Her first time at HB Mercado Certified Farmer’s Market in Huntington Beach, Victoria Ramirez pushed a stroller by the stands, not sure whether she’d buy anything. But before she knew it, she was busy loading bags of produce into the stroller, cramming fruits and vegetables under the seat and even fitting a few items on the canopy.

“I buy a lot,” Ramirez said, sounding a little surprised during a recent visit as she ticked off her items, which totaled $20 and included oranges, apples, chiles and tomatoes. And she bought it all with a check from the federal Women, Infants, and Children program earmarked for use at farmers markets.

The ability to pay using public assistance funds is one important way to make farmers markets, which traditionally have served high-end customers, an option for lower-income shoppers. It’s one of the strategies that HB Mercado is using to bolster access to fresh produce for residents of the Oak View neighborhood.

Sometimes known pejoratively as the “Slater Slums,” Oak View lies within walking distance of HB Mercado, held at Ocean View High School from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

Four months after opening, the market is small but lively, with 14 vendors and a modest though steady stream of customers. If HB Mercado succeeds, it could go a long way toward improving one community’s daily diet, which might make a difference in obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases.

But success is far from guaranteed. Farmers markets fail almost as often as they spring up, according to research by Oregon State University. Markets intended for low-income customers are especially challenging, experts say. Goods can be pricey, and customers have less to spend. In addition, farmers need to make a profit, which depends on a high volume of customers.

“It takes time to get shoppers,” said Ashley Hiestand of Sustainable Economic Enterprises of Los Angeles, which runs farmers markets serving low-income shoppers in LA. “We work with small, family farmers sometimes traveling great distances. … We have to make sure it’s worth it for the farmers.”

Vela, a community organization
contracted to manage HB Mercado, is generating traffic through Face-
book and fliers and by sending representative to schools and com-munity events. Juan Gonzalez, Vela’s market manager, fosters a lively
atmosphere with the help of raffles, face painting, people in vegetable
costumes, music and a food stand memorable for its cactus tacos.
Vela also invites community
groups to set up tables and has ar-
ranged for medical and dental vans
to treat patients on site. But Gon-
zales said he needs to attract more
Oak View residents to the market.
“It’s been a challenge. There are
some misconceptions that pricing is a little high,” he said. “Our customers buy products from the local grocery store not knowing the quality. Everything we have is fresh. We’re still trying to educate and ad-
dress these misconceptions.”
Likely for many of the market’s
customers, HB Mercado vendors
offer many reasonable options.
Examples on a recent day included
$1 for a sizeable bag of tomatoes,
strawberries at $2 a basket, six Ruby
Star grapefruit for $2 and a bag of
three peppers (green, red and yel-
low) for $1.
But what really pleased shopper
June Vallace of Huntington Beach
was three bunches of asparagus for
$5 — not the tough, thick stalks
but, as her friend Kathy Oliver said,
“the yummy, skinny stuff”
Both Vallace and Oliver have
begun making it a habit to stop by
HB Mercado on Saturdays.
“We love it,” Vallace said. “We’ve
been here before. We come for the
tacos. They have beautiful produce.”
Shoppers from outside Oak View
such as Vallace and Oliver are vital
to the market’s success, explained
Josefa Alofaituli, executive director
of the Oak View Renewal Partner-
ship, a nonprofit organization that
launched the market. The market’s
location on well-traveled Warner
Avenue makes it highly visible
to Huntington Beach traffic, so it
draws a cross section of residents.
“That’s part of our philosophy,”
Alofaituli said, echoing recommen-
dations by experts to put markets in
locations that can serve both low-
and middle-income customers.
But the benefits of such a loca-
tion can create a dilemma as well.
“It’s a challenge to serve the specific
population right there in Oak View
but also try to encourage people
from the surrounding area to shop
at the market,” said Gillian Poe of
the OC Food Access Coalition.
According to Hiestand, who
manages a farmers market in Watts,
low-income shoppers are more
likely to need staples than exotic
and expensive offerings. And the
food must be culturally appropriate,
she and other experts say.
Gonzalez knows this well and
regularly talks to Oak View resi-
dents about their shopping needs.
“I’m mostly hearing, ‘When are you
going to bring in chile serrano?’”
Gonzales said. Oak View residents
also want fresh bread and tortillas,
which are in the works.
By contrast, shoppers from
outside Oak View have requested
organic products, which demand a
more expensive and time-consum-
ing certification process that leads
to higher prices.
As in many farmers markets,
vendors at HB Mercado pay part of
their proceeds to market organizers
such as the Oak View partnership,
which raised donations to start the
market. The plan is to break even
within a year of opening so that rev-
venues can go to the partnership as
well as to Ocean View High School,
which is providing the space.
HB Mercado is like any venture
in which you invest capital and
effort and hope to recoup costs
and generate revenue, said retired
executive and philanthropist Jack
Shaw, president of the Oak View
partnership. But the market serves
a purpose beyond putting healthful
food on the table, important as that
may be, he said.
It also helps break down Oak
View’s status as a nearly hidden,
little-known pocket of poverty in
what is known as “Surf City.”
“The greater Huntington Beach
community should know Oak View
exists,” he said, “and Oak View
should be part of the greater com-
munity.”
Jack Shaw
President and CEO
Oak View Renewal Partnership

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