

# Building a Custom Trailer to Increase Market Exposure, Profitability, and Onsite Educational Outreach for Produce and Free-Range Egg Farmers in an Urban Environment

As a new business and farm, we faced a mountain of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We knew we had a good potential customer base out there, but we were having trouble accessing them. We knew we had quality produce and eggs to sell, but storage, processing, displaying and marketing were difficult. We knew our civic-minded goals of environmental stewardship, local food, food security, agricultural education, and philanthropy were noble and would be well-received by our community, but we were having trouble engaging people: we were having trouble drawing them in to initiate those critical opening discussions of these very important matters. We knew we wanted to bring people to our urban farm, but doing that was hard when we had no central hub, no place to gather, no focal point around which to form our community and business.



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We knew we needed something physical, a building, and that this building would help us address all of these issues and more. We also knew, however, that our local building codes and ordinances would prove incredibly restrictive: financially, the cost of constructing a building to code (i.e. with concrete pad) was far more than we could manage; logistically, our ordinances allow for “roadside” produce sales but are more restrictive on building a structure and operating a business out of it in a “residential zone.”

As small-scale-producers, we have to think of creative ways to solve problems, and this situation was no different. We needed a building, a hub of sales and community, around which we could build a business and bring people together for education and engagement. The most logical, most flexible, most economical, and most effective solution we could devise was the building of our trailer-based-produce-stand.



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The SARE funds we received gave us the financial freedom to build our produce stand and therefore set the foundation for our farm’s success. The funding received and the stand it enabled us to build has been the turning point for our farm and the foundation for this growing community of urban food consumers and activists that gather around it. Daily, people visit our farm to buy, talk, walk, sit, and help. Getting them here in this way would have been impossible without the funding from SARE.

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**In line with SARE's mission to "Improve Quality of Life" and "Improve Production Efficiency," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:**

- 1) The construction and use of the trailer allowed us "to overcome restrictions and obstacles to direct marketing our produce and the produce and products of other local growers." As stated earlier, we found ourselves facing restrictive building codes and city ordinances that would have created additional financial hardships and logistical barriers that would have limited our ability to access customers. This building, mounted on a trailer, became a creative work-around: we are a building but portable, so not taxable or subject to the same codes, and we are on a trailer, so "roadside" in nature while within an area zoned residential and not commercial.
- 2) With regard to "Improved Efficiency," the stand has provided the following:

A) Time: As small producers, a family operation, we never have enough time. Struggling to keep up with growing and harvesting, we knew we couldn't give more time to selling. As discussed in the original grant, transporting to farmers' markets and then sitting there all day seemed like it would cripple our operation. We need that time for production. The on-site location of this stand saved us all that time of transporting and babysitting the sales space. It might not work for all locations and operations, but we utilized an Honor System with a self-serve cashbox and electronic payment accounts such as Venmo and PayPal. Not having to sit with the stand all day is a huge benefit. We would empty the cashbox periodically, and never seemed to have an issue with theft. The fact that most customers utilize electronic payment options gave added security in that there was rarely large amounts of cash unattended. Being onsite made this Honor System setup possible. We were always around working—coming in from the field with fresh produce, for example—multitasking, interacting with customers, so that encouraged honesty and discouraged theft. Being close to the house, not in some parking lot, also gave a degree of security and identity to the stand that likely reduced the temptation to steal.



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**(continuation):** In line with SARE's mission to "Improve Quality of Life" and "Improve Production Efficiency," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

**3) MORE PRODUCT, MORE VARIETY, MORE STORAGE, EASIER PROCESSING:** The construction of the trailer provided much more storage space for displaying and refrigerating our produce and eggs. In cases where washing was not necessary, we would carry our produce straight from the field and into the trailer (time and efficiency). We could keep backstock tucked into the fridges and undershelves and rotate it out to display. This added space also allowed us to offer more variety. For example, as discussed later, we were able to stock the products of other local producers.

**4) QUALITY OF LIFE AND EASE OF ACCESS:** The onsite location of the trailer makes selling and purchasing much more convenient. Prior to the trailer, all of our onsite sales of eggs and produce had to be arranged through email and text messaging. We spent as much time setting up appointments for pickup as we did actually producing. It was unprofitable (time vs. income), stressful, and a great imposition on our family time—interrupted dinners, for example, when customers rang the doorbell to pickup eggs. Often, we would find ourselves dropping everything (from helping kids with homework to harvesting tomatoes) to trek to the front driveway to handover a \$5.00 carton of eggs. With the stand and its honor system, people could come and go as they pleased, helping themselves. No more appointments were necessary. No more interruptions of work and family time. No more stress. The stand ran itself, freeing us up for more growing and more family time.



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In line with SARE's mission to "Improve Income or Profitability," "Improve Market Opportunities," and "Increase Business Opportunities," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

### 1) OUR PROFITABILITY

The simplest way to explain the impact this stand has had on the profitability and sustainability of our business is to admit that without it we had no future. We were struggling and had no hope. We were selling word of mouth. The business was growing, but it was growing too slowly and with not enough profit for the amount of time we were putting into it. It was unsustainable. We did not have enough customers. We did not have enough consistency in demand (on the customers' part), and this meant that we were inconsistent on supply. In other words, we would find ourselves with pounds and pounds of produce we couldn't sell (not enough customers to create consistent demand) so we would have yellow squash for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for a week. We would adjust to this loss by decreasing production—or there would be a crop failure or some other limiting factor—and all of a sudden there would be demand and we wouldn't have product to meet that demand. The trailer was critical for the following reasons:

A) We could attract customers to our farm. That stand was a focal point. Through its physical presence and symbolic presence in social media, emails, signage, and conversations, it drew people in, increasing demand. It became a rallying point for customers and civic-minded-purchasers. It became a novelty and drew in families.

B) With a place to store, display, and process (see previous section) we could grow more and be confident that it would not go to waste.

C) With room for selling and storing, and a growing customer base, we could now start selling other peoples' local produce, supplementing what we could not provide, thereby increasing our profitability and better meeting customers' needs. Having the capacity to store and sell other growers' produce was absolutely critical in the survival of our business. It allowed us to maintain consistency enough that customers kept coming gave, confident that the trip was worth it because the shelves would be full and have more variety than what we were growing. It also allowed us to increase profits by taking a portion of the proceeds.

See graph below that captures responses to the survey question: "Rate the degree to which the produce stand increased your purchases from us."



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Continuation: In line with SARE's mission to "Improve Income or Profitability," "Improve Market Opportunities," and "Increase Business Opportunities," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

#### OUR PROFITABILITY , *Continued...*

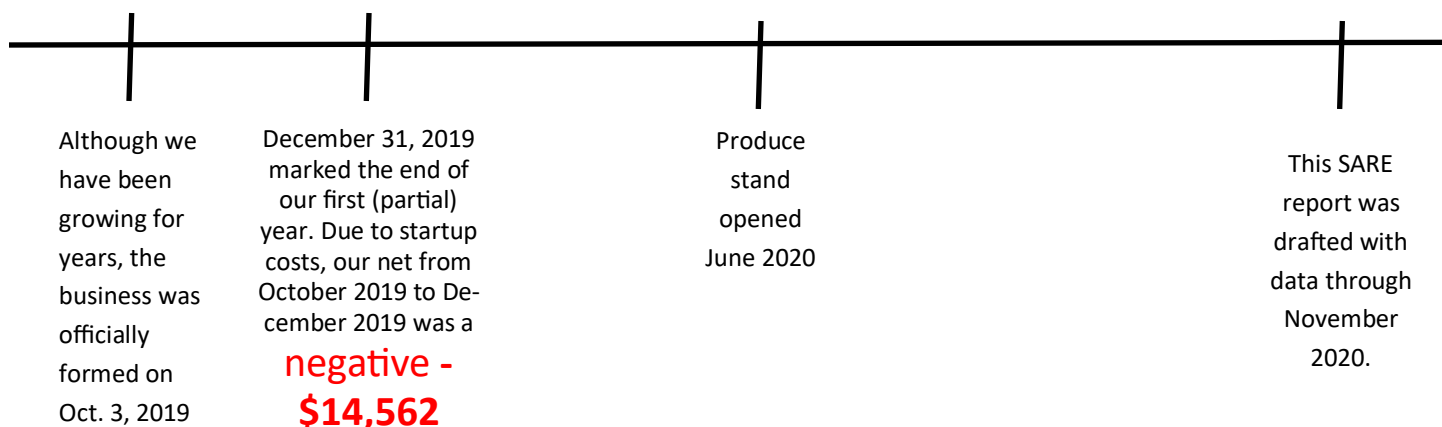
## Farm Losses and Profits by Timeline

In this span from January 1, 2020  
to the opening of the stand in June  
2020 we recorded

**Net loss of \$4,000**

In this span of time (produce stand opening until  
date of report), we show a net

**profit of \$2,798**



As demonstrated above, the opening of the stand proved to be a turning point for our business. It must be emphasized that the net losses in the periods measured prior to the opening of the stand are weighted heavily by our business's startup costs. The start up costs create a heavy weight on net profits, and as the business became more stable, the losses were, admittedly, steadily (but painfully slowly) declining as initial investments in equipment and materials became less. In other words, even prior to the stand, our losses were already declining. However, even with that in consideration, the stand's opening was the boost we needed to turn profitable. Without the stand, the progression out of debt (losses) would have continued too slowly to allow us to sustain our operation. We could not have waited for our business to turn profitable at its own slow pace. We were in the red and spending too much time without showing any return or profit. When the stand opened, it provided a consistent customer base, drawing in more customers, and it allowed us to also supplement our products with those of other growers. This was critical in establishing a consistent income stream that helped us rise out of the red and into a profitable farm. We are hopeful that, with this trend established, initial expenses behind us, and a steadily growing customer base, we will be able to continue to show an increasing profit margin with every new year.

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## 2) PROFITABILITY FOR OTHER PRODUCERS

In our grant proposal we discussed how we would use the produce stand as a foundation to reach out to other local producers. The goal was to use the stand to provide other local growers with the opportunity to increase sales without dramatically increasing their time commitment and overhead (i.e. through sitting at a booth at a farmer's market). We reached out to other producers through social media, personal conversations, other organizations, and letters/emails (see supplemental letters included on SARE reporting site), inviting them to sell their produce at our stand. In other words, as summarized in the original proposal, a goal of the stand was to contact other local "producers with less ideal locations to offer to sell their products....[then to] track the increase in revenue this high visibility outlet generates for them."

This first year we attracted and sold for six other local growers. Their gross revenue is reported below and proves the effectiveness of the stand at increasing market and income opportunities (for them, and for us, as well, as the distributors). In all cases, we did not purchase any product from these growers prior to the opening of the stand (we did not have the capacity or customer base to do so), and so all amounts are a 100% increase in sales of their produce on our site and are directly related to the opening of the stand. These added sales came with little additional time commitment on their part.

### GROSS INCOME FOR THE SIX LOCAL GROWERS WHO UTILIZED OUR STAND AS A HUB FOR SALES:

Grower A: \$4,300.15

Grower B: \$315.00\*

Grower C: \$1,732

Grower D: \$357.00\*

Grower E: \$250.

Grower F: \$120.00



Due to logistical challenges of marketing her honey, this producer has harvested and then given away surplus honey for years. She is too small to rent a stall at a Farmer's Market and sit there all day, and the time commitment and inconvenience of in-home sales was not worth it to her. This loss of potential profit has left her struggling to keep her bees. The stand became a new, convenient, low-input way to recoup expenses through the sales of her surplus honey.

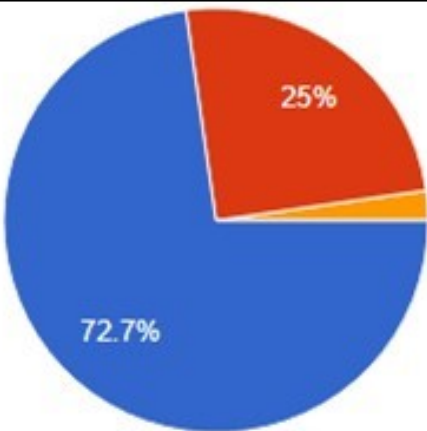
\* Of note is the fact that, due to inability to access customers, these two producers have for years given away or wasted surplus product. They have never profited from their work. Due to various reasons, they have just accepted the losses. This introduction into profitability and access to customers is a direct result of SARE's support of this stand and proof of the stand's impact on building our local food web.

In line with SARE’s mission to “Improve Agricultural and Food System Infrastructure,” “Improve Food Accessibility,” and “Improve Quality of Life,” we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

- A) Evidence of the stand’s contribution to our local food system’s infrastructure can be deducted from the study of previous sections that highlight the direct role it has played in supplying producers with income. Additionally, it should be clear that the stand has fulfilled its role as the link between consumers and producers, providing an opportunity to connect. The same general deductions can be made with regard to improved food accessibility and improved quality of life. As discussed earlier, for example, the stand simplified buying and selling for both consumer and seller. It saved time for all. It created opportunity for more variety.
- B) As proposed in the grant, further quantitative evidence of the stand’s role in supporting our local food infrastructure, improved food accessibility, and improved quality of life can be found in the answers that customers provided to a survey we conducted. The survey was conducted anonymously and was offered to all our customers. See below for the data that proves the stand’s impact in these areas.

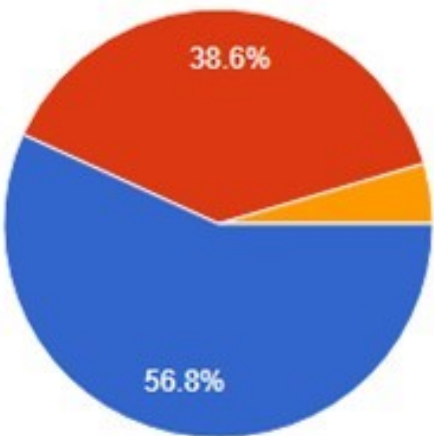
Through our survey, we were able to deduce that the opening of the produce stand has significantly increased our customers’ purchases of local food.

See graph below that captures responses to the survey question: “The Produce stand has...”



- SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED my purchase of local, sustainably raised food.
- SOMEWHAT INCREASED my purchase of local, sustainably raised food.
- HAD LITTLE IMPACT on how often I have purchased local, sustainably raised food.

See graph below that captures responses to the survey question: “Without this produce stand at its current location—if you had to go to a farmer’s market, for example—how likely would you be to purchase local food?”



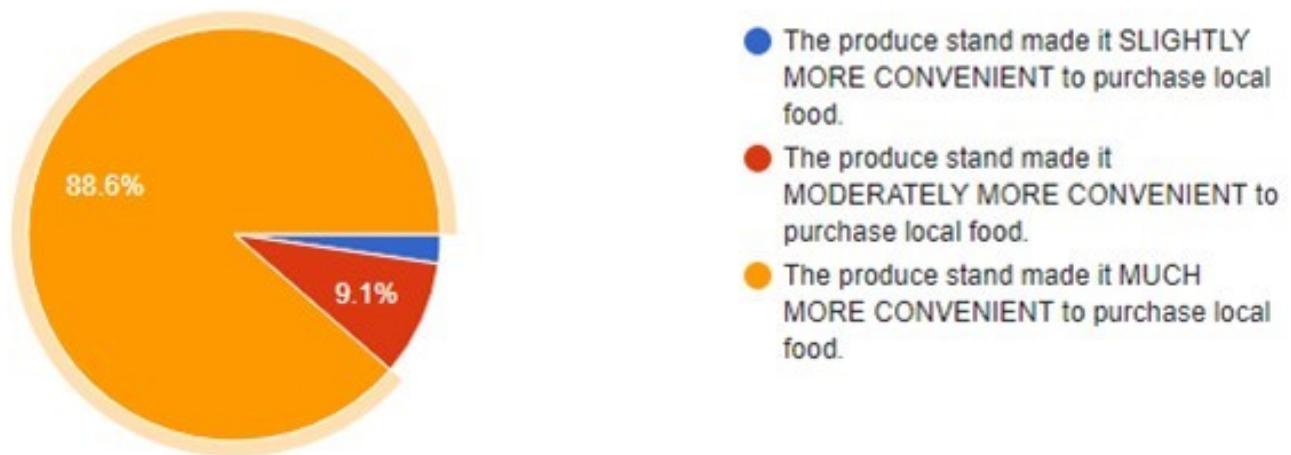
- Not likely. I would not likely travel elsewhere for local products.
- Somewhat likely. It is somewhat likely that I would travel elsewhere for local products.
- Definitely likely. I would definitely travel elsewhere to find and purchase local products.

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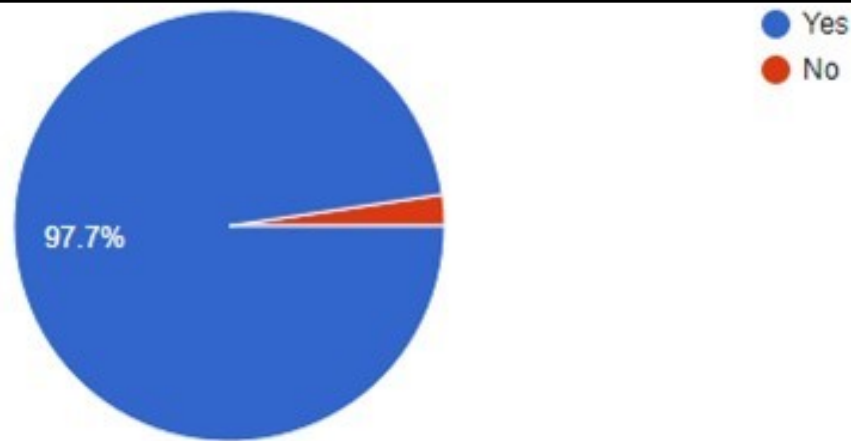
**Continuation...**In line with SARE’s mission to “Improve Agricultural and Food System Infrastructure,” “Improve Food Accessibility,” and “Improve Quality of Life,” we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

As discussed, the produce stand dramatically improved our quality of life as producers, and based upon the answers tabulated below, it significantly improved the quality of life of our customers as local food consumers.

See graph that captures the responses to the question: “Rate whether or not the produce stand made it more or less convenient to access local food:



Quality of the overall shopping experience can be further extrapolated by measuring the responses to the question: “In your opinion, if other area growers utilized a similar approach (i.e. on-site, urban, sustainable, honor system), would you utilize them regularly to supplement your grocery shopping?” It is also important to note how the overwhelmingly positive response to shopping at our stand suggests opportunities for other producers to duplicate the model.





**Continued: In line with SARE's mission to "Improve Agricultural and Food System Infrastructure," "Improve Food Accessibility," and "Improve Quality of Life," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:**

C) In addition to the bullet points above that fulfill the grant's scope, as our customer base grew and farm visits became more frequent and our visitors became more interested in our farm and sustainable agriculture, in general, we recognized additional, powerful possibilities for using the stand to improve our food system's infrastructure and increase quality of life. Utilizing the stand's power to engage and inspire, we created the following stand-based programs, and all were exceptionally well received and successful:

1) Compost Drop Off: When Covid 19 caused staffing shortages that discontinued yard waste pickup, we created a spot beside the stand for customers to drop off bags of Fall leaves. They would come for produce and leave behind leaves for us to compost, thereby saving them from filling up the landfill and creating Methane.

2) Pumpkin Drop Off: We created a spot beside the stand and publicized that we would accept returned pumpkins (after Halloween) so that they could be utilized as feed and compost, thereby saving them from the landfill.

3) Food Waste Drop Off: We provided a compost tumbler beside the stand and accepted peoples' food waste. Many of our customers did not want to compost at home but want to contribute. This provided an easy option that kept their food waste out of the landfill where it would be buried deeply and result in Methane production.

4) Food Pantry Donation Collection Point: We utilized one of the shelves in the stand as a food pantry for non-perishables. When Covid 19 hit and so many were struggling, we stocked the shelf with canned goods. We then publicized through social media. As we always have, we told people that if they want our food and are having trouble paying for it (whether our home grown or now the canned goods), they are welcome to take for free whatever they need. We also invited others who were not struggling to leave cans. This program was a tremendous success and brought in hundreds of cans of food. Some of our customers contributed, and some of our customers utilized the donations to feed their families. At the end of the season, we took the surplus cans to a local food bank.



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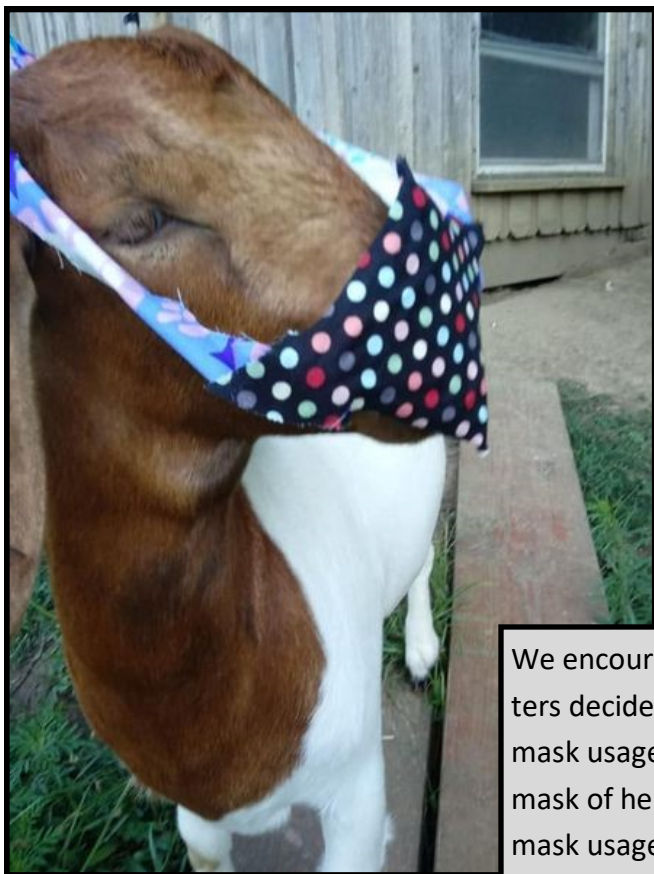
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5) Profits for Chickens: Regularly throughout the growing season, we utilized profits from the stand to purchase flocks of chickens for impoverished people in other areas of the world. Although this did not develop our own local food infrastructure, it helped contribute to overall food stability and quality of life. We shared news of our donations with our customers, explaining to them that their purchases that day had made the donation possible. We feel like this helped empower them and engage them as food security activists.



6) Improved Quality (Safety) of Life: At the time we submitted our grant, we had no idea how the world was about to change. When Covid swept the world, everything stopped, and we all had to rethink a lot of what we do in our day-to-day lives. Unknowingly, the opening of our stand stepped in to fill a void that Covid created. Locally, because of restrictions on large crowds, the Farmer's Market season at local retailers' parking lots was severely limited, thereby reducing peoples' access to local food. The opening of the stand helped to meet this need. It also gave people a safe, contact-free way to shop. Because it is a help-yourself-honor-system arrangement, people could safely shop alone, coming at non-peak times to help themselves. We used signage to encourage mask use while in the trailer, and with Venmo/Paypal, no handling of cash was necessary. We had numerous customers comment on how the stand allowed them to buy groceries while avoiding crowded supermarkets.

Through charitable organizations, we regularly used profits from the stand to purchase animals and agricultural supplies for impoverished families around the world. This helped to empower our customers. They became food activists on both a local and global level.



**"Hi! I completed the survey for your SARE grant. I wanted to add that in a pandemic year, your produce stand was the only place we purchased locally grown food outside of a grocery store. We did not feel comfortable going to farmers markets in large crowds, but we felt totally safe going to the produce stand! We also had such a lovely tour and can't wait to go back and see what the animals are up to. Thank you for taking the time and putting in so much effort to share your little farm with all of us!"—Kara, via. Facebook Message**

We encouraged wearing masks when in the stand. My daughters decided the goats would be our best mascots advocating mask usage and safe shopping. They made this little one a mask of her own, took a picture, and made signs asking for mask usage and social distancing.



In line with SARE’s mission to “Support Education Related to Sustainable Agriculture,” we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

**VIRTUAL EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH**

- 1) We created a new Facebook page that introduced SARE and its mission, discussed our grant and our progress, and highlighted other aspects of the organic and sustainable practices utilized in our operation.
- 2) We created a video introducing SARE and our grant. The video highlights our operation, its sustainable practices, and it chronicled the creation of the trailer. It was then published on Youtube.

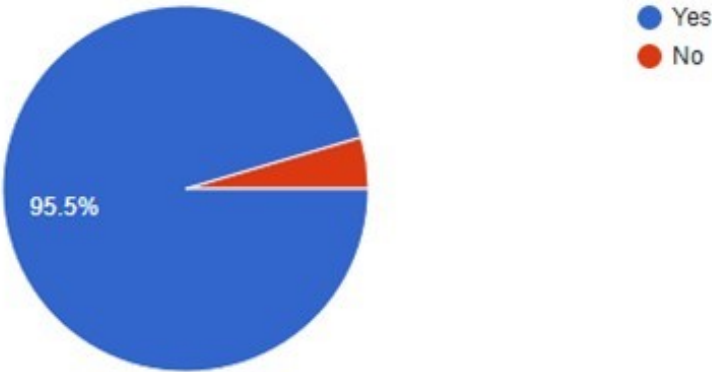
**INCREASED ONSITE EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES**

One of the goals of our grant was to utilize the trailer to bring people onsite where we could then engage them in conversations about SARE, sustainable agriculture, and our specific operation. Our grant committed to quantifying the impact of the trailer on educational outreach opportunities.

1) **Families:** Almost daily, we engaged families who had come to purchase produce and eggs. These conversations were informal and focused on SARE, sustainable practices, and our farm. My 14 year-old became an expert tour guide of the property, taking families around in small groups to show them the highlights of our farm. SARE focuses on growth and education, and her development as a leader, speaker, and educator was an unmeasured but pronounced benefit to this project. She really showed tremendous growth in this area.



By visiting the produce stand, have you (or a family member, like your kids) also had an opportunity to engage in an enriching or educational experience such as a farm tour or conversation related to our operation, local food, sustainable agriculture, etc.?

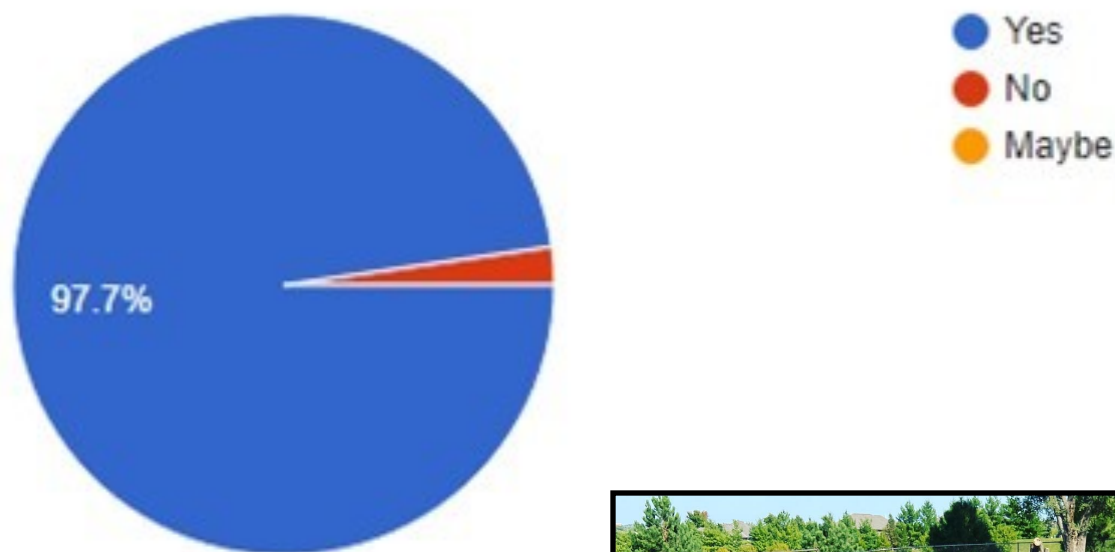


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Continuation: In line with SARE's mission to "Support Education in sustainable Agriculture," we observed the following critical benefits from the construction and use of our trailer:

2) **Future Growers:** Drawn in by our stand and growing operation, we had three different families stop and approach us. In all cases, they asked for a tour and asked a multitude of questions about our operation. In all three cases, they are aspiring to replicate our operation, to develop their own little, sustainable urban farm.

As mentioned above, we drew in prospective future sustainable farmers for farm tours and education sessions, but, as demonstrated below, the stand also raised interest in the general population of our customers. See the graph of responses to the question: "Would you say the produce stand increased your interest in sustainable urban agriculture?"



3) **Girl Scout Tours:** In addition to the numerous informal tours with families and small groups, we also hosted formal groups like girls scouts. We gave them a tour, discussed sustainable agriculture, urban agriculture, and composting.

