

Your Local Farmers Market Society Strategic Plan 2015-2017

Version & Revision date:
V3.0; January 20, 2015

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Executive Summary

In 2015, Your Local Farmers Market Society (YLFMS) will celebrate its 20th year of operation in Vancouver, BC. Over these two decades, YLFMS has worked in dozens of communities bringing hundreds of small BC farmers and value-added artisan food and craft makers together with tens of thousands of Vancouverites resulting in authentic, bustling weekly neighbourhood farmers markets.

Since 1995, YLFMS farmers markets have grown from one to nine weekly markets; from six months to year-round operations; from 1,000 to 20,000 shoppers a week; from \$50,000 to \$8.17M in direct economic impact; and from a handful of part-time volunteer organizers to a highly-experienced team of seven full-time, 25 part-time staff, an 11-member board of directors, and a 16-member elected Vendor Advisory Committee. Supporting 265 small BC farmers and artisan food and craft makers, and keeping 16,000 acres of land in sustainable food production, YLFMS’ farmers market network now ranks among the largest in the entire Pacific Northwest. Indeed, YLFMS’ markets are respected across Canada as truly authentic, community-driven venues through which citizens, businesses, government, funders and others can, together, build a more secure, sustainable regional food system.

Heading into our third decade, YLFMS is poised to become a mainstream, public institution in Vancouver. To enable this, it is ever more apparent that the critical mass that has been strategically built and invested in over the past 20 years must not only be maintained, but carefully nurtured and developed. It will be increasingly important to continue to invest in the long-term viability of our farmers markets, to use our strengths to address challenges and act upon new opportunities, and to engage our many stakeholders, supporters and partners in this effort.



The 2015-17 Strategic Plan will take YLFMS into its next decade of operation. It leverages the successes of two previous strategic plans. It builds on the Society's refreshed Vision and Mission statements, analyzes current Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. And it lights a new four-fold path ahead focusing strategically on "Permanency", "Partnerships", "People" and "Preparedness". These four strategic goals, each accompanied by SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, time-bound) annual Operations Plans, will be implemented by four goal groups formed of YLFMS staff and board members, and will be evaluated on a yearly basis.

YLFMS farmers markets feed community. We keep small farmers farming, people nourished, and neighbourhoods connected. In so doing, YLFMS creates significant, positive change in our regional food system, our local economy and our environment for small BC farmers and the thousands of people, businesses and organizations that are directly connected to them through our weekly farmers markets. The 2015-17 Strategic Plan will ensure a clear path forward as YLFMS achieves its mission, and together with our many stakeholders and supporters, continues to strengthen its place in Vancouver as a public institution.

History of YLFMS

YLFMS was founded by a volunteer group of East Vancouver community residents in 1995 to bring locally grown foods, prepared and artisan-crafted products into Vancouver's neighbourhoods. As a non-profit society, YLFMS' mandate is to serve the public of Vancouver, its communities and neighbourhoods. During its first ten years, YLFMS' temporary, outdoor markets grew from one weekly Saturday market in East Vancouver at Trout Lake Community Centre to a second Saturday farmers market in the West End, and a Wednesday market at Riley Park, all operating for five to six months from late-spring to early fall, plus a two-day holiday market featuring artisan crafts in December. In these formative years, YLFMS staff helped develop other farmers markets around the Lower Mainland, such as the Coquitlam and North Vancouver farmers markets, and played a leading role in the creation of Vancouver's Food Policy Council.

During the next ten years, YLFMS expanded operations to seven neighbourhood-based weekly farmers markets from spring to fall and added two weekly winter farmers markets, bringing much-needed year-round revenue to farmers and the organization. In this time, YLFMS began doing business as Vancouver Farmers Markets (VFM) and grew its vendor pool and shopper bases, helped create new City of Vancouver policies affecting farmers markets and support the City's emerging Food Strategy and Parks Board Food Action Plan, expanded programs and services for vendors, volunteers and members, showcased some of the City's first food and beverage trucks. YLFMS helped foster the BC Farmers Market Nutrition Coupon Program, developed the popular Food Scraps Drop Spots, consulted on farmers market start-up, and, based on vendors' needs for permanent, reliable market and small-scale commercial processing space, collaborated to develop the original vision and business case for a local food hub co-locating an indoor/outdoor public farmers market, commercial processing and product aggregation for small farmers supplying commercial buyers.

Through operations, policies and partnerships that create powerful farm-direct marketing opportunities and accessible, community-based farmers markets, YLFMS has now become a leading agent in the sustainable food system movement in British Columbia.

The Strategic Planning Process

YLFMS' current strategic planning process occurred over seven months with numerous organizational stakeholders providing feedback and leading the creation of revitalized organizational vision, mission statements and overarching strategic directions. The process began in late summer of 2014 with a Current State Assessment Survey, filled-out by 35 individuals including YLFMS board members, Vendor Advisory Committee members and full and part-time staff.



This feedback was compiled and distributed to an ad-hoc Strategic Plan team comprised of 11 YLFMS board members and three senior staff. The team took on the work of assessing the survey feedback along with additional organizational information to populate organizational SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats) analyses with current, evidence-based data. Once complete, the SWOT analyses were compiled and circulated back out to the Strategic Plan team members for review.

As these steps in organizational assessment were taking place, the Strategic Plan team also reviewed YLFMS' vision and mission statements with a view to making them more aspirational and succinct. The team developed a new vision and mission statement and carried them forward into the ensuing strategy development sessions.

The next step in the process was for the Strategic Plan team to develop the overarching strategic goals of VFM's new Strategic Plan. The team did this by assessing the key SWOTs and distilling them into four overarching strategies with basic descriptions of how each strategy will be achieved.

The final step in the process was to engage additional key YLFMS staff in conducting a 2014 SWOT assessment via the annual end-of-year operations review and, based on this, to formulate SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, time-bound) annual Operations Plans for each of the four strategies, along with SMART quarterly actions, for year one of YLFMS' Strategic Plan.

Current State of YLFMS

Strengths

Now entering its third decade of operation, YLFMS has developed significant strengths reflecting the organization's continuing strategic investment in its market communities, internal resources, and future opportunities. As a result of this investment, YLFMS continues to reach and often exceed its annual strategic goals, and to have a very strong reputation in Vancouver and throughout the region and province.

With locations all over the city, VFM markets see about 250,000 shoppers per year and host a dynamic and growing pool of vendors whose total annual sales soared to \$8.17M in 2014, ranking the VFM market network among the largest and most effective in the entire Pacific Northwest.

The Society's people are its greatest resource and asset. YLFMS' highly-skilled, dedicated staff, volunteers and board have years of experience in smoothly administering and running a network of community-based farmers markets, and an openness to innovation, new opportunities and growing the capacity of our region's local food system. VFM market vendors are second to none, and the neighbourhoods and communities that collaborate with YLFMS to host and sustain weekly farmers markets are committed to sustainable local food security for all.

Weaknesses

While YLFMS has experienced a significant amount of growth and success over the past 20 years, the organization also faces its share of limitations. Rapid growth has not been matched by sufficient human, financial and physical resources, and has stretched many of these resources to their limit. YLFMS uses many tactics to communicate its messages to numerous internal and external stakeholders, but does so without a clear identification of stakeholder audience groups and without a communications strategy for most effectively communicating with those stakeholders. Within YLFMS' stakeholder groups, clearer role definition and continued integration of market vendors into leadership roles within the organization will further strengthen YLFMS as a whole.



Despite their success and growth, YLFMS markets operate solely on public lands via single-season special event permits that can be altered or revoked at any time and offer no long-term security of tenure to market operations and vendors. As YLFMS markets grow in size and number, so too does its need for long-term partnerships and relationships with municipal public and private property administrators and owners who can help secure market sites for reliable, long-term use allowing VFM to invest in on-site market infrastructure.

Finally, much of YLFMS' fast-paced growth can be attributed to a high-degree of staff retention (most full-time staff have been with YLFMS longer than three years, and many part-time market crew have returned to work at the markets for two or more seasons). However, not much time is left each year to incorporate succession planning and knowledge transfer into growth planning. As the organization moves forward, YLFMS will need to plan for the succession of its core staff and board and ensure that mechanisms for knowledge transfer are in place.

Current State of the External Environment

Opportunities

Over the past 20 years, YLFMS has harnessed numerous opportunities to secure its existing markets, develop new markets, and partner with great organizations, businesses and funders to enhance public access to local, sustainably grown and value-added and artisan crafted products. These opportunities have resulted in effective initiatives such as the Food & Nutrition Coupon Program, Donation Stations, Food Scraps Drop Spots Program and Chef-Friendly Markets initiatives.

In 2014 alone, YLFMS expanded its market roster from six to nine markets, providing three more neighbourhoods and hundreds of vendors with weekly farmers markets. Preliminary discussions between YLFMS and Park Board staff began to develop a modest market pavilion in Riley Park, and market organizers began a series of meetings with City and Parks Board staff to streamline market application process and improve infrastructure at some market sites.

Going forward, new opportunities exist for YLFMS, its vendors and the communities it serves including developing new types of longer-term agreements for market sites with the City of Vancouver & Parks Board. Locally-made alcohol is now permitted for sale at some VFM markets and the restaurant, food truck and value-added food sectors want to partner with VFM, leveraging our powerful brand and creating opportunities for increased sales and greater commercial distribution of VFM vendor's products.

Many YLFMS initiatives are currently supported by generous, like-minded funders and supporters but opportunities exist to boost program impact by partnering with new funders, donors and sponsors. Across Vancouver an increased awareness of food security and climate change has brought locally-sourced food to the top of people's minds; ethnic communities are seeking out farmers markets and there is an increasing public appetite community engagement. Vancouver Farmers Markets make all of this possible, and opportunities exist for more.

Threats

Despite these many opportunities, external challenges are ongoing. In order for market vendors to operate with reliability and become sustainable over the long-term, YLFMS markets need site tenure beyond one season and suitable, permanent on-site infrastructure. Shifts and increases in civic and provincial regulatory environments may pose a threat to YLFMS market operations, as may competition in what is now a quickly evolving marketplace. Finally, farmers' access to arable land and other impacts from provincial government can threaten YLFMS' current and future operations.



Vision, Mission, Strategies

Vision

To be a leading force towards a world of healthy farms and people.

Mission

To transform our global food system by creating and nurturing a local, sustainable and vibrant marketplace for our community, environment and economy.

2015-2017 Strategies

1. Permanency

Achieve measurable progress towards our long-term goal of securing the tenure of our markets...

- By acquiring multi-year agreements with the City of Vancouver and the Parks Board
- By acquiring multi-year agreements with public and private property owners
- By working towards having a building site for a local food hub featuring a permanent farmers market
- By securing infrastructure for existing market sites

2. Partnerships

Build strategic partnerships with mission-critical third parties...

- to achieve greater resource stability / self-reliance with regards to funding and staff
- to increase our political, business and community influence by leveraging our strong reputation
- to create shared outcomes synergistically and in collaboration with like-minded organizations to reach the broader public (eg. for low-income and ethnic markets)

3. People (Stakeholders)

Enroll all stakeholders in achieving our mission...

- by creating a workable multi-year communication strategy
- by understanding and identifying the role of each existing stakeholder group and leveraging their involvement
- by deepening VFM vendor involvement in the organization
- by identifying new stakeholders and their roles

4. Prepare for the Future

Develop enhanced organizational resilience and proactively pursue long-term opportunities...

- by developing staff retention and succession strategies
- by creating emergency response plans
- by exploring innovations and diversification opportunities for our markets
- by responding to existing and emerging competition in the evolving marketplace

Considerations

Listed below are key considerations for each of the four 2015-17 Strategies:

- **Permanency**
 - Assumes YLFMS's ability to negotiate lease and cost-share agreements with Parks Board and YLFMS' capacity to raise funds for cost-shared projects



- Securing a site for a local food hub is dependent on location, site suitability for year-round market operations, costs to develop and maintain and YLFMS' fundraising capacity.
- **Partnerships**
 - Assumes values and goals alignment, clear mutual benefit, a matched capacity to deliver on goals and communicate successes.
 - Greater resource stability/self-reliance with regards to funding and staff depends on YLFMS' ability to raise funds from high-impact, diverse revenue streams.
- **People (Stakeholders)**
 - Assumes sufficient staff and board capacity to successfully implement a communications strategy for meaningful communications and engagement with YLFMS' many stakeholders.
- **Prepare for the Future**
 - Depends on YLFMS' ability to maintain high staff, board and vendor retention rates, ensure growth is in-line with existing resources, harness new human, financial and physical resources where needed to respond effectively to opportunities, and to prepare for emergencies and staff and board succession.

Taking the Strategy to Action

To translate the Strategic Plan into action, each strategy will have its own working group (ie four goal groups in total). Groups will be made up of a combination of YLFMS staff and directors, and will be led by one or more staff.

Each strategy goal group will produce an annual Operations Plan with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, time-bound) annual goals and SMART quarterly tactics/actions. Each strategy's Operations & Action Plan will work together with those of the other three strategies and, where possible, will dovetail into or support one another.

YLFMS' four Strategic Plan Goal Groups will convene as needed throughout the year to update and assess progress made towards meeting strategic goals for that year, and to report results to YLFMS' board of directors.

Appendices

- Annual Operations & Action Plans (one plan per strategy per year)

