

DOUGLAS COUNTY FARMERS MARKET PROFILE

SATURDAY DOWNTOWN LAWRENCE FARMERS MARKET

Located in the center of downtown Lawrence, the Saturday Lawrence Farmers Market is the flagship farmers market for Lawrence and all of Douglas County. It has two and a half times the number of vendors of the next largest market, and *more than three times the customer traffic of all the other county markets combined*. Now in its fortieth year, the LFM employs a paid, part-time manager and is governed by a board of up to nine members, six of whom are vendors, with up to three customer representatives. The Saturday market has by far the biggest base of “regular” shoppers, with 62% reporting that they shop there weekly or 2 -3 times per month, compared to less than 40% overall for the other markets in the county. At \$20 per visit, the Saturday market also has the highest average purchase amount among shoppers, compared to \$16 overall for the rest of the county’s markets. Recognized by many as an outstanding market and critical asset to the community, the LFM nevertheless faces important decisions over the next few years, as large development projects have rapidly encroached upon the space, generating concerns from vendors and shoppers alike.



Opportunities – When people think about ‘farmers markets’ in Lawrence and Douglas County, the vast majority think of the Saturday market downtown, exclusively or primarily. The customer base for the Saturday market is solid, with a high proportion of committed, regular shoppers, the great majority of whom are both loyal to and appreciative of this market. This broad and devoted base offers potential to help market leadership reach out to the community to bring in new customers, either informally or as ‘market advocates’. If just 1% of these customers could be mobilized for this purpose, the Saturday market would have a core of twenty market advocates to help reach out to their friends, neighbors or coworkers. Given that the Saturday market has by far the smallest proportion of first time shoppers – just 7% compared to 24 – 40% for the other markets – it seems an opportune time to launch such an outreach effort.

MARKET QUICK FACTS

- **Market season:** April – Saturday before Thanksgiving
- **Market day/hours:** Saturday mornings, 7–11 (April to August); 8 – noon (September to November)
- **Location:** Public parking lot on New Hampshire St., between 8th and 9th
- **Current number of vendors:** 50 – 55, on average
- **Estimated number of shoppers:** 1,850
- **Market manager:** Olivia Taylor-Puckett
- **SNAP:** Accepts SNAP EBT cards and offers Double Up Food Bucks match

The diversity, quantity and quality of products available at the Saturday market also provides a strong base upon which to build, particularly by making product sampling much more widespread, and by targeting certain product gaps that would likely increase the frequency of shoppers and their average purchase amounts. Though relatively strong on product diversity, shoppers nevertheless cited this more frequently than any other factor that would get them to shop more or more often at this market. In considering how to increase product diversity, vendors and market leaders should focus on farm products more than novelty items, as 53% of shoppers cited produce or meat and eggs as the main things that bring them to market, compared with only 8% for prepared foods. Should regulations change or a vendor be able to meet the state's standards, the addition of dairy and cheese items would certainly enhance the market, as this was the most commonly cited element "missing" from the market.

While the average purchase total at the Saturday market is the highest in the county, shoppers only buy \$2.50 - \$3.50 more than they do at any of the three mid-week Lawrence markets, all of which have far fewer vendors and far less product offerings. Research indicates that getting current customers to buy more may be more cost effective than trying to bring in a large number of new customers. In the case of the Saturday market, we believe both of these strategies are feasible and necessary.

Challenges – The Saturday market is strong in numerous respects. However, four larger challenges will need to be addressed to maintain and strengthen this fine market.

First, there is a growing perception among shoppers that the market has stagnated over the past few years or begun to decline. This came through in direct comments to that effect, as well as statements about being 'bored' by what some see as a lack of new offerings, or observations about a shrinking base of vendors. Given the substantial increase in alternative options to buy local food – from other farmers markets, through CSAs or at HyVee and other grocers – the perception of stagnation or decline can be sufficient to drive shoppers to more convenient options or to try new venues. Challenging this perception will require both better promotion of what the market already offers along with improvements in the market itself.

Second, the market needs to build on the improvements it has made to its board and management this past year, and to dramatically expand its communication, outreach and promotional efforts. This will in turn require either more volunteer time from vendors or more funds to support these activities by the market manager or other paid personnel. We believe that the latter option is more plausible and could be supported primarily by increasing vendor fees to a level commensurate with comparable markets.

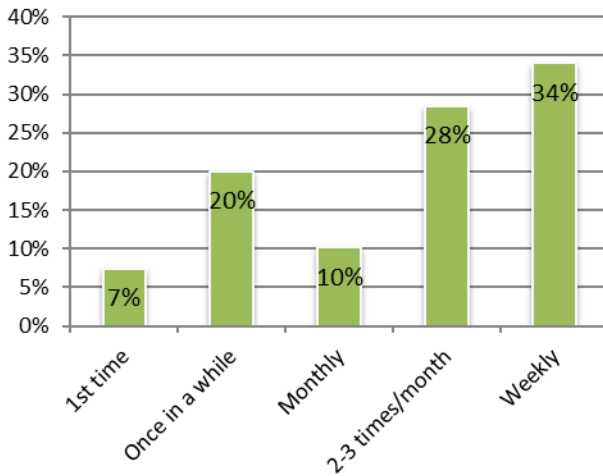
Third, a fairly high proportion of customers believe that prices are too high, in general, at the Saturday market. "Lower prices" ranked as the third most commonly cited change that customers wanted to see (behind more product diversity and a change in market hours), and was mentioned by many shoppers in interviews and focus groups. To be clear, these shoppers expressed sympathy for farmers who they know struggle to make a living. But many indicate that the higher prices limit what they can (or choose to) purchase at the market. Addressing this challenge is extraordinarily difficult, particularly when farmers markets are also seen as a vehicle for improving access to and affordability of healthy foods. But it is a reality that must be faced.

Last, the current location has become, overall, more of a liability than an asset. From a loss of 'ambiance' to a cramping of vendors and shoppers, from the increased difficulty of finding parking close by to the growing sense of uncertainty, even insecurity about the market's tenure at this spot, we believe that it is time to seriously and conclusively address this issue. One of the Recommendations in the main body of this report provides some initial ideas about how to frame that process.

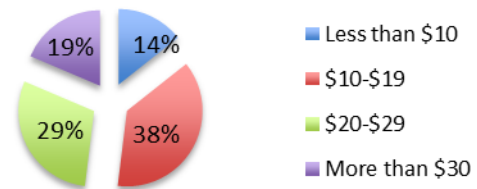
Note that very few people mentioned the issue of "dogs at the market" in any of the surveys, interviews or focus groups, and for those that did, the preferences were mixed, leading us to conclude that this is not of major concern to a significant number of shoppers.

THE MARKET IN THE CUSTOMERS' EYES

How often do you shop at the Saturday Lawrence Farmers Market? (285 res)

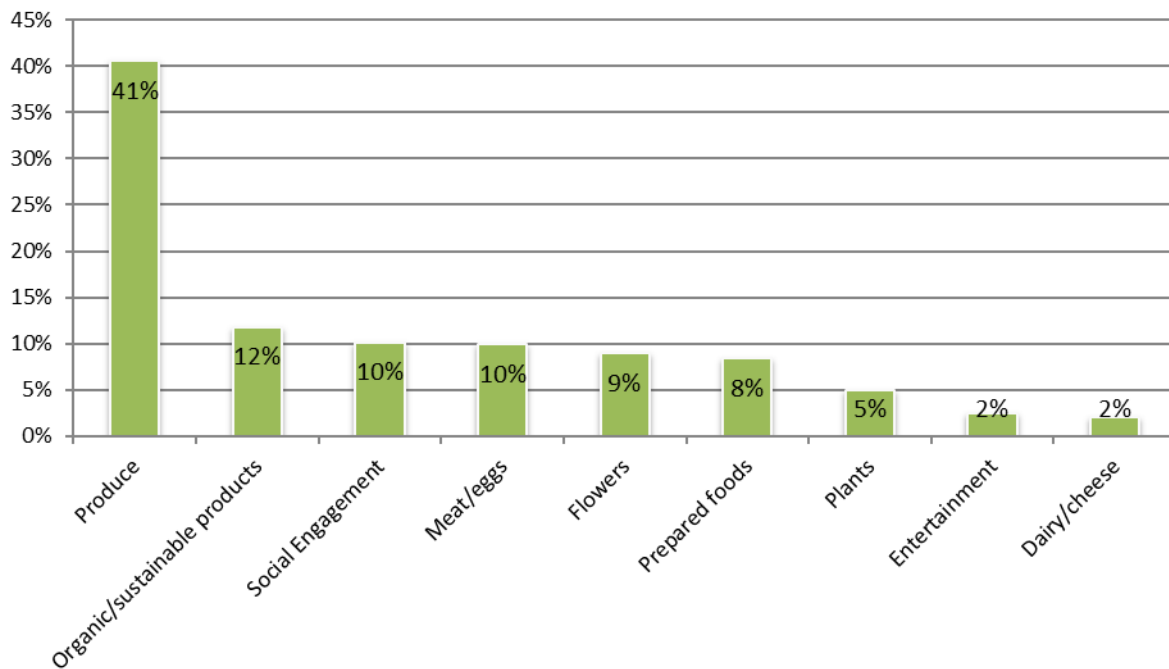


How much do you typically spend at the Saturday Lawrence Farmers Market? (258 res)

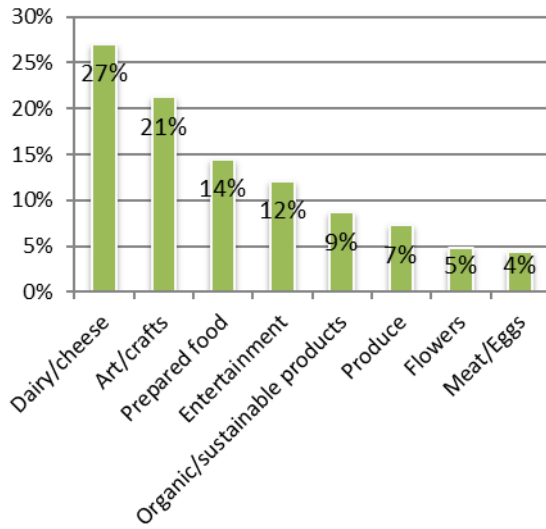


Overall sales for this market are good, by our estimates averaging about \$26,750 per Saturday. However, the proportion of vendors reporting strong average sales - \$1,000 or more – is just 13%, while those reporting modest to lower sales - \$500 or less – totals two thirds of all vendors.

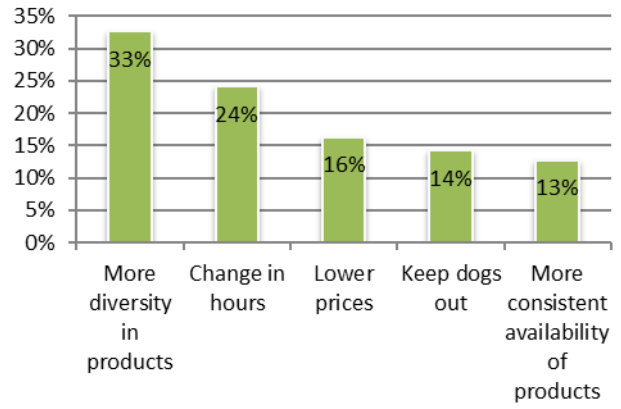
What brings you to the Saturday Lawrence Farmers Market? (525 res)



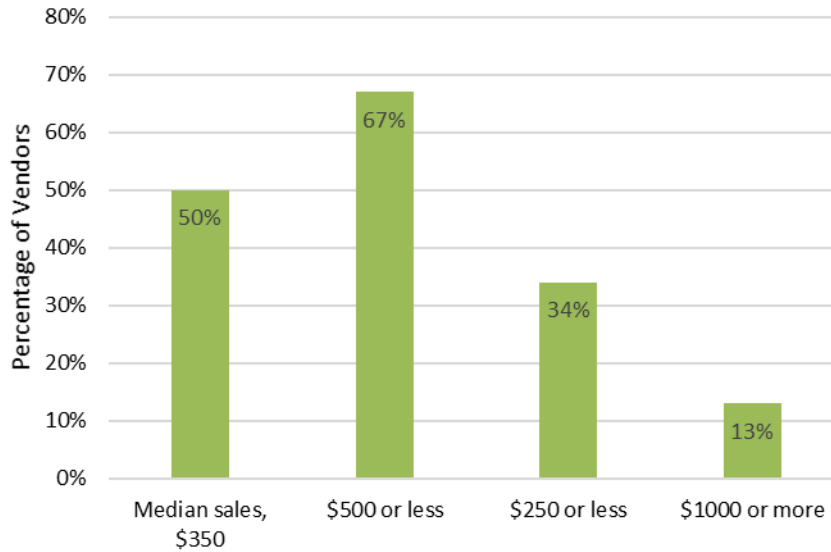
What do you feel is missing from this Farmers Market? (211 res)



What changes would be likely to get you to shop at this Farmers Market more regularly? (143 res)



Typical Vendor Sales (per Saturday), Lawrence Farmers Market



MARKET RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Work with town and county leaders and others to develop and implement a plan to dramatically increase the number of people in Douglas County who regularly buy local food, and to increase the share of it that they purchase at the farmers market. There will be many specific components to such a plan, some of which we suggest in the Recommendations portion of the full report.
2. Using the current estimate of \$26,750 in sales per Saturday, set a goal to increase that over the next five years by a specific percentage or dollar amount. A 50% increase, for instance, would bring weekly sales to just over \$40,000, and annual sales to well over \$1 million.
3. Undertake a detailed analysis as to gaps in the market, both in product categories – e.g., “meats” – and in specific products with strong market demand. More early and late season production of warm weather crops, more main season production of greens and cool weather crops, more tree fruits, and more beef, lamb and other meats all have potential, though markets for the meats need development.
4. Work to fill the product gaps through a combination of expanded production among current vendors as well as recruitment of new, high quality vendors. Enlist the help of Marlin Bates, K-State Cooperative Extension and other farmer groups in this process.
5. Develop an ambitious yet very practical plan for marketing, outreach and promotion of the Saturday market. The full report contains some specific ideas, some of which include:
 - a. Off season outreach to relevant community and civic organizations, as well as specific demographic groups (for example, new parents, or Asian and Middle Eastern graduate students and their families). This will involve developing a strong, concise presentation, and building a base of market advocates – or “champions” – to help promote the market to these groups and communities.
 - b. Creating a more consistent and creative presence in traditional media, including regular radio spots, weekly or bi-weekly ‘featured farmers’, even regular articles or guest editorials commenting on local foods and farmers markets.
 - c. Create a stronger social media presence, including regular newsletters in season and off season. In-season newsletters should include lists of available products as well as featured items and vendors
6. Work with vendors to grapple with the issue of price. One possibility would be to do (and publicize) a price comparison, two to four times per season, on a ‘basket’ of foods between the farmers market and Whole Foods or other retailers. Another would be to encourage vendors to offer good quality seconds at a reduced price, in a designated section of their booth, under the ‘produce with character’ type of label.
7. Increase participation of vendors and core customers in key activities of the market, especially in the realms of outreach and promotion. Having clear goals and specific tasks or options may increase volunteer participation.
8. To generate more revenue for strong promotion and management, undertake a review of current vendor fees and consider a substantial increase. Increasing the current annual fee to \$520, for example, would generate approximately \$12,000 for these activities. Such an increase in fees could easily pay for itself, as a 10% increase in customers and/or average purchase volumes would be equivalent to about \$50 more per vendor per week in sales (assuming 50 – 55 vendors). In this scenario, the fee increase would be paid for in just four weeks.
9. Work with vendors, customers and local leaders to form a working group to tackle the issue of market location, and to develop viable options, implementable by no later than the 2020 season. The Tuesday market venue should be included in these deliberations. More detail regarding this process is contained in the full report.
10. Change the market hours to 8am – noon for the entire season. The customer count from 7am – 8am was far below every other hour of the market, while the count in the final hour was quite strong. We recognize that this may create challenges with heat – for customers, vendors and produce – but believe that these problems can be resolved with a better facility.