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## A Nimble Farmers Market Adapts and Pivots

*As the pandemic shuttered farmers markets across the state, the Madison County Farmers Market used its online platform to nimbly pivot to online sales, contributing to the community's food security during a time of panic and bare shelves in conventional retail sites. This short vignette is part of our "Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project" that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).*

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By Garland Mason

The Madison County Farmers Market has withstood the test of time. It was originally established in the mid-1990s as a producer-driven market but eventually closed as producers realized that many of their neighbors were growing and distributing their own subsistence crops and weren't looking to supplement their inventories with even more local produce. After closing for a number of years, the market reopened in 2008 with the establishment of the Madison County Farmers Market Association led by Brad Jarvis, a Virginia Cooperative Extension agent specializing in crops and soils but working in a variety of sectors in the area. When the market reopened, it was in response to a changing demographic in the area as new folks moved in seeking a rural lifestyle but not necessarily looking to produce their own food as had been done in the past. In 2020, the market has managed to pivot again. They have moved entirely to online sales since the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic this spring.

In 2018, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional planning commission received a \$250,000 grant to promote the Madison County brand and do some marketing to attract visitors to Madison County. With the receipt of the grant, the planning commission awarded the Madison County Farmers Market Association \$30,000 of the funds to attract customers through expanded advertising and to establish an online purchasing option for the farmers market. The online farmers market was established in 2019. As Jarvis put it, "We didn't decide to have online sales because of COVID, we decided to have online sales because we wanted to have a convenience factor for our customers" (B. Jarvis, personal communication, July 21, 2020). He explained that they have about 60-70 core customers that come to the market every Saturday but that some were beginning to be pulled away by work, kids' sports practices, and other activities but still



*A billboard funded by a planning commission grant guides visitors to the market. Photo courtesy of Brad Jarvis.*

were committed to purchasing local foods. Jarvis explained, however, that the first year of online sales was “dismal” and the market leadership began to assume that the effort was a complete failure after receiving only a handful of orders in the first year. Additionally, the vendors struggled to navigate the online forum and found it to be inconvenient for them. At that time, market leaders debated abandoning the online venture.

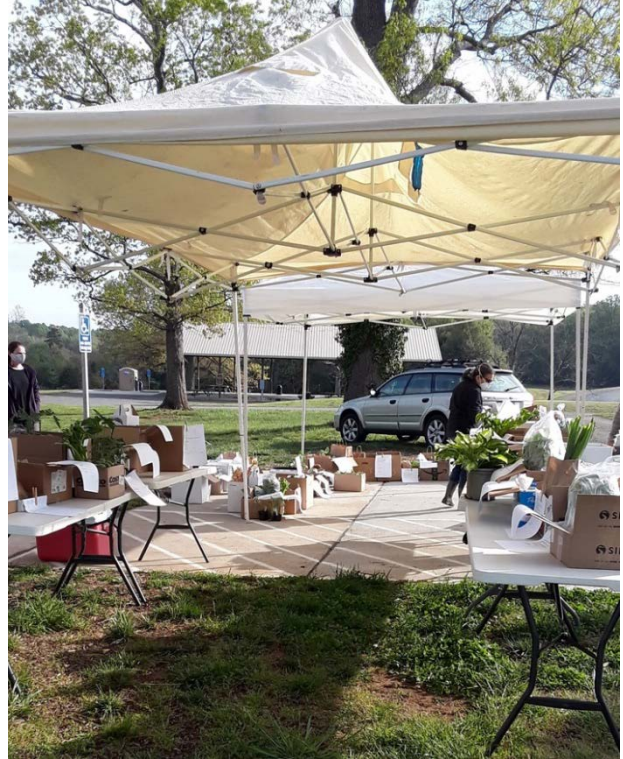
When the coronavirus pandemic hit in spring of 2020, however, market leaders found themselves well-prepared to organize the market into a fully online forum to accommodate physical distancing mandates and reduce the opportunity for COVID-19 to spread across the community. Jarvis explained that what was lacking in 2019 was the commitment from the vendors to use the online system: they were skeptical at first. In light of the pandemic, vendors were immediately committed to the online forum.

The first day the online market was launched in March, there were 60 customers and \$3,000 worth of sales. The online market hit another glitch however, with the growing enthusiasm for online sales, the platform the market was using crashed repeatedly, frustrating both growers and customers. Eventually, as the online market continued to gain momentum, market leaders elected to change the platform to better accommodate the volume of sales. This required vendors to learn to use a whole new system and to upload all of their products a second time.

Market vendors benefitted from their willingness to adapt, however, because as feelings of pending food insecurity were heightened with bare shelves in the larger grocery stores, locals were comforted by the food security offered within their own community and turned to the farmers market for items they may typically have gotten at the store like meats, produce, eggs, baked goods and dairy products. This worked out well for everyone as market sales skyrocketed and local consumers accessed local goods.



*Farmers Market Association President, Margaret Hutcheson (left) and a volunteer package up online orders. Photo Courtesy of Brad Jarvis.*



*In 2020, products are packaged and ready to pick up when customers arrive. Photo courtesy of the Madison County Farmers Market.*

According to Jarvis, however, consumers are beginning to go back to their normal shopping habits with store shelves replenished as the pandemic progresses. Sales peaked at the end of May and have begun to decline. Though market leaders and vendors are disappointed in the downward trend, they believe they have attracted new regular customers as a result of the coronavirus-fueled upsurge. Jarvis provided an example of a couple that drives from Alexandria, hours away, each week to pick up their Madison county goods. Down from the peak, sales numbers are still higher than when the market was open last year and vendors and consumers alike are benefiting from the stability provided by the local food system.

To learn more about the Madison County Farmers Market, visit their website: <http://www.madisonfarmersmarket.info/>. Updates and photos can be found at their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/madisoncountyfarmersmarket/>. This vignette is based on an interview with Brad Jarvis, the Madison County extension agent who helped to establish the market in 2008 and remains deeply involved with the market.