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Starting a Farmers Market Feasibility Assessment Guide

*Should We Start a New Farmers Market in Our
Community?*

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Farmers Market at the Capitol, September 2009

Introduction

Are you interested in starting a farmers market in your community? Of course you are! Farmers markets are amazing places where neighbors come together to support local farmers, share camaraderie and purchase local goods. Farmers markets represent their community and the ideas therein, which can make them unique, place-making entities. One of the ways to ensure that your farmers market will live up to your desired outcomes is to first contemplate the feasibility of its existence. No matter the good intention that generates the idea of starting a market, there are a number of considerations to be mindful of in making it successful.

This guide is designed to encourage a comprehensive assessment of your community and the likelihood that it can and will support a new farmers market. Content includes:

- ✱ **The Why, Who, What, Where and When**
- ✱ **Considering other Nearby Farmers Markets**
- ✱ **Assessing Your Community**
- ✱ **Financial Considerations**

Upon finding that your community is a good fit for a farmers market, the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA) has helpful resources that will guide you in starting a farmers market.



Farmers Market at the Capitol, September 2012

The Why, Who, What, Where and When

Luckily for you, the first step in assessing the feasibility of a farmers market can be great fun! This is the time when the committee, group, organization or friends that have shown interest in bringing a farmers market to your community get to brainstorm the vision of this project. This is as simple as spending time with the *Why, Who, How, What, Where, and When* concepts. Although these ideas will be helping to shape the foundation of your particular market, it is important to realize that as you follow through the steps in this guide, you may come to find that important aspects need adjusting. You may even find that it is possible your community may not support a farmers market at this time. This is a good time to be creative, identify goals, and maintain flexibility in your thinking and planning. Let's get started.

Why?

Why are you thinking of bringing a farmers market to your community? What is your purpose or overarching reason? For example: Does your community have a shortage of



Allen Street Farmers Market, August 2010

fresh produce? Are you looking for a way to engage community members and volunteers in a project? Do you want to create a space for youth in your community? Are you looking to boost your local economy? Would you like to help farmers and food businesses succeed by giving them additional marketing opportunities? Is your parent organization looking to do community outreach? Will a farmers market enhance tourism? Why are you involved? What about starting this farmers market most energizes you?

Understanding the *Why* is vital to the creation of your market's mission statement. Hey, there's a good idea! Get your committee together and draft a mission statement for your new farmers market. It will help guide you through many details and developing market policies as you enter into subsequent planning phases. It is not necessary to define your market policies now, but as you conceptualize the feasibility, you should take note of items that you want to be sure to address. We highly recommend that you start with a shared mission in order to keep a cooperative planning process.

Who?

Who are the people that are going to be involved in starting and running your farmers market? There are many different types of governing bodies that work well for farmers markets. Some farmers markets are run by a local government and others fall under the category of a city's Downtown Development Authority (DDA). Some are started through non-profit organizations or religious entities while others are run by vendors or volunteers. You will need to think through who the potential vendor stakeholders are, who the potential shopper stakeholders are, and what community organizations need to be involved in the conversation. Will your farmers market fall under the jurisdiction of an already existing group, or will it be an entity all its own? If you need to create an "entity" to host this market, consider the legal documents required for that legal structure and governing status.

Regardless of the *Who*, it is recommended that when your farmers market comes to fruition, you create a committee, board or decision-making body to support it. Farmers market committees are important for a number of reasons. They provide group input on decision-making, they pull in a handful of committed community members to see the market into success, and they organize individuals that collectively build a solid volunteer base. Overall the structure ensures that your market represents the community's needs and engages its members and stakeholders.

What, Where and When?

What type of farmers market will work best for your community? What will this farmers market look like if we are successful? Will it be a producer-only market or will you allow out-of-state, non-local or commercially produced goods? Will it include non-food items and the work of artists? When you begin to identify the perimeters of your farmers market and identify *What* it will entail, you also need to consider the *Why*. Throughout this entire process, you will need to always go back to the *Why* to check your decision-making. Are you making decisions that support the reason you are so interested in starting a new farmers market?

The *Where* and *When* naturally go together. No matter what sort of location or structure you are considering, your market season and times will affect and be affected by it. Consider your climate and your local growing season. Will your community support a year-round market or does it make most sense to start with a seasonal endeavor?

Are there any great locations you have your eyes on? Can you ensure it is a safe environment? Is it easy to get to? Have you considered local ordinances and requirements? Municipal parks and commercial spaces likely require renting, paperwork, insurance,

zoning, emergency plans, etc. Is there a public restroom nearby, or would you need to rent a portable unit? Is there water hookup nearby? Who is responsible for trash and litter removal?

Consider transportation in your community. Is it important to locate the market in a place that is walkable and bikeable? Is the location on a bus line that runs during the proposed market hours? Are there bike racks? How about adequate parking spaces for cars?

What hours make the most sense for your location? Will it be best to host a weekend market or a weekday market? You want to be sure to contemplate a time and location that is convenient for your community. The market must be busy enough to support your vendors and have ample space and parking to make it an enjoyable shopping experience.



John Kerr biking from the East Lansing Farmer's Market

In addition, you must consider what other farmers markets operate nearby before you start a farmers market in your community. To be successful, it is essential that you consider competition between farmers markets as well as the opportunities to cooperate and cross promote. The next section covers the details you should consider about other farmers markets located nearby.

Considering other Nearby Farmers Markets

The number of Michigan farmers markets is growing rapidly, as is the competition between these markets. Not all competition is bad, and some farmers markets can operate successfully in close proximity to others. Before you start a new market, you need to consider what other farmers markets are operating nearby. Knowing where other farmers markets are in your local area will help you decide if starting a new market is appropriate. There may be an opportunity to work with and support the existing market nearby.

It is recommended that you familiarize yourself and assess other existing nearby farmers markets – those farmers markets within your county, and if you are near a countyline, add those farmers markets within a 15-mile radius. You can identify those farmers markets using the Find a Farmers Market feature online at www.mifma.org/find-a-farmers-market. On the following page, you will find a template to help you take a systematic approach to assessing nearby farmers markets. Completing the assessment for each of the farmers markets operating in close proximity to your potential market will not only keep you cognizant of what is happening in your community, but more importantly, it will tell you what is NOT happening in your community. When you are able to identify the needs that aren't being met, you have found the niche that ensures your new market's success!



A good rule of thumb is that your market should be at least two miles from another farmers market in an urban setting and 15 miles from another in a rural setting. Remember, this is a general rule of thumb, not a hard decree. Assessing other nearby farmers markets will give you a clearer picture of what your community will support. During your assessment, you will consider:

- * Location and time of operation
- * Product availability
- * Market accessibility
- * Forms of payment accepted
- * What you like and what you don't like



Farmers Market Assessment Tool

Farmers Market:
Location:
Distance from Proposed New Market:
Season Start Date:
Season End Date:
Days and Hours of Operation:
Product Availability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Fresh fruit<input type="checkbox"/> Fresh vegetables<input type="checkbox"/> Meat<input type="checkbox"/> Poultry<input type="checkbox"/> Dairy<input type="checkbox"/> Baked goods<input type="checkbox"/> Ready-to-eat foods<input type="checkbox"/> Cut flowers<input type="checkbox"/> Plants<input type="checkbox"/> Artisan/craft products<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
Market Accessibility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Pedestrian friendly (sidewalks lead to the market)<input type="checkbox"/> Bike friendly (bike paths/lanes lead to the market and bike racks present)<input type="checkbox"/> Access to public transportation (bus stop at or near the market)<input type="checkbox"/> Access to parking (sufficient and convenient parking is available)
Forms of Payment Accepted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Cash<input type="checkbox"/> Debit and credit<input type="checkbox"/> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) via the Michigan Bridge Card<input type="checkbox"/> Double Up Food Bucks<input type="checkbox"/> WIC Project FRESH<input type="checkbox"/> WIC Cash Value Benefits (CVB)<input type="checkbox"/> Market FRESH<input type="checkbox"/> Summer EBT for Children (Kent County Only)<input type="checkbox"/> Hoophouses for Health<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
What you like about the farmers market:
What you think could be improved at the farmers market:

It is also important that you learn more about any farmers markets that may have failed in the area. Identify why they didn't succeed. It could be that the governing authority deemed that the community market didn't fit their objectives any longer. A market could fail because it wasn't properly promoted, and the vendors weren't making enough money. It is important to keep a balanced view of the feasibility of your new farmers market and learn from whatever mistakes or mishaps may have been made in the past. Former setbacks are valuable learning tools!

Assessing Your Community

Vital Statistics

After assessing nearby markets, take a closer look at your community. You've likely already determined your demographic basics, which will include population statistics, income levels, ethnic and cultural percentages and other useful information. If you haven't already determined these numbers you can easily gather US Census data here:

<http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. Simply enter your zip code to start the journey through your community's statistics!



Accepting SNAP benefits at the Allen Street Farmers Market

Another important source of data is the percentage of families in your community that may be struggling with hunger or food access.

Community hunger can be marginalized, and oftentimes we are surprised to learn how many of our neighbors are struggling for either consistent food sources and/or nutritious food sources. Visit

[http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-](http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx)

[meal-gap.aspx](http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx) for Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap project. You'll find an interactive map that allows you to click on your county and access local statistics relating to hunger. Once you learn more about hunger in your county, it may help guide certain decisions. Many states have programs that encourage lower income residents to make healthy food choices. Make sure that you have researched the non-traditional payment methods available. Not only does accepting alternative forms of payment help to make healthy food accessible to more people in your community, but it also supports the farmers and contributes to their economic success. Learn more about the many food assistance programs you can accept at your farmers market online at <http://mifma.org/food-assistance-partnership/>.

Understanding your community is vital to the marketing, promotion, place-making, vendor selection, and special event planning as well. After examining your community's statistics, revisit your market plan. Do you have access to vendors that offer foods and products that reflect the ethnic and cultural make-up of your community? Take another look at the *Why, Who, What, Where and When* and make sure your initial vision still matches your potential patrons.

Vendors

Do you have an idea of how many local farms are in your area? Are local farmers already committed to other farmers markets, or do they have the capacity to add your market as another retail outlet? You need to find out! It is important to identify a vendor mix that will be appealing to your community. You should involve farmers in your planning process and have a good idea of who will sell at your farmers market **before** you start a new market. To connect with farmers in your area, research agricultural support organizations. For instance, beneficial resources in Michigan include:

MIFMA - [Michigan Farmers Market Association](#)

[Real Time Farms](#)

MATA - [Michigan Agri-tourism Association](#)

[Michigan Market Maker](#)

MIFFS - [Michigan Food & Farming Systems](#)

[Michigan State University Extension](#)

MOFFA - [Michigan Organic Food & Farm Alliance](#)

[Local Harvest](#)

[Michigan Farm Bureau](#)

[Local Conservation Districts](#)

Volunteers

A successful farmers market relies on community members not only as patrons but also as volunteers, committee members, and supporters. Can you locate these "market champions" in your community? How will you reach out to them? How do you plan to engage them? Do you have the capacity to manage volunteers?



Proud MIFMA member, Stephanie Morey of Backyard Goodness, at the Farmers Market at the Capitol

Community Input

It is valuable to get your hands dirty early on and do some good old-fashioned, grassroots networking to make sure your community is as excited about a farmers market as you are. Here are a few suggestions for how to assess the feasibility of starting a new farmers market:

1. **Outreach**

Get the word out! Hang simple signs in local retail outlets. "Are you interested in starting a farmers market in our town? Email xxx@xxxx.xxx or call xxx-xxx-xxxx." Poll people about their interest at an existing community event (remember to ask permission first). Start a Facebook page gauging interest and attach a survey (many programs offer this for free, such as Survey Monkey). Address a town hall meeting. Ask to speak at local churches or other gathering spaces. Not only does this give you a better idea of what the community is looking for, it is also your most effective tool in finding committee members and creating your volunteer base, should your market come to fruition.

2. **Address Concerns**

This can be tricky. All people are different, with different needs. It is your job to listen and consider if there is a solution or common theme. If your farmers market is manifested, it is important to learn early on that there is no pleasing everyone. Managing a market is a very judicious task!

3. **Make Adjustments**

Is your location and chosen market time still relevant? Has the *Why* in your motive changed? Make sure that you utilize your findings to start a farmers market that will work for your community.

Financial Considerations

By now, you have a pretty good idea of whether your community is likely to support a farmers market. If you believe your community is in support, you will want to consider financing your farmers market before you start.

Does your organization have the capacity to sustain the market financially? There are many ways a market can be funded, but a plan should be in place. No one wants to put their effort and energy into a project that is only financially sustained for one year through a grant. Utilize your resources to ensure that your organization or your farmers market can pay for itself to continue on and grow, year after year.

You can anticipate a few standard expenses, the first being that your market will need a market manager. Many farmers markets started successfully from a volunteer base, but paying a market manager ensures accountability and a level of professionalism. A paid market manager may be able to increase the sustainability of your market, as they will have time to grow the committee, engage other volunteers, promote the market, and research funding opportunities to expand market activities and programs.

Other start-up costs may include tables, chairs, tents, promotional items (e.g., posters, handbills, banners), insurance premiums, credit card machine and space rental.

An important component to your feasibility is looking at your potential funding sources. Options include earned income (vendor fees, local government support) and contributed income (grants, corporate and individual's donations). Utilize your committee members and volunteers. People give to people. Do you already have someone in your network with fundraising experience? People are often your greatest resource!

Is Starting a New Farmers Market Feasible?

We hope this guide leaves you with a great deal to think about and many practical ways to determine the feasibility of starting a farmers market in your community. Farmers markets are wonderful entities that can feed local residents, support the regional agro-economy, act in place-making efforts, promote neighborhood pride and neighborly behavior, boost tourism, encourage local farmers and artisans, house children's activities, educate the public about seasonal, nutritious eating, and simply connect consumers and producers.

If you determine that starting a market within your area is not a great idea, don't be discouraged! Take your good ideas to the nearest market or other community project. If nothing else, the extensive community research you've done may greatly benefit an existing organization.

If you determine that your community will likely support a farmers market –congratulations! You've already put down a good foundation from which your market will grow successfully for years to come. You are now ready to move on to MIFMA's Starting a New Farmers Market Guide. We would also encourage you to attend our Market Manager Certification Program and Michigan Farmers Market Conference where you can learn more about managing a farmers market and develop a great support network. For more information, visit www.mifma.org.

About the Michigan Farmers Market Association

MIFMA was started in 2006 as a statewide association. Today, MIFMA works with its membership to maintain its mission and attain its vision.

Mission: MIFMA advances farmers markets to create a thriving marketplace for local food and farm products.

Vision: MIFMA places farmers markets at the forefront of the local food movement and works to ensure all residents have access to healthy, locally grown food and that Michigan farmers markets receive policy support.

MIFMA defines a farmers market as a public and recurring assembly of farmers or their representatives selling direct-to-consumer food and products which they have produced themselves. In addition, the market may include a variety of vendors as determined by market management. A farmers market is organized for the purpose of facilitating personal connections that create mutual benefits for local farmers, vendors, shoppers and communities.

MIFMA focuses its efforts in five areas: professional development, organizational development, policy advocacy, marketing and increasing food access.

