

Farmers' market a growing project

Fresh produce to be available every Saturday



JUDY RECKART

"It's a growing project," said WVU/Monongalia County agricultural extension agent Beth Massey recently of the new farmers' market at Seneca Center.

Although the area's relatively wet, cold spring hasn't been conducive to bumper-crop farming, producers participating in the first market May 11 quickly sold out of bedding plants and flowers, and the second week's market was rained out, Massey knows the Seneca Center Farmers' Market is a concept whose time has come.

"I think it will be just fabulous," she said.

Massey's not alone in her enthusiasm for Mon County's first year-round, every-Saturday agricultural products market.

"We've formed an advisory council of 10 or 12 producers, community-based supporters and representatives of WVU's College of Agriculture who really want to see this thing happen. The council currently is determining what the market will look like and what will be sold there. Eventually, we anticipate the council will evolve into an association that actually will operate the market itself," she said.

Massey and the Seneca market's advisory council are researching the practices that have spelled success for similar established markets in the region and hope to conduct site visits to some, including those in Charleston and Pittsburgh.

"There's one huge market between Greensboro and Winston-Salem, N.C. that's incredibly successful," Massey said. "We'll probably take a look there, too."

Although temporarily set up in the retail center's lower side parking area, the Seneca market eventually will relocate indoors into the former glass plant's furnace room, Massey and Seneca Center manager Jerry Hall share a vision for the roofed, shed-like space surrounding the furnace room's massive, towering chimney.

"We can see an airy, open, light-filled space filled with vendors and customers every Saturday morning," Massey said, gesturing around the cavernous room used for storage.

"We hope to install overhead doors we can roll up on the sides facing Beechurst Avenue, the center's side parking area, and the Caperton Trail on market days," Hall explained.

As the former glass plant is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Hall has discussed these envisioned alterations with



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Beth Massey, WVU/Monongalia County extension agent, and Seneca Center manager Jerry Hall inspect the former glass factory's furnace stack as they plan the layout for the center's indoor farmers' market. Organized by Seneca Center manager Jerry Hall.

Renovations will relocate into the center's furnace room following an Ohio-based historical architect.

"Following an initial inspection of the furnace room, he determined the exterior sheathing we're considering replacing was not original to the structure and could be removed," Hall said.

The architect also noted the structural posts and beams supporting the furnace room's siding and roof are a unique design, surrounding the distinctive round chimneystack without actually touching it at any point. The factory's original designers allowed an 8 inch gap around the stack at the roofline to accommodate its considerable expansion when the furnace was fired up to full-blast temperatures.

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Bethy Massey
WVU extension agent

Hall and Massey are researching possible grant sources for financial assistance with the furnace room reconstruction. Funds offered by agencies and organizations involved in sustainable agricultural research, economic development and historic preservation appear feasible... "but we're always looking for addi-

tional grant sources," Massey said. As Seneca market organizers plan the project's physical environment, Massey is confronting the challenge of developing a supply-and-demand market environment capable of sustaining a viable year-round outlet for local agricultural products. "In the past, many area farm-

ers haven't considered marketing directly to consumers because they haven't had a consistently stable and organized retail outlet to sell from," she explained.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. We're attempting to establish a reliable market that will encourage farmers to raise sufficient produce to attract buyers consistently week after week.

"But the farmers have to raise the produce before we can establish that consistently attractive market."

Although consumers generally consider locally-grown vegetables and plants the staple of the farmer's market shopping experience, Massey noted a group of Monongalia County beef producers are preparing to direct-market their product at the Seneca market this fall.

Organized as Mon Valley Farms LLC, several Mon County beef producers have modeled their operations on those of Romney-based Headwater Farms to produce "petite beef for this fall's market.

"Instead of sending this spring's 750 pound weaned calves to feed lots, these producers put them on grass and raise them in environmentally-friendly conditions with no additional hormones and no antibiotics," Massey explained. "This regimen increases the beef's tenderness and decreases its fat content.

"The beef will be processed and packaged at USDA facilities and sold directly to the general public. We hope to have the first Mon County petite beef available at the Seneca market this fall."

But before the arrival of petite beef, Seneca market customers can anticipate weekly availability of farm-fresh eggs, vegetables, flowers and bedding plants and perhaps locally-produced honey. Organizers anticipate the scope and variety of produce available at the market eventually will expand to include "value-added" agricultural items.

"We only have two rules for market vendors at this time: they must register with the extension office at 291-7201 before the Saturday market and they must have produced the goods they plan to sell," Massey said.

"For example, area wool producer Susan Elkins raises her own sheep, shears them and spins the wool herself. She might sell her wool yarn at the market as 'value-added' agricultural goods.

"We also plan to add vendor demonstrations as the market develops. For example, we might feature honey extraction one week, cider-making the next, and wool-spinning the next.

"We're working to create a memorable shopping experience for the consumer who wants to be able to say, 'I went to the farmers' market today.'"

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