

Potential Public Role in Support of Farmers Markets

Introduction

The City of Portland is conducting a study examining the capacity of Portland's farmers markets to expand into the future, looking at both local consumer demand and regional farmer / vendor supply. To complete the study, the City has commissioned the *Farmers Market Collaborative*, a consultant team led by Barney & Worth, Inc.

As an element of the study (Task 6), the consultant team is assigned to identify and evaluate appropriate role(s) for the City of Portland and other public agencies to serve in support of local farmers markets. Specific questions include:

What steps are other communities taking to stimulate farmers markets and direct-market food sales?

Are there efficient and effective methods enabling Portland to promote new markets and enhance sales? How can Portland prioritize market development, especially in underserved areas?

To find answers, the consultant team:

- Surveyed five peer communities and reviewed national literature to confirm the nature of support by cities and other public agencies for farmers markets across the nation.
- Contacted managers of fourteen Portland farmers markets, inviting their suggestions on potential city / public role(s).
- Surveyed 52 farmers / producers – including some who are not currently in markets – to learn more about factors affecting their participation and success in farmers markets.
- Interviewed City of Portland staff who interface with farmers markets.
- Reviewed past analyses of barriers / challenges confronting local farmers markets, and possible City of Portland support / assistance.

The next sections outline:

1. A comprehensive inventory of city / public agency support – already in place, or being considered – in communities around the U.S.
2. An overview of current support given to local farmers markets by the City of Portland and other agencies
3. An examination of current market challenges, and possible future role(s) to be played by the City of Portland and / or other agencies to address these issues
4. Recommendations for the City of Portland's consideration for possible future assistance to markets

Public Agency Support for Farmers Markets Across the U.S.

The accompanying table shows the results of a national search to inventory the various types of assistance (supportive policies and activities) currently offered to farmers markets or being considered by cities and other public agencies across the U.S. Categories of city / public agency support include:

- Facilities
- Transportation
- Technical assistance
- Marketing & promotions
- Management
- Funding

Farmers market systems were surveyed in five peer communities: Sacramento, San Francisco Bay area, Santa Monica, Seattle and St. Paul (MN). In all of these communities, farmers markets are well established and enjoy significant support from their city governments and also from other public agencies. These cities clearly want their markets to succeed, and have “signed on” to play a pivotal role as market partners. In some cities, full operation of the farmers markets is in the hands of the city. However, city government support and assistance seems to be important whether the farmers markets are city-sponsored or organized independently. The types of city assistance cited most frequently by market managers in the peer communities are shown below.

City Assistance to Farmers Markets in Peer Communities*

Free/affordable sites
Signage
Marketing
Trouble shooting
Management
Promote other direct market channels
Street closures
Site assessment
Provide market buildings
Parking
Waste/recycle/compost
Security
Funding/grantsmanship
Technical assistance
Inter-market coordination
Institutional purchases
Advising start-ups

*Listed in order of frequency

Current City of Portland Support for Local Markets

The City of Portland supports farmers markets through the Office of Sustainable Development (OSD). An OSD staff member currently serves – unofficially – as the City’s liaison with farmers markets, and a small portion of this person’s time (about 10%) is allocated to market-related tasks. However, no City staff person is formally designated or assigned to support the markets.

The Portland Multnomah Food Policy Council, staffed by OSD, has also been involved with the markets (see below).

The range of City of Portland assistance provided currently or in the past to farmers markets includes:

- Create, maintain database of participating farmers
- Troubleshooting: parking, street closures, other
- Technical assistance: solid waste, recycling, composting, green building, energy, utilities
- Inter-market cooperation, training
- Web information
- Central contact for web inquiries
- Education / marketing outreach
- Research
- Technical assistance to startups
- Food Policy Council
- Research on zoning issues (Food Policy Council)
- Research on town centers and Diggable City project (Food Policy Council)

Public Agency Assistance to Farmers Markets

National Scan

Facilities

- Free / affordable sites
- Site assessment
- Zoning to accommodate farmers market activities
- Market buildings, weather protection
- Site infrastructure (water, electricity, restrooms)
- Technology: provide electronic benefits transfer, credit / debit card equipment, processing
- Solid waste, recycling, composting service
- Signage: directional, site signage
- Shared kitchen for small-scale food processing and packaging

Transportation

- Parking: on-street, off-street
- Traffic: street closures, barricades, traffic management, meter hoods for vendor access

Technical Assistance / Services

- Permits / regulations
- Security
- Feasibility studies
- Market research
- Applied research
- Seminars and training
- Professional development
- Business plan development
- Troubleshooting, mentoring
- Advising / coaching market startups
- Pilot projects: “green” farmers market, green building, energy-saving projects, rainwater catchment systems
- Economic impact studies

Marketing & Promotions

- Advocacy
- Events sponsorship
- Marketing: maps, brochures, advertising, website, utility bill inserts, facebook page, marketing assistance, media / press relations
- Market promotion; spokesperson
- Development of other direct-market channels: local purchasing preference

Management

- Inter-market coordination; FM umbrella organization
- Market management assistance
- Full city operation of markets

Funding

- Direct funding
- Grantsmanship
- Startup capital
- Micro-lending; training micro-entrepreneurs
- Conduit for charitable contributions
- Institutional purchases

The City responds to market requests, but does little proactive outreach to the farmers markets. In some cases, the Office of Sustainable Development has offered services to markets which were accepted initially – but never utilized (perhaps because market staff were too busy). In fact, some market managers seem barely aware of the City of Portland's supportive efforts.

Several other public agencies assist Portland's farmers markets. Most prominently, the Small Farms Program at OSU Extension Service provides the markets with technical assistance, training and market studies. The program also organizes an annual direct-market conference that draws farmers and market managers, and hosts a statewide listserve – a self-help tool that links market managers across Oregon in a web-based advisory network. This important resource offered by OSU is available to complement whatever assistance can be provided locally to the markets.

Public subsidy for farmers markets varies widely among cities. The City of Portland treats the markets largely as independent, private businesses that sometimes use (rent) public facilities. Little or no City subsidy is provided. At the other extreme, some farmers market systems are funded and/or operated by their city governments.

Addressing Challenges for Farmers Markets

Portland's farmers market managers were surveyed and asked to identify their greatest challenges. At the top of their list of challenges is finding permanent sites of sufficient size. On the whole, market managers rate their current sites as "fair" to "good." However, few of the markets have secured permanent sites. Many are operating on a year-to-year basis, without an ownership interest in their site – or even a long-term lease. For some markets, space constraints are already a problem.

Other prominent challenges for local markets include the desire for a solid organizational structure and sustainable financial foundation. Even the strongest, most "successful" markets find themselves struggling to maintain their current position. Most market managers are caught up in the daily demands of their jobs. They wear so many hats – frequently as one-person offices – that they could use an array of City and other support in expanding and stabilizing farmers markets. Any help would be appreciated. In Portland, farmers market employees generally receive below-average pay and few have full benefits.

City support of the markets can be effective even if it remains locally focused and of modest scale. Many of the challenges confronting farmers markets and their producers at the regional and national level do not seem particularly well-suited to be addressed or overcome through city government's assistance: national agriculture policy, farm production trends, farm labor issues, etc.

Developing Markets in Underserved Areas

The consultant team studied the current distribution of farmers markets in Portland and neighboring communities to determine if some neighborhoods may be "underserved." Market assessments by Oregon State University and the farmers markets have shown that up to 75% of customers for Portland's farmers markets live within a two-mile radius of their neighborhood market. Taking into account these primary trade areas, there are three areas of Portland which appear to be underserved: Outer Southeast, Cully-Concordia (Northeast) and St. Johns (North).

These market deficiencies have been recognized through various other community planning and organizing projects. A volunteer citizen group is underway now organizing a St. Johns farmers market, potentially to open in summer 2009. In recent years, a community development organization explored the feasibility of a farmers market in the Cully neighborhood – but didn't move forward. There is no known market organizing effort in East Portland, although a farmers market recently appeared in a strategic assessment of the area's deficiencies (for the East Portland Plan).

Within the three market-deficient areas, the consultants identified and evaluated seven potential sites. The candidate sites were evaluated using a "Site Evaluation Tool" (SET) developed by Farmers Markets America in collaboration with local market managers. Three sites – two in St. Johns along with one in Cully-Concordia – are highly ranked according to the SET methodology.

Recommendations

The City of Portland has been generally supportive of farmers markets and has provided some assistance as markets have emerged and grown over the past decade. Yet, the City's stance has remained largely – if not consistently – *laissez faire*. City officials acknowledge the value and multiple benefits of farmers markets – but there is no policy that sets forth the City's position on markets, and no City funding for markets.

The simplest step is for the City to designate a staff person to serve as the City's central contact and liaison to the farmers markets, and allocate sufficient time to serve effectively in this capacity. The Office of Sustainable Development's food-related programs seem to be an ideal place in the City organizational structure to take on this assignment.

Next, City government should focus attention on assisting markets to secure permanent sites, offering suitable locations and needed signage, infrastructure and amenities. The lack of a permanent site is the greatest challenge underscored by most farmers market managers. If Portland isn't able to launch an initiative designed specifically to help farmers markets secure sites, it may be possible this pursuit could be linked to some of PDC's redevelopment projects, or connected to other City initiatives through the Office of Sustainable Development, Bureau of Planning, Office of Transportation, Bureau of Parks and Recreation – all of these agencies have assisted the markets at some time. A permanent farmers market site could become the vibrant heart of a town center, or might be co-located with (and double as) a public plaza, park, or parking lot.

In a related matter, the City of Portland should also attempt to determine how best to accommodate farmers markets within the land use zoning structure. The simplest solution may be to specifically list farmers markets as an allowed use in more zones. This opportunity could be addressed through a zoning update that is currently underway, or in the *Portland Plan* – the City's two-year project that will update zoning policies of the citywide Comprehensive Plan.

These recommendations echo the advice offered by the Food Policy Council in October 2003:

1. *Create policies supporting use of public spaces for farmers markets. Review site requirements for farmers markets (e.g., surfaces, utilities) when developing public spaces. Designate a city staff person to coordinate with farmers markets.*

2. *Plan for a network of permanent market sites throughout Portland and Multnomah County. Explore creating multifunctional urban plazas in designated town centers.*

Assistance by the City of Portland could also be expanded fruitfully to include:

- Give public recognition to farmers markets for helping define Portland's acclaimed livability, and for their unique and positive contributions to the City's quality of life.
- Develop an explicit policy statement that spells out the City's role vis a vis farmers markets.
- Provide free use of City property for markets; offer tax incentives for private property owners donating free market sites.
- Assist / advise startup markets in underserved and / or low income communities, with matching grants and other tools.
- Offer grants to cover market fees for low-income vendors.

These and other new contributions to the markets should be made in accord with an updated City of Portland *Farmers Market Policy* that articulates the rationale for an expanded City role in sustaining the markets. This new policy doctrine would provide Portland with an opportunity to reshape its current approach, in keeping with the support being given to farmers markets in other communities.