

IU Food Institute

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We had an excellent turnout for last Tuesday's discussion/planning session regarding the current Farmers Market conflict/crisis. There were over thirty participants including faculty, staff, grad students, vendors, market organizers, at least one journalist, community members and representatives from different local groups. Michelle Moyd (CRRES) and I made some brief opening statements and then opened things up for a wide-ranging discussion. An overarching question was what role might faculty play and what expertise might we bring to this discussion. We came to no definitive conclusions – we're academics, after all - but it is probably fair to say that opinion favored greater involvement by faculty and in particular sharing knowledge with regard to the different sorts of ways markets are organized in other places. The consensus seemed to be that municipal markets like Bloomington's tend to be more efficiently run and more profitable for vendors. As we have seen they also have their own particular problems.

Two large questions that emerge out of the current situation are: who has access to the market; and what characterizes and conditions the groups who a) use the market and b) sell at the market? One obvious barrier to access is economic insofar as lower income individuals will find the prices at the market unsustainable (though doubling SNAP benefits goes some way to addressing this problem). Less obvious perhaps is that many people of color have long seen the market as a predominantly white middle-class and so unwelcoming space. This is of course not a problem unique to Bloomington and while efforts at inclusivity certainly pre-date the current conflict over Schooner Creek Farm, more could be done. The irony of the market's location on the edge of the traditionally African-American part of town and across the street from important Black churches offer evident opportunities for outreach. Not surprisingly, though perhaps not immediately apparent to all observers, the presence of a buffer zone and increased police presence is not likely to reassure many minority groups.

With regard to the second question, to what extent are differing outlooks between patrons, largely “progressives” in a university town like ours (but that may be a fair characterization nationally), and vendors, a rural and likely more conservative demographic, relevant? That tension is especially clear in the current Bloomington situation given Schooner Creek’s association with a series of right wing “identitarian” groups and media outlets, but again it is likely present in US farmers markets – an institution unique in its own way and exactly for these reasons – throughout the country. The discussion in Bloomington has focused much on rules and first amendment considerations – as far as I know we had no legal scholar present – which risks overlooking the other ways those sorts of discourses have and might be employed.

Chances are that this synthesis reflects my own thoughts as much as general ideas expressed in the room on Tuesday, which of course differed among themselves. Another larger unanswered question regards whether this was indeed a planning session, which is to say what are we planning? Possibly an off-campus event with a series of speakers addressing these and other issues? One other idea that occurred to us afterward was to compile a bibliography on farmers markets and link it to the web site. These problems are not new ones and some answers to our questions can doubtless be found in existing literature.

I’d be happy to offer the newsletter as a forum if others would like to weigh in on these issues. Comments can go to foodinst@indiana.edu.

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