

***Let's make a Farmers' Market!***  
**A study of the East Lynn Farmers' Market in Toronto,  
Canada**

by

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RESEARCH REPORT  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Danforth East Community Association (DECA) founded the East Lynn Farmers' Market in 2008. Originally, the association was looking for a one-off community event that would give people an opportunity to meet their neighbours. A local food and environmental activist suggested the idea of a farmers' market and the association supported it. After attempting to organise all aspects of the farmers' market themselves (finding the farmers, obtaining a location and permits, marketing and promotion, managing the finances, organising children's activities, corralling volunteers) DECA realised that the task was too great to overcome without assistance.

DECA reached out to Farmers' Markets Ontario® (FMO) who agreed to manage the East Lynn market under the MyMarkets® brand, which certified the market would be producer based. FMO provided organisational assistance, promoted the market, hired a market manager and provided the farmers. DECA was responsible for providing the customers.

Eventually the market grew from 11 vendors in 2008 to 16 vendors in 2011 and averaged 300-800 shoppers per week. DECA wanted to keep their farmers coming back and came up with the unique idea of feeding the farmers, since the market operates Thursday afternoons from 3-7 pm. The farmers came to look forward to the East Lynn Farmers' Market because of the vibrant community sponsor and the enthusiastic support they received from the

shoppers. Shoppers valued the fresh, local food, the sense of community and the family-friendly environment. Local businesses benefitted from increased numbers of shoppers in the neighbourhood.

The East Lynn Farmers' Market stands as successful example of a community-sponsored, farmer-based market that has strengthened ties within the community, improved the local retail sector, and provided a sustainable local food system for the Danforth East area of Toronto.

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## INTRODUCTION

The publication Harvest Ontario 2011 lists over 150 farmers' markets in the province of Ontario, 21 of which are located in Toronto. Of the 21 farmers' markets in Toronto, 12 have been established in the past five years.<sup>1</sup> This recent surge in the number of farmers' markets in Toronto speaks to the growing demand for alternatives to the global food system offered consumers by the Canadian food distribution and retail industry.

The new markets have sprouted up in diverse areas of the city—from the Ryerson University and the Hospital for Sick Children markets in the downtown core, to the Bloor-Borden market in the earthy 'Annex' neighbourhood in midtown to a market on one of Toronto's main eastern arteries Danforth Avenue—the East Lynn Farmers' Market. Founded by a residents' association and managed by a non-governmental agency, this market has created a local food system where one did not previously exist and has fostered other ancillary benefits.

This research report will review the background of the East Lynn Farmers' Market from the genesis of the idea to the present day. It will highlight the goals of the community association that sponsors the market. It will examine the relationship between the association, the market management and the farmers who sell at the market. It will identify the benefits to the community.

This report will prove instructive to others who wish to establish a farmers' market as a means of introducing a sustainable local food system into their neighbourhood and strengthening the bonds of community.



Figure 1- Entrance to East Lynn Farmers' Market from Danforth Avenue (photo: R. Wilford)

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Primary Data Source**

The primary source of data for this research report was personal interviews with key members of the Danforth East Community Association. These interviewees provided the history of the project and gave insight into the processes they followed.

Further visits to the East Lynn Farmers' Market were required in order to interview the farmer-vendors and the MyMarket<sup>®</sup> staff. It was valuable to get insight from customers of the market to gauge impact on the community. This information is purely anecdotal as the scale and scope of this research report does not support a fully scientific survey.

### **Secondary Data Sources**

An important secondary source was Sharing The Harvest: How to Build Farmers' Markets and how Farmers' Markets Build Community, co-authored by Robert Chorney, Executive Director of Farmers' Markets Ontario<sup>®</sup>.

Various other secondary sources as detailed under *Bibliography* rounded out the research embarked on for this research report.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **1. DANFORTH EAST COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION (DECA)**

One of Toronto's newer markets, East Lynn Farmers' Market began operations in 2008 in an unassuming middle class neighbourhood in the east end of the city. The idea behind establishing the market grew out of the newly formed Danforth East Community Association (DECA). Danforth Avenue is one of Toronto's major east-west arteries and connects with the more stylish neighbourhoods of Bloor Street at the Prince Edward Viaduct over the Don River valley. The rough boundaries of DECA are Monarch Park Avenue to the west, Mortimer and Lumsden Avenues to the north, Main Street to the east and the railway line to the south of Danforth Avenue, approximately 3 km<sup>2</sup>.

Originally a working-class neighbourhood, the area within DECA's boundaries has become gentrified over the last 10 years as real estate prices escalated and young families moved out of the downtown core into a mix of semi-detached and detached 1920's vintage houses. Retail improvements along Danforth Avenue failed to keep up with the influx of a new generation of residents leaving few options for fresh (let alone local) food. People who lived in the Danforth East community had little option but to commute downtown to St. Lawrence Market or one of the large retail grocery stores closer to the core. Very

often, the necessary mode of transportation was the automobile, which contributed to the increasing traffic congestion in East Toronto and did not sit well with the ethic of sustainability shared by many of DECA's members.

DECA wanted to make Danforth East “a more vibrant, walkable, safe place”.<sup>2</sup> According to DECA member and current city councillor for the ward in which the market resides Mary-Margaret McMahon: “[the neighbourhood] was once called ‘no-man’s land’ by the media”,<sup>3</sup> in part because of uninspired retail options. The association was looking for a community event where, in the words of co-chair Natasha Granatstein “people could meet their neighbours”.<sup>4</sup>

The market was the first and most significant step towards achieving that goal and was spearheaded by four neighbours (Alison McMurray, Katherine Porter, Alicia Austin, Mary-Margaret McMahon)—called the *farmerlicious femmes*--who wanted to bring farm-fresh local food to the community. The genesis of the idea came from McMahon who became concerned with food security after reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver. She attended one of the early DECA meetings and suggested the establishment of a farmers' market. DECA now had its community event.

Alison McMurray is a restaurant owner and certified food handler. She was able to coach the association through the public health bureaucracy in order to get the necessary approvals from the municipal government. Katherine Porter, a journalist, had co-incidentally spent time with local farmers as part of her

research and felt that she could attract the farmers to the proposed market. The other women filled the remaining organisational gaps with Ms. McMahon even obtaining human-sized vegetable costumes to help promote the market to passers-by along Danforth Avenue.



Figure 2-L to R: Alison McMurray, Mary-Margaret McMahon, Katherine Porter: three of the 'Farmerlicious Femmes' (photo: DECA)

The association was able to secure a permit to operate the market on Thursday afternoons from 3-7 pm in East Lynn Park, a city park on the south side of busy Danforth Avenue close to Woodbine Avenue and Woodbine subway station. Initially, they tried to establish and operate the market themselves using volunteer staff to organize the set-up, co-ordinate the farmers, manage the finances, organize children's activities, feed the farmers, among the myriad of other tasks necessary in order to run a successful farmers' market. According to Natasha Granatstein:

When we first looked at doing a market, we looked at doing it on our own; finding the farmers on our own...what we realised very quickly was that it's a full time job. We gave up on it a little bit because we thought there was no way we could swing it. <sup>5</sup>

In the end, DECA decided it made more sense to contract the operation of the market to a third party and they entered into an arrangement with the MyMarket<sup>®</sup> brand, a programme of Farmers' Markets Ontario<sup>®</sup>.

## **2. FARMERS' MARKETS ONTARIO<sup>®</sup> and MYMARKET<sup>®</sup>**

Farmers' Markets Ontario<sup>®</sup> (FMO) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1991 that receives funding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. It provides support, training and advice to farmers' markets including start-ups, promotions and liability insurance. FMO seeks to meet the local food needs of urban centres by supporting producer-based farmers' markets. FMO believes that a successful farmers' market is a partnership between the community in which it operates and the producers upon whom it is based. According to FMO, the Model Ontario Farmers' Market possesses the following characteristics:

- Home grown produce
- Freshness, abundance and quality
- Local, from the community, a cottage industry
- Family oriented and a fun place
- The producer is the vendor; proud of the product and fully knowledgeable
- The Market is dynamic, friendly and reflects community personality
- Open-air, seasonal, during the local growing season
- Championed, supported and/or administered by a local community stakeholder
- Provides opportunity for exchange of information and learning

- Product presentation and service training is provided for vendors
- There is policy guidance for leaders and managers to assist them in working with various community groups <sup>6</sup>.

FMO developed Canada's first certified markets with 100 per cent producer grown and sold food, which it branded MyMarket®. The brand was established with the following goals in mind:

Our certified farmers' market concept offers local Ontario producers easy access to an urban, diverse marketplace and a level playing field, where resellers are neither welcome nor permitted.

Our markets will be bona-fide producer based and will champion the cause of real farmers and producers across the province.

We are firm believers in building community through the connection of real farmers to the urban marketplace! <sup>7</sup>.

Farmers selected to participate in the MyMarket® programme must become a MyPick™ verified farmers' market vendor, a process that involves an application and independent farm inspection to maintain the integrity of the programme.

Farmers who are Local Food Plus (LFP) certified or certified organic automatically receive acceptance as a MyPick™ vendor. To date, all MyMarkets are located within the city of Toronto.



Figure 3 – Location of East Lynn Farmers' Market  
(map: MyMarket®)

## RESULTS

### 1. Goals and Aspirations for the East Lynn Farmers' Market

DECA eventually developed three specific goals that the establishment of the farmers' market hoped to meet:

1. Sell locally produced food and support Ontario farmers.
2. Create an ongoing neighbourhood event to build the community.
3. Bring more shoppers to the area to support the commercial 'strip' along Danforth Avenue near East Lynn Park.<sup>8</sup>

As residents in the Danforth East community became more aware of the availability of fresh, local farmer produced and sold food, support for the market grew. In 2011, it is estimated that between 300 and 800 people visit the market on a weekly basis, depending on the weather.<sup>9</sup>

The market has helped to build community spirit, according to Councillor McMahon:

It is a great community hub...if you wanted to talk to your neighbour, or your kids' teacher or your councillor (I try to do my office hours out here as much as I can) or you needed a new stroller or you're a stay-at-home mom and you're feeling lonely, you can solve all of those problems at the market.<sup>10</sup>

DECA co-chair Granatstein concurred:

The beauty of the farmers' market, which we didn't realise at the beginning, was, as opposed to one community event...it was something

that could build over time...in the first few weeks, there weren't that many people...and now it's fabulous because it's an appointment in peoples' calendars.<sup>11</sup>

On hot summer days, parents bring their children to cool off in the park's wading pool then take part in the children's activities organised by DECA (face painting, story telling, games). Strolling musicians (partly paid for by MyMarket®) add to the fun atmosphere of the market. It is clear that the East Lynn Farmers' Market has helped DECA achieve the second of its three goals.

The existence of the market has also benefitted local business along Danforth Avenue. According to Councillor McMahon, the market has succeeded in attracting eight new businesses to the immediate vicinity. They include an ice-cream shop, a hardware store, two coffee shops, a bulk food store and others. The business owners saw the combination of increased foot traffic in the neighbourhood and a powerful residents' association as incentives to locate their businesses in the Danforth East area.<sup>12</sup> Existing businesses have also benefitted from the market. For example, a farmer-vendor from the market supplies a local fruit and vegetable retailer and the local butcher advises that his busiest day is market day.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. The relationship between DECA, MyMarket® and the farmers**

The relationship between DECA, MyMarket® and the farmers can truly be characterised as win-win-win. DECA benefits from the expertise provided by FMO and the MyMarket® brand. MyMarket® benefits from having a motivated community association as its sponsor and the farmers benefit from the market infrastructure and promotion provided by MyMarket® and the caring attitude of the members of DECA towards the farmers' welfare.

According to MyMarket®'s Toronto District Supervisor Diana Gonzalez: "We're the only market who feeds the farmers. Farmers know that there is big community support and people are making the market a success here."<sup>14</sup> The sentiment is echoed by the farmers who were interviewed for the purposes of this report. Durham Region organic farmer Jenny Svetec of Svetec Farms rates the East Lynn Farmers' Market as the 'best' of the nine markets in which she participates:

It's my demographic because young families want to eat organic...the market I need comes right to my stall. Second, the [park] setting is very conducive to sales because people are relaxed and enjoying themselves. There is a splash pad and a playground...it is in a valley so you don't hear the traffic [on Danforth Avenue]...[DECA] brings in entertainment, they bring in story tellers and then, this is the most incredible part, someone every week cooks for us and brings us a plate of food. It doesn't sound like a big deal but it is so caring...I will never leave this market as long as they'll have me because I feel part of the community, which doesn't happen at any other market.<sup>15</sup>

Tara Monckton of Monckton Organic Farms and Bakery in Grey County

concurred with the comments of her fellow producer-vendor:

East Lynn has always been our favourite because it is so family oriented...it's in a park and you know people are coming from their houses with their kids, the wading pool is here, dogs are here. It is the most supportive. It seems that the locals are supporting this market and really try to come.<sup>16</sup>

Other farmers clearly feel the same—of the sixteen producer-vendors who populate the market in 2011, eleven have been with the market since its inception,<sup>17</sup> a testament to the symbiotic relationship that has developed between the farmers, the market management and the association. It would appear that the relationship strengthens with each passing year.



Figure 4: MyMarket District Supervisor Diana Gonzalez at East Lynn Farmers' Market (photo: DECA)

## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Challenges and Solutions**

#### Parking

Perhaps the greatest challenge to confront DECA through the establishment and ongoing operation of the East Lynn Farmers' Market has been parking: parking for the vendors, parking for those shoppers who travel to the market from beyond a walkable distance, parking for residents in the immediate vicinity of East Lynn Park. Attempts were made to placate local residents who might have to park further from their homes in order to accommodate vendor and shopper parking by delivering fresh produce and fresh cut flowers from the market, offering market gift certificates and other in-kind incentives. In spite of these gestures, some residents in the immediate vicinity of the market remain unsupportive.<sup>18</sup>

#### Location

When DECA realised that they would be unable to attract enough farmers to their nascent market, they reached out to FMO for their expertise. FMO's Executive Director Bob Chorney was not convinced that a city park was a suitable location for a farmers' market.<sup>19</sup> DECA persevered and convinced Chorney that they would provide the customers if he would provide the farmers. For the first three

years, the market was set up on the eastern periphery of the park, along East Lynn Avenue. DECA volunteers manually dragged traffic barriers up a 40-foot hill in order to perform traffic calming and vendors were able to park near their stalls to facilitate unloading and loading. In 2011, the market moved into the centre of the park along the pedestrian pathway that bi-sects it roughly along the north-south axis. The traffic barriers were no longer required but now the vendors' stalls were further from their vehicles, creating more work for them during the set up and tear down phases of the market. Moving into the interior of the park from the fringe literally brought the vendors closer to the community that they sought to serve, but made working the market more strenuous. One vendor suggested that a possible solution might be to have volunteers available to assist with the shuttling of produce from vehicle to stall.<sup>20</sup> The matter rests with the market management and DECA.

#### Support of local Business Improvement Area (BIA)

Support for the market from the local Danforth Mosaic Business Improvement Area was not immediately forthcoming. Local businesses saw the market as a threat and were cold to the idea when it was originally presented to them. The common perception among Danforth Mosaic BIA members was that the market would bleed business away from the commercial strip along Danforth Avenue. DECA met with the BIA on several occasions in order to allay their fears and was able to deliver the message that the goal of the market was to increase

pedestrian traffic in the neighbourhood. This increased traffic would benefit all local businesses equally by bringing potential customers into the area. <sup>21</sup>.



Figure 5: East Lynn Farmers' Market (photo: R. Wilford)

## **2. Benefits to the community**

### Stronger community bonds

One of the founding goals of DECA was to bring neighbours together and to this end the market has contributed immeasurably. All interviewees commented on the stronger bonds within the community that have developed since the establishment of the market. In a city as large as Toronto, residents have a tendency to cocoon, isolating themselves from their immediate neighbours. The market has succeeded in bringing people together, giving them the opportunity to interact that they might not otherwise have had. DECA's success in establishing the market convinced residents that the association was bringing value to the community. As a result, other initiatives were embarked upon, such as an arts fair, family movie nights in the park, and a fundraising drive to paint the East Lynn Park wading pool.<sup>22</sup>

### Revitalised retail sector

The retail sector along Danforth Avenue near East Lynn Park was in decline for several years prior to the establishment of the market. A lumber yard and hardware store had been razed by an arsonist in 2001 and never rebuilt, leaving an empty hole several storefronts wide. Businesses have come and gone from the area. The market has had a positive impact. More shoppers drawn to the market have generated interest on the part of business owners—a bakery and

bulk food store have opened between the former site of the lumberyard and the East Lynn Park. The local butcher, Royal Beef, reports that market day, Thursday, is his busiest day, in part because of increased traffic thanks to the market. Plank Road Market, a quality fruit and vegetable retailer, purchases wholesale produce from East Lynn vendors. These examples speak to the revitalisation of the commercial sector that has taken place because of the establishment of the market. True, the market itself did not start these new businesses. However, it did create the winning conditions (more shoppers, pride in community, increased pedestrian traffic) that could motivate prospective business owners to establish themselves in the neighbourhood.

### Sustainable Local Food System

Most importantly, the community has derived the benefit of having a sustainable local food system in the neighbourhood. Some vendors even have community supported agriculture (CSA) members pick up their weekly allotment at the market.<sup>23</sup> Those shoppers are also potential buyers at other vendors' stalls.

Residents can walk, cycle, take the subway, and if necessary, take their automobile to a city park where they can purchase fresh, locally grown, healthy food at a fair price. They can meet the farmers who produce the food they eat. The farmers get to know their customers by name and preferences, and they feel a part of the community.

### Other ancillary benefits

The overall improvement of the community has led to other ancillary benefits such as a safer community, improved health of residents and higher real estate values to name three. These benefits are outside of the focus of this report but warrant mention nonetheless.



**Figure 6: A happy pea-pod (photo: DECA)**

## CONCLUSION

The East Lynn Farmers' Market is still a work-in-progress. Only in its fourth year, time will tell if the seasonal local food system that the market provides for the Danforth East community will have enough impact on farmers and consumers alike to ensure long-term sustainability. However, the roots that have been planted (stronger community, revitalised commercial sector, local food system) grow deeper with each passing year. Friendships have developed, families look forward to market day, so do the farmers. The neighbourhood has cast off the 'no-man's land' epithet and has become a destination for food, friends and families. It is fitting perhaps that the last word should go to the woman who started it all, Councillor Mary-Margaret McMahon:

When you ask people about the market, they will tell you different reasons about why they love it, and the last reason might be the food. It is a community hub...if you're depressed just come out to the market and you're going to be smiling by the end of the day.<sup>24</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

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Website [www.danfortheastcommunityassociation.com](http://www.danfortheastcommunityassociation.com)

Website [www.farmersmarketsontario.com](http://www.farmersmarketsontario.com)

Website [www.my-market.ca](http://www.my-market.ca)