Local Food Systems Response to COVID:
Building Better Beyond

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ISSUE

Farmers markets serve as outlets where farmers and other producers can sell their products and as social spaces where people gather with others in their community. In March 2020, these collective events were upended when COVID-19 restrictions caused the shutdown of many farmers markets across the country. Many markets that were able to remain open, made substantial adjustments to their operations to comply with new public health guidelines and recommendations.

INNOVATION

Farmers Markets were compelled to alter their models in a variety of ways at the onset of the pandemic. They conformed to social distancing guidelines and other public safety requirements which allowed them to remain open and continue serving vendors and customers safely and effectively. Some changed to contactless drive-thru or curbside models, where customers pre-ordered products online or by phone and picked it up in their vehicle. Others opted for crowd control measures or limited entry designs, allowing a limited number of visitors into the market at a time to allow maximum social distancing. In addition, some markets changed their model altogether from a traditional farmers market to a local food aggregator.

OUTCOME

Farmers markets proved to be resilient. By changing models to meet the needs of both vendors and customers, many markets were able to continue serving their communities. However, these operational shifts placed immense stress and new responsibilities on market operators, market staff, and volunteers. After weighing the successes and challenges posed by these changes, some market operators have opted to move forward with making these adaptations more permanent. In some cases, this means creating a "hybrid" market model combining online and in-person sales. Other markets plan to "return to normal" when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Unfortunately, others still may decide market operations are no longer sustainable in any form (Feldman & Creps, 2020).

Alternative Farmers Market Models

The beginning of the spring market season is usually an exciting time for farmers markets. Fresh fruits and vegetables that farmers have been growing for the past several weeks are finally ready for harvest and purchase by eager customers. In 2020, the beginning of the peak market season coincided with shutdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on retail outlets and public gatherings. Market managers all over the country moved quickly to make their case to local governments; arguing that farmers markets are essential businesses, a source of fresh produce for many in their communities and a necessary economic support system for farmers.

In response to COVID-19 restrictions, market operators, staff, and volunteers adjusted farmers market models to protect the health of vendors and customers as well as to remain open and operational in some capacity. Some markets changed to contactless drive-thru or curbside models, where customers pre-ordered product online or by phone and picked it up from a designated location or requested it be delivered directly to their home. Other markets opted for limited entry designs, modifying the traditional walk-up model to allow visitors to continue making in-person purchases from vendors but in a manner which adhered to social distancing and other public safety measures. For some markets, this necessitated a larger market venue, for others it meant limiting the number of vendors, or both.

In addition to curbside, drive-thru, and limited entry options, some markets changed their model altogether, taking on more of a local food aggregator role, offering market boxes or similar programs. Each of these adaptations posed serious challenges for market operators, from market logistics to communication with vendors and customers. The pandemic forced market operators to adapt quickly when assessing challenges and applying potential solutions with little time to test or evaluate prior to implementation. These changes in operation and design had to be both clearly defined and flexible in the face of changing local and state guidelines and shifting consumer behaviors.

This Innovation Brief features four market operators and their journeys through a tumultuous market season to learn how they modified and established new market models. Alongside the description and discussion of these alternative market models, this brief highlights the background and stories of each market. These stories help paint a more complete picture of each market, why they made specific changes, and how these changes have impacted their market(s) overall.

Adaptation: Limited Entry

Bloomfield Saturday Market, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Bloomfield Development Corporation (BDC), a community development corporation based in Pittsburgh, holds a Saturday market in the Bloomfield neighborhood. Their last winter market for the 2020 season, was to be held the 3rd Saturday in March but was canceled due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. After the city of Pittsburgh put out a notice that their city-run farmers markets would not be operational for the foreseeable future as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, the Bloomfield Saturday Market was determined to remain open in order to fulfill their mission of serving the Bloomfield neighborhood. Historically, the Bloomfield neighborhood garnered little attention from the city, resulting in a lack of fresh food options and few community development projects. The Bloomfield Development Corporation has worked to change this, in part through its farmers markets. In 2014, BDC launched their Saturday Market with a two-pronged goal in mind: attract people to the Bloomfield business district to support neighborhood businesses and provide fresh local food to those who need and want it. The Saturday Market was originally held in a hospital parking lot to build trust with local healthcare providers, and often featured hospital personnel administering seasonal flu vaccines and hosting other wellness programs.

When considering alternative market models, BDC decided the requirement to access and use an online store or a drive-thru model might exclude a significant portion of Bloomfield's market demographic. At the time BDC was determining how to adapt their market, online SNAP purchasing was not available for smaller retailers, including farmers markets and other direct-to-consumer outlets. As such, Bloomfield (like other farmers markets) was unable to accept SNAP payments through a pre-order platform. In addition, several of Bloomfield's farmers and other vendors had pivoted to individual online sales (either before or in response to the pandemic) resulting in decreased demand for the market to create an additional online sales space. These accessibility issues and a low participation rate by vendors and customers in BDC's online platform

trial compelled Executive Director Christina Howell and Market Manager Abigail (Abi) Gildea to advocate against the city of Pittsburgh's plans to allow only online ordering models for farmers markets. They successfully obtained consent from the city to continue with in-person operations.

To safely allow people to come to the markets in-person, Bloomfield opted for a limited entry model. Market operators and volunteers regulated crowds using a "one-in, one-out" model with one entrance and exit. For the first few weeks, socially distanced lines required customers to wait up to 15 minutes before entering the market. Organizers recognized early on that some people would not be able to wait in line for several minutes (particularly in the heat) and created a separate line for anyone with a disability or other health concern so that they could enter the market more quickly. In addition to managing the entrance line, volunteers and staff also worked to control crowds at popular vendor booths. There were complaints at the beginning of the transition, but things soon changed. As of August 2020, lines had subsided, and people seemed used to the slower flow of the market.

Photo from the Bloomfield Development Corporation website

Bloomfield Saturday Market has typically attracted a lot of people from outside the Bloomfield neighborhood and dons a "festival vibe," with loud music and large crowds.

However, as Gildea noted, "[the adjustments] were a good opportunity for us to prove our place in the community- we aren't gentrifying. We brought out more place-based people." The pivots that the Bloomfield market had to make in response to COVID-19 restrictions and city regulations gave market operators the space to refocus the market on what it was originally created for- meeting the needs of people in the Bloomfield neighborhood.

Bloomfield Saturday Market:
https://bloomfieldpgh.org/bloomfield-saturday-market/

Adaptation: Online Marketplace/ Drive-thru Pickup

Rochester Farmers Market, Rochester, Minnesota

The Rochester Farmers Market began their COVID-19 pivot in survival mode. They had the option to close their markets for the season or to determine a way to continue providing sustainably produced, fresh food to those in their community. In keeping with their mission, the Rochester Farmers Market successfully navigated the challenges of 2020 by opting to open an online store coupled with a drive-thru pickup operation. Through the online store, customers are able to purchase foods categorized by food type or vendor. This option allows market customers to support the vendors they have come to know and continue to procure the local food items they rely on each week.

Market Manager Ruth Arhleger was hired in May 2020 to coordinate a new online wholesale marketplace which the organization was developing to connect local farmers with schools and restaurants in the area. When this model didn't get a lot of traction, Arhleger quickly turned her efforts to supporting farmers and individual consumers by connecting them through an online market, first using Local Line and then Local Food Marketplace. Arhleger worked with farmers to help them get photos of their products up on the website, and taught vendors how to manage their own inventories and purchase options. This allowed Arhleger to focus on the coordination aspect of the market, rather than keeping track of individual inventories, a near impossible feat.

Each Saturday, farmers would arrive before the market opened to drop off their product, placing it in bags that the market had pre-labelled and sorted alphabetically by customer name. Farmers initialed each customer's invoice next to the products that they placed in the bag, keeping the farmers accountable for the items they committed to providing. This, Arhleger noted, "was important because it allowed the farmers to feel like they were still involved in the process." If the order was filled incorrectly or the farmer could not fulfill the request for a particular product, Arhleger replaced those items with something similar or customers had the option to wait until the following week to receive the product originally requested. In warmer months, customers pull their cars through a building, check in, and drive forward so more cars can fill in behind them. The building houses a walk-in cooler where "runners" (volunteers who run food from the cooler to vehicles) retrieve orders and bring customers their products. In the winter when the weather is too cold for market staff and volunteers to be outside, customers check in at a ticket booth on the side of the building, then drive around to the back of the building to pick up their products.

"Everyone deserves the luxury of fresh, local food, even between the troubles of delivery and pick-up"

Ruth Arhleger, Market Manager, Rochester Farmers Market

To accommodate customers that use SNAP/EBT, the Rochester Farmers Market offered to process SNAP purchases at the market. "Everyone deserves the luxury of fresh, local food, even between the troubles of delivery and pick-up," Arhleger noted. The Rochester Farmers Market also provided free delivery of produce to those that used SNAP/EBT payments.

Although timing did not allow for direct input from farmers/vendors on the decision to move to an online pre-order model, Rochester Farmers Markets' previous work toward developing an online marketplace made it a logical alternative to in-person sales. Rochester Farmers Markets' May 2020 Vendor Survey indicated that vendors' responses to the online model were largely positive, with one farmer stating, "the online program has really increased sales for us…it seems to have drawn in customers who weren't market shoppers but who are now ordering every week." Although this type of change inevitably presents a learning curve, Arhleger says many of her vendors were happy to retain a dependable sales outlet, expressed appreciation for the added income made possible through the dual (online/in-person) market structure, and valued the lower risk contactless sale/purchase option both for themselves and market customers.

Moving forward, the Rochester Farmers Market is going to continue offering online ordering in addition to their in-person market. Data collected by the Rochester Farmers Market indicates that most customers that are shopping through their

online store are new to the market and not the same customers that shopped at the market in person in the past. The online option created a new entry point into the local food system; a safe, simple way for more people to access fresh, locally produced food.

Rochester Farmers Market:
https://www.rochfarmmkt.org/

Adaptation: Contactless Delivery/ Curbside Pick-up

Boulder County Farmers Markets, Boulder, Colorado

The mission of the Boulder County Farmers Market (BCFM), a non-profit organization, is to "serve as community gathering events, provide nourishment to neighbors, boost sustainable agriculture and support the local economy." When the city of Boulder told BCFM market operators that open-air markets would not be a possibility for the 2020 season, they knew they had to shift operations to carry on their mission. Brian Coppom, Executive Director of BCFM, noted that they "couldn't not [fulfill] their mission just because it was hard." With this in mind, in April 2020 BCFM began offering contactless curbside pickup with standardized bags of produce. In the beginning, customers would purchase produce by adding their name to a Google Doc for a $15 or $20 bag of fruits/vegetables with the option to include a $5 add-on, such as eggs or bread. Under this model, farmers deliver their product in bulk to the market. The market staff portion, bag, and box customer orders. In the early days of curbside operations, several farmers volunteered to help BCFM launch this program by assisting with packing and running orders to customer vehicles. However, by July 2020 order preparation and delivery to customers was primarily being handled by paid staff only.

As the number of orders gradually increased, BCFM began subscribing to the online platform, Local Food Marketplace. This allowed for customization of orders, which in turn created a greater need for equipment and space. The market moved to a warehouse and purchased delivery trucks and refrigerators to accommodate this new model. Through the online marketplace, purchases can also be delivered to customers' homes for an extra $10. WIC/SNAP customers are eligible for a $20 market voucher each week and, for these customers, home delivery is free. This is made possible through BCFM's partnership with Via Mobility, a Boulder-based nonprofit organization providing transportation and mobility services to vulnerable populations. Via Mobility provides delivery services to BCFM's WIC/SNAP customers at no additional cost to BCFM.

Photo of produce being boxed from BCFM's Instagram

Coppom notes that the shift to curbside operations happened quickly and, although vendors were advised of changes in advance, there was not sufficient time for the broader engagement and

solicitation of feedback which would typically occur. This was due in part to both the impending public health crisis and the limited capacity for participation as farmers focused on adapting their own business models to the changing marketing landscape and securing alternative sales channels, where necessary.

When street markets opened in June 2020, online ordering dropped off. While this was a positive indicator as it showed that the new model was meeting the needs of those who had previously shopped at their in-person markets, BCFM now had a significant amount of fixed costs they had to manage. They had invested a great deal of money and time in creating efficiencies and advertising centered around the preorder model. In light of this and an increased public awareness of the economic and social benefits of local food, BCFM has decided to continue offering the curbside pickup and delivery model they created during the pandemic. Using this model, BCFM hopes to become a food hub serving the Denver area, aggregating produce from Colorado farms and distributing it to customers across their region.

Boulder County Farmers Market:
https://bcfm.org/

Adaptation: Online Marketplace/ Reservations for Drive-thru Pickup

Boise Farmers Market, Boise, Idaho

The Boise Farmers Market is a year-round market whose mission is to "support a regenerative, healthy food and agricultural system by operating a vibrant marketplace featuring locally grown and crafted products." In the face of restrictions imposed by city and county authorities and the absence of regular fundraising opportunities as a result of COVID-19, the Boise Farmers Market knew they had to find an alternative to in-person market operations. They opted for a drive-thru model that quickly expanded. Vendor participation in the drive-thru market grew from 24 the first day of operations, on April 11, 2020, to 62 vendors by mid-summer. The market regularly had 90 volunteers filling over 700 orders each Saturday. See a video highlighting Boise's drive-thru model here. Boise Farmers Market had great success recruiting and tracking volunteers through City of Good, a local organization formed in response to the pandemic in an effort to support a more resilient community food system.

Boise Farmers Market's success with this model hinged on using two online platforms. Customers purchase food on the Local Food Marketplace website, then go to Eventbrite to reserve a time to pick it up the following Saturday. Each Saturday, vendors deliver their product to the large parking lot where the drive-thru market operates. Customer orders are then organized and placed in bags with invoices attached (sorted by the time associated with the Eventbrite reservation) and bags are delivered to distribution tables for transfer to customer vehicles.

Similar to the experience of the Rochester Farmers Market, the online platform provided ease of access to people who had not previously shopped at farmers markets for a variety of reasons, including the inability to attend the market during market hours. In addition to garnering attention from new customers, Boise Farmers Market manager, Tamara Cameron, explained that the online platform gave the markets the ability to, "have real data" for the first time. The software

tracked hundreds of different pieces of information, from popular price points to which variety of carrots sold best each week. Moving forward, the Boise Farmers Market will continue to offer the drive-thru model in addition to their in-person markets. Cameron noted, "the whole point of the markets is for the farmers to sell everything they have." Using both models at once makes this goal more achievable.

Boise Farmers Market:
https://theboisefarmersmarket.com/

Building Better Beyond:
opportunities and considerations

The evolving role of markets in community spaces

Each of these market operators communicated a need for farmers markets beyond the transactional exchange between producer and consumer. They emphasized that markets play a greater role in the community outside of the marketplace itself and hold a different space than the conventional grocery store. The adaptability of farmers markets and their commitment to protecting public health in the face of ever-changing COVID-related restrictions, their value to farmers and other producers as direct-to-consumer marketing outlets, and their position as access points to local and regional food systems demonstrate the resilience and role of farmers markets as essential services within their communities. Moving beyond COVID-19, farmers markets will need to further evaluate the role they play within their communities and their significance in strengthening local food systems. Brian Coppom noted that, since implementing the changes made in 2020, they have been struggling to find out what their market identity is moving forward. They are, no longer just "the facilitator of sales [between farmers and the community], they are now retailers," occupying an additional layer between producer and consumer. They are trying to move forward in a way that keeps farmers and people at the core of their work.

Farmers Markets as leaders in expanding food access

The challenging decisions these market operators made in 2020 indicate their commitment to retaining and expanding access to local, fresh food. The Bloomfield market opted not to host an online store or drive-thru model over fears that a significant portion of their population would no longer be able to access the market. The Rochester Farmers Market adapted their model to meet the needs of people who use SNAP/EBT, and the Boulder County Farmers Markets dedicated the first several weeks of their pandemic-induced operational changes to meeting the needs of those who would be disproportionately affected by the economic downturn. By shortening the supply chain, supporting local farmers and farm viability, serving as incubators for small businesses, and in

championing nutrition incentive programs, farmers markets play a unique role in their communities and in food access. It is evident from the operators we spoke to that increasing food access is not only something they want to do, but something they prioritize in their missions and actions. In this way, farmers markets are particularly well suited to meet some of the larger social and economic needs associated with building resilient local food systems.

Expanding knowledge of local food systems by making it easier to participate

These alternative market models meet the needs of existing customers, while also providing new opportunities for people who had not previously participated in farmers markets. While large grocery chains had made it exceptionally easy to buy food online prior to the pandemic, many farmers markets had not yet added these types of contactless purchase options. The traditional farmers market model fosters face-to-face interaction between producer and consumer, creating direct marketing opportunities for farmers which might not be available through other sales channels. However, expanding on the traditional model in this way has created new access points for farmers market customers and potentially new revenue streams for vendors and market operators which did not exist previously.

The pandemic has altered the unique selling points of public markets, with some of the intangible benefits currently absent from many markets. Farmers market operators recognize now more than ever that there are many factors which play a role in the food choices people make, including convenience. Tamara Cameron (Boise Farmers Market) explained that, “many people want local food, but they may have soccer games [or other commitments] every Saturday morning,” preventing them from coming to the market. By expanding these options for customers, farmers markets can increase awareness and participation in the local food economy.

In addition to convenience, farmers markets will have to prioritize highlighting the benefits of local food. Brian Coppom stated, "local food systems are competing with [the] idea that food should be dirt cheap." By focusing on the gains associated with purchasing local food, including community building, the economic benefit to farmers and local businesses, as well as the public health and nutritional advantages, farmers markets made it through 2020 with a broader customer base and greater public support.

References

Feldman, B., & Creps, K. (2020, May 29). We must save farmers’ markets [Op-ed]. Retrieved from https://civileats.com/2020/05/29/op-ed-we-must-save-farmers-markets/

If you are interested in reading more about the impact of COVID-19 on farmers markets, the Farmers Market Coalition compiled results from their Summer 2020 Economic Impact Survey in a blog post titled "How Can FMC Help Markets Analyze This Year?" written by Darlene Wolnik, published in December 2020.

Front page photo from Rochester Farmers Market

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Thanks for reading!

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For more information regarding the Farmers Market Coalition, head to:
https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/

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