

# To Market, To Market

by Roberta Brandes Gratz

Everywhere, the rush is on to find the key to the rejuvenation of downtowns, town centers and neighborhoods. More often than not, localities look for the big splash – the stadium, convention center, entertainment complex, or some other large-scale formula – the magic bullet that never delivers on its presumed promise. Many communities are discovering, instead, a whole host of modest, inexpensive, and readily achievable alternatives. The farmers' market is one.

Farmers' markets are probably the most successful tool for the strengthening or regenerating of downtowns of any size, from the smallest Main Street to the most rubble-strewn inner city commercial center. The pulse of life draws people to markets. Providing fresh food is only part of a market's appeal. Always lively, full of human drama, rich in social interaction, and resplendent in changing color, markets offer vast opportunities for economic growth and entrepreneurial innovation.

## MARKETS TAKE ROOT

Today, across America, so many markets are taking root with great success and multiple benefits that one does not need to go far to find an example from which to learn. Twenty years ago, for example, fewer than 200 farmers' markets existed. According to the USDA's *2000 National Farmers' Markets Directory*, there are 2,863 farmers' markets operating in the

United States. This compares to 1,775 in 1994 – a 61 percent jump in just six years. Farmers' markets mostly occupy open air sites on plazas, streets, or parking lots, requiring very little site improvement and financial investment. According to the 1996 USDA *Farmers' Market Survey Report*,



*Fresh food – and fun – draws shoppers from South Philly and beyond to the Italian Market.*

fruit and vegetables alone account for more than \$1.1 billion in sales.

Markets activate every place in which they occur. They provide a road map to the regeneration of downtowns and reactivation of public places. Markets are the antithesis of stand-alone mega-projects that attract the car driving visitor in and out without adding to the strength of the place.

Markets defy categorizing. Individuality and local personality distinguish each from the other. Like authentic places, no two are alike. Markets differ by products sold. Open-air farmers' markets are the most basic and pure. They sell farm products directly from the farm. Simple shed roofs provide shelter over many farmers' markets, and can allow for other events.

Unlike single activity projects, public markets serve a broad public purpose beyond the commercial function. Stimulating social interaction, fostering new local businesses, preserving historic buildings, stabilizing downtown districts or small commercial neighborhoods – any number of public goals may combine in support of a public market.

Many markets still take place in old public market halls, buildings that often evolved at the place where producers came to sell to consumers. Bringing producers and consumers together again is a current public market goal.

Another variation is the street market. In street markets, half sheds coming off the

facades of buildings along a whole street cover the sidewalk. The classic example of a street market is the 9th Street Italian Market in Philadelphia which runs along six blocks and spills over to neighboring streets.

Each kind of market has its own rules on who can sell what – and vary according to who runs them. At New York City's Greenmarkets, for example, vendors may sell only what they grow or produce. Whatever their rules and personality, all markets can function as economic anchors and activity generators for otherwise desultory public spaces and commercial centers, drawing people downtown or to neighborhood centers who might otherwise not come.

While each market is different and

cannot be reduced to a formula, what they have in common is a comfortable, human scale. They offer an appealing alternative to the increasingly standardized retail landscape. Though first and foremost designed to serve a local clientele, markets also attract out-of-town visitors. The birth of new small local enterprises is often a spin-off of markets adding to the local economy.

At markets, shopping is an event not a chore. The scent of the season's freshest fare teases the senses. A melon seller instructs a shopper how to determine a ripe one. A farmer offers a listener a favorite recipe. Elderly patrons share stories of times past with farmers and offer words of wisdom to young cooks. Business people meet and munch while they walk and talk. People watchers watch. Shoppers sample new produce as they ponder an unresolved menu. Friends meet and mingle while strangers encounter each other on neutral territory.

The multiple levels of activity are endless. A more egalitarian activity center is hard to find. Diversity and social interaction are revived, the kind of street life and economic activity that once typified downtowns.



*Located in the heart of downtown Burlington, Vermont, next to City Hall Park, the Saturday farmers' market has steadily grown over the past few years. In response, the City recently enlarged the sidewalk area to make access easier.*

#### MARKETS ACROSS AMERICA

Markets come in all shapes and sizes and produce varied impacts. In Pasco, Washington, a market started when a local businessman, concerned about the deteriorated condition of downtown, sponsored the first Cinco de Mayo Festival inviting area farmers to participate. Success led to construction by the city of two simple, but permanent, steel sheds on

a parking lot (that remains a parking lot on non-market days).

The festival was renamed the Fiery Food Festival in recognition of Pasco's distinction as the largest area grower of chili peppers. Attendance mushroomed. Now, about 6,000 are

drawn to the market on most Saturdays; 100,000 during the May to November season. The market grosses \$1 million in produce sales and provides an outlet for 350 farms. New businesses have also grown up around it, while older ones – some once quite marginal – have been strengthened.

Recently, the market created a commercial kitchen. Farmers can rent time in the kitchen to produce value-added items, such as jams, apple products, and baked goods. This increases the opportunity for innovative entrepreneurial activity and adds to the economic diversity of the market.

The Pasco region is home to strong black, Latino and Anglo-American groups. Historically, nothing overcame the divisions among them. Until the market. Here now is a regular place where they mix and mingle harmoniously.

Across the country from Pasco in

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*The Pasco, Washington, Farmers' Market brings farmers and shoppers together each week.*

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Columbus, Ohio, the North Market, located in the gritty "Short North" warehouse neighborhood, has been a catalyst for the area's extraordinary rejuvenation. Similarly, in West Philadelphia, the Firehouse Market (housed in an abandoned 1903 red brick firehouse), helps anchor a mixed-income, racially-integrated neighborhood struggling to strengthen itself after decades of disinvestment. Similar stories can be heard in a growing number of communities nationwide.

### NEW YORK'S GREENMARKET

Union Square Park's Greenmarket in New York City exhibits all the positive attributes a city could want. The persistent vision of one man, Barry Benape, Greenmarket opened in 1976 with only a few farmers and amidst official skepticism. Union Square – an historic and once beautiful city park – was at that point the hangout for drug dealers and criminals and bereft of any vibrant urban life.

Greenmarket gradually displaced unsavory users, proving the enduring lesson that the best way to make public spaces safe and appealing is to provide an attractive activity. New restaurants started opening nearby. Proprietors and chefs found easy access to farm fresh products irresistible. The undervalued, under-occupied variety of old commercial and industrial buildings started filling up with new tenants. Young people nested. New and modest-sized businesses found office space. Night life got livelier, the neighborhood more chic. Now the area is often referred to as the restaurant district because of the proliferation of stylish, popular restaurants in the vicinity.

The city followed Greenmarket's estab-



New York City's Greenmarket triggered the revival of the Union Square area.



Loaded with produce for the Anne Arundel County, Maryland, Farmers Market. From left to right: edible soy beans, green peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, white eggplant and green beans.



Large numbers of customers enjoy shopping the large variety offered at the Anne Arundel County Farmers Market.

lishment with a major renovation of Union Square Park which officially today is used to explain the area's stupendous rebirth. But the fact is the market was the catalyst. All else followed. While Greenmarket started in Union Square, it now has 19 year round markets around the city, and another 20 seasonal ones, with 162 farmers and food producers participating.

Perhaps most significant of all is the impact of New York's Greenmarkets – and farmers' markets across the country – on the preservation of small farms. In the Greenmarket office is a giant topographical map with blue-tipped pins locating the points of origin for Greenmarket produce. The impact of the market on the farm

counties in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut is clear. Sixteen thousand acres of farmland are represented. Two-thirds of the acreage is in vegetables and the remainder in orchard fruit. Forest, pasture, and water resources producing syrup, dairy products, meat, and fish are not included, nor are greenhouses. This was Barry Benape's original goal when he started the Union Square Greenmarket. "The best part," Benape adds with great satisfaction, "is that the children of these farmers are now helping to run the farms or taking over the operation," instead of leaving altogether. Now experts all over the country acknowledge the significant

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impact on farmland preservation of farm markets.

### SUMMING UP:

The interactive web of urban consumer and rural farmer contains endless layers of positive impacts unmatched by standard renewal schemes. This is economic development at its best, stimulating a solid market-based process in which new, mostly local, businesses open in response to the market's success. The number and nature of the spin-offs can not be predicted. Some will succeed.

Others will fail. But the failures will be small and the successes potentially large. Starbucks started in a hole-in-the-wall at the Pike Place Market in Seattle.

Markets offer urban vitality, street life, and quality of life all rolled into one. No center, large or small, can be revived without genuine street life which is why inward-directed and isolating projects fail to generate vibrant urban activity.

Farmers' markets, however, are not for the planners and policymakers who insist that only costly mega-projects can make a difference. Markets make sense with the recognition that urban rejuvenation is

more about process and people than about projects. The process is organic and unfolds in modest steps, and involves a wide range of community members. But more often than not, it works. ♦

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Mintz & Gratz



## On-Line Comments

"What a thought provoking article. As the author indicates, using a farmers' market as an economic development tool seems to defy those typical 'grandiose economic development plans' of plopping down a stadium or convention center.

Plan commissioners and planners should review their zoning ordinances to ensure that 'farmers' markets' are even allowed in their communities, and if so, in the zoning districts they deem appropriate for such development. I've seen outdated zoning ordinances where these facilities are only allowed in agricultural zoning districts. In one city that I worked in, there is a thriving farmers' market adjacent to a well designed strip center with restaurant and specialty shops. Since the property is zoned for commercial use, the farmers' market is deemed a non-conforming use. Although the owners have wanted to expand or move the location of the market on the property, they have been prevented from doing so because the zoning ordinance prohibits the expansion of a non-conforming use. In another city that I worked in, 'farmers' markets' were not specially listed and were deemed to fall under the category of 'roadside stands,' again only allowed in agricultural districts."

— Theresa R. Koehler, AICP, Koehler Consulting, Peoria, Illinois

"I am a regular shopper and volunteer at my local farmers' market, in the Hollywood Neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. It is a weekly event in a parking lot that brings more street life to this area than any other event. I personally feel it, almost single-handedly, is leading to a renewed awareness of the opportunity for pedestrian-oriented, neighborhood scale retail in this area in addition to bringing

the relationship of local farm production to urban residents 'home' to the participants.

I caution, however, about describing the farmers' market as a 'silver bullet,' for downtowns. ... I feel the spaces dedicated to markets must be multiple use and that other planning efforts, programmed activities, and community development efforts are required to capitalize on the revitalization potential markets offer.

I would also note that my research with Washington State's farmers' market association, based in Seattle, indicates that farmers' markets do fail ... when they make mistakes in retailing. The primary failures are inconsistent schedules, locations, and offering of products; poor education as to product availability; poor capitalization on the qualities of the products (organic, locally grown) relative to supermarkets; poor diversity of products; high prices; and lack of good, consistent, high-quality advertising.

Communities should start small and focus on building a relationship between the farmers and the urban buyers. Adding some entertainment and food (e.g., hot dog carts, coffee stands) to a diverse range of produce and other farm products is the germ of a vital, successful farmer's market. The market is also a good place for structured community outreach and information dissemination from a variety of non-profits, and possibly city agencies."

— Sean Batty, ASLA, Portland, Oregon

"We here in the Baltimore, Annapolis, Washington D.C. megalopolis are struggling with rampant and inappropriate suburban sprawl and out-of-sight upward spiraling infrastructure costs. For the past twenty years, we have operated a farmers' market on the outskirts of Annapolis (see photos on page 11). This market is among the most successful in Maryland. Our approach to the farmers' market concept is less that of a tool for urban

revitalization but more as a vehicle to contain sprawl — to promote 'smart growth.' As long as a farmer can make a good living off the land, the farming enterprise will continue. If the farmer cannot make a good living, the land will fall to sprawling suburbia.

We find that the most important factors for a healthy farmers' market are access (both for the farmer and the customer), product variety, and good management. In other words, if it is good business for the farmer, the market will succeed."

— Helen N. Perry, Treasurer, Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Farmers' Market & Peter M. Perry, Land Use and Zoning Chair, Small Area Planning Committee for Comprehensive Rezoning (Anne Arundel County).

"I am the manager of a small farmers' market in downtown Durham, North Carolina. Our market is the result of several young women persisting in establishing a market to sell their flowers and vegetables in Durham. Two years ago the right connection was made and a public space was obtained. ... Nearly half of our customers are Latino and African American downtown residents. Durham's downtown has been viewed with fear by the white middle class residents and an effort to change that both in perception and reality has been made. I know that our farmers' market, which requires that all vendors grow what they sell, has something unique to offer the diverse community in Durham.

This year we anticipate having a youth group participate during the market season. A community gardening organization in Durham called 'SEEDS' is creating this entrepreneurial opportunity for high school kids to grow and sell produce. I am excited about this connection between food and its origin for kids."

— Elizabeth Gibbs, Manager, Farmers' Market, Durham, North Carolina