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Ensuring the Success of a Community Farmers Market: Assessing Oklahoma City Urban Farmers Needs and Willingness to Participate in a Farmers Market

Abstract

Assessing clientele needs is a critical first step for Extension educators' as they work to provide programs relevant to the needs of the communities they serve. This article summarizes a targeted needs assessment developed by Oklahoma County OSU Extension staff and a community partner agency, the Lynn Institute for Healthcare Research. The purpose of this assessment was to prepare for the development of a new northeast Oklahoma City Farmers Market to improve community food access and provide a local marketplace for urban northeast Oklahoma City producers to sell their products. A small three-zip-code section of Oklahoma City was identified as the primary focus for the assessment. The producers identified for the study predominately operate within these three zip-codes or within close proximity to this identified area. The goal of this project was not to conduct an assessment of all Oklahoma City food producers, but rather to identify the specific needs of producers near the target area to inform Extension educational programming and foster participation in the new farmers' market.

Introduction

Northeast Oklahoma City is home to one of the largest concentrations of African Americans in Oklahoma and is known for its rich history and culture. However, the community also exhibits generations of high mortality rates from preventable diseases and until 2019, was classified as a food desert (Oklahoma City-County, 2014). Interest in increasing access to healthy foods for underserved communities has led Extension systems to engage urban communities through food-based projects (Diekmann, 2017). In addition to traditional Extension programs that address nutrition and food access issues, there is a growing interest in developing programs that help increase food production and distribution systems in urban settings (Fox et al, 2015). The main role of the Cooperative Extension system is to help local communities identify ways to solve their own problems (Cole, 1980). Rummenapp (2017) maintained that Extension professionals must develop a deeper understanding of the unique and complex needs of urban settings to serve to remain responsive to the needs of such communities. The three zip-code area identified for this assessment is locally referred to as northeast Oklahoma City. Oklahoma State University Extension partnered with the Lynn Institute for Healthcare Research, a local 501(c)3 organization, to examine the needs of urban food producers in this target community to develop better Extension support for these producers and increase opportunities for their participation in the new community farmer's market.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the feasibility study was to assess the likelihood of urban farmers participating in a new farmers' market in northeast Oklahoma City. The study began in October 2020 and data collection was completed in March of 2021. The central objective for the study was capacity building by identifying opportunities that connect the community's need for increased food access with local food producers who could address the need.

The following research questions guided the study:

- How many urban farms or farm businesses are located in NE OKC and would they be willing to provide services to the market?
- Which producers would be interested in receiving training and education on how to start a business or education on growing produce to sell to the public?

Methods

The researchers utilized purposive expert sampling with producers being identified by both OSU Extension professionals and the Lynn Institute's knowledge of producers working in or near northeast Oklahoma City. For inclusion in the assessment, sixteen producers were identified as meeting the parameters with eleven producers participating in the study.

Qualitative instruments were developed with input from OSU Extension and prepared in accordance with established Lynn Institute content. Questions were developed with the aim of identifying the likelihood of producer participation in the market and gauging interest in Extension educational opportunities specifically designed for urban agricultural producers. This included the promotion of the farmers' market, business operations, and production methods. The producers were contacted directly by the Lynn Institute via phone and given a brief introduction to the purpose of the study. They were then asked to access the online survey.



Producers Qualitative Form – NE OKC 2020

All information is private and utilized strictly for the purpose of this study.

Name:

Farm Name:

Farm Location:

Farm Website or Social Media Site:

1. Are you currently a grower/producer or plan to be a grower/producer?
2. If you are currently a grower/producer, how long have you been a grower/producer?
3. What specific training have you had related to growing and selling food?
4. Why is local food production or farmers' market important to you?
5. Where do you currently sell your produce?
6. What is the biggest challenge(s) facing you as a food producer/grower in Oklahoma?
7. Would you be interested in training and education on how to start a business or growing produce to sell to the public?
8. If yes, which type of training you will be interested in receiving? Circle all that apply
 - Livestock Production
 - Accessing Land
 - Vegetable & Fruit, Herb or Other Crop Production Methods
 - Financial Planning
 - Rules, Laws or Regulations for Business Operations
 - Marketing
9. Would you be interested in participating in a farmers' market at NE Regional Health & Wellness Campus/OSU Extension, 2500 NE 63rd Street?
10. If yes, when is the best time for you to participate? Circle all that apply
 - Weekdays: Morning Afternoon Evening
 - Weekends: Morning Afternoon
11. If no, you would not be interested in participating, why not?
12. Please list any individuals or farms you know currently producing and selling locally or outside of the Oklahoma City metro area.

Results

Largely, the local food producers selected for this study were willing to participate in the Eastside Fresh Market and showed keen interest in educational training opportunities available through Oklahoma State University Extension. Of the 11 producers representing local farms, ten indicated they would be interested in participating at the Eastside Fresh Market and seven producers indicated they would be interested in training and education. Since many producers sell at multiple markets, scheduling of the Eastside Fresh Market was important to ensure participation. The producers indicated that weekday evenings and weekend mornings would be ideal for their participation.

The producers involved in this study have an average of five years' experience as growers, with most having earned upper-level degrees in horticulture and/or specialized training across the United States. Local food production and farmers' markets were described as important by the survey participants in contributing to healthier communities, and more robust local economies and provide equitable access to fresh foods. Climate change, inclement weather, and pests were expressed as the primary challenges faced by these producers.

Why is local food production or farmers' markets important to you?

- *"People need to control the means of production and have food sovereignty to have healthy communities that are safe and equitable. Food is the basis of that in my opinion."*
- *"It is wonderful to be able to eat fresh produce and what is truly in season. Farmers markets is a way for consumers to learn about seasonal produce and to get to know local growers."*
- *"Local economy, freshness, connection to neighbors."*

What is the biggest challenge(s) facing you as a food producer/grower in Oklahoma?

- *"Growing naturally is a challenge because of the weather and pests. Getting consumers to come out every week year-round is a challenge when they could get all of their produce at a grocery store."*
- *"Resources such as crops aren't always as easy to predict and so early investment in the farm helps us make sure we keep staff learning and growing."*
- *"Climate change."*
- *"The weather."*

Table 1

Would you be interested in participating in a farmers' market at the NE Regional Health & Wellness Campus/OSU Extension, 2500 NE 63rd Street?

Yes	90.9%
No	9.1%

Source: Lynn Producers Survey

Table 2

If yes, when is the best time for you to participate? Check all that apply.

Weekdays Morning	20%
Weekdays Afternoon	30%
Weekdays Evening	60%
Weekends Morning	70%
Weekends Afternoon	30%

Source: Lynn Producers Survey

Table 3

Would you be interested in training and education on how to start a business or growing produces to sell to the public?

Yes	63.4%
No	27.3%
Depends	9.1%

Source: Lynn Producers Survey

Table 4

If yes, which type of training will you be interested in receiving? Check all that apply.

Marketing	70%
Vegetable & Fruit, Herb, or Other Crop Production Methods	60%
Rules, Laws, or Regulation for Business Operations	40%
Financial Planning	40%
Accessing Land	30%
Livestock Production	20%

Source: Lynn Producers Survey

Discussion and Conclusions

The data collected through this assessment informed the development of a new community farmer market at the Oklahoma County OSU Extension center in Oklahoma City. The Eastside Fresh Farmers' Market was launched in May 2021 and the grand opening was deemed a success by Extension leadership. Of the 11 producers that participated in the study, four sold items during the inaugural season of the market.

The responses from the 11 urban farmers who participated in this study provided valuable insights that shaped the formation and structure of the market. Including the day of the week, hours of operation, and length of the market season. The feedback provided by these producers also provided valuable information for Extension professionals in understanding the educational needs of these producers. The responses (Table 4) given by participants indicated a strong need for both production and marketing education. This information was used to plan a series of educational programs for local market gardeners. Overall, this assessment of food producers provided much-needed information that informed the establishment of a new northeast Oklahoma City community farmers' market.

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