

A Farmers' Market will be coming to town! Jodi Perez and Amber Davis started the ball rolling. They promoted a great idea, spoke to motivated people, and now this great idea has a dedicated committee and a viable plan to back it up. Jim Garth and Tracy Melvin of the Waterfronts Partnership provided forward motion through additional research; visiting nearby, successful markets; meeting with state officials, such as Jennifer Taylor of the Small Farm Program; and by engaging the interest and participation of regional farmers. The City Commission has approved holding the market on public land. Just add Sandra Chafin, Kim Harrison and Tom Graney to the mix, and you have the first ever Port St. Joe **SaltAir Market**.

We will be privileged to a sneak-peak of the market on Saturday, December 8, starting at noon and during Christmas on the Coast...just behind Santa's workshop. Several regional farmers will offer their goods for sale as well as Pat McFarland's seafood, fresh wreaths and greenery, Clay Keel's fresh flowers, and a few hand-selected artisans.

The first time Jodi mentioned this concept to me, one of her primary goals was to help generate some Saturday traffic for the downtown business. She was right on the mark; this market will provide a significant increase in the Saturday customer base. The regular market location will be the Dr. Joe Memorial Parking Lot, with built-in shade, parking and room to grow. This location, situated within the business district, will encourage customers to stick around and browse through the shops...shops that will likely be holding exciting Saturday-only specials, sidewalk sales and creative marketing.

Open-air markets such as this will bring wide-ranging benefits to the city. Not only will our residents and visitors have the opportunity to purchase produce "right off the truck," we will also gain from the social and economic results of the market. Project for Public Spaces states, "We know that public markets can become the heart and soul of a community, it's common ground, a place where people easily interact, alive with social and economic activity." As an economic driver, a 2002 survey of over 800 customers from a variety of indoor and open-air markets discovered that "60% of the market shoppers also visited nearby stores on the same day; of those, 60% said that they visited those additional stores only on days that they visit the market." This study further outlines several potential economic benefits of farmers' markets: profits to business owners in the market, job creation, sales and real estate tax revenues as well as the indirect benefit of stimulating development downtown.

Naturally, as the scale of the market increases, so do the economic benefits in job creation and employment. The Pike Place Market in Seattle generated nearly \$87 million in gross revenue in 2002 (\$4 million in taxes directly to the city, county and state). Jobs in that market ranged seasonally from 1500 in winter to about 2400 in peak season. Of course, we will be a start as a very small market, and benefits are benefits, no matter the scale.

The SaltAir Market Committee will be promoting additional community involvement. Potentially, schools, civic groups and even inmates can create and manage gardens to provide produce for the market, thus adding an educational and/or rehabilitation element to the process. The health benefits of fresh produce will also be highlighted, as well as cooking demonstrations to retain the maximum benefits.

As a community, we owe a debt of gratitude to all who are working diligently to make this idea a reality. Let's show our support, starting on December 8th. And bon appetite!