



February 2012
Volume 50 Number 1
Article Number 1IAW3

[Return to Current Issue](#)

Extension's Role in Developing a Farmers' Market

David Civittolo

Extension Education and Research Area Leader, Western Reserve
Extension Educator, Community Development
Ohio State University Extension, Medina County
Medina City, Ohio
Civittolo.1@osu.edu

Abstract: Interest in access to local food is increasing. Communities of all types and sizes have volunteers interested in creating farmers' markets. Extension can play an important role in the development of farmers' markets because it is ideally suited to organize and coordinate these volunteer energies. By helping community volunteers focus their efforts, Extension enabled volunteers, community leaders, and residents to realize the benefits of creating a farmers' market. This article discusses a process for developing a community farmers' market and the roles that Extension has played.

Introduction

Farmers' markets have become more common throughout the United States, and more communities are now interested in their development (USDA, 2010). The resurgence in farmers' markets is good news for consumers, communities, and farmers (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1994). Outlets for locally produced foods provide more than just the freshest possible food, they also help:

- Establish connections between consumers and food producers
- Provide additional income source for farmers
- Serve as a tool for community development (Abel, et al., 1994).

Extension has a long history in leadership capacity development and in engaging volunteers. Thus, it can play an important role in fostering development of community farmers' markets.

History

In the 1980's, the county commissioners initiated efforts to develop a local farmers' market at the request of local farmers who were unable to sell their produce locally and others who wanted the opportunity to increase sales of their goods. After a few years, the market closed due to a lack of leadership, organizational structure, and the revenue necessary to operate. In 2004, local farmers met with county commissioners to ask for assistance in developing a farmers' market again.

The county commissioners asked Extension to lead and develop a committee to study the merits of creating a farmers' market. Extension was asked to lead the committee because of the relationship with the farming community as well as Extension's background in economic development. While the county commissioners viewed a farmers' market as a community event, Extension viewed the market as an economic development tool to increase revenue for the participating farmers.

The Role of Extension: Planning and Educating

Key stakeholders were invited to a meeting to determine interest in developing the Farmers' Market. Representatives of the various stakeholder organizations were included based on the various constituent groups identified in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1.
Stakeholder Organizations and Constituents Represented

| Stakeholder Organizations | Constituents |
|---|---|
| The Chamber of Commerce | Local business community |
| City representatives | City government of farmers' market site |
| The County Economic Development Corporation | Economic Development professionals |
| The County Planning Department | Planning and zoning professionals |
| The Farm Bureau | Local farmers |
| The County Health Department | Health professionals |

At the initial meeting, the following key points were discussed:

- The economic benefits to the vendors
- The role of committee members in developing the market's business plan
- How to expand ownership of the market by bringing on additional committee members

After the group was formalized, the committee focused its efforts on determining a suitable location for the market. Basic requirements such as adequate population density, attractive space, adequate parking, and access to transportation routes were identified. The historic town square in the county seat met these basic criteria and was chosen as the market location.

According to Lev, Briggs, and Stefani-Ruff (2007), the establishment of governing rules and regulations is an effective way of guiding market efforts. So Extension encouraged the committee to establish the day,

dates, and time the market would take place. In addition, Extension facilitated the committee through the process of creating governing rules and regulations. The committee decided to begin the market the first Saturday in June and conclude the last Saturday in October. Hours of operation were from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Not long into the discussion, the group realized an operating budget would be useful in tracking and projecting revenues and expenses. The operating budget could help track the market revenue such as vendor application fees, business sponsorships, and expenses such as rent for the market location, costs of advertising, liability insurance, and entertainment costs. Having worked with others with experience in developing local farmers' markets, Extension provided resources to better inform the committee's discussion of anticipated revenues and expenditures and guided the group in the development of the operating budget.

A guiding committee, suitable location, and operating budget were important to the development of a farmers' market; however, a critical element yet to be addressed was the identification and recruitment of actual market vendors. The committee met with the local farm bureau along with using Extension's lengthy mailing list to solicit potential vendors. Once the group identified potential vendors, a mailing describing the development of the market was created and sent to them. In addition to the letter, vendors were recruited via the following methods (Chase & Winn, 1981):

- Extension newsletters
- Committee members' websites
- Word of mouth

After accepting and processing vendor applications, the committee was responsible for promoting the market. Promotion included:

- Ads in local newspapers
- Radio and television announcements
- Extension website
- Handouts at Extension educational events

Extension created the local ads, prepared announcements for the media, and met with local farmers to discuss and promote the market.

Farmers' Market Coordination

To offer stability and provide for the long-term viability of the farmers' market, the committee determined the market could benefit from regular and on-going coordination. To that end, the committee created a market manager position (Meeks & Culp, 2011). The day before the market opened, the manager distributed advertising signs, contacted vendors and entertainers, and monitored the weather forecast. The day of the market, the market manager arrived early and directed vendors to their specified locations, collected the vendors' proof of insurance, addressed customer questions, and promoted upcoming educational programs. Because of Extension's expertise in educating the public on the importance of purchasing local foods, relationships with local producers and marketing ability (Burrows, 2008), the Community Development Extension educator was identified to serve as the market manager.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Extension is uniquely positioned to help communities, organizations, and volunteer committees through the early and oftentimes most difficult stages of community development projects (Chase & Winn, 1981). In the example described here, the farmers' market has been coordinated almost entirely by volunteers. Extension was able to act as a convener of people, their ideas, and their energies. What started as an idea 7 years ago has grown to a regional farmers' market that involves 19 Saturdays annually. While farmers' markets cannot meet all the local food needs of a community, they can fulfill a valuable role in helping local vendors enhance their business and consumers gain an understanding of where local foods are produced.

References

- Abel, J., Thomson, J., & Maretzki, A. (1994). Extension's role with farmers' markets: Working with farmers, consumers, and communities. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 37(5) Article 5FEA4. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999october/a4.php>
- Burrows, M. E. (2008). Using local farmer's market to promote extension programming. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 46(6) Article 6IAW1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2008december/iw1.php>
- Chase, N. M., & Winn, H. J. (1981). Farmers' markets: An idea whose time has come...again. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 18(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1981march/81-2-a2.pdf>
- Lev, L., Briggs, S., & Stefani-Ruff, D. (2007). The growers' roundtable: Encouraging conversations about critical farmers' market management issues. *Journal of Extension*. [On-line], 45(4) Article 4TOT3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007august/tt3.php>
- Meeks, P., & Culp, K (2011). Developing a farmers' market volunteer team in lieu of a paid manager. *Journal of Extension*. [On-line], 49(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2011june/iw3.php>
- United States Department of Agriculture-AMS-Marketing Services Division (2010). Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing. Retrieved from: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&navID=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth&acct=frmrdirnkt>

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#).