

Support the Farm Stand To Feed “Locavores” And the Economy

by Nadejda Mishkovsky

On a typical mid-March Saturday morning in Florida, Coral Gables Development Director Cathy Swanson arrives at the parking lot behind city hall by 6 a.m. After tying on her promotional apron and setting up a city information booth, she oversees the arrival of vendors at the city’s weekly farmers market.

“We started this 17 years ago because we wanted people to connect with their community on a personal basis—we wanted them to feel better about where they lived and worked, and we also wanted to encourage people to come downtown,” Swanson said. “Business owners were a little skeptical at first, but they realized that this is a huge draw, not only for local families who see it as a social event, but also for snowbirds and tourists. Now the business community actually hangs up banners announcing the annual return of the green market.”

Indeed, over the past few years, shopkeepers have included the market in their promotional efforts in order to harness the economic boost it provides to the community. “It takes a lot of careful planning,” says Swanson. Besides finding the vendors of local fruits, vegetables, plants and trees, spices, and baked goods—no small chore in a region of disappearing farmland and large-scale farming—she lines up free activities, including tai chi, gardening workshops, cooking demonstrations, and children’s activities.

For visitors to the market, the benefits of the weekly ritual are more than social. It’s also a fun way to buy healthy, fresh produce. It’s an excuse to get outside and enjoy the weather with a walk or a bike ride. People feel good because they know they are supporting sustainable agriculture

Bring the Locavores Downtown

You’ve heard of carnivores and omnivores, but what’s a locavore? The latest epicurean buzzword spotlights the trend of more Americans wanting to eat locally grown food, a preference that’s boosting the popularity of farmers markets.

and environmental protection. And, following several food-borne-illness scares last year and the unpredictable cost of fuel, residents—a growing number of whom have become “locavores”—take comfort knowing that their food was grown close to home.

Janice Benson, of the Michigan Land Use Institute’s Taste the Local Difference program, notes that “farmers markets bring us back to those important connections: to the people, the land, and the resources that make up a region. When these connections are strong, communities are strong and growing.” Such benefits have contributed to an astonishing growth in the number of farmers markets. According to the USDA, the number of farmers markets has increased 71 percent in the past decade, to about 4,700 nationwide in 2008.

MARKET PLANNING

Markets are managed in diverse ways. Some are run by farmers’ cooperatives, others by nonprofit organizations. Many are based on some form of partnership between local government and a nonprofit entity. Often local governments contribute financially or in kind, and in some cases they run the markets themselves.

For Carson City, Nevada, the coincidence of several factors in 2007 pushed the city to urgently establish a new farmers market. First, news came that a ring road would be constructed to divert high-speed traffic away from downtown. Second, a 2007 Urban Land Institute–sponsored discussion between city leaders and real estate experts resulted in practical recommendations for a latent downtown redevelopment effort.

In sales tax–dependent Nevada, it was clear that the city had to act quickly to bring more foot traffic downtown and boost local businesses. “When I got the call from the city, to see whether I would run a farmers market for them, it was March. . . . I started looking at some of the literature and discovered I should have been talking to vendors back in



By buying organic produce from a family farm at a farmers market, local residents are helping maintain a healthy environment, a vibrant community, and a strong local economy. Landisdale Farm, shown here at the year-round Clark Park farmers market located in the University City district (West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), sells certified organic produce, cheese, and beef.

December and January, telling them to grow more!” says Linda Marrone, Carson City’s market manager.

City leaders decided to concentrate on hosting the new farmers market for a 16-week period. Alongside the farmers market, the city also sponsored other downtown activities, including weekend concerts, outdoor play areas for children, gardening demonstrations, and bicycling events. Thanks to an all-volunteer downtown consortium team that took on projects from beautification to traffic management, Carson City’s downtown started to see more activity rapidly.

The city purchased a local business license and contributed a shaded public parking lot to host the market. Staff provided advertising and promotion for the new market and leased a portable storage unit on-site to facilitate weekly logistics. The city also provided dumpsters for trash and street cleaning to tidy the area for its

return to use as parking on Monday mornings.

The local government also rented and purchased such conveniences as picnic tables, insulated water pitchers, and a handicapped-accessible portable toilet with a washing area outside. Finally, since the Nevada growing season is so short and many vendors were coming from as far as four and five hours away in California, the city waived its already low vendor fees of \$20 per week, provided that vendors would commit to coming for the entire 16-week period.

“We worked tirelessly for crazy weeks” for about a year, says Tammy Westagard, assistant director in Carson City’s Office of Business Development, “but [the market has] definitely paid its own way.” She adds, “We only spent about \$50,000 on salaries, marketing, and advertising because we did as much as possible in-house. . . .” Besides covering their estimated costs,



There are almost 2 million farms in the United States and about 80 percent of them are small farms. Farmers markets are one of the oldest forms of direct marketing by small farmers. Pennypack Farm, an educational and nonprofit organization, also attends the Clark Park market held in the University City district of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The stand is often staffed by volunteers.

Westagard credits the effort with sustaining businesses in the downtown core and getting citizens excited about going downtown again. "We brought over 130,000 people downtown during the 16 weeks, and each month we had sales tax revenue of 10 percent over the previous month."

SITE SELECTION

A critical element in selecting a site for a farmers market is ensuring that people can reach it with a variety of forms of transportation. The site for the Carson City market, located near a residential area, wasn't the city's first choice, but as it ended up there were "more people biking and walking to the market than we would have ever dreamed...."

People really came and stayed," says Linda Morrone, market manager. The proximity to a residential neighborhood is particularly valuable for a weekend market, when many shoppers are coming from home.

Transportation choices and location are particularly important for low-income residents who may not have access to a car or who are likely to be more sensitive to the cost of

both fuel and food. Because many residents of low-income communities face higher rates of chronic disease than those in higher-income areas and because the risk of chronic disease can be reduced through a healthy diet, access to good nutrition is especially important. Unfortunately, many low-income neighborhoods lack full-service supermarkets that provide a variety of foods, especially fruits and vegetables.

A recent New York City Health Department study comparing Harlem with the Upper East Side found that supermarkets in Harlem are 30 percent less common, and that only 3 percent of bodegas in Harlem carry leafy green vegetables compared with 20 percent on the Upper East Side. The Food Trust, a nonprofit organization in Philadelphia that works to improve the supply of healthy, affordable food in the mid-Atlantic region, found that nearly half of poor adults (44 percent) travel outside of their neighborhoods to a grocery store, compared with 30 percent of the non-poor.

In areas where full-service grocery stores are limited, fast-food restaurants and convenience stores often

take up the slack, but they typically provide foods that are less nutritious but at higher cost. So-called food deserts or grocery gaps occur in rural and urban areas alike. To address its own food deserts, the city of New York has instituted a creative initiative that allows farmers to bring their produce closer to hungry residents. The city's new Green Carts Program, approved in early 2008, will permit up to 1,500 mobile food cart vendors to sell unprocessed produce in neighborhoods with low consumption of and limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Across the country, communities and nonprofit groups are working to tie farmers markets into their efforts to improve access to healthy food for residents of neighborhoods where fresh produce is largely unavailable. The Food Trust operates 30 farmers markets in the Philadelphia area, many of which are in neighborhoods underserved by supermarkets, grocery stores, and other fresh food outlets.

All of the Food Trust's markets accept food stamp/EBT/Access cards, WIC, and Senior Farmers Market Nu-

trition Program vouchers. Accepting diverse forms of payment is a strategic move for the markets given that U.S. Department of Agriculture contributions toward nutrition assistance programs—and to local food sources in general—will be increasing as part of the 2008 Farm Bill.

To identify strategic market locations, local governments may consider reviewing income, health, and transportation data. Making a parking lot or other publicly owned land available to a local government effort or a private partner can then provide a valuable incentive for a market to locate on a given site. Likewise, local government assistance with regulatory hurdles regarding signage or use can be helpful in getting a market started where there is a need.

MARKET EXAMPLES

In Traverse City, Michigan, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) has been running a successful farmers market on a centrally located parking lot for some 25 years. In exchange for the revenue received from vendor fees, the DDA provides awnings for the stalls and pays for the part-time market master position to promote the market and keep things working smoothly.

The DDA contributes funds to the nearby Chamber of Commerce office in order to offer shoppers the use of its bathroom, a convenience that DDA staff consider critical to the market's success. The city also updated the signs in the parking lot to indicate the market schedule, so that car owners are forewarned.

While “the market doesn’t make or lose money,” says Rob Bacigalupi, department director of DDA, “it’s still part of our [informal] economic development strategy.” That’s because when the weather is fine, the number of shoppers in this town of 15,000 is “easily in the thousands,” says Bacigalupi. A 2002 study found that a number of people who attend the market don’t otherwise come downtown. It also noted that about 25 percent of the shoppers at the market stayed down-

town to patronize other businesses.

The historic Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia, considered the fourth most popular tourist destination in the city, sells meat, seafood, poultry, produce, and baked goods to a wide range of income levels. Eleven percent of its customers are defined as low-income, earning less than \$25,000 a year.

The market is served by bus and rail lines and is located in the central business district, where walking and cycling are convenient. As a result, the market is an easy trip to combine with other destinations, and any

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transportation costs add little to the overall cost of food. Managers of the Fair Market Farm Stand, in the Reading Terminal Market, try to reach low-income residents of the region. “We’re in an excellent location [to achieve that goal],” says Sarah Cain, who co-manages the farm stand, “because every income level in the city walks through the door.”

To ensure that they are serving the entire community, all the greengrocers at Reading Terminal Market accept federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) payments, formerly known as food stamps. As farm stands across the country increasingly provide EBT scanners (or a related system) for SNAP funds, it is easier for low-income residents to purchase fresh produce for their families.

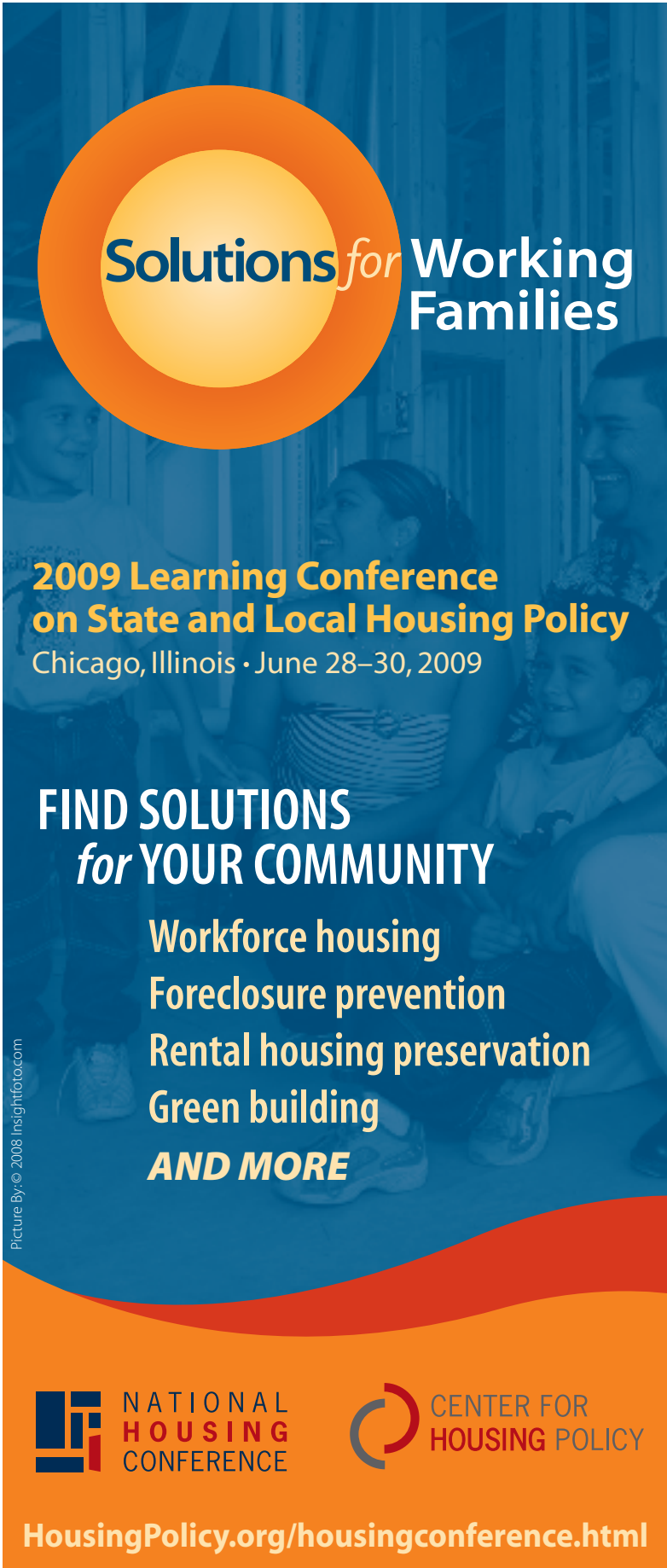
Although “there was a fair amount of paperwork involved” in getting the EBT system in place, according to Cain, “now that it’s in place, it’s just like an ATM card.” It is also common for farmers markets to accept WIC

and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons. For local government-supported farmers markets, ensuring and promoting the availability of diverse payment options can support downtown vibrancy, the market’s success, and healthy options for all residents.

Price, marketing, and education can encourage all residents of a city to take advantage of the fresh produce available at farmers markets. Mike Tabor is a 65-year-old farmer and activist who sells at several markets in the Washington, D.C., area and has a strong commitment to assisting low-income populations take advantage of the fresh produce at farmers markets. According to Tabor, there are often not enough regional and local government staff familiar enough with regional farming economics to know which farmers to choose for their markets.

This type of knowledge can have an impact on both the variety and the price of the produce, he points out. Tabor informally identifies three categories of farmers: “niche” farmers who tend to be smaller scale, “offer 12 kinds of peppers,” for example, and may be able to keep their prices higher because the product is specialized; mid-sized farmers who tend to sell some variety of in-season items at a time and might be more inclined to reduce their produce prices toward the end of the day; and large-scale farmers who specialize in bulk production.

The interests of the three groups don’t always coincide, and sometimes it can be a challenge to participate in the same market, according to Tabor. “I sold at the Takoma Park Farmers Market, and the other vendors complained,” he recalls. “My prices were too low. The other people said I should charge more because people could pay the price. But I told them, ‘I’m not a gourmet farmer. I’d rather sell at \$0.69 a pound and move the tomatoes!’” On the other hand, Tabor notes, he was “swamped” by a larger-scale farmer at another market and had to stop participating because he couldn’t compete.



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Market vendors also have an interest in engaging consumers in trying new foods. “Generations raised on fast food have a hard time knowing what to buy if they don’t have the habit of cooking,” observes Tabor. While vendors are common sources of recipe tips and information, some farmers markets also host county extension agents to provide cooking demonstrations and answer questions.

At others, visiting chefs provide demonstrations that are not only informative but also entice the public to patronize area restaurants. In Coral Gables, Florida, presentations by area master chefs are just one of a series of educational and entertainment activities that keep different demographic groups visiting the downtown market all morning.

THERE IS VALUE

Put simply, there are clear opportunities for local governments to develop or partner in the establishment of farmers markets. Building on an increasing popularity with the public, strong capacity from potential nonprofit partners, and a growing awareness of health concerns for vulnerable populations, local governments have a clear opportunity to custom-fit new farmers market initiatives to address specific community priorities.

Rising levels of support from the federal government with the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill will certainly bring about additional ways to strengthen nascent efforts. And, although it is always important to ensure healthy and affordable food to the neediest in our communities, at this time of continuing economic challenge it is more important than ever. **PM**

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