SEATTLE NEIGHBORHOOD FARMERS MARKETS ANNOUNCES CHANGES TO DRIVE CRITICAL SUPPORT TO MARKETS, FARMERS, AND SHOPPERS RELIANT ON EBT

Like many small businesses and non-profits across Seattle and this country, Seattle Neighborhood Farmers Markets (NFM) has been forced to reduce and adjust operations, to prepare for a new normal, amidst the restrictions leveled by COVID. Three seasonal markets were closed all season and operations at the four remaining markets have been reduced significantly. At the same time, NFM’s expenses have increased in order to meet the safety processes and requirements needed to keep staff and customers safe.

The result has been dramatic: hundreds of farmers across the state have lost vital channels and seen devastating reductions in revenue; hundreds of EBT-reliant customers have lost a local resource for affordable and fresh food in their neighborhood; tens of thousands of neighbors have lost a vital community connection; and NFM has been forced to redesign their financial and operational model, to ensure they can keep the markets going!

But, because of the support of partners and neighbors across Seattle, NFM is also excited to announce important changes that will drive critical support to markets, farmers, and community members, throughout the winter season and into 2021.

“Farmers markets serve a vital market opportunity for thousands of farmers in our state and an important role in improving food access in our communities. NFM is committed to keeping the markets running at a time when our communities and our farmers need them most, while exploring how our organization can continue to evolve to meet the increasing demand on our local food system” – Sarah Schu, Marketing and Development Manager of Neighborhood Farmers Markets

On-line pre-order allows for an easy alternative to support the local food system and maintain food access

NFM launched a partnership with WhatsGood in July to create a quick and easy alternative to market shopping for customers. Since then, pre-order pick-ups have grown to create an additional revenue source for 40 farmers, while making it even easier for community members to directly support our local food system. With the seasonal closure of the Columbia City Farmers Market in October, pre-order is now available for the weekly West Seattle, Capitol Hill and University District markets.

NFM has found solutions that enable payment with EBT, SNAP Market Match, and Fresh Bucks, ensuring that the markets remain accessible, as food access demands continue to grow. In fact, in spite of the prolonged market reductions, EBT sales have represented a growing percentage of sales, as a result of the work that NFM and partners in the City of Seattle’s Office of Sustainability and the Environment already have done to ensure alternatives for shoppers and the community.
Holiday and Seasonal opportunities

As we head into the winter season, NFM is committed to strengthening other connections for farmers and shoppers. Market selection continues to grow, and the change in seasons means a lot of new products, including farm-crafted gifts like wreaths, tinctures, fiber, and dried herbs. Moreover, with many neighbors choosing to stay closer to home for the holidays, they are asking shoppers to think local first throughout the holiday season:

“At a time when upwards of 80% of small businesses will need to close or reduce operations, shopping local is one of the easiest ways we can keep our consumer dollars in our local economy. Make the markets your first stop when buying fresh, local produce, meats, gifts, and other products - for the holiday season and your weekly needs! Each purchase makes a big difference for our local farmers and producers!” -- Jacqueline Gjurgevich, Director of Business Operations, Neighborhood Farmers Markets

Considering new models for supporting Washington state farmers in 2021

COVID has laid bare the weaknesses in the greater food system, while reinforcing the urgent need for building up our local food systems. NFM is well placed to contribute to a stronger and bigger vision for a resilient food system that protects and promotes all of our farmers and neighbors.

“We are at an important inflection point, in understanding what the ‘new normal’ for farmers markets looks like. This is an opportunity to restore farmers markets at the face of the local food community and to design an expanded network of neighborhood-based access points that bind the City and region together through local food. But this is a big task and we cannot do it alone - we are meeting with farmers, partners, government offices, other service providers, and community members to understand how we can best grow to fill the gap and serve the need, in a landscape dotted with uncertainties. My hope and vision is that we emerge from the pandemic with an even stronger network of local farms serving Seattle neighborhoods, but there is work to do.” Jennifer Antos, Executive Director, Neighborhood Farmers Markets.

NFM will continue to explore how their work can provide economic opportunities, reliability, and access to farmers and to communities where access does not exist with dwindling resources, during a global pandemic and beyond. To ensure this effort represents the needs and contributions of our diverse community, NFM is actively seeking community input and partnerships, in building and delivering on a bigger vision for the local food system.

About Neighborhood Farmers Markets

Neighborhood Farmers Markets began in the University District in 1993 and since then has grown to include seven food-only farmers markets across Seattle, with a mission to support and strengthen Washington’s small family farm businesses while educating consumers about seasonal eating, local agriculture, and the importance of supporting our local farm economy.

Pre-COVID, NFM hosted over 200 farm and food businesses within the markets selling a wide variety of products, including produce, honey, eggs, dairy, protein, prepared food, and alcohol. In 2019, NFM hosted 237 market days and over 11,000 vendor stalls! In addition, over $500,000 were spent via food access programs that ensure equal access to fresh food for all income levels. Community groups and nonprofits were offered 193 booth spaces in the markets and 23,765 pounds of food was donated to local food banks.

However due to COVID-19 and local restrictions resulting in market closures, a limit on the number of participating vendors, decreased capacity for shoppers, and an increase in overhead equipment costs, an incredible amount of lost revenue is the reality for this nonprofit organization. The future of farmers markets in Seattle depends on the support of dedicated weekly shoppers, generous donors, community partners and local government.

If you would like to learn more about the markets, make a donation to the future of farmers markets, or join the market team as a volunteer, please visit https://seattlefarmersmarkets.org/