

Increased Access to the Rochester Public Market -- The Market Trolley Trail

The **Friends of the Rochester Public Market** of Rochester, New York received \$100,000 to implement the Market Trolley Trail, which increased customer access to this urban, year-round farmers market by providing transportation to customers from off-site parking to the market. A welcome center was also developed to provide market information, EBT token and gift certificate sales, and nutrition education to customers.

[Final Report FY09](#)

Friends of the Rochester Public Market Inc.

Increased Access to the Rochester Public Market – The Market Trolley Trail

Grant # 12-25-G-0963

Rochester, New York

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FINAL REPORT

The Rochester Public Market's central city location serves as a vibrant market and provides affordable, fresh foods for a large and diverse customer base. Open three days a week, year-round, the Market offers 300 indoor and outdoor selling stalls. Local farmers and vendors operate out of three sheds, one of which is enclosed and two are open air. The Market hosts 40,000 during a busy day, with an estimated 2.4+ million visitors annually. An updated study estimates that these customers generate almost \$50,000,000 in annual sales - the equivalent of about 180 full time jobs. A variety of special events are featured on non-Market days, which include garage sales, "Flower City Days", "Artist Row", "bands on the bricks" and "Holidays at the Market", attracting more customers and revenue to the Market. On Saturdays in September and October, over 40,000 people a day visit the Market. Contributing to an increase in shopper volume has been our **EBT token exchange Program**. Originated 3 ½ years ago by the *Friends* and operated by us since then, this project brought in \$446,000 in SNAP clients' business to our vendors in 2011; when combined with figures from vendors who still accept EBT cards, total SNAP usage at the Market for 2011 will exceed \$600,000 (This figure was less than \$40,000 for 2007, the year before we began the token program.) Another traffic increaser was the selection of the Rochester Public Market as the Farmland Trust "America's Favorite Farmers' Market" for 2010.

While customers flock to the Market, the scarcity of parking on the market site is their chief complaint. Public transportation is limited; virtually all of our customers arrive on foot or in private vehicles. The limited on-site parking results in grid-lock as customers vie for parking spaces. Not finding parking on-site, customers troll the streets throughout the neighborhood to find parking. Shoppers then have to cart their produce-heavy bags from the Market to often distant parking spots.

Due to the physical space available to the Market, creating additional parking spots on-site was not an option. However, the City of Rochester (which owns and operates the Market) purchased property directly across the street from the Market's Union Street Gate, leveled an existing warehouse, cleared and paved about one-half the resulting space to create new parking for 250 cars. This winter the remainder of the lot is being turned into parking for another 250+ cars. While this has helped to solve the problem of not enough parking, many of the new parking spots will lie as much as ¾ mile

from the actual market, a long way for customers to walk as well as carry produce-laden bags.

The *Friends* solution to this was to propose a shuttle that would move people and their parcels back and forth between the Market and the parking lot. In addition the City had purchased from CSX Railroad an abandoned trestle and road bed running from the parking lot, above Union Street, and directly onto Market property. The route would be developed and landscaped to accommodate both our “trolley” and pedestrians; this means that customers will be able to walk as well as utilize the trolley between the Market and parking lot without having to interface with on-street traffic, already overburdened on Market days. The City also purchased additional unused property from CSX to further increase Market parking capacity and also access an additional entrance/exit on the next block. Most customers who park in this area will certainly need a conveyance to transport them to and from the Market.

The Friends proposed to obtain and operate a Market Trolley between the Market proper and the enlarged parking area. Operation was to be initially funded by the FMPP grant with financial responsibility passing to the City of Rochester and fund-raising efforts by the *Friends* as the grant period came to a close. We also proposed to partner with the city to establish a Welcome and Information Center at the trolley drop-off point inside the Market. The Welcome Center would be staffed by *Friends*’ volunteers; we already provide this service at another location.

After a bidding process, we purchased a refurbished and rebuilt SVMI power car and a new Supreme trailer from Specialty Vehicles of Henderson NV. The cost of these two F.O.B Rochester was \$75,000, the amount budgeted for this acquisition. This amount was reduced to \$70,000 to compensate for condition issues which occurred in transit and had to be resolved locally.

We solicited bids for the various forms of insurance necessary to operate the trolley through a local independent insurance broker who has extensive experience working with non-profits.

Rather than hiring our own drivers, we contracted with Monroe Transportation Company, a business that specializes basically in school bus operations, to provide our drivers. This provided experienced, properly licensed drivers and relieved the *Friends* of maintaining the ongoing driving abstract reviews, substance abuse screenings etc required by our insurers.

We entered into a contract with the City of Rochester, whereby the **Friends** operated the tram between parking areas and the market. Once the FMPP grant period has expired in 2011, our arrangement with the city will involve a business plan which will make the tram self-sustaining for the future. We anticipate other revenue streams arising from the trolley to contribute to its continued operation. These include but are not limited to advertising/sponsorships and chartering of the trolley by the city, county and/or other municipalities for community events away from market days.

Initial acceptance of the trolley was enthusiastic and positive. The drivers reported that on peak days as many as forty people at a time were riding the trolley in both directions. Market security guards have noted a slightly improved traffic flow as shoppers are more content to seek parking in the new area. A portion of the Market is now off-limits to private vehicles – this improved pedestrian traffic flow and enhanced safety. Neighborhood residents are already reporting a lessening of traffic and parking incursions on their property.

The main difficulty has been the time required to make a circuit due to the traffic congestion. Many shoppers are content to walk from their cars into the Market and then ride the trolley back to their cars with their purchases. This may change in 2011 when parking lot expansion puts some cars more than ¾ of a mile away from the Market gate.

An unexpected surprise reported by our driver has been the return of many older customers to the Market. They had given up coming due to the long walks and congested traffic and now have been offered an easier way to shop at the market again. This is particularly true on Thursdays, when we are not as crowded.

The second season of the Market Trolley Trail launched on Saturday, April 30th, 2011, in conjunction with the opening weekend of *Flower City Days at the Market*, the Rochester Public Market's annual month-long event in which landscapers, nurserymen, arborists and anyone involved in selling items to the home gardener take over the stalls on Sundays. The trolley experienced increased ridership as shoppers became aware of it and we ran on Thursdays, Saturdays (normal Market days) and Sundays through Memorial Day Weekend.. About that time, we began to experience an overheating problem, which caused the engine to stall and not restart until it had cooled. This was extremely dangerous in the heavy cross-traffic environment that the trolley operates in. As a result, we operated only sporadically during most of June while we worked with the vendor to resolve the problem.

We eventually connected with the Jasper Engines Co., who had actually supplied the power plant for the vehicle and they were able to put us in touch with a local representative and work with them to identify and correct the problem. This service provider is located about three miles from the Market and has become our maintenance contractor. We did, unfortunately, lose about a month of consistent operation, visibility and shopper confidence so that when regular, reliable operation began again about the second week in July, we virtually had to start all over in terms of building our number of users. We also had to forego a month's worth of revenue anticipated from the City of Rochester, our enthusiastic partner, which operates the Market and now has an agreement with *the Friends* whereby the city will gradually assume the cost of our operating the trolley.

Usage increased throughout the remainder of the season until on our heaviest days over 1000 hundred customers used the trolley to transport themselves and their purchases between the newly enlarged parking lot and the actual Market grounds. On Thursdays, as many as 400 riders used the trolley, many of them school groups coming from the

designated bus parking area for the educational Market tours which have been operated by *the Friends* since our founding in 2004. We believe that all of these numbers will go much higher in 2012 and beyond.

The usage of *the Market Trolley Trail* has not been as great as anticipated because:

1. The City of Rochester was forced by budget reductions to postpone beyond the grant period improvements to a new parking area across the street from the Union Street entrance to the Market. This project will produce 300+ new parking spaces and an additional entrance to Market parking, easing competition for spots and traffic congestion around the Market. It involves an area we propose to serve with the trolley. Work began this fall and with our light winter has continued through December; it will be ready by Memorial Day. Shoppers who park here will be as far as $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the Market and we anticipate most of them will use the trolley, especially on the return trip when they will be carrying purchases.

2. Regulations calling for extensive environmental studies involving railroad beds have delayed turning the former CSX railroad siding and elevated trestle that once served the Market into a combination tramway and walkway beyond the grant period. This initiative will **enable the trolley to complete a route into and out of the Market itself that does not require entering into city traffic at any point.** This will result in increased frequency of trolley runs; we estimate a complete market – parking area round trip will require 12 to 15 minutes. The same trip, as currently undertaken at grade level and in competition with Market traffic, takes between 25 and 35 minutes. This project is also projected to continue through the winter. Its final part will be the re-installation of structural steel trestle components which have been removed for reconditioning, rust removal and painting. The project engineer estimates the trail will open between Memorial Day and July 4th at the latest. Increased, regular trips means increased convenience and reliability.

At the time of our proposal, the city had projected that the work described in **1.** and **2.** above would be completed well before the expiration of the grant period. This was also the case for the opening of the Welcome Center, now projected to be ready by the 4th of July weekend. The city of Rochester intends to carry through with this and the Friends have funds in the Trolley budget to participate as proposed in our grant application. We will also be joined by the **Marketview Heights Neighborhood Association** and the **Market District Business Association.** We are now planning to include an **EBT token** dispensing facility here; the location is close to a main entrance to the Market and will be at the spot where shoppers will enter via the trolley and elevated walkway. This will also take the pressure off the Market office, which has been our only token exchange site. At times, the line there has been steady at 20-25 people with two transactors in operation. This function will also be provided by *Friends* volunteers.

BENEFICIARIES – Beneficiaries have been the community, which now has a more accessible, safer Public Market, our vendors, who have benefited from an increase in

customers who are less put off by parking and traffic problems, our immediate neighbors who have experienced a decrease in market customers cruising their streets and parking on their lawns and driveways and the *Friends*, who have gained visibility and a signature project as we continue to recruit members.

LESSONS LEARNED - If we were to undertake this project again, we would:

a. research insurance costs better at the beginning. The premiums for damage, fire and theft, liability (\$1,000,000 per incident), and collision were almost a budget-breaker. Most entities operating a vehicle of this type are sufficiently large (i.e. theme parks, municipalities, parks) to self-insure. Commercial coverage is hard to find and costly. As we move forward in partnership with the City of Rochester, we are seeking a way to take advantage of its ability to self-insure. Anyone attempting a similar project should try to partner with an entity that has this capacity.

b. know more about our vehicle and our ability to obtain maintenance. Open-air trams are essentially sold in the South and the West. Our vendor was in Nevada, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a continent away. When we experienced a significant maintenance issue, valuable peak-season time was lost while we located the proper service provider.

c. research state motor vehicle regulations before purchasing a vehicle.. We were unaware of New York State regulations which limited what streets our trolley can be operated on. While only a mild inconvenience in our situation, this could affect specifications for the vehicle you are looking for.

d. Do not attempt to provide your own driver. Passenger-carrying vehicles of our type require commercial operators' licenses, insurance companies require constant monitoring of these drivers. A company that employs drivers is equipped to provide this – we were not. Our drivers are provided by a company that is primarily in the school bus transportation business – a real positive.

e. if a local political entity is involved, have your project managed by a very patient person..