

## History of Struggle at the San Juan Island Farmers' Market

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### *Abstract:*

Farmers' markets are exploding in numbers all over the country in recent years due to an increased demand to reclaim the right to know who grows food and what it contains. While many studies exist to address this growing trend in farmers' markets, most research centers on how consumer demographics and behaviors limit the success or failure of a market. This study fills in for the lack of focus on farmers and the detailed process of how they drive a farmers' market into being. Through semi-structured interviews with 14 farmers in the San Juan county region, this study seeks to address the challenges that occur during the establishment of a farmers' market. Analysis of these interviews yields many varied answers to these two questions: 1) what is the purpose of a farmers' market according to farmers and 2) what obstacles do farmers face when establishing a market? The history these farmers tell helps understand how a farmers' market can become a thriving infrastructure for small farmers in a rural town. This case study will contribute to a body of research that analyzes market histories to create better models for future market communities.

### *Introduction*

Sustainable farms are good for the environment in many ways and to help them thrive; it is important to understand what small farmers need in order to thrive. Most research shows how studying consumer demographics and behaviors can make farmers' markets better. Customers are an important factor in farmers' markets, but a shift must be made to thinking about farmers and the obstacles they face in establishing a market. By interviewing farmers in Friday Harbor, WA, I was able to document how a market came into being. My research is also a case study in showing the true importance of farmers in a farmers' market.

Livestock that are raised near streams and other water sources can pollute the waters. Harmful pesticides and herbicides can also enter the water on farms and these streams eventually lead to the ocean with the polluted runoff in tow. Sustainable farms reduce this impact on the marine environment because they have limited or no use of harmful chemicals, and they are more conscious of where they allow their animals to

graze. Farmers' markets may be a key piece in encouraging these types of farms that help to protect our marine environment.

Most of the FM research focuses on how FMs can be improved through studying consumer attitudes and behavior. Many articles survey and interview the consumer segment in any given community, while seeking to categorize these shoppers based on their experiences and habits at FMs. The main conclusion of most of these articles is focused on improving the welfare of the communities by studying their behavior. Since the farmers can fuel the local economy, especially in rural areas, it is important to focus on confronting the barriers they face. Their struggles must be addressed before anyone can promote the health of a community. In addition, most studies simply address the growing number of farmers' markets across the country without exploring the steps to setting up a market. Most researchers on the topic ignore the struggles involved with establishing a well functioning market for farmers and present the assumption that markets just happen on their own or that a setup is easy. By asking the question of how a particular farmers' market comes into being, I hope to concentrate on the true struggles and detailed process of providing a market for farmers and for the community.

*Methods:*

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with local farmers, which included dairy, meat, and produce farmers, as well as key people who worked on the project and may have farmed in the past. Each interview was conducted in person and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Many were conducted on the actual farms in which I received tours of the farm and learned a little more about them. I also conducted few informal interviews with previous respondents to follow up and/or clarify on a few

questions. I did participant observation at farmers' markets, town agriculture events, and speaker events such as a fundraiser dinner for the new farmers' market site, a lecture by Percy Schmeiser, and a few evenings of envelope stuffing with the farmers' market association's fundraising committee. I worked with the local Farmers' Market Association at the market and at key events. In addition to the core of my research, I compiled an oral history of the San Juan Island farmer's market, one that had never been compiled before.

*Results:*

I interviewed farmers because without farmers, a market cannot exist. Their willingness to be transparent about their farming practices is unique and it is always interesting to hear from the people who make our food. I went into my interviews with two research questions in mind. I asked: what is the purpose of a farmers' market according to farmers and what obstacles do farmers face when establishing a market?

In answering my first question, I found that 100% of farmers, past and present, stress that a farmers' market is the primary infrastructure for marketing their products, so the purpose for them is heavily focused on job security. In addition, 92% of the farmers interviewed, noted that having a healthy community was one of their biggest priorities. One specific respondent, who serves on the county council, said that "many farmers live on the edge as far as income goes, so the reason they keep farming without much return is because they are happy within their means and work hard on promoting a healthy community, which is very important to them." Aside from these two purposes, 70% of respondents said that the future of farming on the island was also an important purpose of a farmers' market. Many brought up the fact that the average age for a farmer is well

over 50, so it is their hope that this farmers' market will encourage more young farmers to get involved and continue farming on this island for the future.

To better understand the obstacles farmers face when establishing the infrastructure of a market, we must first gain a better understanding of the entire history of the farmers' market here in Friday Harbor. In the context of the first few markets, 77% of respondents noted that instability was one of the biggest obstacles, as the market was kicked out of a few parking lots for example. The original market began in the 1980s and moved around to many different locations; six or seven locations in 15 years. They settled at the courthouse parking lot in 1996 and set up at this spot every year until very recently. This location agreement, however, had to be renewed every year. The instability at each market site was highlighted by the unstructured set ups and constant threat of possibly having to move locations whenever the owner saw fit.

Many farmers stressed the obstacle of the inability for the market to grow in both physical size and in number of sales days. Over half of the respondents noted that the spaces were too small and that there was no room for expansion, even as the market grew in vendor numbers and the amount each vendor sold. Thus, the search for a permanent site became the primary goal of the farmers and their supporters. In 2008 the Agricultural Guild was formed, which is a nonprofit organization with the goal of promoting sustainable agriculture in the county. After the formation of the Agricultural Guild, the search for a permanent site gained a lot of momentum, but also quite a bit of opposition. When asked about the obstacles after the farmers began to look for a permanent site for their market, the great majority (70%) of respondents noted that misinformation and the controversies that existed between 2008 and 2010 were some of

the biggest obstacles for the project. Between 2009 and 2010, the project lost two significant sources of funding from both the town of Friday Harbor and the County Land Bank because of public controversies. These controversies were headed by a small conservative opposition group of mostly business owners who contributed to the circulation of misinformation. Eventually, however, the Ag Guild was able to purchase the Brickworks building in downtown Friday Harbor in late 2010, and the farmers' market started at the outdoor part of this site just a few months ago. Now that the building has been purchased, the bulk of the energy is going to fundraising, as 100% of respondents noted funding as one of the biggest obstacles currently, although few are skeptical that the funding will eventually come through. The great majority of the farmers said that one of their biggest obstacles in the past, but also now, is finding time to give support to the project. They say that farming is a full-time job and it is difficult for them to find the time to establish the infrastructure needed to make their farming efforts worthwhile.

The purchase of the property and move to the new space has showed some success and positive outcomes, though. This begs the question of how did the farmers get as far as they have? The unique sense of community on the island fosters this kind of marketplace and helps it succeed. As a farmer, who grows a variety of crops with her two daughters, put it "The biggest tourist draw of all is an authentic feel of community, and you need real people such as farmers to achieve that." Almost all respondents also stressed that the social aspect of the market was important in its success. These farmers know that it is important to get to know their customers and get that immediate feedback,

and customers love to get to know the person that made their food. As a former market manager put it, “There is an increasing demand for buying directly from the producer.” Those I interviewed said that these close connections between producer and consumer help the market thrive and keep consumers coming back. As stated previously, one of the biggest obstacles for the market is the limitations of farmers and their lack of extra time. Therefore, the farmers’ market has succeeded as much as it has because of the thousands of volunteer hours and the perseverance of supporters. These were community members, many previously supportive of local agriculture, who lent support in any way possible. Supporters donated time, money, supplies, and expertise to keep the project going. 100% of respondents praised the volunteer support throughout all the controversies and site searching.

As it has been so crucial for this market’s success, the great majority of farmers believe in continuing to foster social interaction at the farmers’ market. Because this is the first location the farmers have owned, they are also hopeful that a feeling of ownership will help establish a legitimacy and longevity for their market, with 77% responding this way. However, the most repeated response in these interviews was that the new farmers’ market location has created a central town hub that could bring many different types of people and organizations together around the theme of agriculture. According to the farmers, the benefits of the move to this new central location are new customers and more supporters. 6 out of 7 current farmers said that sales are already up. Two market managers said, “So many people have come around since the market has moved, people get it now after seeing it in living color.”

The struggles of this particular farmers' market echo national struggles for small farmers and the development of the proper infrastructure to help them succeed and survive. Along with other long-term goals of the new farmers' market, the farmers are hoping to encourage people to change the way they think about local, fresh foods, which could take generations to change. Most important to not here, however, is that my study shows how the farmers that grew the food and the supporters that donated their time are the limiting factor in the success or failure of this market. This contradicts most studies, which seek to show how customer preferences and demographics limit the success of a market.

*Discussion:*

Small sustainable farms are better for the marine environment than industrial because they limit the use of pesticides. Farmers markets are a key piece in promoting the survival of sustainable farms. Most studies on farmers' markets show the recent explosion of markets, but mine actually shows a detailed account of how one came into being and the struggles that occurred along the way. The farmers I interviewed said the most important reason for a market is infrastructure and job security. The biggest obstacles they faced in obtaining this were instability of initial markets and controversy during the search for a permanent site. Their success came from having a community market with direct relationships between consumer and producer along with many supporters. My study shows how the establishment of a farmers' market is full of barriers and takes the careful consideration of a farmers' role in the market's survival. More studies of the process are needed to help create better market models that work for both the farmers and the communities in which they live.

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