

Strategic Plan Minneapolis Farmers Market Collaborative

Background

Within the city proper, Minneapolis offers over 30 farmers markets of varying sizes – from mini-markets to some of the largest in the state. The number of farmers markets waxes and wanes from year to year. Recently, however, the overall trend has been one of significant proliferation. Most of these markets are seasonal. They are sponsored by a wide variety of organizations, from developers to private employers to membership associations to non-profit and neighborhood organizations.

What can we do to grow a more robust food economy that raises the tide of the entire community, while increasing food access for communities in need?

The presence and substantial growth in the number of farmers markets in Minneapolis reflect several key dynamics:

- Increasing consumer interest in fresh, healthy food raised on farms near the Twin Cities
- Community recognition of farmers markets as cultural assets
- Rapid expansion of farmers markets—without a corresponding increase in numbers of customers—mean nearby markets erode one another’s viability, forcing farmers to attend more markets to achieve the same level of sales
- Larger investment in farmers markets as a public health intervention to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables to reduce diet-related chronic disease
- Absence of coordinated planning or strategy among markets and the city to ensure appropriate number, size, and location of farmers markets to meet consumer and vendor needs
- Uncertainty of permanent sites for many markets, combined with human and fiscal resource constraints impacting market promotion, management, and vendor relations
- Opportunity for farmers markets to collaboratively identify challenges and develop an aligned strategy to address these issues together

Market managers and City staff recognized the significance of this rapid proliferation of farmers markets, an increasingly competitive food economy, and associated dynamics. For the last two years, market managers and City staff have met regularly, together identifying mutual challenges and opportunities. These discussions resulted in agreement among them that sustained collaboration is a valuable means to explore and develop solutions to these issues.

As this collaboration strengthened and trust grew among its members, these market managers articulated research needs to help strengthen the City’s farmers markets and saw the potential of formalizing their collaborative for longer-term, more strategic and intentional advocacy in the interests of all markets. These efforts have resulted in:

- A robust, ongoing partnership with the University of Minnesota, including faculty and graduate student engagement in the Collaborative, a comprehensive, multi-year research effort across all Minneapolis markets to gather metrics from market managers, vendors, and visitors, and a large federal grant to support this effort.
- Funding for a strategic planning process, involving dozens of stakeholders, to establish a long-range plan for the Collaborative, including mission, vision, values, strategic priorities, and related objectives, activities, and indicators of progress.

Farmers Market Collaborative Strategic Planning Process

In the late fall of 2016, the Minneapolis Farmers Market Collaborative launched a strategic planning process designed to (1) identify key strategic priorities and related actions that can ensure sustainable, prosperous farmers markets across the city and (b) build a productive, strategic alliance among farmers markets to advance shared interests.

This strategic planning process included three phases:

Taking Stock – Gathering perspectives from farmers market vendors, managers, customers, partner organizations, and funders, as well as reviewing background information, to understand the context, challenges, opportunities, and emerging priorities. The Taking Stock process informed the development of a *Taking Stock Brief*, used by participants in the planning process to guide discussion, direction, and decision-making. Components of the Taking Stock process included a survey taken by 85 market stakeholders (managers, vendors, customers, funders, city staff, public officials, etc.); focus groups (market managers, funders, and farmer/vendors), individual interviews; preliminary baseline data from some markets provided by the University of Minnesota; and written material describing the Collaborative.

Planning – Convening farmers market stakeholders and Farmers Market Collaborative partners to identify strategic priorities, related activities, and hoped for outcomes. Planning activities include stakeholder planning events (in-person, webinar, and online) and ongoing meetings of market managers active in the Collaborative. Results of the planning process informed the development of successive strategic plan drafts.

Drafting – Preparing a strategic plan draft included the incorporation of content from the *Taking Stock Brief*; feedback from stakeholder events, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Up to three drafts of the plan will be prepared, with review and revisions provided by Collaborative stakeholders.

Defining “Success” for Minneapolis Farmers Markets

Through an extensive Taking Stock phase, stakeholders articulated a nuanced definition of what it means for Minneapolis farmers markets to be “successful.” Analysis of stakeholder input identified 11 factors for farmers market success that can be prioritized in three tiers. According to this definition, Minneapolis farmers markets are successful when they:

| Primary: Most Important Success Factor | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support farmer and vendor profitability | |
| Secondary: Key Success Factors | Tertiary: Supporting Success Factors |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can sustain their operations • Support local and sustainable foods and products, purchased direct from producers • Improve access to healthy food • Foster community connectedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a diverse mix of products • Offer opportunities for education, knowledge exchange, and learning new skills • Incubate small businesses • Contribute to more equitable health and economic outcomes • Have good, accessible, reliable locations • Collaborate to ensure mutual success |

In addition, stakeholders identified the following necessary conditions for market success:

- **Support from city government** to ensure market locations offer adequate parking, infrastructure, and visibility
- **Steady patronage, volunteerism, donations, and sponsorships** by individuals and organizations across the community
- **Interesting, high quality markets** that reflect the flavor of the neighborhoods they serve
- **Consistent, clear inspections and enforcement** of food safety regulations, regardless of the inspector
- **Long-term, reliable investment** from local and state government for market infrastructure and inter-market collaboration

Successful farmers' markets are platforms of connection, exchange, and reciprocity – for farmers, other vendors, customers, eaters, chefs, retailers, customers, and communities. They support environmental stewardship, social equity, health, and economic vitality.

Vision, Mission, and Values Statements

Vision

Farmers markets are thriving cultural and economic assets that support health and prosperity for all our communities and vendors.

Mission

The Minneapolis Farmers Market Collaborative:

Fosters the vitality of the City's farmers markets through strategic and informed innovation, advocacy, education, and cohesive partnerships

Strategic planning stakeholders defined the primary purposes of farmers markets:

- **Provide access to good food** for customers
- **Serve as a profitable revenue source** for vendors
- **Strengthen communities** and serve as healthy public spaces

Values

The Minneapolis Farmers Market Collaborative:

- Prizes fairness, inclusion, transparency, engagement, and collaboration to cultivate positive relationships among market managers, vendors, customers, and community partners
- Undertakes and communicates its work with intention, strategy, transparency, and accountability
- Works to ensure social, ecological, and economic sustainability of vendors, farmers and markets
- Promotes entrepreneurship of vendors and the health and well-being of customers

Strategic Priorities

Through the Taking Stock process, four strategic priorities emerged that will shape the Collaborative's focus and work in coming years:

1. Ensure Minneapolis has a profitable, sustainable, and equitable 'ecosystem' of farmers markets
2. Foster trusting, productive relationships and mutual initiatives to advance the success of Minneapolis farmers markets, market vendors, and farmers
3. Establish a strong, shared operational base for all City farmers markets
4. Maintain rigorous data collection and evaluation practices to inform funders and guide planning and policy advocacy

This strategic plan describes objectives and related activities associated with each of these four priorities.

Ensure Minneapolis has a profitable, sustainable, and equitable 'ecosystem' of farmers markets

Objective - Grow size of markets' customer base and increase customer purchasing

- Cost-share, create, and execute effective, compelling, joint promotional campaign, targeting new and existing customers, effectively using digital platforms and messengers (including an emphasis on increasing the cultural and economic diversity of the customer base, drawing customers from outside the City limits (including tourists), and describing market benefit; purchasing 'table' to attend high profile events together)
- Develop supportive collateral, such as a market directory and seasonal mailings

- Integrate farmers markets with high profile citywide and other highly visible events (i.e. Open Streets, State Fair, etc.)
- Conduct market research on customers and non-customers, identifying key factors that shape shoppers' habits, factors that will bring non-customers to markets, and increase per customer purchasing, and shape
- Identify and provide creative solutions for supporting increased shopping or to better support existing heavy farmers market shoppers (i.e. carts, wagons, etc.)
- Develop and execute plan to expand offerings at farmers markets, including determining desirable number, types, and varieties of vendors, more prepared foods, more culturally-specific products reflecting markets' communities, and wine/beer/cider sales
- Offer more diverse education and entertainment options, including featuring more youth

Objective – Ensure an appropriate number of markets to meet vendor, citywide, and neighborhood needs

- Assess appropriate total number and distribution of markets to meet citywide and neighborhood needs
- Create operations plan to manage growth, development, and siting of markets in ways that promote the financial interests of vendors and meet communities' needs

Objective – Assess benefits and risks of established joint, standardized pricing policies

- Design and execute a feasibility assessment to determine the possibilities, parameters, and problems with establishing a Collaborative-wide standardized pricing policy (includes national scan, partnerships with existing networks of growers, and systematic evaluation of benefits and risks)
- Implement recommendations from feasibility assessment

Objective – Develop permanent sites for markets in well-distributed locations across the City

- Develop effective approach for ensuring reliability of seasonal farmers market locations
- Establish permanent, year-round markets in parts of the city
- Establish public-private partnerships to support permanent market sites

Objective - Establish adequate, long-term base of financial support for farmers markets

- Coordinate and collaborate on sponsorships across all markets to reduce competition and redundancies and increase mutual success
- Develop strategy for sustainability of accepting EBT at farmers markets. Obtain joint funding for financial and human resources support from city, county, state, federal and other sources, including an agreement from the City to assume management and absorb costs for market bucks program

Objective – Pursue policy and funding requests that benefit all markets

- Prepare and advocate for joint policy and funding requests to city and state government on behalf of all farmers markets in Minneapolis

Establish trusting, productive relationships and joint initiatives between market managers, farmers, vendors, and stakeholders to advance the success of Minneapolis farmers markets, market vendors, and farmers

Objective – Develop and refine processes within and across markets to ensure effective communication and feedback between managers and vendors

- Conduct an audit of market processes regarding vendor recruitment, registration, and communication
- Develop a plan to align and streamline vendor-manager communication across markets, including effective feedback mechanisms from vendors to managers

Objective – Promote activities between market managers and vendors that build trusting, productive relationships.

- Encourage managers to visit vendor farms and operations, leveraging visits as part of market-specific and city-wide promotional campaign
- Systematically assess the kinds of information that vendors want from farmers markets, developing and executing transparent communications processes on a consistent basis
- Explore feasibility of online wholesale opportunities for market vendors

Objective – Shape perception of farmers markets as core cultural assets of the City

- Build an effective case (including framing and messaging) to funders, partners, and customers describes markets' contributions to the city's cultural capital for use in promotions, strategic communications, and fundraising
- Create and deploy strategic communications plan to target audiences to shape this perception
- Develop and sustain strong relationships with media and food influencers to support promotion and visibility of farmers markets and vendors

Objective – Build capacity of market managers, vendors, and volunteers

- Provide multi-faceted learning opportunities for key market stakeholders to enhance their effectiveness, such as peer to peer learning, topic-specific content for vendors (including merchandising, business planning, volunteer management, or useful technology) and market managers (including effective promotion and marketing, and use of technology, and mentorships)
- Conduct annual 'institute' for urban markets to build capacity on above topics and others identified by market managers

- Share evaluation findings in ways that help improve practices of vendors and markets
- Provide connections to funding and training to vendors through effective communications channels. Include this activity as a component of the strategic communications plan
- Identify support services needed by vendors and explore how best to provide them
- Identify capacity-building and training opportunities for supporting stakeholders including market volunteers and farmers market boards

Objective – Meet the translation and communication needs of market managers and vendors who need to communicate across multiple languages

- Develop and implement plan to ensure effective translation of vendor and market meetings, market policies, and other written materials impacting vendors
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Establish a strong, shared operational base for all City farmers markets

Objective – Create administrative and operational joint efficiencies to benefit all markets

- Explore feasibility and need for a shared organizational infrastructure for all markets in Minneapolis (e.g. St. Paul Farmers Market)
 - Create and formalize a Minneapolis farmers market backbone organization/association
 - Develop accompanying budget and recommended staffing plan to present for funding.
 - Develop shared technology and accounting for ‘market bucks,’ EBT, and credit cards at all markets
 - Provide regular communication, training, and technical assistance opportunities to market managers and vendors, as appropriate
 - Conduct staffing needs audit to determine what positions can be shared cross-market. Assess which jobs, duties, and skills require professional expertise and which are suitable for market volunteers. Develop budget and recommended staffing plan to support all markets in the city
 - Conduct operational needs audit of all markets, identifying systems and processes with potential for sharing costs and services (e.g. accounting, technology, evaluation, insurance, communication/public relations, data analysis, vendor support, etc.). Create and execute plan to share costs and services
 - Develop integrated scheduling and siting process, so markets can act in the best interests of vendors and communities
 - Explore options for most effective system for financial transactions at markets. Support operationalizing this system at interested markets
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Maintain rigorous data collection and evaluation practices to inform funders and guide planning and policy advocacy

Objective - Conduct research and evaluation that advances the vitality and sustainability of farmers markets in the City

- Continue to collect, analyze, and share economic metrics for market managers, vendors, and visitors on an annual basis
- Conduct and disseminate a citywide economic impact analysis, focused on the economic impact of farmers markets and vendors, including potential impact of increasing market sales
- Establish consistent, systematic means of obtaining vendor feedback and develop ongoing responses to address their challenges and ideas
- Survey customers, surrounding businesses, and community members regularly on topics relevant to meeting the Collaborative's strategic objectives
- Evaluate affordability and variation of vendor fees at markets across City
- Develop and execute an evaluation plan for the Collaborative that regularly gathers feedback from participants, reports progress on the strategic plan, assesses what does and doesn't work to contribute to market and vendor success, and disseminates this information through relevant channels in engaging ways

Next Steps

This strategic plan, developed through an extensive engagement process involving many customers, market managers, farmers, board members, and other partners, articulates challenges and opportunities (some perennial and some unique to the time and place) and offers concrete, smart solutions.

As the plan suggests—given the current public support and passion for farmers markets in Minneapolis—it is a timely opportunity to assert the critical cultural role of farmers markets to civic life, well-being, and economic vitality. Making this case can lay the groundwork for increased city, state, and federal support in the form of funding, public-private partnerships, reliable market locations, and more.

The Minneapolis Farmers Market Collaborative will develop an implementation plan to effectively address each of these strategic priorities, seeking funding where needed, advocating for policy where appropriate, and undertaking research and evaluation to help measure progress and advance the priorities outlined in this plan. This implementation plan will continue the ongoing commitment of the Collaborative to engagement, equity, inclusion, transparency, independence, and flexibility.