

The Minneapolis Mini Market Project

During the last growing season, Minneapolis saw an increase of seven new public farmers markets. This almost triples the total number of markets in the city. One of the markets embraces only regional, artisan, and sustainable products, two markets are hospital initiatives to provide healthy produce to employees and patients, and four of the markets highlighted here are small-scale “pocket” markets that aim to bring produce into low-income neighborhoods that have traditionally lacked healthy food resources. These markets are feeding nearby residents, providing local food shelves nearly their only source of fresh produce, and are making the case for a more effective city policy regarding the presence of healthy food in the city.

These markets were made possible through the City of Minneapolis’s “STEPS to a Healthier Minneapolis” initiative. Of the dozens of groups funded to increase health in Minneapolis, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and The Northside Food Project were supported to increase access to healthy food in south and north Minneapolis, respectively. From these efforts have come community nutrition and cooking classes, youth gardens, and specifically four new farmers market locations. Local farmers have proven themselves to be flexible and effective in delivering produce to areas where conventional retailers have failed. The features of these projects are outlined below.

Farmers Markets

Markets started this year at the Ebenezer senior high-rise apartment buildings in the Phillips neighborhood, Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in North Minneapolis, and at the Brian Coyle Community Center in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. The idea behind these new, small markets was to bring a few farmers to places where people already are; churches on Sunday, worksites during lunch hour, and apartment building parking lots. Targeting an existing customer base has reduced the need to attract people to a new market location, resulting in almost immediate success with little money or energy invested.

Another factor in their success is that largely subsidized buildings were targeted, since they were home to many who received some sort of food assistance. Often they receive Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons, vouchers that are only redeemable for produce from local farmers. Historically, this program has not



been overly successful, since it depends on individuals to commute all the way to markets. Our markets remove this barrier for participants. These coupons made up half to two-thirds of total sales.

The impact of these markets should last beyond the growing season. Convenience shops at Ebenezer began selling healthy produce, Minneapolis Public Housing near the Cedar-Riverside market plans on hosting a weekly fruit market throughout the cold months, and the Northside Food Project is making plans for a permanent Food Coop Grocery Store for the neighborhood. The word is spreading and other community organizations are starting to appear at the market and asking how to bring these spaces into their neighborhoods.

Food Shelves

Fresh produce does not fit well into the current system of food distribution to the hungry. Many food shelves are unable to provide produce, and the produce that is available is older and of lesser quality. The lengthy distribution chain – from farm to distributor to retailer to food bank to food shelf to consumer – simply does not function well for fresh produce.

At the same time, local farmers dispose of hundreds of pounds of unused produce after farmers’ markets. By connecting food shelves directly to farmers markets and producers, those in need can receive fresh produce within days of harvest. Every farmer at each of five partner markets has demonstrated tremendous generosity, and donated an average of 45 pounds of leftover produce per market. Three different food shelves (El Centro, Groveland Food Shelf, Brian Coyle Community Center) are getting their primary or their only source of produce from these markets. We are now working with the region’s two largest food banks (Second Harvest Food, Hope for the City) to capture left over produce from the Twin Cities’ busiest farmers markets.

Policy

The greatest impact of these efforts may not be taking place directly at the market site, but in City Hall. Through the initial development of this project, we found that City policy presented some of the greatest barriers to marketing fresh produce. Several pieces of legislation, developed with the best intentions of protecting the health and quality of life of city residents, hinder the sale of fresh produce. Fortunately, City staff have been very receptive to our work, and are actively exploring ways to support, rather than hinder, these markets. Many city employees supported our efforts and were unaware of the policy barriers.

For each location, where only one to four producers sold at an apartment building, a significant amount of time and money was invested to create a separate business entity for each site. This involved pages of forms, reviews, and around \$425 worth of fees. We are currently working with the city to create a separate process to license farm stands to allow a small number of producers to sell within city limits without the need to create separate market entities.

This policy change is only the beginning of how the City can adapt their policies to foster the presence of good food. Many cities and states in the United States and Canada have created food policy councils that provide recommendations, research, and community forums for improving the quality and availability of healthy and local foods. Several local nonprofits, including IATP, have held a series of meetings to explore the feasibility of a Twin Cities Food Council.

Research

Concern about the obesity epidemic has triggered a growing interest in increasing the availability of healthy foods, particularly in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The University of Minnesota's Obesity Prevention Center provided a small grant to survey neighborhood residents on the impact that the markets had on diets. We surveyed nearly 600 hundred residents and employees that live or work near the Hennepin County Medical Center (where there also is a new, small scale market), West Bank market, and Ebenezer markets.

Participants were asked about their current levels of fruit and vegetable consumption, current sources of produce, and perceptions of food retailers and farmers market. Comparisons will be made to see to what extent the market impacted their diets and perceptions. The results will be compiled into a report by November.

For more information about the Minneapolis Mini Market Project, visit http://www.iatp.org/enviroag/projects_regionalfood.cfm



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