

# Michigan Municipal League

# Michigan Farmers Markets



michigan municipal league  
Better Communities. Better Michigan.



## PROJECT DETAILS:

### NAME:

Michigan Farmers Markets

### PROJECT START DATE:

Been around for more than a century, but experiencing a resurgence.

### LOCATION:

All parts of Michigan

### THE GIST:

Farmers markets are increasingly playing a vital role in Michigan's economic growth while also providing residents with options for affordable and healthy food and related products.



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# Michigan Farmers Markets

## PROJECT SCOPE:

### The Challenge:

Farmers markets across Michigan come in all shapes and sizes. There are tiny seasonal markets with as few as four vendors operating out of the trunks of their cars and pickup trucks and there are huge year-round markets selling everything from apples to sea urchin. Overall, the challenges markets face are dynamic and diverse meaning no single challenge confronts every market. Farmers markets across the state work to find a balance between supporting multiple vendors' small businesses, meeting the varied interests and priorities of market shoppers, and supporting the goals of the community while creating a welcoming, vibrant place that serves as an access point for local food. Market managers (whether paid or unpaid) are often times working with a small budget, a chorus of different personalities, and ever-changing weather.

### Overview:

The number of documented Michigan farmers markets has more than doubled since 2006. Not only are farmers markets growing in popularity, they're also becoming more accessible and affordable to those most in need, according to the Michigan Farmers Market Association. Today, there are at least 320

farmers markets of all varieties. There are huge markets like the historic Eastern Market in Detroit and small, yet vibrant markets in rural communities such as Dixboro, Fremont, Gaylord, and Suttons Bay. While many of the state's markets are seasonal—running from the spring to fall—there are a number of year-round markets. Some of the markets have fresh new looks, such as the newly relocated and expanded Flint Farmers' Market and the year-old Downtown Market in Grand Rapids, one of the first LEED certified urban markets in the United States. More and more Michigan communities start up local markets each year and while many are a success, some struggle over common pitfalls.

### **Accomplishments:**

- In 2006 when the Michigan Farmers Market Association came into existence, there were 147 known Michigan farmers markets. In 2014, there are at least 320 markets. That's a 117-percent increase in 8 years.
- Main reasons for the growth include increased consumer interest in healthy foods, buying local, and a desire to understand production practices. Consumers are asking more questions about food in terms of farming. Also, farmers are becoming more interested in direct marketing options, which tend to be more profitable.
- Markets are creating a sense of place for some communities, particularly those that don't have an easily identifiable downtown area or gathering place. Farmers markets are becoming the focal point/gathering spot for some of these areas.
- Markets are revitalizing some communities by providing an economic boost. Markets can lead to increased foot traffic which can help existing businesses and inspire new ones to open.
- Some anecdotal evidence suggests farmers markets can positively contribute to home values and rental unit occupancy rates.
- Markets have become business incubators. There are numerous examples of some permanent and highly successful restaurants in various communities that started out at a farmers market on a folding table under a tent.
- Successful passage of the Cottage Food Law in 2010. Supported by a group of pro-farmers market stakeholders, this law allows preparation of non-potentially hazardous foods in a home kitchen without a license. Common products are cookies, breads, cupcakes, and jams and jellies. The law has helped many people startup low-risk business endeavors for the low cost of a 10-foot by 10-foot tent, table, and table cloth.
- Successful passage of a law in 2013 to allow wine makers to offer tastings and sell their wine at farmers markets. A similar effort is now underway for microbrewers of beer.
- Increase in programs and activities and overall creativity is taking place in more and more farmers markets, including cooking demonstrations and classes in Ann Arbor, Boyne City, Dansville, Farmington, Grand Rapids, Grand Blanc, Holland, and Menominee; business incubator efforts at Ypsilanti, Flint, and Holt; family- and youth-focused activities at markets in Birmingham, Byron, Dearborn, Marquette, Rochester, Wayne, and Wyoming—just to name a few. Many markets also have live music, including Bath, East Lansing, Fenton, New Baltimore, and Saginaw.





- Markets are becoming more accessible to those in need. In 2006, only 3 out of 147 Michigan farmers markets accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP) Bridge Cards. In 2014, 143 out of 320 markets accepted SNAP benefits. This means that a much larger portion of the state's families most in need had free access to fresh, healthy and locally grown foods.
- Farmers markets in Michigan are national leaders in their acceptance of SNAP benefits. As the data shows, markets continue to grow the program, with benefits to Michigan families, farmers, and communities.
- More Michigan farmers and small businesses at farmers markets are getting access to federal food assistance dollars.
- In 2013, 84 farmers markets reported 42,435 SNAP Bridge Card transactions during 2013. There were an average of 544 transactions per market.
- In the 2013 season, 111 Michigan farmers markets reported \$1.2 million in SNAP Bridge Card sales. SNAP sales at individual markets ranged from \$0 in sales to \$296,404 in sales.
- Overall, SNAP sales reported by farmers markets increase by about 10 percent between 2012 and 2013.
- Of the farmers markets that compared 2013 sales to 2012 sales, 45 percent reported that SNAP sales had increased; 39 percent reported that SNAP sales decreased, and 14 percent reported steady SNAP sales or lack of data to compare sales.

**Participation:**

Who can be the key participants in creating and sustaining a market? Key organizers can vary greatly by community, and in most cases the farmers markets are driven by volunteers and people passionate about their community.

- Input and passion from market vendors—farmers and other small businesses—is invaluable to market success.
- About 25 percent of the state’s markets are run by a local unit of government, such as the city council or village or township board, downtown development authority, parks and recreation departments.
- About 25 percent are organized and run by nonprofit or faith-based management groups, including neighborhood associations, local chambers of commerce, and area services groups like the Rotary Club and Jaycees.
- Some are run by vendor association groups, informal networks of volunteers, independent management boards.
- Some aren’t really operated by anyone and were formed by a group of people who showed up at a local spot and started their own market.
- There are also a couple privately run markets.

**Budget:**

- The dollar range for a farmers market is quite wide because it is based on the scale of the market.
- But the goal of most markets is to be self-supporting.

**Funding:**

Where does the funding come from? How is it sustained?

- Diversified revenue streams are essential.
- Farmers market revenue includes vendor fees; merchandise sales; fundraisers, such as events like the Bath Farmers Market Farm to Fork Fall Feast; community support through “Friends of the Market”-type groups; sponsorships from local businesses and organizations, including local banks and credit unions; sponsorship and support from downtown development authorities, chambers of commerce, and local units of governments; and grants.

**How-to Start Up and Operate a Successful Farmers Market:****1) SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.**

Some people think starting a farmers market will be fairly easy and they don’t realize all the behind-the-scenes work required. Starting a market involves much more than picking a date and location and hoping farmers and customers just show up.

**2) RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS.**

One of the most important keys to having a successful farmers market is establishing and maintaining strong relationships between all parties involved—market organizers, vendors, local government leaders, sponsors, and the general public.



**3) COMMUNICATION IS KEY.**

It's vital to have input from area farmers and other stakeholders early on in the process of forming a market.

**4) HAVE A GOOD CORE REPRESENTATION OF THE TYPES OF PRODUCTS CONSUMERS WOULD EXPECT AT A FARMERS MARKET.**

Consumers usually will want fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. As your market grows then you can add different non-traditional farmers market products, but the goal should be to have 60 to 80 percent of the products at the market be farm-fresh products, such as fruit, veggies, honey, maple syrup, and flowers.

**5) FORM AN ADVISORY TEAM TO OVERSEE THE MARKET.**

The Michigan Farmers Market Association encourages those starting up a market to have a board of directors or advisory team. The makeup of these teams vary by community, but typically consist of volunteers with a common goal to have a great farmers market in their community.

**6) MARKETING AND PROMOTION.**

Getting the word out about the market is essential. It can be as simple as having visible signage around town, getting a news article in the local paper, starting up a free social media page such as on Facebook and Twitter. Creating community partnerships and relying on those partners to spread the word is extremely important.

**7) GROWING VENDORS AND CUSTOMERS SIMULTANEOUSLY.**

There is a real chicken and egg dynamic between growing the vendor base and growing the customer base. Market organizers need to work on building both at the same time. Having a large number of vendors with few customers will discourage vendors from coming back. Having a large number of customers with just a few vendors and a limited selection of products could discourage shoppers from returning.

**8) CONSIDER GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP WHEN STARTING.**

The Michigan Farmers Market Association, for example, has a variety of fee-for-service programs to help new markets get started, form an advisory board, pick the best location and day of the week to have the market, etc. The association also offers a community analysis service to help determine whether a community can successfully support a farmers market. Also, Michigan State University Extension offices offer a range of support and expertise across the state.

**9) BE STRATEGIC ABOUT YOUR MARKET.**

Know what other markets are nearby and plan accordingly. There may be an opportunity to work with and support the existing nearby market. Shoppers will generally travel zero to 10 miles from their home to get to a local farmers market. Vendors will travel typically up to an hour for a decent market, and they'll travel further for a really successful market.

**10) DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHANGE.**

Much like other businesses, you have to adapt and adjust to climate changes. You may need to add, revise, or drop elements as your priorities shift so that you can grow and strengthen your market. You must also continue to accustom people to making shopping at your farmers market a habit.

**Lessons Learned:**

- Plan well. Poor planning is probably the No. 1 downfall to starting up a market.
- Rely on more than one person to champion the market. Farmers markets started and championed only by one person tend to struggle if that person leaves the area, becomes ill, passes away, etc. It's important to bring in others to the team who can step up down the road.
- Start small. It's best to start with four to six committed vendors who agree to consistently attend the market for the entire season selling fresh fruit and vegetables and other farm products. Then, diversify and grow from this strong foundation.
- Keep the market season short in the beginning. Have the season, for example, run from July through September, and in subsequent years add days, weeks, or months to the season as the market grows and demand increases.
- Success doesn't happen overnight. It requires continued investment and innovation.
- Infrastructure can help markets, but it doesn't guarantee success.
- Have patience when starting up SNAP and other assistance programs. While Michigan is a national leader in farmers markets accepting SNAP benefits, challenges continue to exist in the areas of technology, cost, recordkeeping, and the large amount of work for market managers and volunteers to administer the program.





- Despite the challenges related to SNAP, it's worth it in the long run because as SNAP sales increase at farmers markets, the markets attract more customers and the vendors experience more profits.
- Now what? With the number of farmers markets more than doubling in the last eight years, some people may ask if Michigan has reached its saturation level. Dru Montri, director of the Michigan Farmers Market Association, says no: "There is such a large number of consumers who haven't even yet considered shopping at farmers markets. As long as we have the potential to bring more people into farmers markets, we have the opportunity to expand the number of markets. As long as we are strategic about growth, we can avoid these saturation points. But, starting a market a mile away from an existing market on the same day of the week, for example, can cause over saturation."

### Similar Projects:

For a complete list of Michigan farmers markets go to  
<http://mifma.org/find-a-farmers-market/>

### Contact the Experts:

Dru Montri, director, and her team at the Michigan Farmers Market Association, 480 Wilson Road, Room 172, East Lansing, MI 48824: (517)-432-3381; [dru@mifma.org](mailto:dru@mifma.org).

Michigan State University Extension Community Food Systems team has educators in different parts of the state. Details: [www.msue.msu.edu](http://www.msue.msu.edu).

### Additional Documents:

Project documents, information sheets, guidelines, promotional materials, etc. that could be helpful:

- Michigan Farmers Market Association: <http://mifma.org/>
- National Farmers Market Coalition: [www.farmersmarketcoalition.org](http://www.farmersmarketcoalition.org)





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Better Communities. Better Michigan.

# 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](http://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.