

# Farmers market returns to fairgrounds

El Mercado Popular to  
remain open Saturdays  
at Pajaro Valley High  
Farmers' Market

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WATSONVILLE — A popular outdoor market will return to the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds on Feb. 3.

Patricia Rodriguez founded El Mercado Popular at the fairgrounds in 2009, but has operated the business weekends at Pajaro Valley High School since August 2011.

The shift back to the fairgrounds on Sundays is expected to boost finances at the cash-strapped facility by as much as \$100,000 a year and allow Rodriguez to continue growing the market.

The market will continue to operate Saturdays at the high school, but Rodriguez said it's about "maxed out" there.

"I'm looking into the future," she said. "I started out with a few ideas and I'm building on them. I'm really trying to make this a community event."

The event includes a certified farmers market, a flea market, prepared food vendors and space for nonprofits. At the fairgrounds, Rodriguez also will have use of the Harvest Building from 2-5 p.m. Sundays for live music. The idea, she said, is to provide a safe, affordable venue for families.

"It's almost like a mini-festival," she said.

According to a fair report, the event was a money-maker during its last tenure, generating \$16,000 in rental fees between August and December 2009 and growing to \$123,000 between January and August 2011. But Rodriguez moved to the campus amid uncertainty about the renewal of her month-to-month lease.

The leadership team that took over management of the fairgrounds a year ago made it a priority to reinstate a market, and after reviewing one other proposal, reached an agreement with Rodriguez on a five-year lease with an option to renew for another five years.

The fairgrounds will be paid \$750 per day, plus 15 percent of the parking fees. Rodriguez charges \$5 per car. The Heritage Foundation, which supports capital improve-

## FAIR

Continued from B1

ments at the fairgrounds, will sell beer and keep all the proceeds.

"It's really an important piece of business to the fair," said Dave Kegebein, who leads the fair's management team. "It brings a lot of people to the fairgrounds, and is really a great opportunity for weekly activities as well as the revenue stream."

Rodriguez said she's hoping to continue contributing at the current levels to the school as well despite the reduced use.

She pays \$750 for each day she operates at the campus, generating about

\$40,000 a year for the school's sports program.

Athletic Director Robert Gomez said the money pays for referees and league fees, and any loss would be difficult to absorb.

Brett McFadden, Pajaro Valley Unified's chief business officer, praised Rodriguez as a tenant and a savvy and generous businesswoman. He said the move was necessary to keep the business viable.

"I hope she can maintain her level of commitment (to the school), but if she wants to renegotiate that, I'm going to sit down at a table with her and work it out," McFadden said. "It's in our best interests that we continue to work well together."