

Farmers Markets

Background

A farmers market can serve as an important community gathering place, economic development opportunity and connection point between producers and consumers. Farmers markets sit at the intersection of many policy issues: nutrition and health, environmental protection, food security, economic growth, farmland preservation, and community development. Farmers markets are critical to the sustainability of small-scale, diversified farm businesses and build linkages between agricultural communities and urban and suburban residents. While farmers markets can provide significant benefits, urban markets are often challenged by complicated, expensive permitting, lack of stable, long-term locations, and underfunding.

Both locally and nationwide, local governments have taken steps to remove barriers for farmers markets. These include establishing a clear code definition for farmers markets, amending codes to allow farmers markets in appropriate zones, allowing markets on city-owned property, streamlining permitting, and establishing a program to sponsor farmers markets. Jurisdictions may also consider additional steps, such as facilitating acceptance of electronic payment and food assistance benefits, outreach and access to markets, and options for stable, year-round infrastructure.

Recommendation: *Streamline permitting and fees to remove barriers to establishing and maintaining a farmers market.*

Several local jurisdictions have identified licensing and fee schedule improvements to streamline the permitting process for farmers markets. Several cities in the region have supported farmers markets by streamlining or exempting markets from fees, licenses, or permits. The City of Gold Bar exempts operators at farmers markets from business licenses, while Seattle also exempts direct-market farmers from requiring a city business license and has streamlined market permits and fees. Municipal Research and Service Center has collected other state and local approaches on their [Farmers Market](#) page.

Local examples: Streamlined processes

Gold Bar

[5.04.040\(C\)\(10\) - Business Licenses](#)

The following shall be exempt from the licensing provisions of this chapter and are not required to comply with the licensing requirements of this chapter: Businesses operating at a "farmers" market or other city-sponsored or -approved activity so long as the activity does not occur more than one (1) time per week for more than five (5) months of each calendar year; and provided that the name, address, and telephone number is submitted to the city on a city business license application form, in advance.

Seattle

Streamlined fees and permitting: [Seattle Farmers Market Ordinance](#) (2009)

Recommendation: *Identify allowable locations for farmers markets to operate. Consider permitting markets to operate on city-owned property.*

Several local jurisdictions have clarified where farmers markets are permitted to operate and have reduced administrative barriers for temporary use of public land to host a farmers market. In addition to sponsoring markets, Steilacoom, Renton, Kirkland, Auburn, Issaquah, Snoqualmie, and North Bend provide space for farmers markets on city land. Identifying feasible locations accessible to patrons and market vendors can be an important step forward that benefits both neighborhoods and markets.

Beyond allowing use of city-owned property, jurisdictions can develop clear guidance on how markets can locate on public land and start in your community. Clarity on how to establish a farmers market on public land can make it easier to launch. For example, the USDA and GSA developed a report in 2009 addressing how to [locate farmers markets on federal property](#).

Local examples: Farmers markets on public land

Seattle

Seattle facilitated location of farmers markets on city property with clear process and procedures. See [Seattle Administrative Rules Regarding Use of Public Land](#) (2009)

Renton & Steilacoom

Renton and Steilacoom both host farmers market on city-owned property. Steilacoom has established a clear [process and guidelines](#) to maintain a stable and well-run market.

Recommendation: *Define farmers markets.*

Some jurisdictions define what constitutes a “farmers market” to clearly differentiate these markets from fairs, festivals, flea markets, events with temporary vendors, and other businesses that may use the term “farmers market” or appear synonymous to the public. By defining a farmers market, jurisdictions can target policies and programs aimed at farmers markets more precisely and reduce confusion.

Common components of a farmers market definition:

- The primary purpose of farmers markets is to connect local growers directly to consumers. Establishing a minimum number of farmers needed on market day/season or a minimum proportion of sales from producers are two ways of establishing a vendor mix that emphasizes farmers over resellers, crafters, and prepared foods.
- Markets are generally a temporary use, where vendors break down and set up each market day.
- Markets operate periodically (typically one or two days a week), generally for a defined season, although there are a growing number of year-round farmers markets as well.

Washington State Farmers Market Association’s (WSFMA) [Roots Guidelines](#) define vendor categories and list what items are not allowable for sale at member markets. The Roots Guidelines don’t define “local” but do require all products at member markets to be grown/raised/produced in Washington State or bordering counties in Oregon and Idaho. In 2014, the WSFMA represented 112 farmers markets throughout the state.

Local examples: Defining farmers markets

Snohomish County

Snohomish County defines farmers markets under their county code as a basis for identifying allowable locations and other relevant development regulations. The following definition for a farmers market is used by the county: “A farmers’ market is defined as a site or facility owned or operated by a farmers’ cooperative or similar arrangement for the growers and producers of agricultural products to display and sell agricultural products.” (SCC 30.91F.184) [Farmers Market AG Bulletin #9](#) (2010)

Seattle

The City of Seattle provides a detailed definition of farmers markets in Attachment A of [Farmers Markets Permitting Process](#) (2009). Seattle’s administrative definition of a farmers market requires at least 70% of the market’s vendors to be Washington State farms and businesses selling fresh farm products, value-added farm foods, dried flowers and crafted farm products, and processed and prepared foods. This definition is used as criteria for participation in farmers market program that streamlines permitting and allows use of right of way.

Recommendation: *Take action to support viability of farmers markets.*

In 2013, the Regional Food Policy Council convened a subcommittee to consider obstacles and solutions to farmers market viability in urban areas. The project identified several strategies that local governments can employ to support farmers market operations. More information can be found in the [Farmers Market Sustainability - Obstacles and Strategies](#). Here are some additional strategies local governments could take to ensure that farmers' markets can sustainably operate in your community:

Communication and coordination between markets and city departments. Given the unique role of farmers markets, communication between relevant county or municipal departments and market managers is vital to serving markets. Regular meetings, as well as establishing clear points of contact, can help build relationships and communication to support markets.

Support a range of market sizes. A large weekly farmers market may not be financially viable in all communities. Smaller markets, featuring fewer than 10 vendors, can help fulfill goals of community food access while providing more flexibility in siting and operations. Given the limited profitability of very small markets, appropriately scaled fees and permitting processes are important for allowing small markets to successfully locate.

Provide financial support or sponsorship of markets. Some jurisdictions, like the City of Seattle, have provided financial support in order to help build organizational capacity of independent farmers market organizations. Several jurisdictions and public entities like the Port of Tacoma have sponsored local markets as well.

On market day, prep market sites. For markets sited on public land, like parks and streets, several jurisdictions assist markets by clearing the space or enforcing parking restrictions before market set-up.

Plan for existing and new markets in development of property in prime market locations. Farmers markets hosted in areas with strong development markets are at risk of displacement from redevelopment. Jurisdictions could encourage developer agreements that plan to accommodate existing markets.

Develop long-range strategy for market siting to identify what role the jurisdiction or agency wants to play. Many farmers markets are operated by private non-profit organizations, but jurisdictions often interact with markets on permitting assistance, helping to secure locations, sponsoring markets or siting farmers markets. Developing a strategy in conjunction with farmers markets operators that considers long-term locations and facilities can help use city resources wisely.

Support farmers market food assistance programs. Some jurisdictions have launched programs that increase or match food assistance benefits used to purchase fresh food at farmers markets. These programs have been effective in both serving low-income customers and encouraging shopping at farmers markets. [Fresh Bucks](#), [Health Bucks](#), [Double Up Food Bucks](#), and [Market Bucks](#) are a few examples. Funding for such programs has come from a variety of sources, including city and county-managed funds.

Partner on permanent space for markets. Numerous cities across the country have partnered with farmers markets on providing permanent pavilion space. Jurisdictions can benefit from having markets as an anchor lease holder for an investment in a park pavilion. Markets benefit from the assurance of a permanent location with appropriate facilities. [Olympia](#) and [Bellingham](#) both provide examples of this kind of long-term arrangement. The [City of Carnation](#) also partnered with Sno-Valley Tilth to create a park pavilion space for its farmers market.

Other Resources

[Zoning for Public Markets and Street Vendors](#) – APA Zoning Practice (2009)

[Establishing Land Use Protections for Farmers Markets](#) - Public Health Law and Policy (2009)

[Community Health and Food Access: The Local Government Role](#) - International City/County Management Association (2006)

[King County Farmers Market Report](#) – King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks (2010)

[Farmers Markets, Public Markets](#) – Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington

[Farmers Markets and Low-Income Communities](#) – Project for Public Spaces