



Farmers Market Preplanning Checklist

The keys to organizing and planning for a new farmers market are **Time, Talent** and **Resources**.

A great deal of preparation goes into planning a market positioned for success. Research requirements include looking at the past attempts at local farmers markets, a look at the community demographics and how the market will understand the community, adapting policies and procedures accordingly and appropriately reaching the consumers in the community. Research also includes local zoning laws and regulations that will impact market operations, and outreach to the local business community, as well. Your research will give you a complete understanding of the community residents, business culture and governmental environment so that your new market will be relevant to the community, responding to their makeup and their needs.

Your market planning is best done with a committee of people with the talent and experiences that will benefit the market. For example, a member of the media will be able to assist the new market with outreach, advertising and promotions for the market. Having a lawyer or legal representation on the committee can ensure that the market's rules, contracts with vendors and policies will be done in a manner that protects the market, while protecting vendors' interests, as well. All aspects of the planning process for a new market would benefit from a representative that has experience and expertise in fields of importance to developing a new market; such as legal, marketing, accounting, etc; on the planning committee.

Markets do not start without resources – funds to cover manager salaries, promotion dollars, money to cover special events, funds to purchase market supplies, such as a manager tent and table, market signage, SNAP equipment and supplies, etc. But resources can include other things as well, including barriers to segregate pedestrian and vehicle traffic, garbage cans and trash removal, and police oversight of the market. These can be in-kind contributions to the market from the local municipality, rather than cash outlays for the market.

It takes months of research, planning and preparations to create a plan for a sustainable, successful farmers market. Each step of the process is critical and should be handled with the time, talent and resources necessary to complete each step and plan a strategy that will provide a farmers market that is inviting for consumers, profitable for farmers and that provides the community with a gathering space that educates and nourishes the community.

At this time, there is an oversaturation of farmers markets in many areas of New York State, and in fact, many parts of the US. That means that new markets may be taking away from existing markets, rather than enhancing opportunities for farmers and local consumers. This might be in the form of cannibalizing both customers and farmers. It means less income for the farmers that now share their sales with another market which results in decreased profitability for the participating farms. It also means that the markets will be less able to provide the desired benefits a market can and should bring to a community.

So, before starting plans to create a new farmers market, take some time to consider whether there is a real need for a market. Sometimes the best course of action is to throw efforts into supporting existing markets rather than starting a new market.

Use the checklist below to determine whether you should go forward with a new market or, instead, use your time, energy and funds to support and grow existing local farmers markets.

Time: Research

- **Have you studied other farmers markets to learn from their successes and failures?**
A review of market operations will help you prepare a market that is destined for success. You can learn what is being done at other markets that are well received by customers, as well as vendors. But more importantly, you can learn the pitfalls to avoid. Look at their operations, how they are organized and their market policies. Learn about the various programs and services they offer and what helps to build both a customer base and farmer sales. Review their fee structure and the rationale behind it. Review their rules for the day to day operation of the market – start your market with a set of rules that not only provides for the effective operation of the market, but also removes the potential chaos that can occur without rules that are clear and unambiguous. Finally, be sure to talk with other market operators to learn what they see as the successes and failures that they have learned in the operations of their markets.
- **How close is the nearest farmers market?**
Markets that are too close may result in cannibalizing of farmers and customers. When this happens, no one benefits. In fact, it is actually harmful to farmers. Splitting the customer base means fewer sales for farmers, hurting their business and may actually force them to leave the market in search of a larger customer base. A rule of thumb would be a minimum of 20 miles to the nearest farmers market. However, in large cities markets can be much closer without fear of cannibalizing.
- **Have you done a feasibility study?**
Before starting the work of creating a new farmers market, it is best to do a study of the need and interest in a new market. Survey your community – is their interest from a variety of consumers in your community? Are they already shopping another local market? Do they prefer shopping other venues? Be sure you are looking at demographic information per question. This will tell you who will or will not shop your market.
Survey local farms and food producers. Are they interested in participating in a market in your community, and if so, what days and times are they available? What months will they have product to sell? You can find a sample of a farmer/vendor survey in the Farmers Market Federation of NY's [Guide to Developing a Community Farmers Market](#).
The response to this study will tell you:
 - is there sufficient interest from your community to support a market?
 - is there sufficient farmer and food producer base to provide enough product diversity to attract and retain a customer base?
 - Would your support be better utilized by drawing your community to another, already established, local farmers market?

- **Do you have the support of local businesses?**

Yes, farmers markets can be a significant economic driver. But not every business will see it that way. Common complaints of local businesses are:

- Why can a market full of vendors get space to operate without paying the taxes we, as local businesses, pay?
- The market is taking up our valuable parking spaces and we'll lose business.
- The market has vendors that compete with my business. This is not fair to me.

You must be prepared to answer those complaints and explain the benefits to the local businesses of having a farmers market. Many will agree with your explanations and find a market will boost their success. But you must be prepared to accept their disagreement and find ways to appease them, or drop your market plans.

- **Do you have support from the local municipality?**

Having the support of your local municipality can make it much easier to host a farmers market. Some communities require the market to get a permit to operate in the community, as well as requiring the market and/or its vendors to be licensed to sell in the community. Having support of the municipality may mean you can get those permits and license fees waived or at least reduced to a level that is affordable to all. Many markets operate on municipal property – a village park, a closed street, a municipal parking lot, for example. With the cooperation of the municipality, you may be able to get the space free of charge. In the case of a closed street, the DPW may be able to supply you with the barriers each market day, to prevent traffic from flowing through your market. Trash is always an issue. Some municipalities that support their farmers market will offer trash cans and trash pickup after the market free of charge. Finally, insurance is often a large ticket expense for the market, but often required by the property owners. If on municipal property, many municipalities will place the market on their policy at no cost to the market.

But what happens if you start a farmers market and the local municipality is against the market or at least does not support the market? When faced with opposition, the local village or town may opt to close the market down rather in the face of any taxpayer opposition. This has happened on multiple occasions. A local business sees the market as unfair competition and complains the local government. Without the municipality in favor of the market, they will not defend it against opposition. At that point, your attention will be focused on just keeping the market open rather than on effective operations.

Talent: Self-Assessment

- **What are your motives for starting a farmers market?**

Yes, a sea of white tents in the village center is quaint. But unless your motives include supporting local agriculture and bringing local food to your community, you may not be putting the right efforts in place to make the market successful. Farmers need a market that makes it economically viable for them. Rules must benefit farmers, advertising needs to draw in a customer base, activities need to focus on health, nutrition and access to healthy food. If all of these are in place, the social and economic benefits of farmers markets will fall into place.

- **Are you/your organization in it for the long haul?**

Farmers markets take a great deal of planning to establish the basis for a successful market. You must be prepared for a long period of discussion and planning before launching the new market. But beyond that, it takes time and significant effort to keep the market functioning as a viable economic outlet for farmers and a relevant marketplace for consumers. Shopping habits and food trends continually change and farmers market will need to adjust their practices, policies and strategies to stay on top of current trends and continue to be a shopping space that customers are drawn to.

If your plans are to set up the market and then let someone else take control, then you may be setting the market up for failure. It is your vision that steers the market. That vision is not always shared by other community groups, individuals or the municipality. The market needs a strong vision with the continued support behind it to prosper.

- **Are you willing to put some money into the market?**

Farmers markets are not money-making ventures for market organizers and sponsors. While you may eventually achieve the point where space fees from farmers will cover expenses, this will not happen for a long time after start-up. You'll need to fund the salary for a manager. Yes, some markets have done all right with a volunteer. But the best, most successful markets have a paid manager that is compensated for their time, experience and innovation in building a successful market. Paying a manager gives them value and appreciation, and is an incentive for their continued hard work and dedication.

Next you will need to promote the market. This means advertising whether it's paid or "free", such as through social media. But it takes time and money to effectively reach your customer base and keep them coming week after week.

You'll want to look at programs and services that are critical to running a successful market. Each of these comes with their own expenses that must be covered. For example, operating SNAP at a farmers market is critical to making your market accessible to all segments of your community. But it does come with a certain level of expenses. Other programs, such as musical entertainment, cooking demonstrations and children's programs all require funds to operate and support them.

These expenses are in addition to the everyday expenses of running a market – maintenance of site, mailings to farmers and vendors, equipment such as tent, table and SNAP equipment for the market, etc.

Resources Required

- **Do you have a volunteer base that you can utilize?**

There are many facets to operating a successful farmers market. Even with a paid manager, you will find the need for assistance to cover all the work that needs to be done, For example:

- nutrition programs
- farm inspections
- market Ambassador
- marketing and promotions
- special events
- fundraising

Volunteers can be found throughout your community. Some may be customers that are faithful shoppers and want to support the market farmers by volunteering some of their time and energy toward the market operations, programs and services. Others might be part of a larger community volunteer program, or students at local schools that need to fulfill a community service requirement for graduation. There are many opportunities to find volunteers. A Volunteer Program toolkit can help you, not only recruit volunteers, but also train, supervise and reward your volunteers. A volunteer toolkit is available on the Farmers Market Federation of NY website.

While this checklist is not meant to discourage farmers market development, it is a fact that overgrowth can be just as detrimental as too few farmers markets. But rather, it does require careful consideration into where your resources are best used – creating a new market opportunity for farmers and consumers; or throwing your resources, support and efforts into working with an existing market to expand the opportunities of an already successful farmers market.