

Michigan Municipal League

Mark's Carts



michigan municipal league
Better Communities. Better Michigan.



PROJECT DETAILS:

NAME:

Mark's Carts

DATE:

2011-Present

LOCATION:

Ann Arbor, MI

CATEGORIES:

Local Food
Community Organizing/Building
Entrepreneurship

THE GIST:

Capitalizing on a growing national trend of food carts, Mark's Carts brings people of all ages together by offering delicious local food and communal seating, which has generated energy and activity on the nearby streets and neighborhood.



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PROJECT SCOPE:

Inspiration:

Sitting on the back steps of the Downtown Home and Garden store, owner Mark Hodesh was pondering ways to utilize the privately owned empty lot behind his already successful business. Although he was not thinking about a foodie movement as such, he was inspired by a pizza oven on wheels that he saw in Brooklyn, NY. It took him about "five seconds" to come up with food carts, and thus, Mark's Carts was born.

Project Scope:

Mark's Carts, comprised of eight food carts on a 40 x 75 foot lot, recently completed its second successful season. Each of the food carts is individually owned by the vendors and each presents a different style of ethnic or regional food.

Accomplishments:

- Operated at full capacity during its two years of operation. Preparations are underway for the 2013 season.
- Created 35 full- and part-time jobs
- Creates a festival atmosphere by offering communal seating with picnic tables.
- Two established restaurants are setting up food carts as an avenue to reach out to new customers.



- Allows vendors to enter the food cart business as a stepping stone for opening their own restaurants. Provides an incubator for food owners to try out new recipes and marketing strategies before they move on to a brick and mortar establishment. So far, two food cart businesses have moved on to open permanent restaurants.
- Provides a different downtown dining option.
- Animates and brings more foot traffic to an area of town which originally lacked in activity.
- Brings an increase of business and foot traffic to the Downtown Home and Garden store.
- Raises awareness of healthy, locally grown food.
- Continues to receive extensive local media coverage on the concept of food carts, thus acting as a catalyst to spread the trend to other Michigan cities.
- Sparked additional entrepreneurship on the same property, with a seasonal beer garden adjacent to the food carts. The beer garden in turn has increased the food cart evening business significantly.



Budget/Equipment:

The cost of a food cart can range from \$6,000 to \$20,000. Over and above the cost of the carts, the fee for the 2013 season is \$9,500 which includes: utilities; access to the shared prep kitchen; a kitchen manager; daily cleaning, cleaning supplies and four press releases.

Mark built a kitchen on his property, which is a legal requirement in order to serve food. (It is starting to get some off season use from neighborhood restaurants that need extra space.) Kitchen requirements vary from county to county, so it is important to check with the health department on equipment and design elements. Mark also recommends that you share the menu(s) with the county health department.

Actions Taken:

1) IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITY:

Adapt to changing markets. Food always brings people together and food carts are an easy entry level. Talk to area restaurant owners to see how they feel about it. Research shows that food carts do not take away from established restaurants, but rather attract more people and potentially create viable entrepreneurial opportunities to start other businesses.

2) FOLLOW THE RULES:

Talk with your city officials and planning department to make sure that you are in compliance with your local ordinances. Meet with your county health department. Make sure you are fully informed of what you are allowed to do. If barriers exist, present your business plan and gather your supporters to try and work with the city to see if the affected laws can be amended. Regulations in Michigan do require that a legal kitchen be on the premises.

3) SOLICIT NEIGHBORING ALLIES:

It's important to get buy-in right up front. Talk to nearby business owners, share your ideas and make your case for the potential economic impact food carts would bring to the area.



Mark Hodesh, Owner of Mark's Carts.



4) MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE:

As an entry-level business to the food industry, food carts offer people from all different socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to potentially start a small business. Keep it affordable and the application process straightforward.

5) PROMOTE GOOD PHYSICAL DESIGN:

In addition to good food, create a physical space that allows people to sit and interact with those they don't know. Picnic tables provide excellent seating to encourage spontaneous conversations. The goal is to create a social "room" that encourages neighborhood social activity.

6) IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE FOOD:

It's about creating a new social space and animating a previously dead space and street. Mark's Carts has transformed this west edge of downtown. Be flexible and open to other activities that can spawn from the original intent. Music and food tasting contests have been wonderful additions to Mark's Carts.

Lessons Learned:

- Keep it simple. Avoid expensive infrastructure costs. No heat in the winter? Close down – business is light in January and February anyway.
- Keep it flexible. Mark allows the carts to stay open as long as they want if there is business. (Some of the carts stay open to serve the beer garden customers.)
- Be honest with yourself about what will realistically work for your community. But don't be afraid to try. Mark states that he is "driven by fear of failure."
- Contact the appropriate governing bodies upfront to make sure that everyone is on the same page.
- Get buy-in from surrounding neighbors and businesses. Demonstrate how increased people traffic benefits everyone.
- Use social media - Twitter and Facebook – to market your business and engage the community.

Documents:

Food Cartology: Rethinking Urban Spaces as People Places Food Cartology.pdf

Application Form: Mark's Carts Application.pdf

Agreement: Mark's Carts Commissary Agreement for 2013.pdf

Visit: www.markscartsannarbor.com

Twitter: @MarksCartsA2

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The Center for 21st Century Communities

Building 21st century communities

Experts from around the world—in academic, business, and public sectors alike—agree that investing in communities is a critical element to long-term economic development in the 21st century. Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract and retain knowledge-based workers. Central to attracting this priceless commodity is *place*. Research proves that successful 21st century communities effectively leverage the assets summarized in this brochure. Learn more and stay engaged at mml.org.

Who we are...

The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. We are a nonprofit, but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs; our people are dynamic, energetic, and highly approachable, passionately and aggressively pushing change to achieve better communities and a better Michigan.

What we know...

Never before have so many diverse interests, from academic researchers to the business community to government leaders, shared a single conclusion: Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract knowledge-based workers. And what is central to attracting this priceless commodity? *Place*, specifically vibrant 21st century communities.

What we offer...

Through its Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3), the League provides education, technical assistance, public outreach, and unprecedented access to experts and resources. The 21c3 is a “one-stop-shop” for communities interested in creating and sustaining livable, desirable, and unique places that attract the highly skilled, creative, and talented workforce of the next century.



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