

OCTOBER 2020 NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

COVID SPURRING COLLABORATIONS

FARMERS' MARKET

The Alliant Energy Center has become a food distribution point in another way as well. When the pandemic threatened the hugely popular downtown Dane County Farmers' Market, organizers began considering options for how to get healthy, locally sourced, fresh food to eager customers while supporting small businesses in our community. Initially the Dane County Farmers' Market offered local food pickup at Madison's Garver Feed mill, but the parking lot proved to be too small and traffic congested neighborhood streets. So, organizers started contacting various locations as they looked for a more viable solution.

"Immediately Alliant Energy Center stepped up and said it could provide space," says Sarah Elliott, Market Manager for the Dane County Farmers' Market. And plans were made to use some of Alliant Energy Center's expo space, but plans had to shift when the Alliant Energy Center became a COVID-19 testing site.

"We're so grateful for all of their support and especially how they continued to work with us when the expo space began being used for COVID testing. They've been fantastic to work with. They've been on our team and willing to work with us as we added walk up," Elliott says. "And their expertise in event management addressed things we hadn't even thought of. They have the infrastructure pieces we needed — like orange traffic cones and bike racks."

Willow Island has been hosting the Farmers' Market and Elliott says the space works perfectly. She says it is large enough to easily allow six feet socially distancing for customers and a 12-foot distance between vendors. The large space means customers have the ability to stroll safely through the market and easily select the produce and products they want.

Elliott explains that providing both drive-thru and in-person shopping meets everyone's needs. Approximately 400-500 customers have regularly been taking advantage of the drive-thru option and those numbers didn't change when in the in-person option was added.

"The hybrid model grounded our understanding that different customers have different needs. We want to serve as many customers in ways they are comfortable with."

The Farmers' Market doesn't keep track of vendor sales, but Elliott notes that pre-order drive-thru vendor sales have topped \$845,000. Some vendors, such as those who sell plants and meat, noticed brisk business when folks were concerned about meat shortages and began tending gardens and doing landscaping.

For folks who miss the food trucks that pre-COVID lined the Capitol Square, they too can check out the Alliant Energy Center campus. Each Friday from 4 to 8 p.m. Willow Island is the site for Food Truck Fridays. Local food trucks sell their specialties to eager customers in social-distanced safety.

The Alliant Energy Center will continue hosting both the Farmer's Market and Food Truck Fridays until late October. COVID testing and the Second Harvest will both likely continue to utilize Alliant Energy space for the foreseeable future. Alliant Energy Center remains committed to help answer community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.