone suffering a dementia-related episode and additional signage was added at the market to offer better directions.

The market's SNAP benefits acceptance program is in its fifth year and stronger than ever, with around 40 vendors accepting food assistance redemptions.

The market's vendor base will increase from 60 to over 100 once June and July come round, Cribbs said, urging residents and visitors to come out early and often.

"You still have plenty of things to choose from," Cribbs said. "The weather is perfect. It's market season. It's really turned into a destination event. It's more than just shopping."

Illinois resident Laura Alearado has been coming to the market for the last five years and on Saturday she brought children Leandro and Aaliyah along for the day.

"We like to buy things that are local and fresh," Alearado said. "It's important to get fresh produce. They're healthier. It's great to come here because you can find a variety of things." But Leandro had his 7-year-old sights on something else - snacks from Tacos El Gordo, a food vendor staple at the market.

"I like their tacos," he exclaimed with a laugh.

For longtime vendor and Double Ds Bs Owner Terri Dodge, Beloit's market is second to none. The local staple has been at the market for 17 years, offering a range of handmade soaps, salves, balms and honey-based products. This year, the store is expanding with Crone Apothecary to offer essential oils and other homeopathic items.

"To watch the kids and grandkids grow up and keep coming year-after-year is wonderful," Dodge said. "It's an extended family. There's a warmth you get when you come to the market. This market is home to us."

The market runs from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday through October on State Street and East Grand Avenue downtown. It draws an average of 9,200 residents and visitors, according to DBA attendance data.