

Community Harvest Initiative
Connecting People. Cultivating Opportunity.

THE BIG IDEA:

Access to fresh, locally grown foods and the knowledge to prepare them – particularly for those in lower to middle income brackets – is a serious issue in America. With health care costs and childhood obesity on the rise, our country's farmers markets will play a central role in a long term community health and wellness plan.

These markets also offer a secondary benefit when they are incorporated into economic development strategies. They provide a much needed primary and secondary income for struggling urban and rural families, while drawing additional consumers to downtown.

The Bentonville Farmers Markets has been a center of community and commerce for over 30 years, and the *Community Harvest Initiative* was developed by Downtown Bentonville, Inc. (DBI) to strengthen and expand the positive impacts this event has on our city and its citizens. The initiative's mission is to position the Bentonville Farmers Market as the catalyst for innovative economic, educational and community development programs, thus transforming relationships between urban development, workforce education and agricultural sustainability.

Connecting consumers with local growers and artisans remains the primary focus of our market and the initiative. In addition to DBI's efforts to participate in the state Women, Infant and Children food program, our organization is also looking at several other connecting opportunities, including:

- Participating in the federal food stamp program to provide further access to lower/middle income citizens
- Developing a restaurant produce brokerage program, which opens new opportunities to the local growers and provides a unique product for local restaurants to stay competitive
- Starting a Farmers Market fresh food subscriber program, which would deliver produce to the consumers in the downtown area – of which over 50% earn less than the median family income
- Supporting the creation of an urban Bentonville Community Garden and opening opportunities for gardeners to sell extra produce at the Market
- Developing packaged food products and original publications such as cook books that use and/or focus on locally grown produce and would be sold in stores around the region – creating jobs, additional income and positive marketing for the market

Cultivating lifelong learning opportunities is also part of the Community Harvest Initiative. DBI is exploring several options, including:

- Developing a grower mentor program through the University of Arkansas Extension Office – Benton County that would work with Farmers Market growers to extend harvest seasons and diversify crops offerings

- Providing opportunities for elementary through college age students to flex entrepreneurial muscles by implementing unique partnerships with schools and universities that explore business concepts in real world situations
- Producing on-site chef demonstrations, cook books, and prepackaged food product that focus on local produce and provides hands-on job training while delivering financial results for the student, growers and program
- Implementing unique internship programs that extend the classroom experience for students interested in agriculture, marketing, culinary arts/hospitality, and small business development
- Developing and/or supporting curricula that directly connects the Community Harvest Initiative to a deepened elementary through college in-classroom experience
- Hosting educational programs such as tai chi, yoga and exercise classes, group bike rides and runs, health diagnostics such as blood pressure and cholesterol tests, etc.

PHASE I – 2008

Successes:

- ✓ Created Farmers Market Advisory Committee
- ✓ Participated in WIC program
- ✓ Hired seasonal Farmers Market Manager
- ✓ Developed and initiated vendor sales assessment tools
- ✓ Strengthened management structure and grower/crafter guidelines
- ✓ Enhanced Saturday experience by experimenting with a variety of educational programs, live music and theatre performances, children and family activities
- ✓ Invested in electronic marketing and outreach to engage new consumers
- ✓ Developed new revenue streams to support long-term growth
- ✓ Cultivated partners with knowledge and resources to support initiative goals
- ✓ Identified needs in farm to consumer supply chain and consumer target area and demographics
- ✓ Centralized support network for Bentonville Farmers Market growers
- ✓ Recruited Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) Culinary Arts and Hospitality Program to provide fresh baked goods at market

PHASE II – 2009

Goals:

- ✓ Recruit no less than 30 vendors to the Saturday Farmers Market
- ✓ Create Community Harvest Initiative Advisory Committee
- ✓ Hire full time Community Harvest Initiative Director
- ✓ Develop and initiate assessment tools such as consumer feedback surveys, economic impact studies, etc.
- ✓ Develop Farmers Market page on DBI website
- ✓ Add an additional day to Farmers Market
- ✓ Introduce new programs such as tai chi, yoga and exercise classes, group bike rides and runs, and expand educational/culinary programs, hands-on children and family activities
- ✓ Develop infrastructure to restaurant produce brokerage and Farmers Market subscriber program
- ✓ Integrate R.E. Baker recycling and greenhouse curricula into Farmers Market

- ✓ Implement NWACC/University of Arkansas internships with Horticulture, Entrepreneurial, Early Childhood Education, Students in Free Enterprise and Culinary/Hospitality program

PHASE III – 2010

- ✓ Tie new vendor recruitment goal to 2009 average sales figures so new vendor recruitment does not negatively impact existing vendors
- ✓ Implement restaurant produce brokerage and Farmers Market subscriber program
- ✓ Add an additional day to Farmers Market
- ✓ Expand Farmers Market website page to include maps, vendor biographies and recipes
- ✓ Utilize social media to enhance marketing efforts
- ✓ Continue to expand/enhance special events, programs and activities
- ✓ Recruit additional elementary school partners and begin Community Harvest Initiative in-class curricula