

The Development and Testing of a Blueprint for Establishing a Coastal Area Farmers' Market

Coastal Harvesters, Inc. of Buxton, North Carolina received \$29,960 to establish the Hatteras Island Farmers Market and develop a blueprint for establishing farmers markets in other coastal NC communities.

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Project Summary

While farmers markets are blossoming and thriving throughout the nation, in rural and urban settings alike, many rural coastal communities still struggle to begin their own. They face a different set of obstacles than their inland counterparts due to unique economic and social frameworks, as well as their sheer distance from farms. Of course there are advantages to being on the seaboard, such as the capacity to harvest seafood in lieu of agricultural goods. However, rallying the participation of watermen in markets and ensuring favorable policies for the direct sale of seafood create further distinct challenges for creating successful farmers' markets.

For a deeper examination of these challenges, one must first consider the extent to which these coastal communities are remote. In the case of Cape Hatteras, the closest farm is over 100 miles away. This farm is an anomaly in its area, and the next "closest" farm is yet farther still. What's more, the commute to the island from such locations is not a simple hop onto the interstate. To access Hatteras Island from the southern NC coast you must island hop and take a minimum of two ferries, adding about four hours to your commute from the mainland. From the northern NC coast, access to the island is limited to a single bridge that connects to the mainland. Once on the island you must still continue driving south another fifty miles to the island's villages, where the majority of the population resides. Adverse weather also greatly dictates the extremity of the island's isolation. Extreme weather conditions often prevent access to the island from either route, and can inhibit travel without notice. Consequently, such communities are not only faced with the challenge of persuading farmers' to make the long commutes, but even once persuaded can lose farmer participation due to routes becoming inaccessible without notice.

The local economies also present unique challenges for a farmers' market. Most are highly seasonal and dependent on the service industry, which is in turn reliant on the influx of a more affluent tourist population. This structure presents a multitude of factors which must be considered. To begin with, the difficulties in reaching the island which influence the farmers' decisions in coming to the island also impact the tourists who fuel the economy. Adverse weather, such as the hurricanes and tropical storms that are common during the late summer, can force mass exodus of the tourists due to mandatory evacuations. Such weather can also wash out the roads and interrupt the ferry system, preventing entrance onto the island. Both scenarios deplete the consumer base for the market. Additionally, the tourism industry is always highly affected by the health of the national economy. Therefore when the national economy struggles, these small tourism-based economies are often the first to flounder. Without the pull of the more affluent tourist population, whether it be hindered from weather, the national economy, or simply the season (tourism is mainly confined to the summer months), these communities rarely have a large enough population to attract the farmers' presence. Further complicating the situation is the consequential fact that each of the preceding factors that influence tourists presence on the island can change without warning.

However, while the tourists create the larger consumer base needed to attract the farmers and make market participation profitable, providing access to local foods for the local community is the heart of the farmers' market's purpose. Yet catering to both populations is complicated. These small local populations are largely blue collar. When the tourist season is in height, the locals are working. The hours that the most financially profitable demographic would attend a farmers' market are in direct competition with the local working class's availability. Maximizing access to farmers' goods for both populations is vital but not easily or obviously resolved. To reach all of a rural coastal communities' potential market's customer base would require innovative resolutions in hours, location, and marketing.

Project Approach

These issues were addressed by Coastal Harvesters, Inc. (CHI), a nonprofit on Cape Hatteras Island, whose focus is enhancing quality of life on Hatteras Island by providing local growers and harvesters an opportunity to sell their goods directly to consumers, to educate consumers about local foods and seasonal eating, and to encourage and promote the use of local products. They began by conceptualizing a blueprint for a coastal farmers' market and then carrying out a test run, a farmers market on Hatteras Island to provide the data necessary to revise and produce a reliable blueprint for other coastal markets. The blueprint was not intended to readdress commonly accepted procedures that are taken in creating any farmers' market, but instead focused on the unique issues faced by this specific type of community. The approach was intended to specifically investigate the following topics: how to encourage farmers to drive to remote and isolated destinations to participate in the market; how to ensure access to the farmers' products for both the tourist and local populations; and how to sufficiently market to both consumer bases.

To encourage the farmers' participation CHI:

- *Actively sought out farmers, nurturing relationships and trust to encourage and secure participation.*
- *Actively sought out local restaurants and grocery stores as potential customers for the farmers to increase the profitability associated with participation in the markets for farmers.*
- *Provided physical infrastructure and equipment for the farmers' use at the market.* Tables, chairs, & tents were made accessible for the vendors (farmers), through FMPP funds, so that they could bring more goods with the space they saved by not bringing their own equipment. This was done to increase profit potential by freeing up valuable transportation space to help off-set the cost of transportation, time, and manpower necessary to participate in the market.
- *Set the market's time and day of the week according to the farmers' requests.* The market was held in the morning, as the farmers voiced preferring to make the drive

earlier in the day. The market was also set on Tuesdays, a day that did not conflict with any other farmers' markets in the region.

To ensure access to the farmers' products for both the tourist and local populations CHI:

- *Ensured that the markets' location was easily accessible and known by locals and tourists.* The market was held on the main road providing high visibility, at the Fessenden Center, Burrus Field, and Hatteras Realty, and in the most densely populated villages of Buxton and Avon.
- *Set the day of the week the market was held in relation to the best time for the tourist population.* Tuesdays were chosen because tourists check in for their predominantly week-long vacations during the weekends. Tuesdays were early enough in the week that they would be grocery shopping for the week, without fear of having left-over waste at the end of the week. The majority of local residents whose jobs serve the tourists lack a standard schedule but rather work around the clock. Therefore catering to the local residents summer schedule was not sufficiently plausible.

To market to potential customer bases CHI:

- *Investigated and utilized various forms of media and marketing to reach both low-income coastal residents and the more affluent tourist population.* Strategically placed signage informed both populations of when and where the market took place. Flags and kites were utilized to draw attention to the Hatteras Island Farmers' Market (HIFM) on market days. The HIFM website was created and expanded, proving to be highly effective in reaching both populations. Information was kept up-to-date and specifically included articles on current events relating to the market and the direct sales of seafood¹. All preceding forms of marketing were purchased with FMPP funds. Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter also informed and reached a multifaceted population. Newspaper advertising and press releases were utilized in reaching both populations as well. Local newspapers, both online and print, were successful in keeping audiences up-to-date with market changes that occurred throughout the

¹ The direct sales of seafood is not currently permitted on Hatteras Island under County law. CHI and the HIFM are working at effectively bringing about new laws that would allow watermen direct sales of their catch, while maintaining health codes and consumer safety.

season, as well as ensuring the market was relevant and prevalent in the media and public discourse. Reusable bags were also purchased with FMPP funds as a source of marketing. The bags were high quality, USA made canvas, featuring the colored HIFM logo. These bags were given with memberships to CHI, enlarging CHI's network of informed and involved members, and were also made available at the HIFM. They have been a strong form of nomadic visual marketing and a conversation piece.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The Hatteras Island Farmers' Market completed its inaugural season in September 2010. In many ways, the first season of the HIFM was a success. Farmers were given a new market and a new customer base. The community had more access to local goods during the season than prior to the market. Local restaurants and stores were able to purchase from local farmers. However, the HIFM faced many unexpected hurdles, causing strong variants from their original issue-specific blueprint, and even causing deviations from procedures that are usually taken for granted. For example, choosing and securing a suitable location to hold the market was taken care of months before the first market and was addressed in a manner similar to any farmers' market. However, local politics forced the HIFM to change locations four times in their three month season. Before the season began, CHI had secured the right to hold the market on a Parks & Recreation Dept. field. However, when an internal power struggle ensued within the local government, officials used the HIFM's location as a pawn to demonstrate their authority to one another. Another move was based on the displeasure of a local business owner, who feared that the HIFM was competition to his business. Subsequently it was moved multiple times from one county property to the next. Eventually, the HIFM found permanence when they partnered with a local realty company for the market's site. Hurricanes and tropical storms led to a decline in tourism and eventually resulted in a full evacuation for those who were not residents. Farmers faced health and family issues that prevented participation. Some farmers did not want to participate if competing farmers were present. As a result, the HIFM has produced

strong recommendations and cautions for those seeking to begin coastal farmers markets.

Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries to this project were both direct and indirect, some immediate while others have and will be actualized in the future.

The local and tourist communities of Hatteras Island were provided with local produce and food products. This access to fresh and local produce complemented county and state health initiatives, such as programs to prevent obesity. Through interaction with the farmers, the customers were endowed with a deeper knowledge of the crops that thrive in the region. The local community was also specifically fortunate with relationships with the farmers and consequently gained a more resonant understanding and respect for the work that goes into farming in rural eastern North Carolina.

The local restaurants, such as Rusty's Bar and Grill in Buxton, as well as local stores, such as Conner's Super Market (also in Buxton), were able to purchase local produce directly from the farmers, resulting in economic benefits for both sectors.

CHI benefitted in creating and nurturing relationships and partnerships with local farmers. They were able to grow their membership base, therefore securing a larger population to educate and empowering them to work within the local food system.

While the laws prohibiting the direct sales of seafood were not overturned, the HIFM was a successful platform to inform the public about the issue. Hundreds of names were gathered to petition the local government and many advocates were brought on board.

Other coastal communities will benefit from CHI's recommendations, which are outlined below under "Lessons Learned".

Lessons Learned

Through the execution of the HIFM we have learned that the literal sweat and tears of volunteers can overcome numerous exasperating circumstances. However, when push comes to shove, CHI would not recommend without hesitation the traditional farmers market structure for many remote coastal communities.

To begin with, through the market alone, producers were not necessarily able to meet the needs of the local consumers, mainly in regards to quantity. The number of farmers in the region were few. Those few were often restrained in the frequency of their trips by the long commute and/or personal issues. When they did come, the farmers could not always bring enough produce to meet the consumers' demands. The hours of the market were not conducive to many residents' work schedules, and by the time they could make it, there was little left. This issue was addressed by CHI throughout the fall and winter months. To rectify the situation, CHI is working with at least one of our local farmers to bring weekly boxes of produce for residents who request the service in advance, to be picked up at specific locations.

Community demographics remained a large factor in the success of the Farmers' Market. The small local population, which is largely lower to middle class, could not provide sufficient demand to make the long travel worthwhile for the majority of the producers. However, by hosting the Market in the summer months, the tourist population brought in both the demand and the resources to make the Market a worthwhile venture for our producers. As previously noted tourists' presence was highly dependent on extenuating circumstances, such as the weather and state of the national economy.

The farmers also had population centers much closer to their farms, offering more accessible customer base, further dissuading the commute. Since both the local economy and the tourists' presence are so volatile, other markets besides the weekly farmers market must be made available to secure profitability for the vendors. Once again, it is hoped that the weekly boxes of produce may work to bridge the gap in the needs of the local community and the traveling producers. Whether in conjunction with, or in lieu of this format, we believe there is also large potential for CSA memberships. Weekly allotted amounts of produce could be delivered for pre-established members of a given CSA farms. This would allow the farmers to produce directly in relation to their

set customers. We also see practicality in harnessing the internet, to create a “local produce store”, where individuals could buy online from the local farmers, and then orders could be picked up once a week from a particular location.

There are of course many extenuating factors that would support a recommendation for coastal communities to execute the traditional farmers market structure. If seafood sales were legally permitted, and the interest was strong with the watermen to take part in the direct sales of their catch, the market would be substantially more formidable. It can be supposed that if there had been more education and more established community support before the market, then perhaps the location would have been more secure and not moved. On that same note, stronger support from local political entities would also have been crucial to the farmers’ market’s success. The frequent location moves were a strain and burden on the farmers, the consumers, and the volunteers working to execute the market. Both of these issues could potentially be addressed by ensuring that the planning, hosting, and execution of the market is carried out by a renown and longstanding organization. While CHI was a respected entity in the community, it was also very young. Its youth prevented it from having a scorecard or reputation within the community, which could have bolstered it’s efforts with the local government and populace. It is also vital to actively address both populations’ needs in different ways that reflect their very different needs and circumstances. The seasonal farmers’ market, in conjunction with a CSA style relationship between farmers and local residents, could very well be a plausible and profitable solution.

Additional Information

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