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ALTERNATIVE FARMERS MARKET

'Mercadito' goal: Healthy community

Looks like there's a new farmers market in town.

It's the new Certified Smart Farmers Market — or "Mercadito" — but don't even think of looking for deep-fried Snickers bars or jelly-stuffed doughnuts.

The Smart Farmers Market, set for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every Sunday through October, focuses on healthy living and is aimed at the Latino community in the underserved 92411 ZIP code, according to its organizer, Rita Arias.

Sunday marks the debut of the new market in La Plaza (Placita) Park, 685 Mount Vernon Ave., San Bernardino.

Rita, an 11-year veteran with the Community Action Partnership Food Bank of San Bernardino County, is



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the visionary and force behind the new market.

"This is not your usual farmers market. We're trying to get people to change their eating habits and encourage a healthier lifestyle," says Rita, who, at 75, is something of an Energizer Bunny herself.

"When people are healthy, family life is happier," she says.

Fresh locally grown produce includes tomatoes, squash, corn, avocados, onions, chiles, water-

melon, cantaloupe, pineapple and mangos.

Fresh tortas and grilled greaseless carnitas, as well as fresh snacking fruit, also will be available.

To celebrate the mercadito opening, a special ribbon-cutting ceremony is set for 11 a.m. Sunday.

Amid the park's shade trees, vendors will offer an array of goodies including jewelry and accessories, T-shirts and Avon products. Live entertainment and a kids' zone also will be part of the fun.

"We'll have a different theme each week but this Sunday, we are having an Americana theme for Independence Day," Rita says.

The Certified Farmers Market is the anchor component of a multi-pronged strategy to address

health disparities in the Latino community.

Other components will include healthy cooking classes, diabetes-prevention education, exercise and a community garden.

The walking club and community garden are being developed, Rita says. "We also plan to have a renowned Latina chef from the community provide healthy cooking classes focused on culturally appropriate cuisine."

According to Rita, the project will be a teaching experience that involves both moms and kids.

"If moms don't bring home potato chips and soda pop, that will be a good start," she says.

In addition, the Paul Villasenor Library will host the proposed twice-weekly lecture series on nutri-

tion, focusing on topics from diabetes and obesity to high blood pressure and heart problems.

Rita clearly has a passion for the project.

"I want to help people," she says. "I've recently been to funerals of people who had diseases that were preventable. We just want people to eat healthy foods and get some exercise."

As the program develops, she plans to add new features.

"We're starting this Mercadito to address several of the pressing health issues prevalent among Latinos residing in the area," she says.

"I anticipate some bumps in the road, but it won't discourage me — the community needs this."

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