

Best Practice

Downtown Market Square

CONTACT

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THE PRACTICE

The development of Market Square was inspired in part by Swift Current's vision: "To be a growing, vital, thriving city, the choice location in which to live, work, invest, visit and play." Market Square plays into this vision by supporting downtown revitalization, creating a sense of excitement in the city core, and providing a vibrant venue to attract residents and visitors on a weekly basis. The square also engages local businesses – especially those on the city's periphery – nearby farmers, the cultural community, artisans, and city administration on economic development.

On Saturdays in June through September, a section of Swift Current's downtown transforms into Market Square, hosting 1,000-1,500 people. The market offers live, local entertainment, and the chance to buy goods from farmers, producers and artisans from nearby and as far as British Columbia.

THE PROCESS

The Chief Administrative Officer spearheaded the project with a vision of a Saturday Market Square that would support downtown revitalization by bringing together a cross-section of businesses to put on an event that would draw people to the city core. She worked with businesses, the public, and city staff to start the project on a limited basis.

City council approved the venture, provided funding on an annual basis, and supported the time commitment of the CAO and other city staff. The city provided a framework for the operation, established health and safety guidelines, sourced and provided support to vendors, supplied infrastructure and facilities, organized entertainment and events, provided funds, secured sponsorship, and help with advertising. Staff is heavily involved in the market. There is now two staff dedicated to Market Square and many volunteer at the events. The Downtown Business Association and Chamber of Commerce are involved; some local businesses provide sponsorship. The existing Swift Current Farmer's Market was eventually engaged as well.

THE RESULTS

Market Square is now well known in Swift Current and across Saskatchewan – consumers and vendors are even coming from outside the province. Based on a survey during the 2013 season, 25 per cent of patrons came from outside Swift Current (36 per cent of those customers were from out of province).

The square has increased resident's pride in their community, and promotes a sense of community. Local businesses believe the excitement in the community is leading to innovation: 100 per cent of businesses surveyed said they felt Market Square is

driving innovation and excitement across the community, and 24 per cent feel it is a showcase for the city. Fifty-eight per cent of all surveyed (100 per cent of Market Square sponsors and 80 per cent of vendors) said Market Square has brought the community together and engenders a sense of belonging.

The activities and vendors available during the market are also promoting diversity: 60 per cent of patrons and 71 per cent of non-vendor businesses said they felt the market promotes access to a diverse offering of cultural activities in the community.

Market Square promotes revitalization, with 77 per cent of surveyed city-centre businesses saying they've seen an increase in traffic to their location during the market, and 62 per cent saying it is attracting more people to the city core. Patrons agree; 60 per cent say the market is changing the city core. The 2013 survey also showed that 38 per cent of city businesses and 26 per cent of patrons believe that Market Square is promoting tourism.

LESSONS LEARNED

- You need strong, committed leadership (mayor, council, senior administration, staff, volunteers, and businesses).
- Engage many stakeholders and establish partnerships. The Swift Current Farmers Market was engaged in year two, but engagement from the beginning would have been better. Establishing a partnership with the downtown businesses was also difficult until the Downtown Business Association was created. Stronger relationships with the Chamber of Commerce and Swift Current Tourism are also in the works. Working with the arts and culture community, businesses, suppliers, and area businesses helped maximize success and minimize the city's costs. Ongoing networking and connection is critical to grow the event.
- Clear, convincing, and effective communication with everyone is critical.
- Street closures need to be well- advertised in a timely fashion.
- Adequate power supply (and quick staff response in the case of problems) is critical.
- A city presence shows the event is important to the municipality, and gives the chance to address issues on the ground, with a personal and timely response.
- It may have been advantageous to have an event coordinator for all the organizing.
- Engage the whole community by having something for everyone.
- Ongoing entertainment sets a positive and festive tone which attracts all demographics.