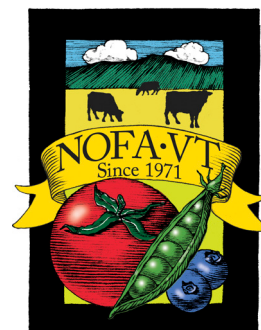
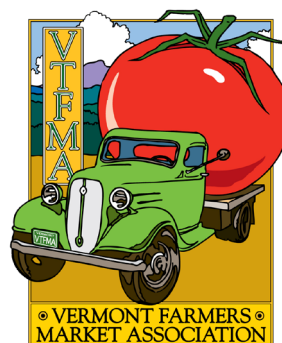


Reflections on a Successful Relocation: A Case Study of the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market

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MARKET HISTORY

In November 2006, Post Oil Solutions, a small grassroots non-profit, launched the Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market (BWFM) in response to our community's growing interest in accessing local food year round. With the mission to support sustainable agriculture by providing a viable direct market outlet for local farms during the winter while building community and regional sustainability, the market found a ready home and enthusiastic customer base at the River Garden on Main St. in downtown Brattleboro.

By 2011, the BWFM had grown from operating only in November and December, to every Saturday from November through March - one of the few weekly winter markets in Vermont, and a local institution in the Brattleboro region. Our thriving market was bursting at the seams with customers craving the fresh local foods and community that our market offered. Our vendors were successfully incubating new products, growing their customer base right along with our market, and most importantly, were enjoying a reliable source of income over the lean winter months.

By fall 2013, however, the River Garden building had been sold. The new landlord ushered in a series of annual rent increases along with renovation plans that meant the loss of vendor spaces, making it less and less likely that market revenues could meet these rising costs. Contract negotiations were strained and our once ideal location began to feel less secure. The overcrowded market space was less inviting to young families and the mobility-challenged. Simultaneously, customers were clamoring for more space as well as convenient and accessible parking.

PROBLEM SUMMARY

By 2016, the market was at a crossroads: do we stay in our lovely light-filled downtown location and increase vendor fees to cover rising costs, depend on unpredictable fundraising, or find a new home? Until now, the market had been self-sustaining, operating on a shoestring budget with little cash reserve to cover increased costs, let alone fund a relocation.

FROM CHALLENGE TO OPPORTUNITY

The BWFM is not a membership-based market. The nine person steering committee (SC) is made up of a mix of vendors representing all sectors of the market, a customer representative, the founder of Post Oil Solutions (the parent non-profit), and the market manager, who oversees our market. The SC strives to make decisions by consensus and represent the best interests of the market as a whole. This organizing structure was key to the market's ability to be relatively nimble in navigating the process we describe.

1. **VENDOR VOICES** - In March 2015, feeling the strain of rising rental fees and diminishing space, the SC brought vendors together and, as a group, made the key decision that the market needed to achieve security. We began to seriously evaluate potential spaces that would allow for reasonable managed growth.
2. **PRIORITY SETTING** - To do this, the SC ranked our priorities in terms of "must have", "nice to have", and "dreams." We also

did a short SWOT analysis to help understand the market's strengths and weaknesses in speaking with landlords and thinking about our future. Though we considered nearly 20 sites, those that met our needs were either unavailable or unaffordable.

3. **STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT** - Late in 2016, the SC held an important meeting with our local stakeholders. Facilitated by Erin Buckwalter of NOFA-VT, 30 community members, including banks, non-profits, realtors, local politicians, town officials, agricultural leaders, and USDA representatives weighed in with overwhelming support for the market and surprise at the crisis we were facing. This turned out to be a significant meeting. In fact, the property owner who would become the market's new landlord was actually in the audience that day! We were strongly encouraged by some meeting participants to apply for a USDA Rural Business Development Grant to support a feasibility study.
4. **GRANT APPLICATION** - Applying for a USDA grant involved some heavy lifting by Market Manager, Sherry Maher, and customer representative, Janice Baldwin. Janice's skill sets for research and writing were invaluable, and the number crunching over the ensuing months resulted in a \$14,000 grant. That enabled the market to fund a six-month feasibility study to determine if the community could support an expanded market, and to identify a suitable new location. Post Oil Solutions (the parent non-profit) and NOFA-VT supplied additional financial and technical support.
5. **FINDING THE RIGHT CONSULTANTS** - Writing the grant application required us to consolidate our thinking about the market and our future, and outline what we wanted from the feasibility study and from a consultant. **We learned that we needed expertise not just in finding a location but also in the process of reaching a final decision with clarity and stability.** A well thought-out RFP and good fortune brought the market Jen Brodsky of Kitchen Table Consultants, a Pennsylvania-based firm who was already doing work in Vermont. Jen's personal commitment to winter farmers' markets intrigued her enough to take on the project along with her team who had a wealth of experience, technical expertise, and the ability to ask the hard questions.

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THE FEASIBILITY STUDY: FALL OF 2017 - MAY 2018

Kitchen Table Consultants (KTC) convinced us from the outset that our **"biggest challenge was actually an opportunity to revitalize our aging market, re-energize our vendors, and excite our customers."** Changing our mindset in this way was a turning point in transforming our thinking and our approach. KTC worked hand-in-hand with us to provide guidance and expertise in several key areas:

KEY STATS FROM WINTER CUSTOMER SURVEY



78% of "big spenders" (\$40+ per market) likely to follow market to new location outside of downtown.

TAKEAWAY

Not all customers are created equally. The ones that spend the most were more loyal and likely to follow.



Gathering Input - We began gathering input from customers and vendors via surveys and one-on-one conversations at both the summer and the winter markets (the Brattleboro summer farmers market is a separate member organization). See page 5 for the customer survey we used. The customer input confirmed that we are a very local market with loyal customers, and that 78% of the top spenders were likely to follow us to a new location, even if it was outside of downtown. Surveys also revealed that more space, a downtown location, and better parking were key priorities for both customers and vendors.

Vendor input - We also organized an opportunity for vendors to meet with Jen, separate from market management, in early December of 2017. Rising vendor concerns about a potential move surfaced at this point along with other questions. Jen was able to bridge an undercurrent of division that had been stewing quietly, and made herself available to speak individually to any and all vendors as the process continued to unfold.

Site visits - Based on the market's priorities and customer feedback, KTC created 26 key metrics to assess each potential location and accompanied us on each site visit. This enabled us to narrow the sites to four seemingly viable ones.

Supported negotiations – KTC encouraged us to ask potential landlords for what seemed impossible, such as affordable rental fees, a multi-year lease, and a term that only involved the 5 months of our season rather than a full year.

Demographics and farmers' market trend analysis enabled us to understand the competition and whether our market could support a move and growth. We visited all winter markets within an hour's drive of Brattleboro to assess how they compared and to understand their customer base.

Data analysis – With the help of KTC, we were able to survey, analyze, and compare hundreds of customer/non-customer survey responses and use that information to better understand our market. They created a financial model for each of four potential sites, weighing the criteria that surveys indicated were important to vendors and customers.

WEIGHING OPTIONS

After working through the feasibility study process with KTC's guidance, we were able to focus on four potentially viable options:

1. Stay where we were, reduce vendor spaces, increase fees, ramp up fundraising efforts.
2. Stay where we were for 1-2 more years, until another space was prepared.
3. Relocate to a large gymnasium located in a residential neighborhood removed from downtown.
4. Move to a large office space (Church Building) with onsite parking that had been vacant since Tropical Storm Irene, provided the owner would agree to an affordable rent.

PRESENTING THE FINDINGS

Although the SC had the prerogative to make the final decision and all SC members favored the move to option #4, obtaining support from a majority of vendors was essential to the success of the decision. At an all-vendor meeting, KTC presented the pros and cons of each potential site and used a customized tool to assign weighted scores for each site based on the criteria identified as important to the market and our customers. The Church Building location (option #4) had high scores in parking, size, and proximity to downtown, which helped make the case that we could be confident customers would follow us to the new location. Though some vendors remained skeptical, a roughly two-third majority approved the decision in March 2018, along with a commitment

from the SC to minimize the decision's impact, if any, on vendor fees. Through our partnership with KTC, we felt empowered by our role in the process and confident when the time came to commit to a path forward.

KEY STATS FROM WINTER CUSTOMER SURVEY



Top 3 changes requested:

1. More space
2. More vendors
3. Better parking

TAKEAWAY

Top 3 changes would all require moving.

MOVING IN

With a \$10,000 grant from the Thompson Trust, BWFM began to prepare a 5400 sq. ft. space that had been empty for seven years by painting, replacing ceiling tiles and light bulbs, purchasing café tables and chairs, a used 3-bay sink, and an outdoor sign. Funds from participation in NOFA-VT's Market Metrics Project helped support graphic design and marketing to create awareness of our new location in the Church Building.



The Thompson Trust funds enabled us to keep our promise to vendors that we would not increase vendor fees as a result of the location move. A highlight of the new space is the ability for vendors to easily unload and set-up their booths for an entire season, without having to break them down each week. Thrilled by this prospect, many vendors joined the manager and SC to paint, clean, bang nails, hang signs, locate resources, and donate equipment for their new Kids Room, where a local artist volunteered to paint a friendly dragon. This all happened with the enthusiastic support of our biggest cheerleader - our new landlord!



A SUCCESSFUL OPENING DAY & SEASON

Saturday, November 5, 2018 began with a steady flow of customers – their eyes popped out at the spacious market before them, children made happy noises in their bright new space, the parking lot overflowed all day and sales exceeded the previous two years' opening days by 25-30%. Customers reported how happy the vendors were and we closed that first season in this new home nearly 24% above the previous season's sales. An end-of-season vendor meeting confirmed that vendors were content and re-energized in helping the market succeed. Data presented at that meeting showed that while we may have lost some foot traffic from our Main St. location, we retained local customers who arrive intent on shopping and that they purchased more than in previous years.

YEAR TWO & BEYOND

As we near the close of our second season at this new location, customers and vendors continue to smile and sales continue to grow. Gross sales as of the end of February 2020 are running 17% over last year, with our most significant growth seen in the late season timeframe - January through March. We even had to bring on a parking attendant this season to ensure that only market customers or other building tenants were utilizing our parking lot. The Church Building and the revitalized market we created here are meeting all the needs and priorities identified by customers and vendors, and far exceeding our expectations!

Our lease agreement includes one more year, and we hope to extend beyond that. However, the building has been on the market throughout this process, and we knew that this location, wonderful as it may be, will not likely become a permanent home for our market. The good news is we also know that we now have the tools and a process to help find our next home when the need presents itself. And, we know that our loyal customer base will follow us, provided that we once again follow our data to create a market that will serve them well.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Don't go it alone!** Involve your community and local expertise. Without John Muse of USDA Rural Development's encouragement, we wouldn't have applied for the USDA grant that funded the consultants who shepherded us through the process. Also, knowing we had our business community behind us was empowering. NOFA-VT was another powerful resource throughout our process.
2. **Keep your vendors involved** and informed throughout the process. We sent out frequent updates, talked with folks personally, and held meetings. Listen to your vendor's concerns and fears, as well as their ideas.
3. **Gather data.** Using the data we gathered was essential in making a solid decision and in convincing our vendors that this was the right move. We might have made the same decision instinctively, but having solid information and numbers behind us was powerful in marshaling support.
4. **Don't be afraid to ask for what seems impossible.** KTC coached us to negotiate what seemed like a ridiculously low rent given the value of the site. Changing circumstances and a civic-minded landlord came together at the right time to make it happen.

5. **Cultivate an opportunity mindset** and inform everyone you have contact with about all that your market has to offer to vendors, customers and the community as a whole.

Vermont Community Foundation, Vermont Council on Rural Development, and trusts and foundations that offer funding specific to your area.

6. **Seek out funding.** There are funding resources out there to help markets with feasibility studies. Look into USDA,

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Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market Survey

*NOTE: All data collected is confidential and anonymous and will be used for research purposes only.
Please complete one survey per person!*

1. Where do you live? (CHOOSE ONE)

I live in the Town of Brattleboro

I live within the Greater Brattleboro area (within 30 minutes of Brattleboro)

I live within an hour drive of downtown Brattleboro

I live further than an hour drive away from Brattleboro
2. How often do you visit the Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market (BWFM)? [CHOOSE ONE]

This is my first visit

A few times a season

Monthly

A few times a month

Weekly

Never
3. When you visit the BWFM, which statement best describes you? [CHOOSE ONE]

I am already in town, am passing by the market and decide to stop in

I come to town with the plan to visit the farmers' market

Other: _____
4. On a typical visit to this farmers' market, how much do you spend in total? [CHOOSE ONE]

\$0 (just a market visitor)

\$1 - \$19

\$20 - \$39

\$40 - \$59

\$60 or more
5. Do you use EBT (Food Stamps) for any of your purchases at the BWFM? Yes / No [CIRCLE ONE]
6. When you attend the Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market, what mode of transportation do you most commonly use to get there? [CIRCLE ONE]

Car / Bus / Bicycle / Walk

Other: _____

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PLEASE SEE REVERSE

7. How satisfied are you with the following characteristics of the BWFM0?

	Not at all satisfied			Very satisfied		
Current location	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Product variety	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Size of the space	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Width of customer aisles	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Handicapped accessibility	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Live music	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Prices	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Parking	0	1	2	3	4	n/a
Lunch cafe	0	1	2	3	4	n/a

8. Is there one change that you would recommend to improve this market? _____

9. The BWFM is considering moving to a new location. How important would the following be in your decision to attend the market?

	Not Important			Very Important		
Staying in downtown	0	1	2	3	4	
Convenient parking	0	1	2	3	4	
Free parking	0	1	2	3	4	
Public transportation	0	1	2	3	4	
More spacious venue	0	1	2	3	4	
Handicapped accessibility	0	1	2	3	4	
Similar vendors/products	0	1	2	3	4	
Space for lunch cafe and to visit with friends	0	1	2	3	4	

10. If the market were to leave its central downtown location, how likely would you be to attend the market?

- Very likely, I will follow this market to almost any location!
- Likely
- Unsure
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

11. Please share your thoughts about the possibility of BWFM moving locations? _____

OPTIONAL - Thank you for completing this survey! To enter to win a farmers' market gift basket for taking this survey please provide your name and email address so we can let you know if you win! Note: your name will not be associated with your responses in the data analysis.

Name: _____ Email Address: _____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND PARTICIPATION!