

Bancroft farmers? market cancellation sows new ideas



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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

Since the late 1970s, the Bancroft Farmers' Market has been a staple in town. From June to October of every year, its vendors sell fresh produce, locally baked goods and some non-food items weekly at Cenotaph Park. Unfortunately, with this year's COVID-19 pandemic, the market was cancelled, and will not return again until next year.

Farmers' markets generally are a community gathering place for friends, family and neighbours and Bancroft is no exception. They are also crucial for vendors, with 43 per cent of them earning more than 70 per cent of their income from market sales, according to the Harvest Hastings website.

Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins explains why the cancellation had to happen.

?Farmers' markets have different requirements for operation during the COVID-19 period. These requirements are contrary to the normal operation of a farmers' market and would require an unsustainable level of supervision on the Town's part. There is also confusion surrounding interpretation of whether certain activities are classified as an essential service. Through the County of Hastings, we have requested additional clarification from the province on the essential service legislation. At the present time, final authority for interpretation of the legislation rests with the OPP.?

Lianne Sauter, the director of corporate services and clerk for the town of Bancroft says the decision to cancel the farmers' market was not any easy one.

?We are working with our vendors and the farmers' market community to determine other ways to support our vendors.?

She says that while the pandemic has brought uncertainty and frustration for many, it is also encouraging people to look at new ways of doing things.

Louise Livingstone is the coordinator of Harvest Hastings, an organization that has a vision of a vibrant community, sustainable agriculture and forestry based on ecological principles, healthy ecosystems and long-term food security for the people of Hastings County. She thinks that a new way of doing things that Bancroft could try would be akin to the e-market model undertaken by Memorial Market in Kingston, Ontario.

?What happens is that the producers will say on a Tuesday or something I've got 12 chickens, three cabbages and whatever, they will put up an inventory, then the customers will go in and order what they want, pay by e-transfer like an Amazon type thing, then the producers will take their stuff to a central location, and I think for Memorial Market it's a church, and then volunteers will make up the order for the customer with cabbages from here, and meat from there and bread from there, and pack them all up. Then the customers come at a set time, properly socially distanced with their invoice and they pick up their box. So, I think it's either they do something like that, or they have a system with a van where somebody can deliver things to people. ?

Livingstone thinks it's either this kind of online market with curbside pickup and/or having deliveries put in place, where the farmers' wares are delivered right to people's doors. A possible third alternative she mentioned was an online store without the payment option, like the Harvest Hastings website. Customers can browse the online wares, see what they like and contact the vendor, and arrange payment directly with them, either by e-transfer or credit card.

Valerie and Roger Kelly of Kelly's Berry Farm were vendors at local farmers' markets for over 20 years, although Valerie can't remember what exact year they started.

?We started marketing fruit produced on our wild blueberry farm southeast of Maynooth in the early 1980s. We had a strawberry U-pick and a lowbush blueberry U-pick here at the farm and supplemented earnings from those enterprises with sales at one of the local markets each summer Saturday. We started at Combermere farmers' market first, then moved to Maynooth market and finally to the Bancroft market,? she says.

They are now downsizing their operation due to semi-retirement, and haven't had a stall at the Bancroft market for about three summers. Now they sell their jams and fruits directly to their customers. She said that all the markets they went to, including the Bancroft market, provided invaluable community contacts for them with the customers that purchased their products.

?Many of these people are still loyal customers. We also developed important relationships with other local vendors. Many opportunities, both business and personal, developed as a result of face to face market conversations. Market revenue earned was an important part of sustaining our farm business for many years. We are far from markets in the more populous regions of southern Ontario and our local markets gave us the opportunity to provide local families, seasonal residents and many summer visitors to the area with locally grown, fresh products. Sudden cancellation of the markets would have caused financial consequences for us. Much fruit would not have been sold. Employment we provided to local workers would not have been available. Fortunately, our jam has a long shelf life and can wait for later sales opportunities though we would have missed sales to tourists and summer visitors. Both groups were a major part of our customer base. I am sure that vendors at the current Bancroft farmers' market will be impacted by the closure,? she says.

Mary Lou Robb is a current market vendor affected by this year's cancellation. She runs a non-profit called Mary's Mission, and with that non-profit, has been involved with the market for the last six years.

?I grow flowers, perennials, and that's how I've been participating, to raise money for charity but also to get flowers out there to people to bring light into the world. I generally participated in the early summer at the Bancroft market with the perennials,? she says.

As to what she'll do now that the market has been cancelled, she's weighing her options.

?I might do something like a roadside stand if it's allowed but I live out in the country so it's a bit of a drive for people. When my flowers do come up, I'll be exploring my options. I'll be using social media I guess, as far as getting the word out. I'll also be looking into what's involved in setting up an e-commerce payment system. Also, the Bancroft farmers' market Facebook page opened it up for people to post their items on there during market season,? she says.

Whatever happens as we get into the summer months, Lianne Sauter feels that the Bancroft community is resilient and smart, and will find a solution that will provide a platform for farmers' sales, although it won't be the traditional farmers' market.

?The Bancroft Business Improvement Area is also spending a great deal of time and effort supporting our business community,? she says. ?We are all in this together.?