

Washington Neighborhoods

Outdoor shopping big on Thursdays

Growers, buyers make Main Street Farmers' Market a big hit

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By Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When something's going gangbusters, as is the case with the Main Street Farmers' Market in downtown Washington, it's easy to assume it was always that way. Now in its fourth year, this popular outdoor market regularly draws upwards of 500 shoppers on Thursday afternoons, many of whom are seduced as much by its excellent one-stop shopping as by its funky, street party-like atmosphere.

Yet Suzanne Ewing remembers a time not so long ago when she and her fellow market organizers worried that they might not be able to rustle up enough local farmers to get the event off the ground. In some ways it was a classic Catch 22: farmers didn't want to go to the trouble of packing up their trucks if there weren't going to be lots of shoppers, and the Washington Business District Authority couldn't promise market-goers a quality shopping experience without a certain number of quality vendors.

Not only that, but the incredible interest you see today in locally grown and produced foods had not yet caught on with the mega supermarket-loving general public, noted Lee Young, Washington County director for the Penn State Cooperative Extension Service, who would help identify farmers and offer advice on how to run the market. Nor had the concept of "food miles" and a belief among some that the best foods are those that have traveled the shortest distance from farm to table.

So really, it was something of a leap of faith for old-timers like Frank and Karen Zrimm of Zrimm's Farm, to be among the first to sign up. Having sold their fruits and vegetables at three other farm markets, they knew it would be good, of course. But the question, Mr. Zrimm said, was, "how good?"

Ms. Ewing was more direct. "It was a hard sell," she said.

In the end, though, all that nervous hand-wrenching proved much ado about nothing. Almost from the get-go, the market -- which runs from mid-May to the end of October in a city parking lot on South Main Street -- was a hit, drawing 18 vendors. So much so, that it routinely drew people not just from outside of Washington County but from as far away as Ohio and West Virginia.

"People came and they bought and were excited," said Ms. Ewing, a commercial real estate attorney with Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney. "They expressed true happiness that something like this was going on."

Thanks to a push toward local produce and a desire to have relationships with the people who grow it, farm markets are more popular than ever in Western Pennsylvania, with new ones opening up almost every month. (The Post-Gazette currently counts about 40 in Arlene Burnett's weekly farmer market report.)

But not all are successful to the point where potential vendors get turned down during the selection process, or where customers return time after time and know each and every seller (and their families) by name -- both common occurrences at the Main Street Farmers' Market.

In coming up with a business plan, organizers looked at other local markets to see what was hot, and ones much farther afield, including the Historic Roanoke City Market in Virginia, the Market Street outdoor market in Charleston, S.C., and the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco.

National City Bank provided the seed money and the city, which quickly offered up the parking lot, agreed to also make parking free during market hours. But to make it a true community effort, its volunteer staff also solicited sponsorships from a variety of other local organizations, including Washington Hospital, Washington and Jefferson College, Wash Arts and the Observer-Reporter. The Washington Business District Authority, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving downtown Washington, is also involved.

"We wanted the market to be part of the redefining and revitalization of the city," noted Ms. Young. The goal, she continued, was to create a community that creative people would want to be part of. A destination, if you will.

The market owes much of its success to the fact that it is intensely managed. For example, vendors, who pay \$150 a year per booth, must submit applications to assure their products fit within the market's strict guidelines and agree to participate in 18 of the 24 market days. Generally, products must be self-grown or produced within 100 miles of Washington, and be of the "highest quality and freshness." The market is also heavily promoted through a Web site and a weekly e-mail newsletter that goes out to more than 1,000 people.

"It's like the farmer's market version of the juried craft show," said Ms. Young.

Yet its also owes a lot to its vendor mix. Organized according to the consumers' point of view, it offers the widest range of local foods as possible, and then some. Freshly picked fruits and veggies are a given. But its 21 vendors also hawk everything from creamy artisan cheeses and homemade pierogies to baked goods, confections, all-natural meats, flowers and sugary bags of kettle corn popped right on site.

There's also live music by local musicians most weeks in Patriots Pavilion, and presentations by community groups. On July 12, for example, members of the Washington Spinners & Weavers Guild were giving demonstrations at one end of the parking lot while Patti Spadaro and Harry Funk jammed on guitars on the other.

"We try to make it as congenial as possible," said market coordinator Steve Dettinger, who also designed the market's Web site. "The vendors know and like each other and don't have to feel like they're competing."

Maribeth Klescich, who's been selling homemade pies, bread and cookies for Spring House restaurant in North Strabane, would agree the market is a wonderful place to buy and sell. Unlike at the store, where customers wander in one at a time, the pace here is "boom, boom, boom!"

"It's a really good interactive environment," she said, "and you get to see so many different things."

"It's so much fun," agreed helper Kayla Kaminski. "People are different when they're outside."

Dani Ramallo, one of two women manning Bluebird Farm's organic produce stand, is another who's fallen in love with the Main Street Farmers' Market. At other markets, vendors are stuffed in like sardines atop the black asphalt. But in Washington, she said, there's a real sense of community.

"It has an ambiance," she said. "These are people who really care about food and its presentation."

Apparently, she's not the only one to think so. The Main Street Farmers' Market now is so highly buzzed that it's been used as a model for three new markets that opened this year: Avella, Uniontown and Waynesburg. Which suits organizers just fine.

"Our goal is to keep farmers in business, and you can't make it selling one day a week," said Ms. Young. "So we welcome other markets and want to do everything we can to help them."

The Main Street Farmers' Market is held, rain or shine, in the municipal parking lot at 139 S. Main St., Washington, from 3-6 p.m. Thursdays, mid-May to the end of October. For more information, call 724-229-7207 or visit www.washpa.net/FarmersMarket.

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