

Outdoor market to open in downtown Port

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/042513/produceSM.png> **Produce sellers will operate out of tent on former bank property while looking for a permanent city location**

Port Washington will have a full-time fruit and vegetable produce market on Franklin Street this summer.

Port Produce will be an outdoor market housed in a large tent just south of Harry's Restaurant, in the drive-through lane for the former M&I Bank this summer as owners Louis and Paul Demos search for a permanent downtown location for their business, the city's Plan Commission was told last week.

Commission members approved the market April 18.



The market, which will run from mid-May through September, will be open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week, offering a full range of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as deli sandwiches, cheese trays and beverages. Fresh bakery may also be offered.

When the market is closed, food will be stored inside the former bank, where coolers will be located.

Once the market finds a permanent location, it would increase its offerings to include fresh meats, bakery and other items, Demos said.

Ron Giguire, president of the Mitchell Street Business Improvement District in Milwaukee who described himself as the project expeditor, said the intent is not to compete with existing businesses, such as Bernie's Fine Meats across the street from the market, but to complement them.

"We have no intention of competing with Bernie's," he said, noting Bernie's has a specialty niche. "I think the town is looking for something unusual. I think there's enough business in Port with the variety of things we offer.

"We want to be part of the fabric of the community. We don't want to just take from the community."

Giguire said Port Produce is based on Pete's Fruit Market in Milwaukee, which began in a tent and grew into a 30,000-square-foot produce store.

The intent, Giguire said, is to offer a wide variety of produce at a reasonable cost with an eye

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toward becoming a permanent fixture downtown.

“I think Port is ready for this type of operation,” he said. “Our main focus in Port is to be a part of it for a long time.

“I believe in downtowns. You’re certainly bringing in quality merchants downtown. I think a lot of the flavor is starting to return.”

The market will have local produce but will also buy items through a wholesaler, he said, adding an emphasis will be placed on Wisconsin products.

While many Plan Commission members were enthusiastic about the proposal, the fact that the market would be located in a 20-by-40-foot tent this summer caused some consternation.

“I think the idea is fantastic,” commission member Earl Kelley said. “My problem is a tent on the main street. If it’s off the main drag, it might be a different story, but this is on Franklin Street. It takes away from the main street.”

Commission member Bud Sova concurred, saying a better representation of the tent and site plan was needed before the commission made a decision.

“We want to see the entire package,” he said, noting members were only given a grainy copy of a picture of a wedding tent.

Randy Tetzlaff, the city’s director of planning and development, said the tent will be set back in the former drive-through and largely hidden from view.

“This is a good location,” he said. “You’re only going to see one face of it.”

The tent, Tetzlaff added, is a temporary home for the market. If they don’t have a permanent location by the end of the summer, they won’t be back next year.

Giguire agreed, saying the intention is to assess the market and develop a following.

“We do not want to be Joe’s Produce Stand for five years,” he said, adding that the Demos’ have been talking to one potential landlord and has identified a second site as well.

Public Works Director Rob Vanden Noven, a member of the commission, said that the location is a good one.

“They’re putting it on a block that has had a deteriorating building since 2007,” he said. “We have vacant buildings in more locations than we would want to see. I think we should be embracing this.”

Mayor Tom Mlada, the commission chairman, said the market will bring traffic and vibrancy to the downtown that will help the entire area thrive.

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Tetzlaff said people have been asking for a small, specialty market downtown for years. Port Produce will fill that niche, he said.

“You have to be different or better,” he said. “Fresh produce is their niche. Bernie’s niche is fresh meat. Sentry is your full-service grocer. I think the market can handle them all.

“I think this is a winner. It’s an important use for our downtown and our community.”

Port Produce will also enhance the farmers market, he said, noting organizers have long said their search for additional vendors and new offerings has been stymied because there isn’t enough traffic downtown.

Port Produce could help provide the extra traffic that’s needed, he said.

Image Information: THE DRIVE THROUGH between Harry’s Restaurant (left) and the former M&I Bank building in downtown Port Washington will become the location for an outdoor produce market this summer. The market will be housed in a tent while the operators seek a permanent location. Photo by Sam Arendt