



TRACE CHRISTENSON/THE ENQUIRER

Returning the Farmers Market to downtown Battle Creek would be a good idea, according to Larry Sibley of Bellevue, who helps organize it and also sells products like these Paw Paw trees.

A corny and flowery idea

City seeks grant to return farmers market to downtown

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Homegrown vegetables might just improve downtown Battle Creek.

Kathleen Eriksen, Battle Creek Unlimited's downtown development director, is so sure of it that she is seeking a \$100,000 grant from the Michigan Cool Cities program to refurbish a downtown park for the farmers market.

The city will know June 1 if Battle Creek will receive the money to repair and improve Festival Park, just outside Kellogg Arena at the corner of Jackson and McCamly streets.

If Battle Creek receives the grant — and it's a long shot, because 142 Michigan cities are seeking 12 grants — work could be completed in time for the farmers market to move back to downtown by October.

"It used to be downtown," she said, "but the park fell into disrepair and neglect. But I think everyone will notice a huge improvement.

"Farmers markets do a lot for a community," she said. "It adds new products, it promotes health and fitness, it attracts people to downtown and promotes diversity."

The grant also would get Larry Sibley and Terry Hill out of the Burnham Brook Center parking lot.

Hill, of Ceresco, and Sibley, of Bellevue, organize Battle Creek's farmers market and during the summer are joined by nearly a dozen vendors selling corn, peppers, squash, flowers and an assortment of other farm products.

The market has been held in the parking lot across from Kellogg's Cereal City U.S.A. for the past several

years, but Hill and Sibley agree with Eriksen that returning downtown, where the market has a long history, would be better.

"Any kind of improvement would be better than this wide-open parking lot," Hill said. "If it is done right, it might be the ideal place."

And Sibley agrees.

"Being downtown would be terrific, but a roof would be helpful on rainy days and on sunny days. But a permanent spot would be a goal."

In the pitch for the Cool Cities grant, Eriksen said:

- A farmers market is a successful tool to strengthen and regenerate downtowns.

- The farmers market deserves a public place downtown.

- The market brings together diverse people.

- Festival Park will be renovated to include new awnings, park furniture, banners, lights, removal of the brick wall surrounding the park and improvements to the concrete.

Hill and Sibley remember when the farmers market attracted several vendors and big crowds because people like the contact with the vendors.

"Michigan Avenue used to be lined with people on Wednesday and Saturday," Hill said. "We like to visit with them. It is a community type of thing and we talk with them about life."

This year's farmers market, now held from 7 a.m. to noon Saturday mornings, will expand to three days a week — from 3 to 7 p.m. Mondays and from 7 a.m. to noon Wednesdays — beginning June 14.

Eriksen said improvements to the

park will accent the \$3 million renovation to Kellogg Arena, which will move its main entrance and ticket booths to the park area.

Improving Festival Park and moving the farmers market back to the core of the city is one of several projects that Eriksen, hired in January 2003, is proposing as a solution to a city with 50 percent vacancy rate in retail space and an area considered by many residents as an afterthought when compared to the Beckley Road shopping area.

The overall plan includes improvements to the downtown image, which Eriksen said is perceived as tired, outdated and cold.

Proposed changes include historic streetlights, benches, trash containers, bike racks, banners, public art, flowers and trees. Changes to the facades for several buildings also are proposed, along with the possibility of outside seating for restaurants, showing movies at the Discovery Theatre and allowing antiques stores.

BCU also is using a Business Recruitment Incentive Program and providing financial incentives and technical assistance to businesses willing to locate or expand downtown.

Sibley said he is hopeful that money is available for improvements to the park and farmers market.

"It's a piece of the puzzle," he said, "to get people into the area and then they are likely to stay in the area."

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