

Synergy by the Pound

Farmers, food consumers and downtown development meet at Winter Farmers Market in Rutland



BUILT IN 1913 BY THE SHRINERS ORGANIZATION, the majestic Strand Theatre was once the place to go in downtown Rutland. Audiences of 1,800 people would turn out for local stage performances, traveling vaudeville stars, silent films and, finally, the “talkies” of golden-era Hollywood. But by the late 1950s, movie attendance across the country was in decline. The theater changed hands, the seats were torn out and the Strand became a noisy, gritty automotive tire center. Eventually the tire shop moved, the place was used for storage and then the Strand sat vacant for two decades.

Large empty buildings can haunt a downtown — battered husks of a more prosperous time — but this particular building was about to be saved. Over in nearby Depot Park, a group of farmers, growers and vendors had been holding a lively Summer Farmers Market for years, spurred along by Vermont’s emerging local-food movement. Gradually, an idea took shape: If carrots could sell in July, why not in January? Why not start a Winter Farmers Market?

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Greg Cox, the owner of Boardman Hill Farm in West Rutland, joined with other summer market vendors and arranged a lease with the local owner of the Strand. Then, with support from city officials, they began reviving the place.

It was “a community project,” says Cox. About \$7,000 was raised to install a new emergency exit, volunteers emerged to help with the scrubbing and repainting, and several businesses

contributed. Gilmore Home Center in Bomoseen donated paint; Noble Ace Hardware in Rutland offered new lighting; Rotella Building Materials of Rutland contributed lumber; and Fabian Earthmoving of West Rutland delivered stone to construct a loading dock. “We also invited local artists to paint wall murals to make the place more vibrant,” says Cox.

The market launched in the winter of 2007–2008 and quickly demonstrated the synergy that can occur when Vermont farmers, Vermont food consumers and a Vermont downtown meet in one place.

“The impact has been huge,” says Jen Hogan, owner of the new Café Terra coffee shop, one of several nearby businesses to enjoy the ripple effect of the winter market. “On Saturday mornings, the streets fill up.”

Even Rutland Natural Food Market, initially skeptical of such a direct competitor, has benefited. “The farmers market certainly has helped our business,” says manager Mike Muller.

“The market gets people downtown, and that’s a plus,” says Tim Schneller, who for 21 years has owned and operated Timco Jewelers and Goldsmiths, a block up from the market.

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Vermont’s downtowns, small miracles of entrepreneurial perseverance and a buy-local culture, can nevertheless seem precarious. When something like Rutland’s winter market comes along, spirits are lifted and efforts become focused on the future.

The winter market is not a panacea for downtown Rutland. But Mike



Coppinger, executive director of the Downtown Rutland Partnership, says it is helping to raise property values on Wales Street, and the increasing pedestrian traffic has encouraged the city to make needed sidewalk and curb improvements. He says the market has been an incubator and a catalyst for at least one new business in the downtown — Catamount Crafters Cooperative, a shop run by several artisans who began selling their work at the market. And Coppinger is hopeful that the revitalized Strand will move the city to renovate Center Street Alley, a spacious brick courtyard just behind the theater.

Three decades ago, the courtyard was envisioned as a minipark where downtown workers and visitors could

meet, stroll or have lunch on a bench. Today it has fallen into neglect (on a visit last season, the water fountain was nonfunctioning and marred with graffiti), but a \$1.7 million renovation has been proposed and the winter market may provide the impetus to push the project forward.

For Marc Theodorou, owner of the nearby Wales St. Used Furniture Co., the winter market has already provided a turning point. Theodorou sells a dizzying array of items — lamps, chairs, figurines, CDs, books, radios, window fans — to shoppers emerging from the market. “If the market weren’t here, we would have had to leave a long time ago,” says Theodorou. “It is that strong.”

Market fare

The Rutland Winter Farmers Market features vegetable growers (lots of root crops), craftspeople, bakers, orchardists, weavers, vintners, even Asian take-out (Young-la’s garlicky Korean noodles are often gone by noon).

All the food and wares are set up on folding tables on the concrete floor of the former Strand Theatre, a grand brick fortress revived by the market.

About 400 people pass through each Saturday — several hundred more in the weeks before Christmas — and the street atmosphere is upbeat. At noon on a typical day last season, visitors gathered, shopping bags in hand, to listen to live music by the Bogstompers, a Rutland band playing old-time mountain tunes, and antinuclear activists were parked nearby, their truck sporting solar panels and slogans.

Inside, vendors enjoy a brisk trade — Boardman Hill Farm owner Greg Cox estimates that sellers will do an estimated \$300,000 this season — and you might even see an occasional goat or other farm animal.

Shoppers can also enjoy murals painted by local artists on the 20-foot walls, such as a flock of geese in flight or a mountain panorama.

- Open Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., November through April
- 77 Wales St., Rutland
- (802) 438-9803

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