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## Local farmers have important role in a revitalized market

**By MARCY KAPTUR**

The Blade appropriately drew attention to the potential of our Farmer's Market and adjacent Erie Street Market as unique assets that can build the heart of our community forward.

Located in a historic district, this area holds enormous potential as Toledo's "Little SoHo" - an exciting, eclectic section of our downtown that draws visitors because of its diversity, combining farmers' wares, ethnic specialties, restaurants, artists, galleries, musicians, loft housing, and horse barns, all close to the river and entertainment district.

Back in the 1980s when the area was largely abandoned and dilapidated, the first new investment that occurred there was in a business plan prepared through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Marketing Service that I asked to be commissioned.

The goal was to improve the original Farmer's Market, which amazingly still functioned despite neglect and lack of attention. People sought it out, liking the experience of direct farmer-consumer shopping in downtown.

Eventually, federal support assured the buildings were rehabilitated and adjacent uses like Libbey Glass anchored. Private and public sector dollars flowed to undergird redevelopment of the Civic Auditorium and erect new outdoor stalls.

Fifth Third Field, the City Environmental Services Building, adjacent businesses, and housing leapfrogged. Existing firms like WSPD, Spaghetti Warehouse, and Columbia Gas made decisions to stay.

The transformation that has occurred in a little over a decade has been truly exciting. Much credit is also due to the Toledo Warehouse District Association, the Farmer's Market Association and its staff, Libbey Glass, the Antique Mall, and small businesses that have sprung up, like Downtown Latte, various art galleries, the Bronze Boar, and Grumpy's Deli to name a few.

Toledo now faces the question of whether our local farmer pioneers, who endured hot summers and cold winters and attracted customers, still will have a revered place in our downtown. Due to the wonderful addition of so many other uses, access and parking have become constricted, sometimes almost crowding out the original vendors. Trucks do not have dock space. The Collingwood exit and transportation system lock in the market, making access to the market from all sides difficult.

Importantly, a strong recruitment plan to involve farmers in a 100-mile radius needs to be updated, and the overall question of how to strengthen our local food system to wrest it away from displacement by imports is essential.

Did you know 97 percent of the beef consumed in Ohio is not raised in Ohio? The only locally grown chickens you can purchase are for sale at the Chicken House at the Outdoor Market.

Our food system, more and more, is being outsourced, as local farmers find themselves frozen off supermarket shelves. Consumers pay more, and farmers get less, in a food system where a few food processors control much about what we eat and how much we pay.

In my opinion, an appropriate question is: What role will local farmers have in a revitalized city center so our region can become self sufficient in food production again, rather than giving away our dollars to foreign producers and processors?

This may be the first year America imports more food than it exports. There is a word for this situation: dependency.

Other communities across America have given local farmer and food vendors prime location. Recently, I visited another such successful market in Philadelphia, the Reading Market. Washington D.C. has the Eastern Market and Seattle has Pike Place Market. Fundamental to all is a sound business plan that links to local food producers and vendors. For Toledo, then, the fundamental challenge will be to address the question: Does Toledo want to strengthen the direct farmer-consumer experience at our Farmer's Market, or at another location? To that cause, I would continue to devote much energy.

Let us lead our region to food independence again.

**Marcy Kaptur is a member of Congress from Ohio's 9th District.**