Planning for a Farmers’ Market in Downtown Bowling Green

Introduction
The Downtown Foundation, Inc. in Bowling Green, Ohio undertook the project of relocating a farmers’ market in the Downtown Bowling Green Special Improvement District in order to create growth and stability for the market while strengthening ties between area farmers, downtown businesses, and local governments. The Downtown Foundation received a project grant from the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at Ohio State University. The Center’s mission is to enable communities to achieve farmland protection policy and food and agricultural economic development priorities by partnering on innovative projects and providing needed programming.

In order to establish a thriving Downtown Farmers’ Market in the new location, the Foundation implemented seven steps:

1. A community asset map and location survey
2. A vendor survey
3. A community survey
4. A downtown business owner survey
5. Focus groups
6. Best practices research
7. Operational recommendations

Step 1: Community Asset Mapping and Location Survey
Two meetings were held in late 2011 and early 2012 to identify the best site for the market. The Downtown Bowling Green Design Committee partnered with the Downtown Farmers’ Market manager to develop evaluation criteria, and propose and rank potential market sites. The recommendations developed from that process were shared with the Directors of the Downtown Bowling Green Special Improvement District, who approved the siting of the market in the location ranked top priority by the group.

Step 2: Vendor Survey
A survey was distributed to all 2011 market vendors to assess vendor needs and perceptions of the Downtown Market. With over half of the vendors participating, responses indicated that vendors were generally satisfied with community response to the market, volunteer support for the market, as well as the market’s staff and promotional work.

In keeping with the perceptions of the Downtown Foundation, vendors were generally dissatisfied with parking and visibility at market’s previous location. In addition, vendors reported that they believed the ideal size of the market to be between 25 and 40 vendors, while suggesting that the addition of vendors of soap, meat, eggs, cooking related products, and more produce would strengthen the market.

**Step 3: Community Survey**

A community survey was distributed via community gatherings and an online survey platform. The survey received 204 responses between December 2011 and August 2012, with 175 of the responses coming from the online survey, therefore representing self-selected respondents.

The survey identified the majority of market customers as residents living in small households within the city limits who regularly turn to the local newspaper for information. The respondents indicated that they spent 15-30% of their weekly food budget at the Downtown Market, and that their reasons for shopping at the market included the quality of foods offered, supporting the local economy, finding good deals, and taking advantage of the children’s activities, music, and informational programs.

However, respondents to the community survey reported dissatisfaction with the mix of products offered, including lack of organic vendors. Respondents also indicated that they would like to see an increase in size and amenities offered at the market, providing support for relocating the market to a more spacious and visible location. In short, the community survey lent support to the Downtown Foundation’s efforts to identify an alternative market location and add vendors, some of which represent novel product categories.

**Step 4: Downtown Business Owner Survey**

Nine downtown businesses responded to a survey of downtown business owners, representing a response rate of 12%. While the survey indicated general support of the market from downtown businesses, the low response rate indicated to the Downtown Foundation that relations between the downtown market and local businesses could be strengthened. The Downtown Foundation suggested communicating with local businesses about the market’s promotional activities that increase traffic to the downtown area as a means of strengthening the market-business relationships. Some of these promotional strategies include an open invitation to businesses to promote themselves at the market, and the market’s Frequent Farmers card, which allows frequent visitors to the market to redeem incentive cards for Downtown Dollars, which can be spent at participating local businesses.

**Step 5: Focus Groups**

The Downtown Foundation convened focus groups to understand how the market might serve as a more welcoming and inviting environment for its customers. Through these focus groups, the Downtown Foundation learned that their customers are highly motivated to shop locally, be informed about the foods they are consuming, and make choices that positively affect the environment.
In response to these concerns, the Foundation is considering increasing strategies that will better merge local business activities with farmers’ market activities, such as the Frequent Farmers card or sidewalk sales that occur in conjunction with the market. In addition, the Foundation would like to pursue marketing strategies that foster customer engagement with market products, such as cooking demonstrations and recipe contests. Finally, to address environmental concerns, the Foundation proposes marketing around the environmental benefits of shopping local and increasing the share of organic products at the market.

**Step 6: Best Practices Research**

In order to learn more about enhancing the market, representatives of the Downtown Foundation attended the 8th International Public Markets Conference. Major topics covered at the conference included the role of public transportation in the health of markets and their communities, as well as the role of public space in creating vibrant communities. In order to leverage the market as a means of enhancing the Downtown Bowling Green Special Improvement District, market management is committed to creating more welcoming public spaces, increasing public programming, and advocating for a more comprehensive public transportation system in Bowling Green.

In addition to these long-term goals, market management is focused on data collection and evaluation as a means of displaying the economic impact of the market in the community. The conference alerted the Downtown Farmers’ Market managers to techniques for collecting confidential sales data from vendors that will ultimately be aggregated and shared for public benefit. The market will also begin administering a short customer survey in the coming season that will record customers’ zip code, gender, spending habits at the market, and likelihood of patronizing other downtown establishments, as well as whether or not customers are motivated by the market to visit the area. Market management plans to share the information gathered with key community stakeholders, such as city and county officials, Bowling Green State University, producers, and downtown businesses.

With regards to increasing the variety of vendors at the market, the conference informed market management of a number of techniques to showcase the market as a desirable option for farmers, while cultivating more truck farmers and food vendors. In order to do this, market management is considering such strategies as hosting incubator tents for budding vendors, hosting training seminars on topics such as merchandising and good business practices, creating a curriculum with the local high school and Future Farmers of America chapters, and collaborating with the Center for Innovative Food Technology.

The market also plans to focus more on fundraising and advocacy. The conference highlighted the importance of a concerted public relations effort in ensuring long-term viability for the market. This effort may include thoughtful delineation of the role of the market in the community, cultivation and inclusion of community opinion leaders, creation of a strategic public relations plan and coherent brand identity for the market, as well as ongoing dialogue with community members and vendors about their wants and needs in relation to the market.

**Step 7: Operational Recommendations**
Going forward, the Downtown Foundation will be guided by a set of operational goals and recommendations to enhance the role of the market in the community. The operational recommendations developed by the Foundation are listed below.

1. Document and communicate the economic benefits of the Market. This initiative should be immediately undertaken.
   a. Design and implement a vendor economic reporting system, with vendor input in the design phase.
   b. Make customer counts a part of every Market session.
   c. Survey Market customers about spending patterns on a regular basis.
   d. Survey downtown businesses at least twice each Market season.
   e. Include the results in our annual reports, and devise a publicity program around the information to include press releases, reports to local government agencies and presentations to other local organizations.

2. Develop the Market’s staff to provide better operational support. This is an immediate priority.
   a. Analyze current staffing to identify how it does and does not help us achieve our goals for the Market.
   b. Formalize the roles played in Market staffing by the existing Downtown Bowling Green staff.
   c. Create job descriptions and salary requirements for needed positions.
   d. Identify and secure funding for the additional positions.

3. Set revenue targets for the Market that will enable us to make needed improvements to the operation in terms of infrastructure, staffing and economic impact. Devise plans to reach those targets which may include a mix of sponsorship funding, vendor fee increases, grant funding, community based support and merchandising.
   a. Analyze financial data from the last three seasons looking specifically at infrastructure, staffing, programming and promotion.
   b. Develop cost/benefit data for different expense categories.
   c. Cost out the desired improvements and prioritize based on cost/benefit data.

4. Find ways to extend the economic impact of the Market to the wider downtown business community. Some of these initiatives can and should begin immediately, others will take time to develop and implement.
   a. Continue the Frequent Farmer program begun at the end of the 2012 season. Mark the gift certificates earned as part of the program so they can be identified when they are redeemed by downtown businesses.
   b. Encourage Market vendors to spend the Downtown Dollars they take in at downtown businesses rather than redeeming them at our booth.
   c. Develop, in advance, a calendar of regular and special events that are promotable. This may include a monthly schedule of Sidewalk Sales. Work closely with businesses on promotion.
   d. Brainstorm ideas with downtown business owners.
   e. Do regular cross promotion between the downtown businesses and the Market. This may include some of the ideas heard at the Markets Conference, during our focus groups, or in the brainstorming sessions with business owners.

5. Work to broaden our customer base while retaining the loyalty of current customers. Our current regular customers are mostly older “townies,” and we want to reward them for their loyalty. We also want to achieve better penetration into the BGSU student and
faculty markets and also into the wider county area.
   a. Create promotional materials that the vendors can distribute
   b. Create a PR and promo list for Market messaging. Include information about
      recipients and specific topics so that messaging is consistent and ubiquitous.
   c. Refine our programming and promotional offerings to focus on the themes of
      localism, food, and environmental issues identified during our focus groups.
      Seek out appropriate new audiences for these messages.
   d. Continue the Frequent Farmer program, and brainstorm other reward programs
      for customers.
6. Continue adding vendors until we reach an optimum size. Broaden the product mix to
   include appropriate yet diverse items.
   a. Step up networking efforts in the agricultural community
   b. Work on developing young and/or inexperienced vendors and look for funding
      to help finance vendor development programs.
7. Build out the Market’s physical infrastructure to make the Market more visible and a
   more comfortable experience for vendors and customers.
   a. Make longer-term arrangements to secure the current venue and to allow for
      future expansion at this site.
   b. Implement short term, portable improvements such as additional seating and
      shade for visitors, as well as additional signage, immediately
   c. Generate a comprehensive list of improvements to be implemented with
      estimated costs.
   d. Seek out funding and work out logistical considerations for more permanent
      improvements.

Find Out More
To learn more about how the Downtown Foundation, Inc. applied its Community-Based
Agricultural Economic Development planning grant from the Center for Farmland Policy
Innovation to develop a farmers’ market in the Downtown Bowling Green Special Improvement
District, contact:

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