**Report to Select Board**

**From the Amherst Agricultural Commission on the Winter Farmers Market in Amherst**

November 22, 2010

A new Winter Farmers’ Market, featuring over 25 local farmers and producers will open its doors at the Amherst Middle School Cafeteria on Saturday, December 4th. The Market will be open from 10:00 am to 2:00pm, and is designed to be a shopping experience where people can meet neighbors for breakfast or lunch. The market will offer over 100 different items including a wide range of vegetables, herbs, fruit and fruit products, meat, cheese, eggs, yogurt, juices and drinks, pickles and other canned and frozen food, wool, felt and fiber products as well as prepared food. This came about through a team effort that started last spring with some meetings hosted by Ellen Story and Jay Healy (former MA Commissioner of Agriculture who is now head of USDA/Rural Development agency for MA) that included farmers, Amherst town staff, Ag commission members, and others. The Amherst Agricultural Commission endorsed the project at its June meeting.The farmers market subcommittee of the Ag Comm. has worked closely with Michael Docter, a Hadley farmer who started the Food Bank Farm CSA and now grows root vegetables for winter storage, to organize the winter market. USDA/Rural Development provided startup funds, including support for Michael’s organizing efforts and a partnership with CISA to study the feasibility of a permanent year-round farmers market in the region. .

This has been an open and inclusive market from the start. The Ag Comm wanted to be sure that the market was open to any and all Amherst farmers who would like to participate. We contacted Amherst farmers through our mailing list that includes every farmer that we know of in Amherst, to invite them to participate and give them first option on any types of products. We also posted an announcement in local papers. This first year, three farms in Amherst -- Swartz Farm, Simple Gifts Farm, and Wm Levines’ farm -- are participating. Once we knew who was interested in Amherst, we sought out farmers from around the region to cover the full range of products we needed. Other farmers are coming from Shelburne, Conway, Ashfield, Deerfield, Worthington, Hadley, Belchertown, Granby, Ware – all around the region. We anticipate that once Amherst growers see this market in operation, they will be more likely to produce items that could be sold all winter – if you create a great market, the farmers will grow for it! It takes time to get the systems in place for winter sales and winter harvests. So we expect that participation from Amherst famers will increase over time.

We have appreciated the strong support of Amherst town staff, especially David Ziomek and Ron Bohonowicz in working out the details of using the cafeteria, and getting the word out. We will be renting the cafeteria at the regular rate, as well as paying for custodial staff, so the project is budget neutral for the schools. Our education subcommittee, Sally Fitz and Touria Eaton, is in contact with teachers and principals to encourage student involvement. Our budget also includes liability insurance and a market manager. Vendors who come every week are paying $25 per 10X12 booth space per week, but we still have a shortfall in the budget of about $2500 that must be made up by sponsorships. Additional sponsors thus far include UMass Extension and Florence Savings Bank. The Amherst Chamber of Commerce is helping us with publicity and sponsorships and we appreciate Tony Margulis’s support. We are also working with the Health Department to make it possible to use Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program cards to purchase items at the market. This takes a bit of doing, but we have a group that includes Julie Fetterman and Eunice Torres , Jeremy Barker-Plotkin from Simple Gifts Farm, Kelly Colemen from CISA, and Danya Tettlebaum of Queen’s Greens working on it. Cathy Keough, our market manager, is working with Joanne Sunshower and others to get the word out about the market.

The obvious benefits of a strong winter farmers market will be greater access to local food for citizens of our town and region, and stronger winter marketing opportunities – which translates to a year round income stream for farmers. It will also create a vibrant community space that we hope will draw people out of their homes even in the cold season. Every mile we shave off of our food’s journey from field to table is a small but important shift toward a less fuel-dependent food system and a stronger local economy. The money spent at farmers markets stays in our community and recycles to other businesses in our region.

One point to highlight is that what seems to be an explosion of winter markets in the region is being matched by an explosion of real interest and commitment among the public in buying local year round. Thus we see this market as complementing and actually supporting the other winter markets such as at least three winter CSA’s in Amherst (Brookfield, Simple Gifts, and Swartz farms; there may be others) and the North Amherst Farmers Market. We are seeing the same trend all around New England. And while we had some farms decline to participate because they need some time off in the winter, others are stepping up their winter growing in high tunnels, their storage facilities, their food processing, their pastured livestock, everything that it takes to produce food for winter.

So, we look forward to seeing you all on December 4 and on Saturdays through the winter until the third week of April.

Submitted by

Ruth Hazzard

Chair, Amherst Agricultural Commission.