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## greenpaper [gren-pa-per] - noun

1. a document that shares with those interested in the field of public markets marketumbrella.org's findings and learnings as practitioners
2. statements by marketumbrella.org not of policy or practices already determined, but of propositions for discussion
3. produced for the policymaking process, they hope to inform interested parties on specific topics in a brief, easy-to-digest format

# Considering Mobile Markets

## Executive Summary

It remains a fact of American life that large segments of urban and rural populations have little or no access to food apart from convenience stores and fast-food outlets. Farmers markets—a growing trend for bringing farm-fresh produce and other nutritious foods to consumers—have made significant inroads. Still, their outreach has been less than comprehensive for a number of reasons:

- Many farmers markets have technological difficulties accepting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) cards, which are often a significant part of monthly incomes in many low-income families;
- Markets that serve mainly poorer

residents may be viewed as less profitable for the suppliers than markets located to serve the affluent or some other cross-section of the community;

- Markets have only begun to realize their larger mandate to contribute to the public good by introducing new access programs;
- Market organizations still operate with limited resources;
- Not everyone can get to farmers markets at the times or locations (without assistance);
- Diverse points of entry are needed to serve a successful local food system offering more opportunities to more people for increasing local health and wealth.



*cultivating the field of public markets for public good*

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In short, despite their intentions and potential, stationary farmers markets alone have not been able to completely address the social injustice inherent in much of our nation's current food delivery system. Rather, a strategy for a more layered approach to increase access to the most nutritious local foods, grown by local producers, is key. One component to this strategy may be mobile markets. They are typically trucks bringing produce and other groceries to food desert neighborhoods. They present a possible, partial solution. For this reason, they were of interest to marketumbrella.org especially in 2006 soon after Hurricane Katrina. We were intrigued with the prospect of mobile markets for disaster stricken neighborhoods .

In researching the experience of mobile markets, however, marketumbrella.org found many were quickly successful in building community ties among shoppers and organizations, but less successful in adding more local food suppliers. They also struggled with sustainability, requiring outside philanthropic investments of as much as 60 percent of their operating budget to maintain operations. Sobered by these findings and mindful of our desire to balance at times competing interests between supply (farmers) and demand (consumers), we examined our own plans for a mobile market in light of the "Four Ms": Mission, Management, Marketing, and Measurement. (Was a mobile market in keeping with our mission? Do we have the resources to manage, market, and measure it?)



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*learning, sharing, growing*

Dedicated to cultivating the field of public markets for public good, we define public markets as "recurring assemblies of vendors marketing good directly to consumers in a public setting." Learning, sharing and growing, marketumbrella.org cultivates community markets that utilize local resources to bolster authentic local traditions. We believe that ambitious social, health, environmental and financial goals are achieved if trust and respect are present. We envision communities of market umbrellas, like flowers in the field, opening all over the world for the public good.

Founded in 1995 as the Economic Institute and operated under the auspices of Loyola University's Twomey Center for Peace through Justice until 2008, marketumbrella.org is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3 organization.

## Background

Mobile markets are a 21st Century adaptation of farm delivery trucks and traveling produce vendors. They have intrigued contemporary food access advocates attempting to address current disparities in our food distribution system. More portable than a grocery store, potentially occurring more often than a weekly farmers market, the appeal of a mobile market is its ability to travel, bringing fresh, quality produce and affordable groceries into targeted "urban food deserts."

In post-Katrina New Orleans, numerous neighborhoods faced intense food access problems, many that continue to the present. Although the rebuilding effort has brought grocery stores and farmers markets back to some neighborhoods, the food access disparity between rich and poor persists. Addressing this issue was our principal motivation to convene meetings in 2006 with other food system activists to research mobile food projects in the city.

Mobility is the key. Circa 2006 in New Orleans and with a population living in short-term rentals, FEMA trailers and on family

couches, there was no realistic way to plan where most of the population would end up. Every one of the four weekly markets that we ran before August 29, 2005 was reevaluated. As of 2009, only two were reopened. A third weekly market was added in January 2010. By staging the reopening of markets, we saved organizational time and resources so that we could assist neighborhoods as requested. In other words, as a flagship within the local food system we felt the responsibility to foster other innovation. Adding more and different “points of entry” for farmers and consumers to facilitate transactions is part of the farmers markets strategy in many regions.

Prior to Katrina, we staged our own interpretation of a mobile market to link shrimpers in search of markets with consumers in neighborhoods hungry for fresh, local food. One-off events, we called these White Boot Brigades, named after shrimpers’ trademark rubber boots. (View two of our short films on our YouTube channel about our local and global Brigade strategies: <http://www.youtube.com/user/marketumbrella>).

After rebuilding began, we hoped that Brigades or mobile markets would address health and food disparity issues around New Orleans by encouraging residents to assemble in these impromptu town squares. Instead of only asking consumers to come to the few operating farmers markets in the city, we hoped we could increase support for local food by going to them.

## Research Results

As we and — our partners in the project—Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana and the New Orleans Food Co-Op—began to investigate the experience of other organizations with mobile markets, we discovered how they often struggled. We were encouraged by indicators of textbook grassroots organizing: Communities that were supposed to “benefit” from the projects were actually involved in planning them. And yet, despite initial enthusiasm, long-term success—such as recovering initial costs and making changes in shopping behavior among users—had yet to be measured.

For example, the West Oakland People’s Grocery no longer operates. Beginning in 2002, it had experimented with a small health-food store on wheels. The truck had been managed by one part-time staffer and a crew of youth volunteers. This had (with a small operating budget only \$7,500 per year) proved to be unsustainable. The project can boast a number of successes: It educated people about healthy eating, distributed fresh produce and healthy food to residents, built a consumer base for healthy food, provided jobs and training to over a dozen people, and brought awareness to West Oakland’s food just problems. And yet, People’s Grocery discovered that the project was not feasible economically, spatially, or organizationally. With eight stops on the initial mobile market route, People’s Grocery eventually stopped traveling and parked its truck in one location at the request of customers. It is currently on

hiatus as People's Grocery attempts to redesign its model for a more efficient and effective system. There is no date for its re-opening.

Although research shows other mobile markets remained in operation longer or are still running—notably Good Groceries Mobile Market in Tucson, Arizona and Farm Fresh Mobile Market in Syracuse, New York—most struggle with sustainability issues, both in terms of costs, goals reached and level of “ownership” among the residents served.

With regards to sustainability, how are mobile markets contributing to a sustainable food shed? Some have relied heavily on non-local foods to supplement supply between peak growing seasons. We see this as an indication that mobile markets do not see the growth of the local food system as integral to their goals. In 15 years of running local food markets, we learned that while growing a year-round local food system made be difficult, it is always possible. Moreover, there are no shortcuts. It takes time and commitment to learning on both sides of the supply/demand equation. Consider growing regions as varied as New York, Wisconsin, Washington State, and Texas. All boast farmers markets that offer local food consistently throughout the year. Certainly, it had taken weeks — even months — of sparse vendor tables at first, but over time farmers learn to grow between peak seasons and to add preserved foods to their tables. This emphasis on local foods brings balance between supply and demand: More nutrition for local shoppers and more wealth for area farmers.

Another tricky issue is the very name “mobile.” If a location and shopping day are chosen with residents’ input, does the mobile market have the right to move to a new location in the future? Often, the market is meant to be a temporary answer. However, if a permanent solution does not appear, are mobile markets obligated to put down an anchor? From the vantage point of post-disaster stabilization, we considered the mobile market strategy because our partners shared strategic assets and goals. The food bank owned a vehicle; the Food Co-op dreamed of a grocery store; and we seek equitable transactions between supply and demand. Our interest came on the heels of disaster. At that point, the discrepancies between short and long term planning became less important in the quest for quick leadership and on the ground innovation. Similarly, many food insecure communities perceive their situations to be akin to crisis and disaster. Are mobile markets stepping stones for permanent retail, nomadic classrooms in the public pursuit for culinary literacy, or part of an increasingly complex food system? We are not so certain.

### **Analysis on the Go**

While others have struggled to make mobile markets work, this should not necessarily destine all such projects to fail. However, their difficulties do provide us with added incentive to follow our own advice: We explored how the proposed mobile market conformed to our own “Four M strategy”—Mission, Management, Marketing, and Measurement. This strategy helps us to assess new projects or realign existing

ones. We examine each project in light of our mission and how closely the other Ms add up to a measurable conclusion. For more on the 4M Strategy, visit our website.

At a half-day 4 M strategy session, our staff discussed the mobile market proposal and came away with the conclusion that buying local products from own Crescent City Farmers Market vendors and re-selling them to mobile market consumers delivers a confusing message for our public. Reselling undermines several of the more important attributes of a farmers market organization:

It eliminates the cultivation of social capital among rural food producers and urban food consumers. When farmer meets shopper, both sides learn.

It deprives food producers of the profitability (financial capital) afforded by direct-to-consumer sales. (For the mobile market to offer affordable food to low-income consumers, it would have to purchase it wholesale from producers. This undermines one of the primary incentives for farmers to forego the scale of industrial agriculture.)

It is not financially sustainable. While we certainly recognize the business model weakness embedded in the recent and remarkable rise of farmers markets, their numbers continue to grow and their organizations are maturing. Meanwhile, we have yet to find this to be the case with mobile markets.

Staff also realized that the mobile market project would strain the organization's second M, "Management."



Other mobile market operators reported how labor-intensive were their projects. The weekly farmers market had built-in earned income with rent being paid by those farmers who attend. Other than by way of charging mark up on products sold, the mobile market did not have an obvious stream of income. Thus, staff concluded that the mobile market project—as currently envisioned—not only represented significant “mission drift,” it did so at a cost to the organization’s ability to handle our other commitments.

### **From Conclusion to Inspiration**

We applaud the inventive nature of the mobile market phenomenon, for its nod to the tradition of street vendors who still to this day sell goods in a mobile manner, and its desire to “go to vulnerable consumers” rather than waiting for “them to come to us.” Perhaps, it is this last attribute that most influenced how we as a public market organization chose to embrace the spirit of the mobile market in our work. USDA’s move from paper Food Stamps to electronic SNAP largely narrowed our shopping base to those consumers with the ready cash to shop at markets. We are grateful to

these consumers who came in the early years. After all, they have served as many a farmer's consumer research wing by tasting new crops and rediscovering old ones. Chefs too have aided many farmers who otherwise would have likely given up the land. And yet, during this period of exploration the figurative "town square" of the farmers market could not serve every citizen.

Together, market organizers and USDA proved how necessity is the mother of invention by piloting new programs to alleviate these technocratic blind spots. The Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) helps markets add new, overlooked shoppers to join in on the transactions that occur beneath the tents and umbrellas. In our experience, these programs have done more to democratize the consumer base of our Market (long before we figured out how to address the digital divide caused by SNAP.

Many farmers markets have raised funds and added staff in order to bring SNAP into their operations — be it with a wireless terminal at every farmer's stall or via a centralized terminal and accompanying scrip system, usually tokens. The challenge is this: While some may tackle the technological obstacles successfully, too little resources remain to address the sociological. Here is where we have found it valuable to "got to them" before "they come to us." If we are asking food insecure shoppers to join a conversation between supply and demand that began more than a decade ago, we owe it to them to prep newcomers before they arrive.

How do we do this? We pursue friendly, engaging strategies that bring a sense of fun and dignity to the habitual ritual of shopping for food. In order to make a group's first visit to the Market memorable, we stage an event we call "Meet Me at the Market." This is where public schools and senior centers, for instance, are invited and if necessary, subsidized to visit the Market as honored guests with perks, like complimentary lunch, tours, etc.

With the Marketeers Club, children up to age 13 are invited to join a birthday club that awards kids \$5 in wooden Market tokens during the month of their birthday.

Each of these strategies require the people — food insecure people, in particular — to come to us, to our farmers markets. We recognize the limitations here, be it transport or comfort level. Therefore, we also recognize the need for us to often first "go to them."

To reach this goal, we partner with community organizations and schools to meet people halfway. One of our successes to date has been our work with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and senior centers to increase redemption and participation in the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program (S/FMNP). Working with 12 local senior centers, we play Farmers Market Bingo (a game we developed after a model in New York City which includes nutritional information, market details, purchasing options and physical activities). In 2009, we played Farmers Market Bingo with almost 600 seniors. Following the senior center visit, we

arrange a trip to the Market and a guided tour with the center's administrator. Seniors spend their FMNP vouchers and qualify for matching dollars (in the form of Crescents, our market tokens) as a part of our conditional cash transfer program.

### **Is it Mobility or Agility?**

Instead of hurriedly venturing into "food desert" neighborhoods as the reseller of local foods, we reexamined our core competencies and values and launched three separate outreach programs in 2009 to bridge relations between farmers and consumers on the convening public space of our Farmers Market:

#### **Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program Coupons (S/FMNP).**

Working with the state on FMNP since 2000, redemption rates in our region has always been a challenge for this tiny program. In 2006, after Katrina, the work began anew. After all, Unfortunately, the same post-hurricane partners and databases were not to be found, so the work started anew in 2006. The hypothesis of this pilot was simple: since seniors seemed to draw out the cashing of their coupons over the summer, we rewarded those who remembered to return by offering a one-time incentive for the used booklets turned into our Welcome Booth.

**WIC/FMNP.** In 2009, Louisiana attempted its second pilot of WIC coupons. Unfortunately, the initial results from 2007 were disappointing. The Department of Agriculture approached us to conduct the second pilot in the New Orleans area. In our pilot, we combined the senior booklet approach

with education to the WIC administrators about the usefulness of markets to their clients.

**MarketMatch.** We built a four-month pilot that used the word-of-mouth campaign in partnerships with community centers and public health programs to encourage an ongoing "match" for their EBT or SNAP dollars. This was run in a difficult season; late summer in New Orleans is traditionally a low traffic time at markets. We devoted \$18,000 to advertisements on bus shelters, gospel and Spanish language radio, and informational flyers we distributed to community partners and health agencies in advance of the pilot. Conforming to a color coordinated campaign brand, we produced welcoming signage at the Markets Welcome Tent to assist newcomers overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of a farmers market. Here, our staff introduced themselves, the Market Match pilot, disbursed wooden tokens and a brief questionnaire (designed to ascertain zip code, age of SNAP cardholder, mode of transport, and means by which the participant learned of the match). A synopsis of our impact can be found elsewhere on our website. In short, by trading on the trust we are beginning to build via our public health partnerships, we increased SNAP redemptions by 600% during the pilot and have since sustained a level of 300% increase as compared to SNAP levels of a year earlier.

### **More Places for Food**

Beyond the success of our Market Match work, we also continue to work with other alternative local food streams,

which mirror our values of balancing needs of farmers, consumers and neighbors. Public markets of all kinds, wholesale sales, CSAs, storefront box programs, school lunch changes have all utilized the organizational resources of [marketumbrella.org](http://marketumbrella.org) and find themselves meeting at our flagship project, the Crescent City Farmers Market.

This multi-faceted approach to adding benefits to the public market system has increased attendance by more at-risk citizens, added partnerships with public health organizations and strengthened the relationship with agriculture and seafood organizations.

At the same time that we conducted comprehensive outreach, staff within our organization were streamlining the process for market vendor applications,

producing short films to show good business practices for new direct marketers and assisting neighborhoods with their own market strategy in the hopes that increasing the capacity will lead to more farmers and fishers selling at more outlets.

Clearly, mobility was key, but not as originally expected: instead, agility in planning “campaigns” to promote the seasonality of the town square and selecting the partners for each project was more important. Local food is now available nearly every day of the week in New Orleans circa 2010, although not yet at the level needed for all. Work continues to build more farmers and to add successful programs in every corner of the Crescent City to reach that goal. ♦