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Market hopes rise anew

Backers say time and site are ripe for public market

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After years of planning, hopes for a year-round public food market in Portland are spiking – although not for the first time.

In January, the Historic Portland Public Market Foundation, which has been lobbying for the idea since 2000, released an architect's rendering of an indoor/outdoor food market at the downtown end of the Morrison Bridge. The drawing shows pavilions amidst the bridge's cloverleaf ramps and a high-rise on the current parking lot. The market would spread out from the ground floor of the high-rise and would be named after the late food writer and Portland native James Beard.

The Multnomah County-owned site isn't a lock, but it's at the "top of the list," says Ron Paul, a paid consultant to the market foundation. Paul is the public face of the market, although he's not a one-man band. The foundation board includes City Commissioner Dan Saltzman and prominent restaurateur Greg Higgins, among others.

Periodically over the past decade, plans for a market have been released, followed by a flurry of news media attention, and then – disappointment. So the question is, will this time be any different?

A public market provides a central location for local vendors of fruit, vegetables, seafood, cheese, prepared foods and sometimes crafts. Seattle's century-old Pike Place Market is one example; San Francisco's relatively new Ferry Building Market is another.

Portland has been home to various public markets since at least the 1880s, but the idea of a central location to buy and sell locally grown produce is now being cast in a new, greener light.

When customers buy directly from farmers, says Ann Forsthoefel, executive director of the Portland Farmers Market, it supports the local farm economy and prevents urban sprawl. Less fuel is spent on transportation, and small farmers tend to be good land stewards. For every dollar spent at a farmers market, Forsthoefel says, 93 cents stays in the local economy. With a chain grocery store, it's about 25 cents.

Founded in 1992, Portland Farmers Market oversees five seasonal, weekly farmers markets, including the flagship Portland State University market on Saturdays.

The markets are booming despite the sour economy, and Forsthoefel doesn't think a larger, year-round James Beard Public Market would interfere with that success.

"The Portland Farmers Market is in support of anything that we can do to make our community more food-secure, to move the local food movement," she says.

Location, location, location



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Public markets have come and gone throughout Portland's history. The Portland Public Market, which opened in 1933, was the world's largest public and farmers market, built to replace the chaotic and unsanitary Carroll Public Market on Southwest Yamhill Street. The new three-block showpiece on the waterfront struggled through the 1930s, and closed in 1942.

In 2000, Paul organized the predecessor to the nonprofit market foundation, a citizens group of about 50 people. Paul, who was chief of staff to then-City Commissioner Charlie Hales, had owned Ron Paul Charcuterie, which had three restaurant locations in the Portland area in the 1980s and '90s.

Initially, foundation members identified the historic federal building at 511 N.W. Broadway and Fire Station No. 1 near Naito Parkway in Old Town as promising sites. Later prospects included Old Town's Skidmore Fountain Building and Union Station, but none of the ideas made it past the planning stage.

The foundation returned its focus to the 511 Building two years ago. Though the foundation couldn't secure the property, that effort forged new ties with Melvin Mark Development Co., a major downtown developer.

Melvin Mark and the foundation expect to jointly submit plans when the county seeks proposals for use of the Morrison bridgehead site later this summer.

"We're trying to determine exactly what all the key elements are that we want to put into this market," says Daniel Petrusich, president of Melvin Mark. "Once we secure a site, that takes us to the next level, where we're able to develop plans, to design a building that we know will work and to complete our team."

Marco Shaw, a chef and former foundation board member, calls the idea of a public market a "no-brainer" for Portland, and was frustrated that it didn't seem to have wider support.

"There is nothing like it here," Shaw says, "and a lot of the major cities that consider themselves food cities have something similar. It's hard for me to understand why it's a hard sell."

Different from farmers markets

The plan is to leave crafts to the Portland Saturday Market and focus on food, flowers and artisan products, including beer and wine. Only Portland-based companies would be allowed, Paul says, and labeling would be required so shoppers know where food is produced and whether it's organic or sustainably grown.

"What we know from successful markets is that we need to have internal competition, so not just one fruit vendor, but two or three. Not just one cheese monger, but two or three," he says. "That's because you have a truer market economy when there's internal competition, and you achieve critical mass."

The market would combine local and other products, so a shopper could buy Pacific salmon and California lemons.

"The public market is showcasing local ingredients whenever they're available," Paul says. "But it's also a destination for people to take care of all their shopping, so they don't need to make a second stop."

Paul doesn't see the public market taking away business from farmers markets. A study commissioned by Portland's Office of Sustainable Development found that farmers markets accounted for up to 3 percent of produce sales in the city.

"There's 97 percent of the public left that aren't buying fresh, direct produce," Paul says.

Unlike a farmers market, there would be plumbing and electricity, enabling refrigerated cases for cheese, meat and fish. And the public market would be able to sell wine, beer and spirits.

Paul estimates the market would create about 200 permanent jobs and become a destination for locals and tourists.

Although it's too soon to put a price tag on the project, Paul expects the money to come from individuals, corporations and local and federal governments. Most public markets are nonprofits created with government support, he says.

Different climate

Portlanders' interest in local and organic foods has ballooned in the decade since the market campaign began. Farmers markets have mushroomed. Artisan coffee roasters, chocolatiers and brewers have proliferated.

It's not clear if those developments make the James Beard Public Market more or less viable.

Ten years ago, the Eastmoreland Market was a corner grocery catering to a small neighborhood clientele. Under new owners Colleen and Patrick Mendola, it's a beacon for sustainable eating.

The Mendolas stock their meat cooler with locally grown beef and Portland-made cured meats. Their produce case is filled with seasonal organic fruits and vegetables from about ten different local farmers.

It's the kind of place that might be adversely affected by a big centralized, publicly funded market. But Colleen Mendola is unconcerned.

"I think it's kind of cool," she says. "Whatever benefits the local farmer is the most important thing."

But sustaining a local market financially has been a challenge.

In the 1980s, the small, privately-owned Yamhill Market Place in downtown Portland never caught on.

A daily, year-round public market in Vancouver, Wash., lasted less than two years, closing in late 2007.

"I don't think Vancouver has enough downtown residents to really support something like that at this time," says Robert Ray, market master for that facility and the adjacent outdoor farmers market, which is still operating.

"Portland's a completely different demographic," Ray says. "I think that Portland's indoor farmers market should succeed without a problem."

Petrusich says construction will take at least three years once a site is acquired. He doesn't see a repeat of earlier problems securing a site.

"From my experience, persistence pays off," Petrusich says. "I really think the stars are going to align in the near future, and we're excited to be a part of it."

Limitations at the Morrison Bridge property make it unappealing for other development.

"It's a tough site, and they've come up with a very creative plan for how to use it and turn it into a real community asset," says Multnomah County Commissioner Jeff Cogen.

He calls it a "terrific idea," and says the market would provide a "visually stunning" gateway into downtown.

With a vibrant farmers market scene and community-supported agriculture programs in place, "this is the key missing link," Cogen says. "I think Portland will embrace this."

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