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Spiffed-up farmers market opens in St. Paul

Rick Nelson, Star Tribune

As of Saturday, an address in St. Paul's Lowertown will show off its multimillion-dollar renovation. But don't expect a tour through one of the neighborhood's trendy loft apartments. The makeover is at the St. Paul Farmers Market.

The \$2.2 million improvements are designed to make the market more efficient for its 200-plus growers. And more pleasant for shoppers, who can exceed 25,000 on a peak-season Saturday.

While budget constraints didn't permit an expansion beyond the market's 168 stalls, aisles have grown wider, from 7½ feet to 12 feet.

(More elbow room for vendors -- as many as 60 -- will arrive with a year-round, multimillion-dollar indoor market, now in the final planning stages and set for a site across Wall Street from the outdoor market.)



Mark Madden works on Farmers Market roof.

Jim Gehrz

Star Tribune

Other notable refurbishments to the 22-year-old facility include putting it all on a single, wheelchair-accessible level.

A rain-proof roof -- a first -- was added over every stall. New lighting and skylights will brighten gloomy days. Electrical outlets were added to every stall -- a boon for refrigeration -- and water access has been significantly improved. Wi-Fi service will give farmers computer and credit-card access.

The place looks spiffier, too: A snappy green roof replaces a dull, dirty gray one. Restrooms and concessions got a much-needed upgrade. The shed's exposed framing has been covered, which, one hopes, will discourage the pesky pigeon population. Eye-catching signage and artworks were commissioned. "We're in an arts district," said market manager Jack Gerten. "So it seemed fitting to tie art into the market."



Another change is the addition of Friday-afternoon hours, a jump-start to the market's traditional weekend schedule. The market is expanding its network of satellite locations, too. The first branch opened in 1977; the 13th makes its debut June 26 at the Apple Valley Municipal Building, 7100 W. 147th St.

The renovation is the culmination of efforts of hundreds of growers, volunteers and staffers. A long-range planning committee, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, went to work in 1992. Among the many groups involved in the process were University of Minnesota and University of St. Thomas students, who contributed everything from architectural analysis and vendor research to customer focus groups and Web site design.

The Friends of the St. Paul Farmers Market, a nonprofit advocacy group created in the mid-1990s, launched a capital campaign in 2001 and raised \$1.7 million. Foundations, including the St. Paul Foundation and the Bush Foundation, also helped finance the effort. Corporate sponsors include Wells Fargo, Land O' Lakes, Ecolab and Bremer Bank. The city of St. Paul contributed \$600,000.

"You hear about public-private partnerships, but this project is real dollars on the table," said Dave Nelson, real estate manager for the city of St. Paul's department of technology and management services.

Farmers markets are growing more popular. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there were 3,100 farmers markets in the United States in 2002, a 79 percent increase over 1994. There's a simple reason for that explosive growth.

"More and more, people care about where their food comes from," said Patty Brand, Friends' executive director. "At the market they can meet the people who produce their food. And since it's grown locally and picked the day before it's brought to market, it's fresher and usually tastes better."

The wide support for the renovation is a sign that the St. Paul Growers Association, the market's governing board, is on to something. The group maintains a local focus; all produce must be grown within a 50-mile-radius of the market; all other food must be produced in Minnesota or western Wisconsin.

"Now other markets are coming to us and asking, 'How do you do that?' " said Gerten. "That reaffirms what we're doing and why we're going to keep doing it."

St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly will officiate at a ribbon-cutting on Saturday at 9 a.m. to open the market's 152nd annual season. A grand opening celebration is set for May 22.