

The Formation Story of Farmers Market Fund

By Rosemarie Sweet
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In fall 2008, I attended a neighborhood association meeting in Northeast Portland. There, I learned from the Director of **Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods** (NECN) that the association wanted to start a farmers' market in the parking lot next to its office. Since I was president of **Portland Farmers Market** (PFM) at the time, my ears perked up. At PFM, we had discussed starting a Northeast Portland market. I also knew that the location was excellent, near to Alberta Street and boasting a park and a school with play equipment as well as a large parking lot.

In the ensuing months, we at PFM successfully negotiated with NECN to operate the market on that site. The Executive Director at the time, **Ann Forsthoefel** and I wanted the market to be a true reflection of the community. So we supported NECN in creating a community advisory committee to help start the market. This committee was to be composed of a diverse group of community members. Unfortunately, NECN made little effort to recruit low-income people or people of color. As a result, the committee was composed mostly of middle-class women. My husband, **David Sweet**, joined the committee since he was a board member at NECN. We were both excited to see that **Traci Manning** also joined the committee. We both knew her from former work and remembered her as very competent.

Notwithstanding the committee's lack of diversity, we all wanted to work toward making the market financially accessible for everyone. When the **Alberta Food Co-op** offered to make a \$3,000 donation to start the market, they suggested that we use it for a SNAP (food stamps) match program, similar to the one at the Lents International Farmers Market. We were delighted with this idea and accepted the donation for that purpose. Both NECN and PFM added matching funds. So we were off and running. **Jocelyn Furbush** (then an employee of the co-op) joined a subcommittee set up to design and implement the match program. Alberta Food Co-op continues to be a loyal supporter.

Initially, there were about 6 people on the SNAP match program committee. But quickly, the committee dwindled to David, Traci and Jocelyn. Since I was presiding over PFM and the committee was attached to NECN, I felt it was a conflict of interest for me to join it. But I helped as I could with the formation of the match program. In spring 2009, the **King Farmers Market** opened to great fanfare. Public officials were at the opening ceremony and especially lauded the fact that the King Market had a SNAP match program to make its produce more accessible to low income shoppers.

Our original vision for the SNAP match program was that it would get most of its donations from individual members of the community. Our tagline was, *neighbors helping neighbors*. To that end, David solicited every neighborhood association under the NECN umbrella (12 in all) for a donation to the program. Many of the associations donated. In addition, we got individual donors at community fairs and at the market. We also staged an annual event called Build-A-Burger, ably organized by PFM staffer, **Anna Curtin**. While that event was well received and well-staffed by volunteers in its first two years, its effectiveness gradually dwindled and so it was discontinued.

The SNAP match program was well-liked at the market and in the community. In 2010, another group of volunteers, who were inspired by our success, decided to start the match program at the **Buckman Farmers Market**. That match program was also well-received. In the following year, we decided to combine our efforts into a single volunteer committee. By that time, I was on the SNAP match committee and we added **Anna Halpin**, a volunteer from the Buckman market SNAP match effort.

As volunteers, we were very committed to making the program successful. We even tried to raise enough funds to increase the match per visit from \$5 to \$10. For one or two years, we experimented

by increasing the match at King, though the money for the larger match ran out before the end of the season. Since we were in constant fundraising mode, this became draining for us.

While PFM made regular financial donations to the work, they also helped us by providing leads to potential donors, especially organizations that wanted the exposure offered by being at a Portland Farmers Market. **New Season Markets** came through with the first large donations and remains a dedicated sponsor of Farmers Market Fund programs.

We volunteers recognized that we had to broaden our fundraising strategy by adding other potential donors besides individuals. While we had some success with local businesses, it was very difficult to attract foundations because our effort was too small to demonstrate a significant impact. For example, I remember approaching **Kaiser Permanente** about our program. They responded by saying “come back to us when your program is larger.”

In order to grow the program and simplify its operation, PFM decided to further partner with our group of volunteers to form a non-profit companion organization. **Dick Benner**, president of the PFM board of directors at the time, led PFM in this effort and our tax-exempt status was confirmed in February 2012. The organization, which we named simply *Farmers Market Fund*, is dedicated to providing low-income, elderly and under-served populations in the region increased access to healthy, locally grown food. Our plans soon expanded to offer SNAP match at all four PFM neighborhood markets. And we envisioned bringing together other markets in the Portland region to collaborate on access programs and, perhaps eventually, to bring all of the match programs together.

FMF’s first board consisted of the four original King Market volunteers – David Sweet, Traci Manning, Jocelyn Furbush and me – plus two PFM board members, Dick Benner and **Karie Trujillo**. David discontinued his service shortly after it began. Jocelyn continued with us for a longer period, but eventually left to travel. I became FMF’s first board president, a role I held for more than four years, through 2015. Traci was our first Treasurer. **Trudy Toliver** was our Executive Director and we received professional services from other PFM staff: Anna Curtin and **Aldie Spires**.

A critical element in our success was starting and maintaining regular meetings among the Portland-area farmers markets that shared the desire to offer SNAP match programs. Once I saw that the meetings were going to be vibrant and well-attended, I knew that we could make headway at increasing the impact of this work region-wide. This collaboration of markets shared a vision and goals. For example, we hoped to merge our SNAP programs, creating a common currency so that shoppers could seamlessly use the benefits at any participating market and we wanted a uniform match amount of about \$10. Having formed this alliance, we were in a perfect position to succeed with our application for federal funding from USDA under the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant program. That grant and matching funds from local grantors started our Double Up Food Bucks program at markets around the state in 2016.

I will never forget when I first felt that the tide was turning in our favor. In about 2012, I requested another meeting with Kaiser Permanente. This time, I was able to say that we were now part of a larger collaboration and that together we had an impact in every corner of the Portland region. True to its word, Kaiser began giving us grants since we had demonstrated the extent of our potential impact. Thankfully, that led to other funders such as **Meyer Memorial Trust, Rose E. Tucker, Templeton Foundation, Umpqua Bank** and more.

I hope this captures the gist of FMF’s formation years. This work was been very rewarding for me and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to do it.