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ROYAL OAK'S HISTORICAL FARMERS MARKET CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE DUE TO LOSS OF PARKING

Farmers and vendors continue to experience declining sales and parking challenges

ROYAL OAK, Mich., October 16, 2019 — Since opening in 1925, vendors at the Royal Oak Farmers Market have experienced the most challenging 15-months in its history as a result of the shortsighted planning by city leaders that eliminated most of the market's conveniently located surface parking.

The 2019 season has continued to shed a dark light on the struggle farmers are experiencing from parking, construction and a dwindling customer base. The market has seen the loss of several long-standing farmers resulting in an increase in cottage food items and non-food vendors.

"The Mayor and majority of the commission claim the market is a high priority, but ignore the fact that it was the unprecedented no-bid City Center Development that eliminated more than 80 percent of the existing surface parking adjacent to the market," said Kim Gibbs Royal Oak city commissioner. "I hope our citizens get out and vote in November to restore some sensibility and transparency to the Mayor's office and commission."

In recent years many farmers have been wary about their future at the Royal Oak Farmers Market, claiming business is just not what it used to be. Sales and shoppers have continued to decline over the past 18 months, plummeting to a sales decline of 20-to-30 percent. The market also is battling the recent growth of alternative shopping options for produce and fresh farm goods.

Heather Rosencrantz, founder of Dirty Girl Farm, began her business out of the Royal Oak Farmers Market in the early 1990s and grew the business into a collection of more than 400 vegan and organic skincare products.

"Over the past year, customers were complaining constantly to me and my staff about access to the farmers market, even though we couldn't do anything about the problem," said Rosencrantz. "The construction left dirt and grit over everything in my booth and my employees would have to spend a day cleaning everything before the market opened. We kept our heads high, didn't complain and tried to make do; however, when even my most loyal customers stopped coming in, I knew we were in big trouble."

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This October would have marked 25-years at the Royal Oak Farmer’s Market for Dirty Girl Farms, one of the few long-term lease vendors at the market. In August, Rosencrantz did not renew for 2020 and left the market to focus on her national on-line sales distribution; she cites declining customer traffic and sales of more than 50 percent for not renewing the long-standing lease.

“Leaving the market, that had been home for so many years, was not an easy decision,” said Rosencrantz. “City leaders talk about the importance of the market to Royal Oak, but why then would they eliminate so much convenient parking, tear down the atrium for a road and inflict such damage to market vendors and patrons? My customers said a parking structure was not a viable solution and now that’s been proven.”

Customers find it very inconvenient to carry their market purchases blocks away to the nearest parking structure and have few options for convenient free parking.

“If the Mayor and commission majority really wanted to help the market and community, one thing they could do is to stop resisting the call by market vendors to put a program in place for low-income shoppers,” said Gibbs. “There are many programs in Michigan supporting those in need, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Food Assistance Program. Despite the cost associated with managing the program, it could open the possibility of state grants for the market, which would minimize any impact to the Royal Oak budget and possibly lead to an increase in revenue and customer traffic for the remaining farmers.”

For Rosencrantz, she is hoping that voters flip the administration in November and put in a mayor and commissioners who care more about the city, residents and the farmers market than themselves. “We had something really amazing here at the market for many years. Unfortunately, this gem is suffering and it’s heartbreaking for the residents of Royal Oak and many others in southeastern Michigan.”

For more information, visit the Save the Farmer’s Market website, www.savethefarmersmarket.com.

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About the Take Back Royal Oak Coalition:

The Take Back Royal Oak Coalition is comprised of business and property owners in Royal Oak looking to expose the lack of transparency and mismanagement by the city’s government in order to restore honesty and integrity to City Hall.

Contact:

David Roznowski, 248-550-6620 / droznowski@kinetic-llc.com
Kinetic Communications Marketing, LLC