

# Virtual Veggies: Farmers markets open, offer online options

By Stephanie Shomin [sshomin@record-eagle.com](mailto:sshomin@record-eagle.com) May 16, 2020



TRAVERSE CITY — The Sara Hardy Downtown Farmers Market, like many events throughout the area, moved virtual — at least, for ordering.

The market opened May 9, with curbside pickup at Lot B in downtown Traverse City. Pre-orders were accepted the week before, from May 2-7.

Downtown Development Authority CEO Jean Derenzy said they were “cautiously optimistic” about their season opening this year. They needed to figure out how to get “rich agricultural products” to customers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Derenzy said it will be a work in progress.

“We had the social distancing, of course, but some had to wait a bit longer than we hoped,” Derenzy said.

“We will tweak it to make it a little easier for the customer and vendors.”

Nearly 400 individuals placed orders online, netting nearly \$21,000 worth of local products. Derenzy said they appreciate the community’s overwhelming support and patience.

“It went phenomenal,” she said. “I was not anticipating as many. It was busy for sure, but some of the vendors indicated it’s one of their best openings.”

Vendors are from Mesick, Central Lake, Brethren and elsewhere in northern Michigan, including 9 Bean Rows, Lakeview Hill Farm, Boss Mouse Cheese, Bear Earth Herbals and many others. Their products range from fresh herbs and vegetables to breads and cheeses. Soaps, nursery plants and other non-food items are also available.

Derenzy said the breads were “really big sellers” as well as the “chives, the salads — those fresh produce.”

She added that flowers and plant starts were popular purchases.

People may pay with credit cards or through food assistance programs like SNAP, Double Up Food Buck, Project Fresh, Senior Project Fresh, Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), Hoophouses for Health and Munson Healthcare’s Prescriptions for Health.

“It’s easy for anyone to be able to have access to fresh food on this platform,” she said of the new website. “That’s always been the goal — to make sure it’s open to as many or to all.”

Derenzy credited local organizations SEEDS and Taste the Local Difference for their assistance.

Taste the Local Difference CEO Tricia Phelps said the organization trained 35 vendors to use the online format. It only took about a week to get them up and running.

Though they planned, Phelps said she was not 100-percent ready for the outcome.

“We expected the first one to be a huge kick off,” she said. “I was blown away by the support we got.”

Phelps explained that online ordering opens at noon Saturday and closes at 10 a.m. Thursday.

People can shop for products throughout the week, adding items to their cart before confirming their final list. Then, they should check their email for pick-up instructions.

Phelps said vendors may add items mid-week if they initially sell out of something. The first event saw a rush on asparagus and cucumbers.

“We had the first of the local northern Michigan asparagus, and it sold out within the first day,” she said.

They expect new vendors in the future, as seasonal items become available.

Phelps stressed the importance of moving virtual rather than canceling the event all together, highlighting the economic impacts for both consumer and farmer.

“Farmers have fresh produce that needs to be sold, and if it can’t be sold, it will just rot in the field,”

Phelps said.

“This is how we’re pivoting in this crisis. This is an opportunity long term that’s a huge economic opportunity regardless of the current pandemic.”

The DDA aims to resume the in-person Sara Hardy Downtown Farmers Market in June with social distancing measures in place. Derenzy said they plan to continue the online platform for anyone who wants to preorder.

Many other northern Michigan farmers markets plan to open with modifications. The Leelanau Farmers Markets Association offers online ordering and curbside pickup in Suttons Bay (open May 23), Northport (June 5) and Glen Arbor (June 16). These and the Leland (June 18) and Empire (June 13) markets will feature face-to-face ordering, with vendor booths farther apart, sidewalk chalk indicating where to stand and hand sanitizer. Customers are encouraged to wear masks.