

Meadville Market House Sustainability Project

Pennsylvania Environmental Council

Project Completion Report

Background

The Meadville Market House is the oldest market house in continuous use in Pennsylvania. The Market House provides a sizable permanent market space for area farmers - being a two-story permanent structure, and including 3400 square feet of available interior market space, as well as over 2000 square feet of outdoor market space under (porch) roof. However, by the 1960s, what once had been a vibrant, economically viable farmers' market since 1870 had devolved to an economically unstable business largely relying on retail sales of crafts produced outside the region. To reverse this trend and "reestablish the Meadville Market House as an economic, cultural and historical center of Meadville urban life and as a viable market to help sustain the region's working farms" the Pennsylvania Environmental Council ("PEC") entered into a three-year agreement in July 2005, with the Meadville Market House Authority to manage the



Market House.

PEC's **Meadville Market House Sustainability Project** was initiated to reverse the impacts of two interrelated cultural trends that together threaten the economic and environmental sustainability of the region: the flight of residents and businesses from urban centers and the attendant chronic loss of working farms and agricultural land. The project presented a unique opportunity to reverse those trends by integrating the

revitalization of downtowns like Meadville's, the conservation of our region's numerous working farms and the sustainability of our area's economy.

Market House Location

The Market House is located in an economically distressed area of Meadville (as defined by the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council Geocoding System). It is situated in a census tract block group that is 71.1% low-to-moderate income. However, that area of the City is a "shifting sands" neighborhood, and the Market House is envisioned by the community at large as a cultural, historic and economic keystone of its revitalization efforts. That neighborhood encompasses Meadville's Kepler Hotel project - called "Impact Meadville," a fully funded \$14 million downtown redevelopment initiative embracing three city blocks contiguous with the Market House. The Impact Meadville project is designed to restore vibrancy to the downtown district - replacing blighted buildings with a mix of new retail, commercial



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and residential space, as well as more green space. The Impact Meadville initiative is being implemented in stages. Once complete, Impact Meadville will include the renovated historic Kepler Hotel and adjacent buildings, 50,000 square feet of new retail and commercial space, 48 townhouse units, and landscaping and greenway development – with the Meadville Market House as the project’s cultural and business hub.

The State of Farming in the Project Area

Numerous small working farms occupy Crawford County (the average size of the County’s 1,069 farms in 1997 was 194 acres). However, as in much of the rest of the nation, the rural portions of Crawford County face pressure from suburban growth expanding from urban areas. Rural business and home site development have resulted in a net loss of farmland in Crawford County. Between 1969 and 1997, the County lost nearly 17% of its farm acreage to other uses (41,832 acres of farmland lost). Additionally, smaller farms in the County are merging into larger farm operations. Average farm size grew by 42 acres during that same 18-year period. Because of these two trends, during that time the number of working farms in Crawford County fell 35%.

Much of the development of former farmland in the County is poorly planned growth that inevitably leads to two primary outcomes. First, neighboring towns such as Meadville become culturally and economically distressed at the expense of growing suburbs. Second, agricultural land is lost, since the primary locations for new business and residential development is farmland (in the short term they are viewed as easier and cheaper to develop than areas in urban centers or brownfields, which often require significant site preparation prior to development).



Those two primary impacts have secondary influences, which diminish the potential for long-term environmental and economic sustainability for the region, especially the sustainability of the City of Meadville and Crawford County’s working farms. With the chronic loss of population and business and their associated tax base, urban centers deteriorate, exacerbating poverty. With the deterioration of urban centers, regions lose their intrinsic identity and tax base, intensifying the population flight from the area. With the loss of urban markets and local population, farmers face decreasing local market opportunities and are forced to compete with larger agribusiness ventures at

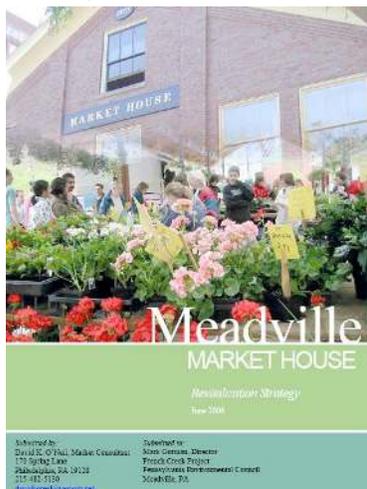
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a national and international level. Faced with such competition, small working farmers operate with increasing debt loads and confront increasing pressure to sell their land to developers, perpetuating the agricultural land loss cycle, or sell their smaller farms to larger agribusiness entities. Such development and larger-scale farming operations generally result in greater pollutant loads to streams than do smaller farms, largely due to increased imperviousness of developed areas and decreased efficiency, respectively.

Accomplishments

Sales at the Market House presently include both indoor (food and non-food items) and outdoor (farm food products in season) sales. The number of indoor (daily) and outdoor (Saturday) vendors selling goods at the Market House has increased substantially over the past three years. And a majority of those vendors are now farmers (a dramatic reversal from the sales ratio prior to July 2005). Because of that intentionally designed shift from a decidedly non-agricultural to a markedly agricultural majority of goods available, since the change in Market House leadership in July 2005, recorded sales at the Market House have increased significantly (see Figure 1; 2008 FY total is estimated).

In addition to the ongoing evolution and growth of the day-to-day workings of the Market House, PEC was also able to apply for, be granted and implement a Pennsylvania



Department of Commerce and Economic Development grant to hire a marketing consultant, David K. O'Neil, to complete a marketing plan and feasibility study for the Market House (June 2006. Meadville Market House Revitalization Strategy) (“Revitalization Plan”).¹ That Revitalization Plan maps a path forward toward economic sustainability for the Market House. It is important that the gains achieved over the past three years not be viewed as an appropriate end-point in the growth of the Market House. The Meadville Market House is not yet economically sustainable on its own. And although the gains over the last three years have been nothing short of remarkable, the Revitalization Plan’s Huff Gravity model estimate of the potential market share at the Meadville

Market House indicates that the fresh and prepared food sales at the Market House have the potential to increase from up to over 600% above current sale's figures.

Recognizing that the Meadville Market House was not sustainable on its own, not only has PEC provided the direct Market House management services over the past three years, but also PEC subsidized the Market House income (over \$12,000 annually), so that the growth described above could continue unhindered by a lack of unrestricted funds. That financial commitment and support will not end with the end of PEC’s market

¹ The initial funding for PEC’s management of the Market House and outreach to farmers and consumers was provided by a PA DEP Growing Greener grant. The funding for the Revitalization Plan development was provided by a PA DCED First Industries Agriculture grant.

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management tenure. PEC has secured a commitment from a donor who is willing to fund through PEC the major part of a certifiable kitchen at the Market House. PEC will thus help to put into place a licensed, incubator kitchen that will sell prepared food products at the Meadville Market House. The intended effect of the kitchen is to incubate the development and sales of value-added food products, further boost the volume of fresh food consumed in the region, and increase the income of more small local farmers.

All of this work accomplished and achievements gained over the past three years have been accomplished and gained through the dedicated hard work of a committed community. Together with local growers, Market House vendors, neighboring businesses, the Friends of the Market House, Allegheny College, Meadville Council on the Arts, Meadville Redevelopment Authority, the regional Chamber of Commerce, City of Meadville, Market House Authority, the market's many customers and so many others, we have reestablished the Meadville Market House as the hub of a community-based food system, with that market helping to drive customer demand and catalyze local production.

Conclusions

Rarely have the problems of farm closures and empty downtown storefronts been addressed in the comprehensive manner in which they have been approached through this work with our many farming and downtown Meadville partners.

The overall goal of PEC's **Meadville Market House Sustainability Project** has been to link the numerous economically struggling small agricultural producers in the central



French Creek valley with the potentially large local market by growing the Market House into an economically sustainable farmer's market that is a keystone of a regional, secure food system. By taking this distinctive producer-market view toward problem-solving, PEC has positively impacted the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of the region, especially the sustainability of the region's downtown centers such as Meadville and the valley's working farms. By effectively managing the Market House,

PEC has helped local farmers utilize that vibrant market for their produce, and given shoppers ready access to healthy, fresh, delicious locally grown foods.

In accomplishing these shorter term goals, the project has laid the groundwork for: (1) a regional food system that is ecologically sound and economically viable, (2) heretofore-unavailable access for low-income persons living near the Market House to easily obtain

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fresh, and locally and sustainably produced food, (3) a regional food system founded upon the principles of affordability, cultural responsiveness, encouraging nutritional and healthy eating habits, and fighting hunger among low-income persons, and (4) downtown Meadville economic revitalization.

Final Thoughts

Keeping in mind the greater purpose of the community's work in any endeavor such as the ongoing work of the Meadville Market House is one of life's most challenging demands. This closing of this three-year project - one of the many chapters in the life of the Market House - gives us the opportunity to pause and remind ourselves of the greater purpose toward which we have and continue to work. We are not just farmers growing produce, crafters stitching quilts, growers selling flowers, elected officials making the city run, authority members caring for an historical heritage, artists creating beauty, businesspersons selling products and services, or organizations managing buildings. By doing what we have done and continue to do to help keep our farmlands productive and green, and help keep our downtowns vibrant and alive, we ultimately are helping to sustain this rich quilt of a landscape we call the French Creek valley for ourselves and our children. That is ultimately why PEC took on this work. That is why the community will continue the legacy carried on by so many others over the years.

In the Middle Ages, the story goes, a traveler asked three hard-at-work stonemasons what they were doing. The first said, "I am sanding down this block of marble." The second said, "I am preparing a foundation." The third said, "I am building a cathedral." That is an appropriate story to stop and reflect upon once in awhile. While we are sanding our individual blocks of marble, all the while we should be envisioning the cathedral we are all working together to build.

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