

Local Food System Development in Mississippi:

How Local Governments Can Support Farmers Markets



Creating a vibrant, local food system in Mississippi is an important economic development strategy. A significant part of that is recognizing the growing demand for fresh, local foods and then working to support the development of markets to bring local food producers together with consumers. Recently, increased demand for fresh, local food has boosted efforts of businesses and communities to coordinate easier access to local food markets. One of those markets in Mississippi communities is farmers markets. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of farmers markets increased from 54 to 95 (Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, 2017). **Figure 1** shows a strong, continued growth in the number of farmers markets that have emerged in Mississippi.

The purpose of this report is to document the benefits associated with establishing farmers markets and describe the success factors that contribute to strong farmers markets in Mississippi. Additionally, we present nine ways that local governments can support farmers markets based on a statewide focus group-type meeting with farmers market managers in April 2017. Finally, we describe a new approach within the Mississippi State University Extension Service that supports local food systems using a cross-disciplinary, statewide team through an initiative called Local Flavor.

Farmers Markets Are Important to Economic Development

Economic development is a broad term related to the benefits communities acquire from the recruitment and retention of businesses and industries. In this report, economic development refers to the benefits to a community from establishing a farmers market. Hughes et al. (2008) concluded that farmers markets have several benefits to communities, including these:

- Consumers have access to local food products that they might not otherwise have.
- Food products are often high-quality in terms of freshness.
- Consumers like having access to and interaction with local producers, which facilitates discussion about pesticides, herbicides, and other production topics.
- Consumers enjoy knowing they are purchasing locally, which benefits local food-based producers.
- Small farms that supply farmers markets can attract affluent in-migrants to the local area.

Capturing these benefits requires significant planning and consistent management of the farmers market. Often, market managers in Mississippi share best practices and

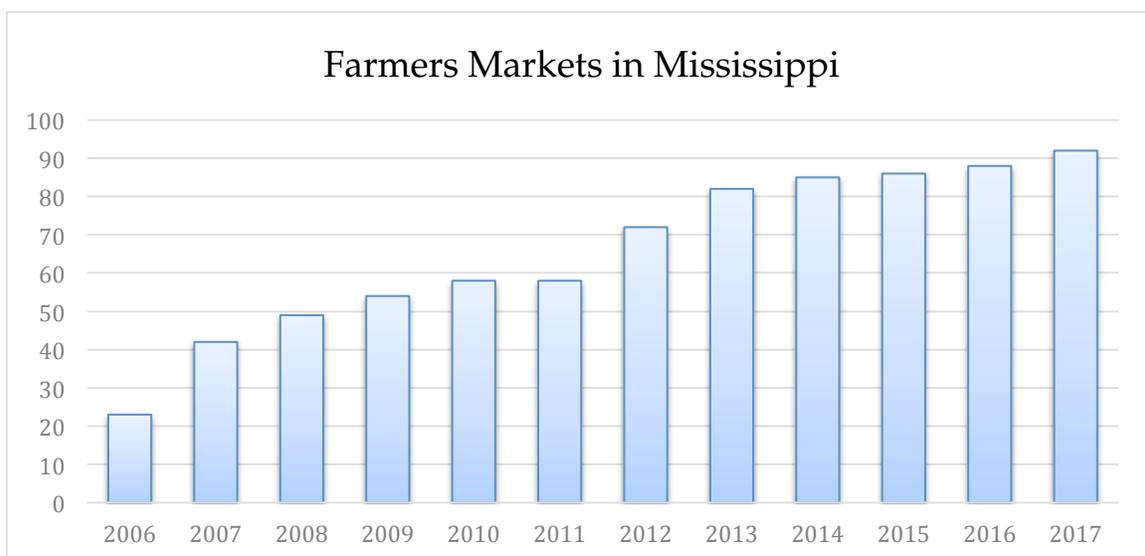


Figure 1. Farmers markets in Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, 2017).

learn from one another. Local governments often play a key role, as well. Collaboration among local governments and farmers market managers is key to market development.

Improving farmers markets was a key topic at the recent Mississippi Farmers Market Managers Annual Conference held in Jackson in April 2017. The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) hosted the event. At this event, MSU Extension facilitated a group discussion among managers to identify areas that continue to be challenging and ways to overcome those challenges. In the following sections, we describe the process of improving farmers markets, look at results from the statewide discussion, and discuss nine ways local governments can encourage development of farmers markets in Mississippi.

Improving Farmers Markets Is a Process

Figure 2 shows a market-improvement model for improving a farmers market. The evidence we collected can be best explained as it relates to this model.

Improvement begins with collaboration. Sharing best practices for farmers markets is a necessary part of improving all markets. Market managers can implement ideas that work and make changes to those that do not. This type of sharing is the first step toward improvement.

Market managers can adopt new best practices and implement them with the support of their advisory councils or others who govern the work of local farmers markets. This process builds partnerships among institutions, consumers, and producers. The implementation of new ideas across the local food-supply chain can create innovative approaches to improving farmers markets.

Successful farmers markets tend to move quickly on new ideas and learn how consumers respond. This process can be repeated each time market managers collaborate to examine threats, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses they have observed while working to develop farmers markets. Online tools (e.g., email, social media) also can serve to increase collaboration in terms of frequency of interactions and quality of those interactions.

Farmers Market Success: 9 Factors

Within the farmers market-improvement process, several success factors have emerged. The following list was developed from the group discussion among farmers markets managers at the MDAC meeting in April 2017. Each issue relates to one of the market-improvement process steps described in Figure 2. Here are some of the success factors identified by market managers:

- Farmers markets should focus on dedicated hospitality toward all shoppers and maintain a safe and clean environment at all times.
- Managers indicated that one of the important success factors was location and easy access for consumers, including ample parking.
- Success was also related to offering a wide variety of such products as baked goods, produce, and crafts to attract a larger pool of consumers.
- Involving young people in events held at farmers markets was seen as a contributing factor to increased engagement, especially when combined with educational or entertainment events. In some cases, young people volunteered to assist consumers with their purchases.
- Managers stated that focusing on customer service at the market was critical to success and recommended that vendors understand how to effectively manage customer relations to build connections with their buyers.
- Several market managers indicated that they stay on-site during the market to welcome newcomers and to create activities for attendees.
- Managers agreed that highlighting a particular commodity gave their markets a focused theme on which to build children’s activities and other entertainment options. Dairy Day was one example provided.
- Managers also stated that having a unique mascot or character helped in marketing their farmers markets using websites and social media.
- Providing nutrition education, healthy recipes, and cooking ideas can be beneficial to consumers.



Figure 2. The market-improvement process model.

Farmers Markets Assistance: 9 Needs

In our time with the market managers, we also facilitated discussion of existing issues and needs, and how we might make progress toward improving farmers markets. Following are some of the unmet needs we discovered:

- Training for social media management, signage, business card design, and visual merchandising were among the most needed educational programs noted by managers.
- Attracting a diverse set of vendors to increase the appeal to more consumers is a high priority.
- More training is needed on using websites, blogs, and other online marketing tools.
- Managers cited the need for more information to help young people understand local food production.
- More training is needed on nutrition and healthy eating habits.
- More information is needed about federal nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). SNAP works with limited-resource populations to provide nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, cooking classes, school and community gardens, and assistance in making the healthy choice the easy choice through policy, system, and environmental changes. SNAP issues EBT cards, which can be used at some markets. EFNEP provides direct nutrition education to limited-resource families to help improve diet quality and physical activity.
- Managers cited limitations at each market, including a need for increased cold storage for meat and dairy products. Managers indicated grants would be a feasible vehicle to provide this type of equipment.
- Managers indicated a need exists to have local and state regulations explained to vendors, especially regulations about food safety labeling and processing.
- Vendors noted local foods such as muscadines, organic vegetables, eggs, fruit, butter beans, and some meats continue to be in high demand.
- Managers indicated future work and training needs should focus on food hubs and understanding branding requirements or other regulations.

Local Governments Can Help

Demand for local foods is a growing trend in Mississippi, and the number of farmers markets continues to increase. Local government organizations can play a vital role in the creation and growth of farmers markets. Here are some steps local governments can take:

- Determine if a farmers market is needed in a specific local area.
- Create a plan regarding the services the city/county can provide before the market opens.
- Work with emergency managers to ensure facilities are kept safe and accessible.
- Provide legal assistance to determine any liability that needs to be addressed, and provide options for liability coverage.
- Facilitate dialogue between state agencies and the local planning committee, especially when it comes to understanding regulations about food safety and processing.
- Provide a facility or space for the farmers market. The facility needs to be easily accessible and affordable to sustain a farmers market.
- Provide free garbage collection, parking, and police support.
- Provide access to public restrooms either directly on-site or adjacent to the market.
- Provide funding for staff members to assist the farmers market manager.
- Provide advertising by creating a link on the city or county website to the farmers market website and social media channels.
- Support educational programs on preparing healthy foods, growing vegetables, or other relevant topics.

The Next Two Steps

In this report, we documented a discussion among Mississippi farmers market managers to highlight some success factors, existing needs for growth, and ideas for local government support of farmers markets. Providing such information can generate increased collaboration between farmers market managers and local elected officials. This is an important aspect of market development as it can lead to sizeable benefits for consumers, local governments, and local food producers. To further economically develop farmers markets and local food systems in Mississippi, MSU Extension is actively working to bring about new programs and efforts in a two-step process.

The first step is to find new ways to support the collaboration between farmers markets and local governments. One of the best ways to facilitate this type of collaboration is to identify the benefits that could accrue from greater collaboration. By benefits, we mean the economic impact of farmers markets. Some work has been done measuring the economic impact of farmers markets in Mississippi as a way of documenting the benefits of developing local food systems.

Myles and Hood (2010) estimated the economic impact of farmers markets in Mississippi by collecting sales data from 26 of the 52 farmers markets that existed in 2010. Results indicated approximately \$950,000 in sales. These direct sales generated another almost \$670,000 in indirect benefits. As a result, the total economic impact of these 26 farmers markets was more than \$1.6 million. With only 50 percent of markets reporting in this study, \$1.6 million serves as a conservative estimate of the total economic impact of farmers markets in Mississippi in 2010.

Fast-forward only 7 years, and Mississippi now has more than 90 farmers markets. What is the economic impact of this increased number of farmers markets on the state's economy in 2017? We plan to examine the economics and management of local food systems more broadly, as well.

The second step is about organizing and aligning resources. To do this, we have begun the task of organizing all MSU Extension educational programs aimed at assisting producers, farmers markets, food hubs, consumers, local governments, and institutions—all stakeholders—into a virtual front door for anyone who needs assistance within the local food system in Mississippi. This virtual front door will include all resources and educational programs that MSU Extension currently offers on its website and through social media. New Extension educational programs will emerge focused on supporting local food systems, and those programs will provide businesses, communities, and institutions with online tools to grow Mississippi's local food system and, therefore, its economy.

To see more about the new work that is developing to support local food systems in Mississippi, follow MSU Extension's local foods initiative (Local Flavor) on Twitter @LocalFlavorMS or search for #LocalFoodsMS.

References

- Hughes, D.W., C. Brown, S. Miller, and T. McConnell. 2008. "Evaluating the Economic Impact of Farmers Markets Using an Opportunity Cost Framework." *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 40, 1(April 2008): 253-256.
- Myles, A. and K. Hood. 2010. "Economic Impact of Farmers Markets in Mississippi." Mississippi State University Extension Publication 2582. Available at: <http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/publications/economic-impact-farmers-markets-mississippi>

Publication 3126 (POD-05-19)

By **Rachael Carter**, Extension Instructor, Extension Center for Government and Community Development; **James Barnes**, Associate Extension Professor, Agricultural Economics; and **Chance McDavid**, Senior Extension Associate, Agricultural Economics/Southern Rural Development Center.



Copyright 2019 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

Mississippi State University is an equal opportunity institution. Discrimination in university employment, programs, or activities based on race, color, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, genetic information, status as a U.S. veteran, or any other status protected by applicable law is prohibited. Questions about equal opportunity programs or compliance should be directed to the Office of Compliance and Integrity, 56 Morgan Avenue, P.O. 6044, Mississippi State, MS 39762, (662) 325-5839.

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director