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## Kellie Sebastian: Franklin County Farmers Market 'one of the most successful markets in the state'

By Kellie Sebastian Guest columnist

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With more than 106 different opportunities for folks to shop with the Franklin County Farmers Market, it's no surprise that we are recognized as one of the most successful markets in the state of Kentucky.

This year, those shopping opportunities presented themselves as our Tuesday and Saturday in-person markets, Thursday pre-order and curbside delivery, and a few pop-up markets that happened alongside local events like the Summer Concert Series and the Candlelight Weekend. Our produce, proteins, breads and treats also made their way to 15 area businesses from April-November via our workplace delivery program.



Kellie Sebastian

We strengthened community relationships with the South Frankfort Food Share every other Tuesday from May-October, providing discounted produce to SNAP customers and those who self-identified as “having a hard time putting food on the table.” We welcomed students and faculty alike with our second annual Celebrate KSU Market, where we celebrated fresh food and provided a space to connect community members and local service organizations.

Each week, at in-person markets, we did an hourly customer count, and extrapolated that figure to determine how many friends made their way to the market that day. This year we estimated more than 30,000 trips to our markets from repeat customers, brand new faces, state employees working nearby, guests of the Capital Plaza Hotel, families who came to our Kids Days, friends you brought, and more.

It’s also sort of fascinating to see how far and wide people travel to shop with us. We found that some customers drove through multiple counties just to shop at our market.

The distance people travel to check us out shouldn't really be surprising since we also have producers that come from all of our surrounding counties, and even further, to sell with us.

We would like to note that as far as accepting vendors goes, we do give preference to Franklin County applicants first, then adjacent counties, only outsourcing when we fail to find that product closer. This is in an effort to keep dollars local, bolster local food systems, and increase food security right here in Frankfort.

With 106 opportunities to sell (and shop) with us, it's no wonder that vendors (who sell at multiple farmers markets across the state) often report that we are their favorite, mostly citing reasonable fees and a great deal of markets and events to make a return on their investment.

Plus, we support them with active social media accounts, multiple mailings of digital newsletters and a bi-monthly column in this newspaper. We also work hand in hand with other community groups, many of whom support vulnerable populations, which increases awareness about their businesses and makes it simple for farms to exercise goodwill.

Our produce vendors also appreciate all the extra income from "incentive" programs, which equated to more than \$50,000 in extra income for our farmers in 2023.

In our world, "incentives" refers to things like the Kentucky Double Dollars program, Farmers Market Nutrition Program and other vouchers we distribute on behalf of our community partners. Last year, we worked with Simon House, Anthem Medicaid, Community Farm Alliance and the Emergency Food Pantry to distribute those vouchers and get more food into the hands and homes of those that would not otherwise be able to shop at the farmers market. Clearly, incentives are a win for families, farmers and our community.

There's so much symbiosis that is occurring, depending on your vantage point, it can be hard to see the market as a separate entity. One that serves the community and some of its most vulnerable populations, as well as one that serves nearly 70 local farmers, bakers, artisans and their employees, neither of whom exist in their current state without one another. We support this community and it supports us, and on and on.

We see producers like Happy Jacks Pumpkin Farm, Mefford Family Farms and Ayres Orchard slowly passing the reins to the next generation of farmers. We see children that used to shop with their parents 20 years ago grow up, go away to college, and come back, sometimes as shoppers, and sometimes, as producers like Jacob McCowan and Earthrun Farms.

Beyond farmers putting food on your table, which allows them to put food on their tables, beyond the exchanging of funds and foods lies something much greater that even our most impressive numbers can't quantify.

Hand-in-hand, we raise the next generation of farmers and chefs, healthy eaters and artists, entrepreneurs and food justice advocates. In a world filled with food like substances, and produce shipped from the other side of the globe, our farmers market is a vital asset to the opposition.

By supporting us as a producer or consumer, we breathe life back into this place and fulfill our vision to root community and economic health in local harvests.

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