

Business grows at Haymarket Market -- Rain or Shine

by Mark Morelli, *Portage Penny Press*

The only music that buyers hear as they browse through these aisles is the rumble of a freight train below.

The only misting on the vegetables--and the buyers and sellers--comes from the sky.

On Saturday mornings, the farmers come to town, to this lot on Franklin Avenue in downtown Kent. They set up tables and lower the backs of their pickup trucks and sell vegetables so fresh that some were picked from the soil that very morning.

The Haymaker Market, only a few weeks old, was the brainchild of Rick Hawksley, a Kent architect and Fritz Seefeldt, a massotherapist from Brimfield.

"I don't believe this has ever been done," said Seefeldt as he sauntered from booth to booth with a clipboard. "I've spoken to people who have lived here for 30 or 40 years, and they do not remember a farmers market."

The use of the lot is donated by Bob Lindsey, who owns Lindsey's Bar across the street. Seefeldt said the market is designed to put profit back in the hands of the growers.

"I have no interest in this except to see a market," Seefeldt said. "I want to see downtown busier."

John Vechary, a produce grower from Mantua, is one of the handful of growers who sets up shop each Saturday.

"It's great," he said. "Wholesalers buy our produce and pay us 50 percent of its value. They haul it away, keep it for a day, then they bring it back to your neighborhood store and before you know it, it's a week old."

Vechary smiled through his beard and squeezed the stem of a radish. "Hear that cracking? Now that's fresh!"

Vechary, with the help of his youngest daughter, Martha, had no trouble hawking their healthy wares as the morning air misted their table of dill weed, onions and radishes.

"Radishes like this kind of weather we've been having," Vechary said. "But it hasn't done my hair very well."

A customer picking a patch of aromatic dill said to the curly-haired farmer, "I'm glad something likes all this rain."

Seefeldt said a downtown market can make it. He contends that the Sparkle Market on Depeyster Street closed not because of poor business, but because the owners retired.

The approaching groundbreaking for the mall on the outskirts of town sped up the idea, said Seefeldt's wife, Joann Jones.

She said her husband and Rick Hawksley wanted to find something to keep the proposed mall from sucking away the spirit of downtown retail and to encourage enterprise that flies in the face of hectic, mall-oriented business.

And what the farm market teaches is that some things, can't be rushed to ripen or coaxed to wait.

Corn, for instance.

Don Etling of Mantua watched the neatly stacked sweet corn on his truck bed slowly get picked over in disarray then sold.

"There's no other place around to sell our farm produce except Aurora Farms," he said. "Corn is best when sold freshly picked. The sugar content is better when it's sold the same day it's picked."

The day when local farmers could sell their produce directly to local groceries is gone, Etling said. Corporate-owned supermarkets ship only from their warehouse. Are farmers would, for example, have to haul their produce to a regional warehouse as far away as Pittsburgh, only to have the fruits and vegetables shipped back to markets here some days later.

A local farmers market provides buyers and sellers the most direct route from field to table.

"People want to buy fresh produce," Seefeldt said, "and you can't get fresher than this."

The market will continue through early October.

Interested produce growers should call Seefeldt at 678-5748.