Athens Farmers Market

Common Ground Athens, Inc., Athens, GA received $23,532 to start a new farmers market in downtown Athens. Funds were used for farmer business training, market development, developing a marketing plan, promotional events, and advertising. The market used students at local schools as part of the program.

Final Report

Final Performance Report

FMPP Grant 12-25-G-0701
Grant Period October 1, 2008 – September 28, 2010

• **Project Summary**. Athens, Georgia, a college town with a permanent population of 110,000 and a student population of about 34,000, is the economic center of Northeast Georgia and had only a small farmers market operating on the patio of a small in-town business. The five farmers selling on a regular basis were all using sustainable growing methods, and were struggling after a larger downtown Saturday market had failed. (The downtown market had little organization, no stated policies. The cause of its failure is unclear.) Vendors at the tiny patio market produced little or no profit.

Lead by the founding director of a local non-profit "Promoting Local Agriculture and Cultural Experience" (PLACE), two community-oriented volunteers, an agent from the Athens-Clarke County Extension Office, a craftswoman and those five farmers decided to collaboratively organize, launch and operate a bigger market that would be of sufficient size, scope and visibility to help local, sustainable farms succeed in Northeast Georgia by reaching a large number of consumers. Community leadership came from a volunteer who had completed a "Classic City Farmers Market" feasibility study and marketing plan as a project sponsored by the Athens Chamber of Commerce LEAD Athens program. A second community leader happened to serve on the Athens-Clarke County Planning Commission, where interest in the farmers market concept was seen as an opportunity for economic development. Another local non-profit, Common Ground Athens, took on the task of sponsoring a grant application to FMPP.

It was decided early on that inclusion of products from local purveyors of prepared food, local artisans and craftspeople would attract more patrons to the market and be congruous to the mission of promoting local and sustainable products. Organizers also decided to dedicate market space to local non-profit organizations to support their efforts in the community. Athens has a very active local music industry, so local musicians were also booked for the venue every Saturday.

The hope was that this market would be planned, organized, governed and operated so that it could remain robust and viable for the long term and have strong standards promoting the "local and sustainable" theme.

The new Athens Farmers Market (AFM) in Athens, Georgia, launched on May 9, 2008. AFM's mission is to foster a dynamic economic and educational connection between community members, farmers, and artisans by providing a marketplace for food grown locally using sustainable farming methods and for locally produced hand crafted goods. The market only

accepts farmers who produce fruit, vegetables, meats and eggs using sustainable farming methods and who produce that food within a twenty-two county area in Northeast Georgia, which does not include the Metropolitan Atlanta counties. Similar rules apply to artists, craftspersons, prepared food purveyors and non-profits.

The FMPP grant program included budget for strategic planning (consultant), consumer education, student education, supplies and advertising.

The FMPP grant period began in October, 2008, but AFM operations began in May, 2008, so our first year was without grant assistance for promotion. We had a successful season in 2008, which provided us with a good benchmark to measure the effect of the promotion program afforded by the FMPP grant. (Our promotional programs would begin for the spring 2009 market.)

Funding provided by FMPP was used to advertise and promote the market through print, broadcast, web-based and graphic media. Grant monies were also used to educate the consumer on the health and economic benefits of food produced by local,sustainable farmers.

• **Project Approach**. Discussed below is AFM's approach to promotion, education and a brief discussion of market governance, which is one of every market's biggest, most important challenges.

Advertising

The 2009 AFM opened on May 2, 2009. Using FMPP grant funding, the public was made aware of the market through print, narrowcast television, broadcast radio, web-based and graphic media, beginning during the last week of April, including:

National Public Radio: The local NPR station, WUGA, aired morning and afternoon "drive time" underwriting messages Wednesday afternoon through Friday and early Saturday morning. These underwriting messages were aired throughout the season and were judged to be very effective, especially with their low cost.

Local Newspaper Ads: We decided that the most effective use of our newspaper advertising would be through local weekly newspapers, rather than the daily newspaper. We advertised one time per month in "The Flagpole Magazine", which is very popular and publishes local news of the arts and politics and is available for free at most local bars, restaurants and downtown newsstands. We also advertised in the community newspaper "The Oconee Leader". Oconee County is in the second most populist , but most affluent county adjoining Clarke County, where AFM resides.

Local Newspaper Stories: AFM has been a favorite subject of local newspapers since its opening in 2008. Pictures and stories about the market and its farmers and artisans seem to be a popular way to fill the pages. AFM unwittingly became the center of attention for several months when the county park where we operate was threatened by major change that would

have caused AFM to find a different venue. That story progressed through the entire 2010 market season and brought goodwill from the local community, and with a good outcome for AFM.

The Food Channel: Thanks to FMPP funding, AFM produced a 30-second promotional video, which was narrow-cast on Charter Cable on the Home and Garden Network (HGTV) and the Food Channel several times per week during the 2009 and 2010 market seasons. Judging from comments made by patrons and friends, the video was seen by many.

AFM Website: We self-developed a rather primitive website during our 2008 season, and we used Mailchimp.com e-mail campaign services to build e-mail contact lists. In August 2009, we finally had our new AthensFarmersMarket.net website ready, thanks to FMPP funding. This website was developed by a local company, Young Athenians, and has proven to be very effective and easily maintained and updated using SquareSpace hosting services.

Facebook: We did some advertising on Facebook, in an effort to reach local college students using Facebook demographically targeted advertising. It was difficult to measure the effectiveness of this advertising, however. Later, we put up a Facebook page, which has proven effective, judging from the number of "fans" and their activity on our Facebook page.

Local Music: The performances of local musicians, beginning at 8AM every Saturday, benefitted the market in several ways. Foremost, the music added to the festive atmosphere. Some patrons came primarily to see and hear the musicians. Children were always entertained and loved to stay for a while. Local newspapers listed the Athens Farmers Market as a musical venue, listing the artists scheduled to perform each week, for a bit of free promotion. Nuci's Space, a local non-profit a non-profit health and music resource, provided use of sound equipment so that musicians sounded their best. (Musicians seemed happy to be compensated by voluntary contributions of food from farmers and patrons, and always went home with plenty to prepare and eat.)

Special Promotion of EBT SNAP Program: In 2010, as student team took on the promotion of the new EBT SNAP program at AFM. Using a small amount of FMPP budget, the team produced posters in city buses and brochures for distribution in government offices and businesses.

Governance

While policies and procedures are certainly outside the scope of FMPP's grant, it is worth at least mentioning that considerable, ongoing effort in writing and refining market policies and procedures is required for a market to remain sustainable and in good relationships with its vendors and patrons. AFM's current policies are on its website at athensfarmersmarket.net/governanceandpolicies.

Education

Local School Classrooms: An agent and ex officio member of the AFM board in the Athens-Clarke County Extension Office and a local non-profit "Promoting Local Agriculture and Cultural Experience" (PLACE), collaborated in educating local elementary and middle school students in

understanding "from where does my food come." During 2009-2010, approximately twenty-five classrooms were given a short presentation and given seeds and a planting demonstration. Several classroom gardens were started.

Cooking Demonstrations: Athens has many good restaurants. Local chefs were invited to use ingredients from the market to demonstrate many ways to prepare dishes using fresh ingredients available locally. Patrons were able to taste the food. The smell and excitement in the air added to the pleasure and attraction of the market.

Support of Sustainable Farming Methods
From the outset in 2008, all growers were required to sign an affidavit that their operations complied with the rules of Certified Naturally Grown (CNG), an alternative to the Certified Organic program. In 2010 AFM required all of its growers to have CNG certification, or be well into the process of CNG certification.

• **Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes Achieved**.

Outputs –

Local Farm Success: Since AFM does not monitor individual vendor sales, it is not possible to quantify the effect that AFM has had on the economic well-being of the local farms that participate in the market. However, fulltime membership by growers grew from 11 in 2008 to 17 in 2010. Only one farm did not return for the 2010 season, and that was due to flooding. Productivity on several farms was doubled or tripled during that time period, as demand for their products grew because of the market.

Local Artisan Success: One local photographer had her first debut exhibit at the market. She since has become quite successful, selling books and photos over the internet and touring the Southeast with her show. A local soap maker has expanded from the market to provide a product line to a regional health food market chain. A local coffee roaster has increased the public's familiarity with the quality of his coffee and his company's values and become a major supplier of coffee to local businesses and opened a coffee shop downtown. A local artisan baker has grown from selling only at the market to supplying special bread to several local restaurants.

Famers Market Attendance: In 2008, before we won the FMPP grant, average attendance at the Saturday market was about 900 adults. In 2009 average attendance was about 1200 adults. In 2010, average attendance topped 1500 adults per Saturday. (So far in 2011, attendance is averaging about 1900 adults per Saturday.)

Sales: The market does not track individual vendor sales, but all indications are that sales have risen even greater than average attendance would indicate.

Farmers Market Venues: In 2009 AFM operated only on Saturday mornings at a local park, located just north of downtown Athens. This market has room for 47 vendors. In 2010 a smaller second market was added on Tuesday late afternoon in downtown Athens. This market has room for 11 vendors.

Sponsorships: AFM solicits sponsorships from local businesses. Sponsorships cost $300 per year and result in the sponsor's logo being displayed prominently on our website and on our market banner at the entrance to the market. In 2010 we had 12 sponsors. This has proven to be not only a significant funding stream, but an important element in our relationship with the community.

EBT Program: In 2009, AFM began honoring EBT debit cards. The non-profit Wholesome Wave Georgia (WWG) agreed to double EBT dollars from customers with a grant of up to $10,000. By August, AFM had used all of that $10,000, which was more than all of the other farmers markets in the state of Georgia combined. WWG agreed to extend the grant, resulting in $12,500 of doubling. So AFM facilitated over $25,000 in EBT sales. That collaboration with WWG continues today.

Outcomes.

• **Beneficiaries**.

The Local Community: The Athens Farmers Market has become a Saturday morning and/or Tuesday evening destination for thousands of people. They enjoy the atmosphere, the healthy food, the music and the interesting objects of art. The community, in many ways, has expressed its appreciation to the market for "being there." Perhaps as important, the political and economic dialog around the benefits of "local food" has increased far beyond what it was in 2008. This is a national phenomenon, of course, but AFM and its community partners have certainly played a role in promoting this discussion.

Local Sustainable Farmers: It would not be an exaggeration to say that AFM makes it possible for at least 12 farms to continue operations. An additional five or more growers would probably continue operations with or without AFM, but their viability certainly benefits from their participation. Several growers have been able to expand their production to meet demand. Growers include poultry, vegetables, and dairy and apiary operations.

Local Artisans and Craftspeople: AFM has become an important venue for artisans and craftspeople. Some sell every week, but the concept of coming monthly or less frequently has caught on as more effective. This allows the artist to appear at other shows and keeps his products fresh in the minds of the patrons. It also gives patrons more variety of beautiful products each week. At least one photographer launched a successful new career at AFM. A soap/skin care craftswoman who became successful at the market is now distributing her products to a chain of health food stores.

Non-Profit Organizations: AFM is recognized as an effective way for local non-profits to make contact with the public. Participants have included agencies promoting recycling, Habitat for Humanity, Master Gardeners, food coop, feline adoption, and several more diverse organizations.

Local Musicians: "The market" is a significant venue for local musicians to touch the community with their music and sell their CDs. The performers also benefit by receiving a bounty of fresh food.

• Lessons Learned

The AFM board of directors and membership have learned many important lessons in our first 3 ½ years of operation:

- Limiting grower participation to "local and sustainable" assures high quality food, maximizes benefit to the local economy, educates consumers about the benefit of healthy food and gives sustainable growers a market where they can learn and succeed.

- Requiring CNG certification of growers best assures that the growers are using sustainable methods.

- CNG certification and enforcement is not always straight forward, particularly in the meat, dairy and apiary operations, due to limited availability of organic feeds and evolving standards for apiary operations.

- Peer-to-peer feedback between growers about the appearance and quality of their products must be encouraged so that the quality of the market as a whole is high and consistent. Everyone benefits, especially the recipient of the critical feedback.

- Operating policies require frequent review and revision, based on experiences and issues encountered over time. However, not every problem can be anticipated and addressed in policy.

- A reliable, full-time market manager is critical to the long-term viability of the operation. Volunteer labor is difficult to organize and cannot always be relied upon. Year-to-year knowledge of the operation and policies is important. A passion for the cause of local and sustainable food compels the market manager to excellence and hard work. Patrons and vendors know who to talk to about issues and questions.

- A board of directors which represents each facet of the market (growers, artists/craftspersons, animal operations and the community at-large) assures better decision-making and policy formulation and communicates to the vendor community the values of the market and brings vendor issues to the Board in a timely manner.

- The board of directors functions best when there is a strong, experienced leader, able to navigate the board through disagreement, controversy and difficult decisions.

- Diversity of product offerings (produce, meats, dairy, apiary, arts, crafts) at the market benefits everyone, by keeping the market interesting and a regular destination for its patrons.

- Advertising and promotion during the first few years of operation are important to letting the community know that the market exists and continues to operate successfully. Even after the first few years, there remain large populations of potential patrons who are unaware of the market, so some level of targeted promotion is beneficial. Significant free advertising by notifying the press of significant events is well worthwhile and can result in full page articles and photographs about the market.

- Opportunities for participation by local businesses and non-profit organizations create goodwill and a sense of community important to the success of the market.

- Providing alternative methods of payment, such as EBT, Debit and Credit cards increases sales and better serves the community. By centralizing the transactions and providing tokens for patron spending, vendors and their patrons are not inconvenienced by the transaction.

- Use of social networking and traditional website communications is important in communications and promotion.

• **Additional information**.

A great deal of information is available at the Athens Farmers Market website, which is managed and updated proactively.

Project Partners' websites:
P.L.A.C.E
Athens Chamber of Commerce LEAD Athens
Athens-Clarke County Extension Office
Common Ground Athens

• **Contact person**.

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