

Making Farmers' Markets a Central Part in Food Systems Planning: A Case Study of Urbana, Illinois

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Farmers' markets have a unique opportunity to play a leading role in local food systems. When successful, they bring a significant number of people into direct contact with fresh, healthy, local foods, providing a number of community-wide benefits. Not only does sourcing food locally lighten the carbon footprint of a community and play a large role in food security, such sourcing also promotes economic sustainability by providing jobs to residents, supporting local farmers and their enterprises, incubating new businesses, and keeping financial resources in the community. At least in part because of the national obesity epidemic, people are becoming more aware of the importance of fresh, healthy foods, which in turn contributes to the popularity of farmers' markets throughout the country. Because of all of the potential benefits they can provide a community, farmers' markets can and should play a leading role in local food systems. To do that, markets need to undertake a strategic planning process to develop a guiding vision of their position in the local food system.

Here in Urbana, Illinois, we have one of the largest and most diverse farmers' markets in Illinois. The market draws up to 10,000 visitors every Saturday during peak season—not bad for a community of 115,000 (Urbana-Champaign). Vendors at the municipally-run market sell fresh fruits and vegetables, flowers and plants, meat, dairy products, honey, baked goods, candy, and prepared foods to be consumed both on- and off-site. Local artisans offer art and craftwork such as photography, clothing, woodworking, pottery, furniture, soaps, and more. The market also includes stalls for local non-profit organizations looking to connect with the community such as the public library, animal rescue societies, a cooperative daycare, a bicycle advocacy group, and many more. In addition to all of this, the market invites performers such as traditional street buskers, classical violinists, and balloon artists to join in the fun. The market also serves as an incubator for local businesses—several have grown into regional and national businesses—and is home to nationally-recognized, award-winning food producers.



Although Urbana’s market is a major attraction in our community, contributing enormously to Urbana’s identity, vitality, and “sense of place,” it had never undergone a strategic planning process and lacked a guiding vision and goals. For Urbana’s farmers’ market to play an important role in our local food system, it needed a local food-centered mission to guide it. In early 2010, as part of a goal of environmental sustainability, the City of Urbana launched a strategic planning effort for the market to address this deficiency.

Strategic Planning Process

Undertaking a planning process for the Urbana farmers’ market was something a number of vendors had been requesting for years. So much of their livelihood was dependent on the market, yet there was no formal structure in place to guide decision-making at the market. Input gathered from extensive public meetings, Steering Committee discussions, and through the experience and knowledge of the market’s director identified an inherent conflict for the market. A survey found that the public ranked the market as a social activity nearly as highly as it ranked the direct access to local foods. Yet from the perspective of the produce vendors, the trend towards the market as a social experience hurt their sales and jeopardized their farms. A bit of background here might be helpful in explaining this conflict.

The Urbana farmers’ market began in 1978 with a handful of farmers selling their produce in a City parking lot downtown. Over the years, the founding vendors, along with a couple of additional farmers, were able to expand their farms in both the quantity and variety of fruits and vegetables they grew as the market gained in popularity. Several of those farmers (or their children) are still at the market today. Due to the size of their farms, the quantity of produce they are able to supply is significantly larger than all of the other produce vendors added together. If the market did not have those core vendors with their huge supplies, the market would not be a reliable source of produce and many of the market’s patrons would no longer do their weekly shopping at the market. Those core vendors are analogous in a way to the anchor stores at a regional shopping mall: you would not have a shopping mall if you didn’t have the anchor stores.

So as the market attracts more visitors due to its plentiful supply of fresh local foods, “going to market” becomes more of a social outing than a trip to the grocery store and paradoxically the focus shifts away from the foods that bring people there in the first place. Although more visitors mean more potential customers, many of these visitors come to the market for the social experience rather than to buy food. And, as the market is more crowded, many of the people who come to market to do their produce shopping find it too crowded. Farmers’ markets need to carefully balance these two potentially competing interests—providing a fun weekly social activity as well as an opportunity for direct access to fresh, healthy, local foods. Once this conflict was identified through the planning process, we recognized the importance of keeping direct access to local foods as the main cornerstone of the market.

A related issue we encountered had to do with problems associated with growth. In recent years, the Urbana farmers' market has grown in the number of customers attending each week as well as in the number of vendors, community groups, and performers applying for space and attending the market. The market has grown physically to accommodate this increasing participation and is close to reaching its physical limits during peak season. This raises the question as to whether there is an optimal size for a fully functional farmers' market. While expansion would seem desirable and an indication of increased market effectiveness in the local food system, it comes with dangers. Can the market support more vendors without



Aerial of Market Area

Current Market Layout

hurting existing vendors? If the market keeps accepting new vendors who compete directly with the core vendors, the core vendors may well not be able to remain at the Urbana market. In a typical free-market system, this would not be a problem as another vendor could quickly take the place of those pushed out. Unfortunately, due to the nature of small-scale local farming, it would take years for a new vendor to build up their business to the point where they would be able to replace one of the core vendors. The anchor vendors, on whom the success of the market is dependent, need to be assured of economic viability.

Aside from growth of physical space and number of vendors, growth can also mean an extension of hours of operation and/or length of season. Would extended hours and/or season be desirable from the customer or the vendor perspective? Could such an expansion be supported from a fiscal and sales perspective? Here, too, decisions made about extending the hours of operation or the length of the season could greatly impact the anchor vendors. If the market expands too quickly, the focus on local food could be diluted.

A third key issue we discovered concerns governance of the market. Currently, the market has guidelines that assist in day-to-day operations, but decisions on policy creation and enforcement, programming, and long-range planning are made by the market's director in consultation with other City staff and the City Council. Market vendors have expressed concerns that decisions about the market, which directly affect their livelihood, are made without their knowledge or input by

people not directly involved in the market. This lack of security may make vendors hesitant to invest in their farms; the concern, for example, is that they invest in greenhouses to offer more produce in early spring and late fall and the City decides to shorten the market season. Through the planning process, we identified the creation of an advisory body as a way of addressing these concerns. Not only could an advisory body provide a chain of expertise to assist with policy creation and decision-making, but it would also serve as a formal method for stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process.

For us here in Urbana, although we are not quite at the end of the planning process, we are finding there are two key outcomes. The first is the development of a mission statement and program goals for the market. The second is the creation of a market advisory board. The mission statement keeps the focus on the importance of local food, but also recognizes the community or social aspect of the Market. Here is what we came up with:

Urbana’s Market at the Square Mission Statement

“Urbana’s Farmers Market is a vibrant market that connects the community with local food growers and producers, strengthens our local food economy, provides access to local artisans, and serves as a community gathering place.”



Out of the ten program goals we have created for the market, five specifically address the issues mentioned in this article. Among them are (1) ensuring that the provision of a variety of fresh, healthy, local foods remains the cornerstone of the Market, (2) including key stakeholders in the decision-making process, and (3) planning so that future growth is consistent with the market’s mission.

As the strategic planning process for the market draws to a close, I am confident that the Urbana farmers’ market has the ability to play an increasingly important role in our local food system and that the planning process will prove instrumental in actually making that happen.

For more information about the Urbana farmers’ market, visit our website at <http://urbanaininois.us/market> or contact Rebecca Bird, Planner, at rbird@urbanaininois.us or Lisa Bralts, Market Director, at ljbralts@urbanaininois.us.