

Gates grants offer help for rural hungry

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A new food bank will come to La Center, thanks to money from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The grant, worth nearly \$15,000 and administered by the local Community Foundation, could help pay for a permanent food bank site or for a food bank van aimed at bringing sustenance to hungry people in rural areas of north Clark County.

"It could be both," said Anne Digenis, program officer at the Community Foundation. "We are still brainstorming the best way to address the need."

In all, \$75,000 in grants from the Gates Foundation, passing through the Community Foundation, will attack rural hunger in Southwest Washington. The Community Foundation hopes to match that amount with additional donations from local supporters.

"The needs of rural Southwest Washington residents are growing at a staggering rate," said Community Foundation president Richard Melching. Unemployment, evictions and foreclosures are all up — and so is the demand for services from nonprofit agencies and charities. That demand has grown 15 percent in Clark County, 8 percent in Cowlitz County and 9 percent in Skamania County in the past year, according to the Community Foundation.

A food bank in Stevenson will be able to replace an aging refrigeration unit; seven food banks in Cowlitz County will get general support through the Lower Columbia Action Council; and La Center will get money for the new food bank — be it stationary, mobile or both.

Food on wheels

The grant could help the Lewis River Mobile Food Bank, a grass-roots effort started by some parishioners at the Highland Lutheran Church northeast of La Center, get the van it's been hoping for.

"I'm excited," said organizer Janet Borst, who hadn't heard the news until The Columbian called her Thursday.

Last Saturday, Borst said, she transported 3,000 pounds of food in her half-ton pickup truck from the Clark County Food Bank warehouse in Hazel Dell up to her garage near La Center.

"It was a perilous journey," she said. Fifteen volunteers showed up that day to sort the goods into four-person and two-person food boxes, which now take up most of her garage space, she said.

"I'm happy to donate my garage," Borst said, "but I'd also like to put my truck away again."

The Lewis River Mobile Food Bank's plan is to make four Sunday stops, from 2 to 4 p.m., at north county locations in November. They are:

n Nov. 1: Fire District 10, 37604 N.E. 119th Ave., View.

n Nov. 8: First Independent Bank, 305 N.W. Pacific Highway, La Center.

n Nov. 15: Amboy Middle School, 22115 N.E. Chelatchie Road, Amboy.

n Nov. 22: Yacolt location to be determined.

Organizers want to gauge the depth of need in north county, and are encouraging people to show up even if they're not in need now but think they could be later.

The money for Southwest Washington is one of 12 grants the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced for Washington state on Thursday. Nine other community foundations received similar grants; the Washington State Library will be able to increase programs for job seekers; and the LAW Fund will be able to provide more legal services to people facing economic hardship or family crises.

The Community Foundation, based in Vancouver, has brought \$84 million to the local community since it was started in 1984.

Comments