

# *The Greenwood Ave. Farmers Market:*

**Established 2015**

*A 5-Year Reflection and a Glance Ahead*



**RUTGERS**  
New Jersey Agricultural  
Experiment Station  
■ Cooperative Extension





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*How long people live and how well they'll live should not be predetermined by their zip code.*

– Samuel Frisby, CEO, Capital Area YMCA

## Sowing the Seeds of GAFM

The Greenwood Ave. Farmers Market (GAFM) was founded to address concerns of food access in the heart of New Jersey's capital city, Trenton. Since its beginnings, the market has prioritized community involvement and engagement, and has established itself as a safe gathering spot and social hub in addition to being a source of healthy food within the Chambersburg/Southeast Trenton neighborhood.

### Community background

Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, is home to approximately 83,000 residents. About half identify as Black and almost 40% identify as Hispanic. Over 40% of households in the city have children under the age of 18. Trenton has the highest poverty rate in Mercer County. The median household income is just below \$36,000, and 29.4% of all families are living below the poverty line; 40% of households with children under the age of 18 are living below the poverty line. Twenty seven percent (27%) of Trenton households are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, a figure that increases to over 50% for households with children under age 18. One in five residents lacks health insurance, and the city has disproportionately high rates of diabetes and other chronic diseases when compared with other municipalities in Mercer County and the State of New Jersey as a whole.

Food access and food security are major concerns in the city. With just three supermarkets in Trenton, two of which are near the outskirts of the city, access to a variety of produce and other healthy foods at affordable prices is extremely limited, especially for those who do not have access to a car. Instead, many residents rely on small neighborhood "corner stores" and convenience stores throughout the city, most of which have small selections of fresh produce, eggs, dairy, and other healthy food options.

There are two long-standing farmers' markets that have existed in Trenton before the GAFM was created. During warmer months, the Capital City Farmers Market brings vendors near the downtown capitol building on Thursdays in the middle of the day. With the location and timing during lunch breaks, this market caters to state workers who typically commute from outside of the city on weekdays. Additionally, the Trenton Farmers Market, which boasts a permanent year-round location in an enclosed space and a seasonal weekly schedule, is located on the edge of Trenton as it borders Lawrenceville, a township with a substantially higher median income. Given the primary target audiences of these two markets, at the time of GAFM's founding there were no farmers' markets catering to lower-income residents of Trenton and, in this particular neighborhood, the seniors and the families of the adjacent childcare center.



Photo by: Adobe Stock

## Founding the Market

### Initial collaboration

The origins of the GAFM can be traced back to 2014, when Marissa Davis, then Project Director of the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids-Trenton (NJPHK) at the YMCA of Trenton (the Y), and Beth Feehan, then Director of the New Jersey Farm to School Network, looked through the window of their shared office building and pondered the idea that the large, empty lot a few doors down could be a great space to run a community farmers' market. Beth was an experienced farmers' market leader, having run the West Windsor Farmers Market for several years. Marissa had created the Trenton Healthy Food Network and was a highly respected community leader. This seed of an idea was brought to the Y leadership which wholeheartedly supported the proposal and set the wheels in motion to seek partners and funding.

Several partner organizations, drawn from the Trenton Healthy Food Network, became involved in the market's initial planning, including St. Francis Medical Center, Henry J. Austin Health Center (the county's Federally Qualified Health Center), Isles, Inc., a community development and environmental not-for-profit organization in Trenton, and Rutgers Cooperative Extension Department of Family & Community Health Sciences (FCHS) of Mercer County. A primary element of the planning was securing the space itself. While the lot was unused, it was still owned by Nexus Properties, a private party. Organizers of the market reached out to the city government, and with its support, were able to secure an agreement with Nexus to lease the lot to the Y without charge.

Being new to the farmers' market concept, the Y staff had to learn how to engage with different city agencies to obtain the required permits and licenses to sell at the market. They had to hire a market manager and provide her with the needed technical assistance and training. Fortunately, expertise was available from the NJ Farm to School Network and the market manager of the West Windsor Farmers Market. The Y also took the lead in coordinating all partners, vendors, health services, volunteers, and arranging for voucher and EBT enrollment and security services.

### Funding

The next critical step was to secure funding. According to the Y, it was difficult at first to find funding. The Y spearheaded grant applications for initial funding. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the NJPHK-Trenton based at the Y, became the main financial source. Additionally, for the first year, funding was sourced from the New Jersey Department of Health's ShapingNJ Healthy Community Grants Initiative, Novo Nordisk, United Way, and the Y's operational funds. Additional support that year came from the Hunterdon-Mercer Regional Chronic Disease Coalition to fund a

### Greenwood Ave. Farmers Market

— Mission Statement —

*To improve the health and well-being of the Trenton community through fresh food access, nutrition education, and economic development by supporting New Jersey farmers, and local small businesses.*

voucher coupon initiative to boost customer purchasing power at the market. Funding sources and donations have varied over the years, with the Y continuing to draw from its operational funds whenever necessary to sustain the market.

**Community input**

Strong community involvement in the market is evident from the very start, during its design. Initial organizers went door-to-door in the neighborhood and held focus groups at the preschool and senior housing complex, both of which border the lot. Through these conversations, organizers learned more about what community members were looking for, and even found that many of the senior citizens were not interested in a farmers’ market at all. However, by listening to and centering the voices of the community, organizers found that many seniors were instead looking for social activities outside of their center, as well as access to healthcare services. Both priorities were incorporated into the market’s debut and served as a way to encourage people to attend the market who may not have otherwise been interested in it. Additionally, the organizers learned that those seniors who are homebound could not physically attend the market, which led to arrangements being made for a preordering system and home delivery.



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

Beyond focus groups and conversations, community involvement in the market’s planning is evidenced by the commissioning of a mural by Trenton artists Leon Rainbow and William Kasso. The mural not only brought vibrancy to the space, but also added an element of permanence in the way it transformed the lot and marked it clearly as the Greenwood Ave. Farmers Market.

**GAFM Reach**

Between 2015 and 2020, GAFM held 93 market days and hosted approximately 24,474 total attendees, with an average of 277 attendees per market day except during 2020\* due to an abbreviated season under COVID-19 conditions. This estimate is predicted to be lower than the actual number of attendees since total figures are likely higher than the recorded figure.

*GAFM Attendance Summary*

Year	Number of Markets	Total Number of Attendees	Average Attendees/Market
2015	17	3,940	232
2016	17	5,003	294
2017	16	5,171	323
2018	18	4,661	259
2019	18	5,017	279
2020	7*	682	97

## GAFM Growth and Scope

During the initial 2015 and subsequent 2016 market seasons, market coordinators focused their operations on the foundations of market programming, building rapport with stakeholders, and strategic planning. From this strong foundation, GAFM grew its impact in 2017 and the ensuing years, incorporating benefit programs to expand food access and equity in Trenton.

The market hosts food vendors and so much more. Visitors come by to take advantage of healthcare services, cooking demonstrations and nutrition education, games and family activities, fests, and special events. In addition, the market has strong support for community members who receive federal food assistance, with incentives to double and, in some cases, triple Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP EBT), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) dollars.

### Services

GAFM has had positive impacts on the neighborhood it serves, fostering long-lasting relationships between residents, vendors, and staff, and supporting health on both individual and community levels.

### Vendors

Perhaps the most essential element of any farmers' market is its vendors who provide fresh, locally grown produce and other products to the community. Throughout the years, GAFM has collaborated with a number of vendors, with some cementing permanent positions in the market, and others participating during one or a few years.

**Norz Hill Farm:** Norz Hill Farm is a family-owned sustainably run farm in nearby Somerset County, New Jersey. Norz serves as the primary permanent vendor at the market, offering New Jersey-grown ("Jersey Fresh") produce, along with meat and eggs. In order to better meet the cultural dietary preferences of many community members for tropically grown items such as mangoes and plantains, Norz purchased tropical produce to sell alongside their locally grown harvests. Various community partners reported a perceived positive impact on customer attitudes with this addition. Norz Hill sales account for half of all market purchases.

**Isles, Inc.:** For four decades, Isles has focused on addressing food insecurity in Trenton, offering nutrition and environmental education, supporting school and community gardens, and more. Isles has served an integral role in connecting various organizations and



NJ Department of Agriculture



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

initiatives in the city to coordinate efforts to support the community, and as noted earlier, played a major role in supporting GAFM's original planning and development. At the market, Isles sells produce, herbs, and flowers grown in their community gardens. They also operate beehives in the city and sell their award-winning honey.

**Other vendors:** Other local farms and vendors have sold their harvests and products at the market throughout the years including Franca Bakery, Local 130 Seafood, Capital City Farm, Snapping Turtle Farm, Juicin' with Judy, Rachel's Real Juice Smoothies, the Feed Truck, and Food Bazaar, each providing healthy and affordable options for customers looking for baked goods, seafood, refreshments, prepared food and snacks during their visits.

Underlying the community focus of the market is the constant collaboration among vendors. Prices and weekly specials are coordinated between farms so as to not undersell one another, and to encourage customers to visit multiple vendors during their visit. The emphasis on a collaborative energy undoubtedly supports a more welcoming space and highlights the prioritization of community over profit.

### Health Services

A variety of health services are offered at the market, ranging from basic health screenings to insurance sign-ups to education about common health concerns, medications, and nutrition. The community has benefited greatly from the presence of these partners. Overall, based on available data from 2015-2019, there were 4,903\* visits to the health services. Initially, the services offered at the market consisted largely of tabling and providing information to anyone stopping by, and later confidential health screenings in health vans were added.

\*This represents a minimum count based on the information that was turned in by the providers.

The importance of having health insurers represented at the market became apparent during 2015 upon recognizing that 34% of visitors had no health insurance and 32% had no primary care provider.

Other providers have included the New Jersey Division for the Blind and Hearing Impaired, the Hunterdon Mercer Regional Chronic Disease Coalition which provided cancer prevention resources, and various other one-time providers.

### Health Services

#### Health Screenings:

City of Trenton  
Trenton Health Team  
St. Francis Medical Center  
Capital Health  
Henry J. Austin Health Center

#### Insurers and Navigators:

State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) Mercer County  
The Family Resource Network Health Insurance Navigator Program  
Amerigroup  
Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield

#### Pharmacies:

Viva Pharmacy  
Medical Home Pharmacy

#### Nutrition Education:

Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Mercer County Department of Family and Community Health Sciences/NJ SNAP-Ed  
Henry J. Austin Health Center

#### Others:

NJ Division for the Blind and Hearing Impaired  
Hunterdon Mercer Regional Chronic Disease Coalition

4,903 Visits to Health Services

**Health Screenings:** Health vans are situated at the market on a rotating basis to conduct health screenings and counseling services. Health screenings at the market were provided in part by the City of Trenton’s mobile health unit, which had previously been sitting idle for many years because of a lack of funding. It was brought back into service by Trenton Health Team and their clinical partners with financial support provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. St. Francis Medical Center and Capital Health alternate service weeks. With the implementation of health vans, services expanded to offer weight, blood pressure, and glucose screenings, along with HIV testing. The more private environment afforded by the vans allow nurse practitioners to answer questions in a confidential space, and when needed, aid community members with finding primary care doctors and scheduling appointments. Henry J. Austin Health Center provides a Registered Dietitian and pharmacist who offer individual counseling.

**Nutrition Education:** In addition to the Registered Dietitian from Henry J. Austin Health Center, Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Mercer County’s Department of Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS) educator and SNAP-Ed program coordinators and nutrition educators provide nutrition information, cooking demonstrations and taste tests.

**Health Education and Support Services:** Pharmacists educate market visitors about such topics as sunscreen use and drug interactions; a behavioral health counselor informs community members about local counseling services; and an asthma specialist answers questions and provides disease support. Additionally, some providers offer help for Medicaid and other health insurance registrations, as well as prescription assistance programs.

### *GAFM Health Services Summary*

Year	Number of Visits to Health Services Vendors
2015	470
2016	2,042
2017	1,131
2018	621
2019	1,109
2020	Health Services suspended due to COVID-19



## Spotlight: Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, NJ SNAP-Ed of Mercer County

Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Mercer County's Department of Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS) and its SNAP-Ed team are longstanding community partners with the GAFM. Initially as a member of the Trenton Healthy Food Network, then the Trenton Food Stakeholders and other Trenton-based nutrition collaborations, FCHS faculty and SNAP-Ed staff have provided technical assistance and education for the market founders, organizers, and patrons.

The SNAP-Ed team has prioritized long-term relationship development with other GAFM vendors and personnel, community members, and market patrons. SNAP-Ed staff have designed programming that is culturally relevant; aimed at extending patrons' SNAP EBT food dollars; supportive of local farmers; and targeted to increase accessibility to fresh produce in Trenton. Each of these efforts has mirrored the overall mission of GAFM.

**Education:** FCHS and SNAP-Ed provide several services at the market with the goal of promoting community health and supporting healthy, nutritious choices on a budget. Staff report that the response has been overwhelmingly positive and that customers are engaged and open to sharing and learning. One element of their work at the market is the Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables curriculum. These brief educational lessons have included topics such as MyPlate, reading nutrition labels, physical activity, food safety, and reducing food waste. In addition to providing education, relevant giveaways are often included in lessons to increase appeal – for example, when apples were in season, the giveaway item for that week was an apple slicer.

### Volunteer Support

FCHS and SNAP-Ed initiatives have been supported by volunteers. A community member with a background in foodservice and dedication to supporting food access in Trenton has worked with the team every year. Other volunteers have been students from Rider University and The College of New Jersey.

**Demonstrations and tastings:** During the 2018 and 2019 GAFM seasons, SNAP-Ed staff conducted 25 nutrition lessons, reaching more than 350 market patrons. Market patrons look forward to FCHS and SNAP-Ed cooking demonstrations, tastings, and recipe handouts. During cooking demonstrations, staff offer tips on how to adjust recipes to make them more appealing or accessible. There is very clear intentionality with the recipes that are chosen each week, from considering seasonality and working with vendors to showcase produce on sale, to considering cultural dietary preferences of the community. By spotlighting different produce while offering tastings, SNAP-Ed found success in expanding comfort zones of customers who expressed hesitancy about trying unfamiliar foods.

Photo by: Capital Area YMCA



Barbara Inman Clark, FCHS Volunteer;  
Madelyn J.C. Tannous, FCHS Mercer  
County SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator

*I've never seen or had spaghetti squash before. It's very tasty.  
I have to try this recipe at home.*

– anonymous

As seasonal produce was shared in the SNAP-Ed cooking demos, signage is intentionally utilized to promote which vendors were selling this same produce. Anecdotal evidence from vendors suggests that sales of produce were often higher during weeks where any given item was highlighted in SNAP-Ed demonstrations and tastings. After a spaghetti squash tasting, one SNAP-Ed nutrition educator watched a market patron walk to the Norz Hill Farm stand to purchase their own spaghetti squash. On another occasion, SNAP-Ed staff sampled four diverse varieties of apples. Doing so allowed market patrons to explore new flavors of this fruit. As a result, numerous market patrons remarked that they were not aware of the wide spectrum of apple varieties that exists. At the time of this SNAP-Ed sampling, the owner of Snapping Turtle Farms sold a wider variety of produce based on what was sampled during this apple tasting.

Through outreach to low-income market patrons during the past five years, the FCHS and SNAP-Ed team built relationships that subsequently led to increased participation in SNAP EBT redemption rates. While all participating voucher programs have contributed to the social and economic development of GAFM, SNAP EBT matched purchases accounted for 29%-39% of the cumulative GAFM matched purchases. GAFM also had the highest WIC redemption rates among the state's farmers markets.

### Seasonal Recipes

Beet and Chickpea Salad

Blueberry French Toast  
Casserole

Bean and Corn Salsa

Summer Squash and  
Chickpea Salad

Fall Pumpkin Fruit Dip

Salsas

Chilis

Sauces

## Special Events and Artistic Connections

Through collaboration with diverse creatives, artists, and community stakeholders, the market has supplemented its food focus with several weekly activities, seasonal “fests”, and programs responsive to the interests and needs of community members. Market activities embody a holistic approach to community health while also embracing the strengths and creativity that are inherent to the City of Trenton through mural arts, music, and other placemaking activities.

### Art

Community-led art projects are a significant draw for increasing market participation by neighborhood residents, vendors, and the local artist community. In 2017, the GAFM space was identified by constituents as an opportunity for a community-led mural project to be completed. Responsive to community input, and with generous funding from Mrs. G's Appliances store, Trenton artists Leon Rainbow and William Kasso were commissioned to complete a mural on the large storage container in the public space where GAFM is held. These artists lent authenticity to the market in the eyes of the community. On the day of the mural painting, neighborhood children and passers-by helped paint, and the market's first manager and local artist, Lori

## Greenwood Avenue Farmers Market

Johansson spray-painted her signature bee image on the back of the container.

The result of this collaboration provides a physical representation of the local neighborhood's vibrancy. The presence of a colorful and mindfully designed mural contributes to the holistic health of ongoing market efforts. The graffiti-style artwork was also used as the first GAFM logo. Positive health outcomes of this community-led project include increased social connection, a sense of belonging, neighborhood beautification, placemaking, trust building, and sentiments of permanence for the market. A new market logo, still in use, was created following an online global contest.

### Music and Games

Music at the markets is often led by Ms. Sue. Ms. Sue, a well-known and well-loved DJ from the community, and DJ Ahmad Shakir. Danceable music combined with family activities and games such as Bingo and checkers, cultivates interest across different ages and backgrounds.

### Fests

Beyond these more regular offerings, four to five fests are held each year. Art Fest offers opportunities to display student work, and for market attendees, particularly children, to participate in creative art projects.

Bike Fest offers bikes and safety accessories at little or no cost. Partners including Isles, the Y, REI, the Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association, and the Boys & Girls Club Bike Exchange who coordinate bicycle repair services and safety education. St. Lawrence Rehabilitation Center donates helmets. And of course, there is plenty of designated bike riding space!

Water Fest, another fest cemented into the fabric of the market, offers packaged water and water safety education that caters to adults. Community members of all ages enjoy the water balloons, water slides, and other games during the hottest part of the year.

Lastly, there is the Fall Fest, or Harvest Fest, held towards the end of the season which features family-friendly fall activities, such as pumpkin painting, apple cider tasting and other seasonal treats, games, and giveaways.

During some fests, Isles brings its mobile "T-Recs" truck, a retrofitted, repurposed box truck driven to community events and public spaces, filled with fun activities for all ages including sporting equipment, games, arts and crafts, and music.



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

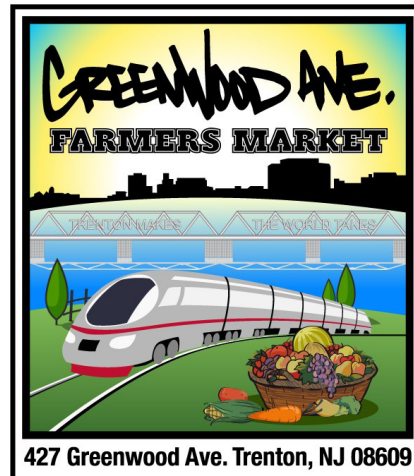


Photo by: Mike Mancuso NJ.com

Unique celebrations included the 2017 Solar Eclipse Fest, a 2017 visit from New Jersey native and Olympian Joetta Clark Diggs who led a fun workout session, and the GAFM 5th Season Celebration in 2019.

### Acceptance of Food Benefits and Matching Incentives

With the support of outside funding, GAFM offers two matching incentive opportunities to help customers access more buying power. The Good Food Bucks program, funded by City Green, matches SNAP EBT purchases dollar-for-dollar. This benefit only covers fresh fruit and vegetable purchases. The Greenwood Green program matches \$2.00 for every \$1.00 spent on any market purchase made with SNAP EBT, WIC, FMNP and SFMNP vouchers. Between the two incentive programs, it is possible for customers to double or, in the case of SNAP EBT, even triple their purchases. Typically, the matching programs are capped at \$20.00 per customer per day. For example, by spending \$20.00 using SNAP EBT, a customer could access \$60.00 worth of eligible purchases.

**Matching Incentives Redemption 2017:**

\$1,194.00 Good Food Bucks

\$9,261.00 Greenwood Green

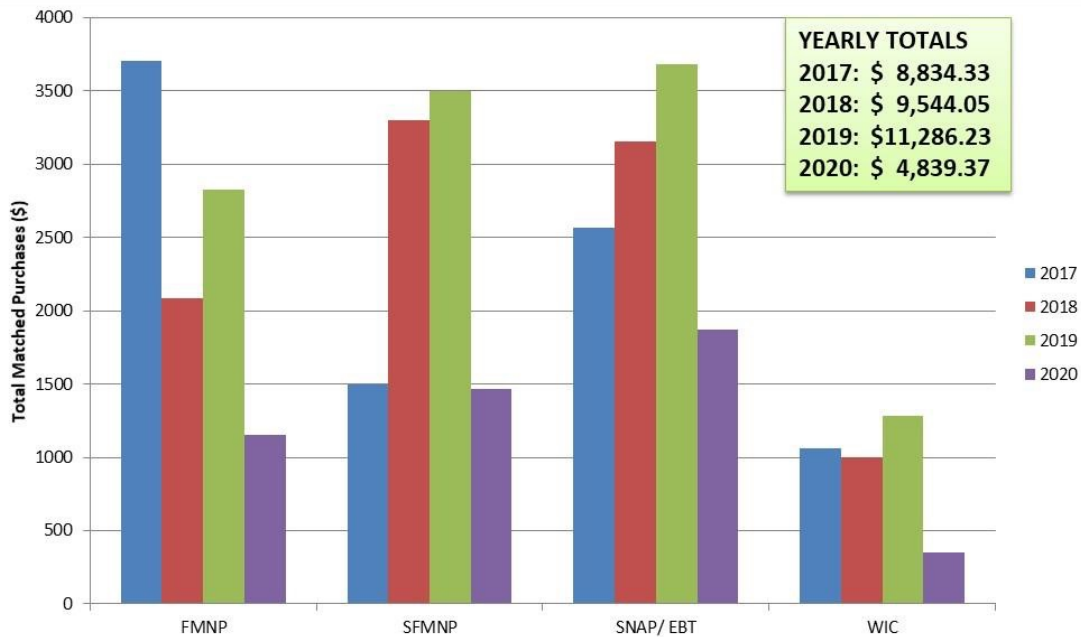


*GAFM Matched Purchases Summary*  
 (Matched Purchases are a portion of the gross receipts of the market)

	2017	2018	2019	2020
FMNP	3,708	2,082.74	2,828.59	1,152.82
SFMNP	1,494.76	3,304.38	3,496.39	1,465.67
SNAP EBT	2,568.73	3,153.68	3,680.84	1,868.43
WIC**	1,062.84	1,003.25	1,280.41	352.45
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$8,834.33</b>	<b>\$9,544.05</b>	<b>\$11,286.23</b>	<b>\$4,839.37</b>
Number of Markets	16	18	18	7
Average Matched Purchases per Market	\$552	\$530	\$627	\$691

\*\* GAFM had the highest WIC redemption rates of all New Jersey's farmers' markets

*GAFM Matched Purchases Summary (continued)*



### USDA Summer Food Service Program

In 2016, the market’s second year, GAFM became a pilot site, and first farmers’ market site in NJ, to offer the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Summer Food Service Program, providing access to summer meals for children. The rapid rise in utilization can be seen in the Table below with 328 meals served in 2016 and 729 meals served in 2019. It is extremely notable that in the abbreviated 2020 market season, due to COVID-19, 715 meals were served on only 7 market days as compared with a normal season of 16 to 18 market days.

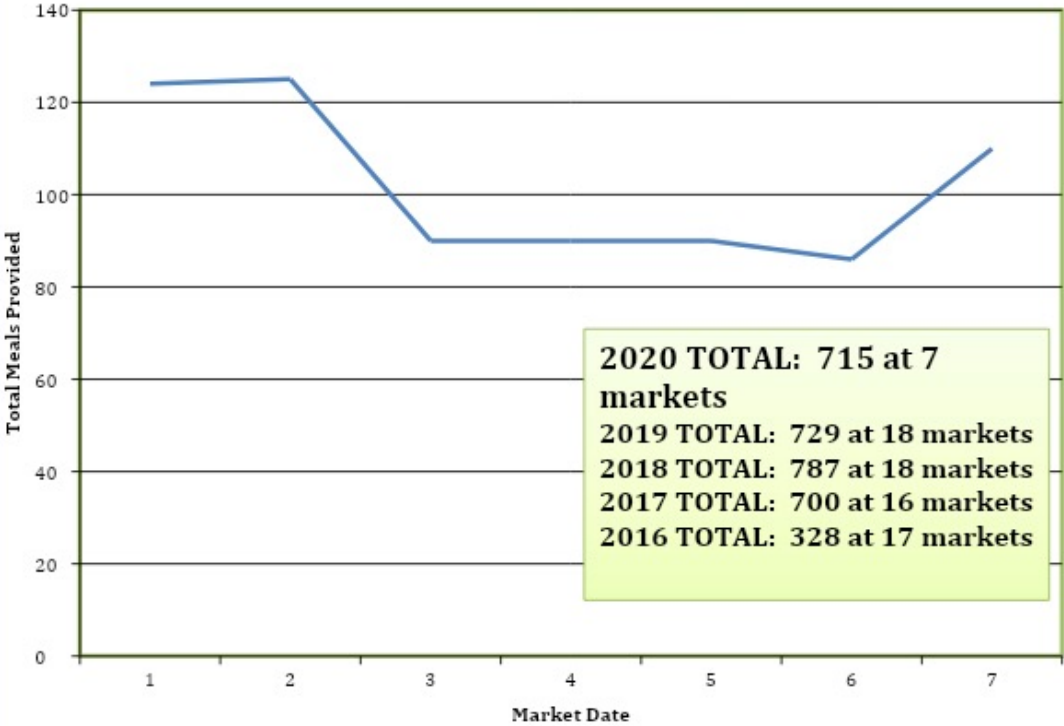


Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

Doug Fisher, NJ Secretary of Agriculture and Francis Bianco, Chief of Staff, Mayor’s Office serving summer meals.

While the Summer Food Service Program is limited to children, GAFM recognized the importance of families eating together and that hunger does not have an age requirement. With some quick thinking, GAFM was able to offer all adults a healthy meal for only \$3.00. During the gap when the Summer Food Service Program did not operate (early June and from the end of August until the opening day of school in September), the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK), provided 40-50 free meals for both children and adults.

### 2020 Summer Meals Served



## Recognition of Accomplishments

The Greenwood Ave Farmers Market's innovation and success has been recognized by many dignitaries and organizations over the years. In 2015 and 2016 representatives from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service including Angie Tagtow, then Executive Director for the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, Kevin Concannon, then Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, and Patricia Domboski, Administrator, and Doris Chin, SNAP-Ed Coordinator, USDA Food and Nutrition Service Mid-Atlantic Region, visited the market as did New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture, Douglas Fisher and Rose Tricario, Division Director, New Jersey Department of Agriculture. Local leaders have visited as well including Mayor Eric Jackson, representatives from the Trenton Fire Department, Nexus Properties, Rutgers University, and the Henry J. Austin Health Center.

In 2016, WHYY, the regional public radio station, interviewed Samuel Frisby, CEO of the Trenton YMCA, for a story titled "Wide disparity in health, longevity within just a few miles in New Jersey" which examined food insecurity and the inequities of health by zip code. The article states "A favorite new addition [to the city of Trenton] is the Greenwood Avenue Farmers' Market where you can take a Zumba class or get your blood pressure checked during one of the mobile health-screening events". Mr. Frisby is quoted as saying "You have the opportunity for children to come and ride bikes in a closed-off area where they are safe, ... How long people live and how well they'll live should not be predetermined by their zip code". Also in 2016, the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences awarded the FCHS Educator the 1st Place national Community Partnership Award for her work with the GAFM.



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

Left to right: Jasmine Hall-Ratcliff (former Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation); Lori Johansson (former Market Manager, Capital Area YMCA); Marissa Davis (former Project Director, Capital Area YMCA); Rose Tricario (Division Director, NJ Dept. of Agriculture); Michael Ciesielka (Chief Information Officer, President, Nexus Properties); Douglas Fisher (Secretary, NJ Dept. of Agriculture); Patricia Domboski, (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Mid-Atlantic Region Administrator); Francis Blanco (former Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office, City of Trenton); Kevin Concannon (former Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services); Dr. Kemi Alli (CEO, Henry J. Austin Health Center); Ayo Richardson (former COO, Capital Area YMCA).

In 2017, NJTV, New Jersey's public television station, launched *NJTV In Your Neighborhood*, a state-wide year-long initiative that took public television deeper into the communities it serves. The *NJTV In Your Neighborhood: Trenton Special* featured the GAFM, and was broadcast live from the Trenton Thunder minor league baseball team's stadium. The broadcast included interviews with key stakeholders and community members. Also in 2017, Barbara Inman Clark, one of the market volunteers who supports FCHS' and SNAP-Ed's work and who has deep ties with the community, was honored with the Mercer County Woman of Achievement award.

In 2020, the market received the New Jersey Agricultural Society's Phillip Alampi Industry Marketing Award recognizing innovation in increasing local New Jersey farm sales.



Photo by: Al Murray

Front Row (L-R): Yvonne Diaz, Ayo Richardson, Chris Cirkus, T.K. Oluwafemi, Marissa Davis, Madelyn J.C. Tannous, Alaa Al-Shujairi, Jackie Bavaro; Back Row: (L-R): Aneisha Felton, Melanie Lewis, David Specca; Lynn Kaiser, Debbie Norz.



## Building Connections

*It's a lot more than transactional...It's about social interaction and connecting with people through food*

– unnamed vendor

Beyond formal recognition and acknowledgments, GAFM's success can be measured by the quality of the connections its partners have formed with the market's customers and with each other, and by the strength of the market in creating dependable seasonal space for socialization and healthy habits in the neighborhood.

In interviews and surveys, market organizers, volunteers, vendors, healthcare providers, and FCHS and SNAP-Ed staff discussed the relationships built with regular customers. Vendors and SNAP-Ed staff shared stories of connections formed through food tastings and recipe sharing. Many remarked that customers would return weekly to discuss how they made the past week's recipe at home, and during the demonstration of the next recipe, conversations would flow about how it could be adapted based on preferences and dietary needs.



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

*[One of GAFM's greatest successes is] the reputation they have built among the community, and the genuine care for the well-being of its individuals.*

*I can't overestimate or overstate the social aspect, the frequency of regular customers, the trust that's built in the community.*

*GAFM is a unique space where the community can feel welcome, positive, and encouraged to make meaningful interactions and celebrate good food.*

*The market is also child-friendly, and a place where they can participate in fun events, play, get free summer meals, and learn about healthy behaviors early in life.*

There are also a number of stories reported of customers sharing pride and excitement in the produce they buy. A member of the SNAP-Ed team shared:

*Participants build relationships with us, but they also build relationships with these farmers. And there's an excitement that comes around it, like, 'I got this amazing organic or really healthy local, sustainable fruit or vegetable that I'm going to feed my family!'*

*The participants are happy, and then there's this communication they'll come back another time and say, 'Hey, this is what I did with it!' So it's just idea sharing and generating ideas from each other.*

Through a loop of taking home different produce and ideas, experimenting at home, and returning with more to share, many of the market's partners developed lasting

Photo by: Capital Area YMCA



relationships. And with these lasting relationships came trust that further supported healthy behaviors. One of the former vendors, now SNAP-Ed staff, recounted:

*[When we were] growing interesting varieties of vegetables that maybe not a lot of people have seen or tried, we had that trust with the community to be like, 'Hey, have you ever tried a hard curry turnip because they sound kind of weird, they might taste kind of spicy, but there's something that'd be cool to try.'*

*My motivation for remaining part of the GAFM: Meeting the needs of the community and being part of the larger vision of reducing food insecurity and providing access to food and information that can help reduce chronic disease.*

Another vendor shared how encouraging sales, reducing waste, and supporting customer relationships intersect:

*If we've got a ton of produce at the end of the day, we'll wheel and deal or give people samples. It's like, 'You came for the tomatoes and peppers- here's some blueberries or some cherries or something else to try.' And they'll come back and say, 'You know what, those are amazing, my kids love them, I'm going to buy a pint of these,' because they appreciate the education, or being turned onto something new, or they want to be loyal to you- because you give them little freebies, or just spend quality time with them.*

Despite the market's seasonality, some partners who provide year-long services to the community noted that the connections made in the market are often reinforced after the season ends. Staff at Isles and SNAP-Ed both noted the joy of seeing market regulars at other health and nutrition related events in the off-season and appreciated the opportunity to catch up with them.

The market also fosters connections within the community itself.

Through the open and welcoming environment created, along with the games, activities, fests, and other programming, GAFM has converted an empty lot into what many partners have called a "social hub". One organizer wrote:

*The premise of the market in its original intention was to create a safe space and to provide healthy food access, also to boost the economic drivers in that community, but what it really ended up becoming was a community hub where people would come in and just talk with each other and kids would play, really just building*



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

*that sense of community. And even when the market is over, that hub is gone, it's created a place where now the kids are still coming and playing on that ground when the market's not in session.*

Many others corroborated this point about a community space especially for children; between games and activities, resources for bike riding, free summer meals, and more, the market becomes a space for summer fun for kids.

Furthermore, there is also a clear sense of support and deep appreciation between partners and stakeholders of the market. In interviews, partners underscored gratitude for the dedication of other partners. Many took the time to praise individuals involved in the market. One SNAP-Ed organizer spoke of a market volunteer:

*Barbara knows so many people in the community and is such a friendly face... And there's trust when you know that there's someone from your community to welcome you... And I can't stress enough how much value she has to the project.*

In this way, the market not only facilitates connections between the community and partners, but among community members and among partners. The spirit of collaboration is visible in all aspects of the market.



Photo by: Capital Area YMCA

Michelle Brill, FCHS Educator, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Barbara Inman Clark, FCHS Volunteer

## Promoting Health and Community Economic Development

The support for health on community-wide and individual levels is evident through the design, data, and anecdotes from customers and partners. A member of the FCHS SNAP-Ed team recalled that some regular customers would frequently discuss health as it connects to nutrition and food, and that they would often share updates on their personal health, celebrating improvements. In a local news feature of the market, two customers spoke out on the impact of the market on their lives, sharing about weight loss and diabetes management. And certainly, there are more stories to be told of the positive impact of the market on health. One organizer remarked:

*I think [the market] has these impacts that we don't even know that are long lasting within the community.*

One survey respondent noted supporting farmers' sales revenue, particularly through increased redemption of vouchers and double bucks programs, as one of the market's greatest successes. The GAFM has demonstrated that urban markets that offer SNAP, WIC and other assistance are viable ways for consumers to purchase produce and for farmers to sell produce.

## Future Considerations and Challenges

The rent-free arrangement with Nexus Properties, which remains in place today, makes the market much more financially feasible. However, organizers have noted that while the market has cemented a strong place in the community over the past seven years, there is some concern that in the future, the space may no longer be available. In addition, while having an open-air market has many benefits, including comfort for some immigrant residents who are more familiar with this style of market, as well as having more space for socialization and activities, the open-air format also means that weather can be a major challenge. Poor weather such as extreme heat and rain has discouraged turnout and occasionally led to market cancellations. The need for sufficient volunteer coverage each season also remains a challenge.

While the large number of providers throughout the years indicates broad support for the market, it has also created a few difficulties. With so many services being offered, there has been some level of redundancy at times. On the other hand, some partners did not attend every week during a season, leading to inconsistencies that may have prevented community members from relying on their services. Additionally, there were many logistical considerations involved in certain testing and screening offerings, such as temperature control for blood testing that also contributed to these inconsistencies. Stronger coordination between providers may help address these issues.

Staff running the FCHS SNAP-Ed tables noted many challenges with getting the space set up, from getting approval from the health department, to preparing ingredients in advance, working around the lack of running water and electricity, and ensuring that all the necessary equipment is ready at the site. Food safety was addressed by using insulated coolers, ice packs, and thermometers. SNAP-Ed staff also noted the importance of planning ahead and a trial-and-error process to help their work run more smoothly despite these challenges.

Another concern that arose is the role of stigma in accessing the health screening services. One vendor noted some hesitancy among residents in entering the van for its association with the medical screenings being offered. Some healthcare providers have been able to offer market vouchers and other incentives to customers who engage with them at informational tables when funding is available, however, perceived value of the van's free services seems to be the main motivator to combat this stigma.

### GAFM During COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the market's operations for its 2020 season. Initially, the market's opening was delayed due to government mandates restricting outdoor events as part of the stay-at-home order. The market's organizing partners, with guidance from Rutgers Cooperative Extension, designed a compliant COVID-19 Mitigation Plan for approval by the City of Trenton. The Plan was approved in time to run the first market on June 29th, 2020.

The market's COVID-19 Mitigation Plan, detailed a safely distanced physical layout, safety measures for vendors, summer meal distribution, staffing, crowd control, payments, and customer guidelines. Universal themes in all of these sections included mandatory mask-wearing, distancing, and sanitation, with plans to limit the touching

of produce and other items. Staff at the market played a role in greeting customers and informing them of guidelines and sanitation stations, as well as limiting the market to 20 customers at one time and guiding traffic through a one-way U-shaped layout.

Many core aspects of the market were omitted for the season as it took on a “grab and go” style. Outdoor seating, SNAP-Ed cooking demos and tastings, healthcare partner tables, recreation spaces, fests and other events, live music and dancing, raffles, and other physical and social elements could not be offered at the market due to safety concerns. These gathering points for the community, so critical for the vibrancy of the market were sorely missed, especially for the seniors, who treasured having a safe and lively place to interact. The loss of live music, which was a draw for the neighborhood and the community in general, was another big loss for attendees.

As discussed throughout this report, these features have turned the market into a social hub for the neighborhood, and without them, the market has suffered. While the original COVID-19 Mitigation Plan projected that the market would run through October 19, 2020, it instead ended its season two months early, after August 10th. Beyond the lack of social features, a number of other COVID-related issues led to this decision, including delayed build-up of attendance attributed to the delayed start, delayed distribution of Senior Farmers Market Program vouchers, difficulty meeting increased staffing needs, and less demand for the market’s resources due to ongoing free pandemic food distributions around the city.

Despite the abbreviated season, and the lower number of attendees, it is important to note that matched purchases were comparable to previous years and summer meals distribution numbers accelerated significantly. This is an indicator that the community has really come to rely on the market as a source of healthy, affordable food.

## Conclusion

The GAFM is more than a place to purchase food and go. It is a place where the community goes to get healthy. It is about community gathering. The space is now known as an anchor for healthy food, community gathering and connection. Because of the iconic nature of the space, the site was used for emergency food distribution during the pandemic, by several organizations partnering with the Y. It is unclear how the pandemic may impact future seasons, though market organizers are optimistic about resuming the market’s standard offerings when it is safe for the community to do so in accordance with current COVID-19 guidelines.

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## Addendum

In 2021, under an updated COVID-19 Mitigation Plan, the market operated for a full season with some key elements returning, such as SNAP-Ed cooking demonstrations and live music. Although there were fewer food vendors, new health services were added, and new partnerships were established. Access to Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers was improved by having the Mercer County Office on Aging on site. Attendance reached 2,296 visits.

A demographic and opinion survey was completed by 77 patrons: 55 in English and 22 in Spanish. The majority of patrons live close by, are female, over age 60, and African American. Incentive redemption rates remained high averaging 90%. Patrons reported that freshness and quality, friendly service, lower prices, and product variety were most important to them. Many respondents reported that having more vendors would improve the market. Market organizers will use this feedback to create opportunities for improvement.

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