



PACIFIC COAST
FARMERS' MARKET
ASSOCIATION

REFLECTIONS ON INTENTS 2024



In early March, I was able to attend the Intents Conference in San Diego in person for the first time. This was the eighth annual conference organized by Farmers Market Pros, a group that operates farmers markets in San Diego County and provides technical support and consulting to farmers markets nationwide.

After some time back home and after catching up on emails received while I was gone, I had the opportunity to reflect on my experience at the conference.

In-Person Engagement Builds Truer Connections

After several years of online participation in Intents and other conferences, and more Zooms than I ever thought possible, it was great to connect with colleagues in person. Intents allowed me to meet in person many people that I had only communicated with through email, phone calls, and Zoom, including some who also live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I appreciate that Zoom helped me to stay connected with colleagues and statewide and national work throughout the pandemic. I acknowledge that being able to join a meeting from anywhere means I can spend more time in meetings and less time traveling to and from meetings. However face-to-face interactions allow for connections on a deeper level when body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice contribute to the meaning being conveyed.

I think that for many of us, this desire for personal connections is part of what makes the farmers market experience so important. We can read about the farmers who grew our food but hearing directly from the farmer in their own words is much more meaningful.

Farmers Markets Face some Universal Challenges

A chance meeting during a break at the conference found me talking with farmers market operators from New York City and Washington DC. Our three organizations are the three largest farmers market operators in the nation. While we are each unique organization, we found we were facing similar challenges. This point of universal challenges was echoed by a farmers market operator from Alaska when I mentioned that at PCFMA we very often hear from both those who want to be able to bring their dogs to their local farmers market and those who don't want any dogs allowed in the market.

The shared challenges farmers markets face include recruiting new farmers when farm consolidation is reducing the number of farmers nationwide, supporting local and seasonal products when customers are accustomed to being able to order anything they want and have it arrive within 24 hours, and paying a living wage with good benefits to market employees without passing on costs to farmers that force them to raise food prices for struggling consumers.

Events like Intents help those of us struggling to find solutions with the knowledge that we are not alone in our struggles which makes continuing the fight a little easier.

There are no Universal Solutions

Across the three days of the conference, many speakers shared their strategies for building strong organizations, engaging more customers, and helping farmers sustain their operations. For nearly every presentation – including my presentation on PCFMA's efforts supported by the Farmers Market Coalition – there were conference participants who disagreed with the speakers.

One of the presentations that generated a lot of discussion focused on social media. Many conference participants who agreed that social media is an important and effective way to engage farmers market customers disagreed with the speaker's strategy.

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions to challenges that farmers markets are taking on. Each solution is as unique as the farmers market implementing the solution and the community in which they are working. This is true of many conference topics such as local sourcing rules, human resource processes, and emergency plans, as well as social media strategies.

But there are Lots of Inspiring Solutions

The most important outcome of my participation at Intents was the renewal of spirit that comes from being inspired by so much incredible work happening at farmers markets throughout the nation. While PCFMA is not looking to jump into mobile farmers markets or fruit and vegetable prescription programs, it was great to hear how these programs are

helping families in food deserts to afford and access fresh and healthy foods.

The work that we do is often hard. The industrial food system that tries to convince consumers to choose the convenience of a processed product instead of the nutrition of a natural product has deep pockets and a loud megaphone.

On our side, we have the best food, grown by hard-working farmers who literally stand by their product every week, and the best experience for customers. As Intents reminds us, we also have each other to look to for support and inspiration

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