

PRESS & GUIDE

Officials exploring farmers' market for West Dearborn

By Sean Delaney, Press & Guide Newspapers

PUBLISHED: January 23, 2008

DEARBORN

With construction of a multi-story condo development between the West Village parking decks at a standstill, local officials are exploring other options for the vacant property, including a farmers' market.

"Our goal is to create an epicenter of activity in the heart of West Dearborn," said Jennifer Giering, president of the Dearborn Chamber of Commerce.

"Sometimes people forget about what's happening in their own back yard. A farmers' market would provide an excellent opportunity for Dearborn residents and visitors to our city to take another look at what's been happening downtown."

Dearborn resident Joan Reed suggested bringing a farmers' market to downtown West Dearborn more than six months ago, Giering said, and the Chamber has been working with the city to make it happen.

"There are a lot of benefits to operating a farmers' market," she said. "You're getting fresh, healthy food that's grown locally — it's a great way to support the community."

Buying locally grown produce also keeps about \$37 million per week from leaving the state, Giering said.

Farmers' markets allow local farmers to sell their produce directly to the public, which means the producers are able to save on the cost of shipping their produce across the country while consumers are able to enjoy locally-grown products picked at the peak of freshness.

"Every-thing is locally grown at a farmers' market," Giering said.

The vacant property between the West Village parking decks — located just south of Michigan Avenue — is ideal, Giering said, because of its location in the heart of downtown West Dearborn's business district.

"It's a great spot," she said. "If you look at what's around there, you have a very dense residential community, interspersed with some great local businesses — all within walking distance."

Several new businesses have opened their doors recently in downtown West Dearborn, Giering said, although the work on the condo development between the West Village parking decks has yet to break ground.

The lack of progress at the site was criticized last year by some members of the Dearborn City Council, who said preferred developer Burton-Katzman had not fulfilled its end of the agreement it made with the city to complete the project.

The development company was selected by the city in 2005 to complete the "West Village Commons" — a 75,000 square-foot commercial and office mixed-use project on the site of the former Jacobson's department store on Michigan Avenue at Howard.

The complex officially opened for business in June 2006 but still has un-leased commercial and office space.

The agreement also called for the construction of two condo towers between the parking decks on West Village Drive. Those plans were later changed to allow for the construction of a 10-story tower including ground-floor retail space. The project has yet to break ground.

The developer has cited the state's current economic woes as the primary reason for the lack of progress at the site, and Giering said a community event like a farmers' market could be just what the city needs to help spur economic development in the area.

"Obviously, we hope that the economic impact of an event like this would be great," she said. "But things are happening all the time in downtown West Dearborn — from the 'Mutt Strut' to 'Art on the Avenue' and 'Fall into Dearborn.'

"Whatever we do at this location, we want it to be successful," she said.

The vacant property between the West Village parking decks is one of two sites being considered for the farmers' market, Giering said. The other is Ford Field Park, north of Michigan Avenue.

"Ford Field would also be a great location — it already has many of the amenities we would need to host an event like this," she said.

The Dearborn Chamber of Commerce has submitted a proposal for the event to Mayor Jack O'Reilly, who seemed receptive to the idea, Giering said.

"He loved it," she added. Both parties are scheduled meet Jan. 30 to discuss the details of the event.

"This is going to be a group effort — but I believe it's worth doing," Giering said. "There's an incredible sense of community here in Dearborn, and if we can tap into that, the possibilities are endless."