

Price Hill farm stand does more than sell food

Mini market encourages community members to connect with neighbors

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Ron Landers of East Price Hill picks out sweet corn at the Findlay Market Price Hill farm stand, located in the Roberts Academy parking lot. Organizers of the stand say it doesn't just provide fresh food; it also encourages the community to form relationships with their neighbors and the East Price Hill school. / The Enquirer/Gary Landers



Written by
Carrie Blackmore Smith

If you go

What: Findlay Market Price Hill farm stand

Where: 1702 Grand Ave., East Price Hill

When: 3-6 p.m. Tuesdays

Payment: Findlay Market staff can accept electronic transactions, including credit cards, WIC and SNAP benefits for fruits and vegetables, but the independent vendors generally take cash only.

EAST PRICE HILL — Some Tuesday afternoons in the Roberts Academy parking lot off Grand Avenue, there's a man churning ice cream on a stationary bike contraption. Most weeks, fresh breads and specialty cheeses beckon shoppers. And sometimes, if you're lucky, a local pastor is selling his homemade Guatemalan pastries.

And shoppers can always expect to find fresh, local fruits and vegetables.

Since opening in the parking lot of the Cincinnati public school the first week of July, the Findlay Market Price Hill farm stand's offerings have grown slowly, as has awareness of the humble operation – run out of a converted metal shipping container, like one you'd see hauled by a train or semi truck.

The farm stand idea seems to be accomplishing its goals: making nutritious food accessible and engaging the community, said Karen Kahle, Findlay Market's resource development director. Kahle sees these mini markets – and they're envisioning more – as proof of Findlay's commitment to rebuild a local, healthy food system in Cincinnati.

“Public markets ... are about community,” Kahle said, and while many of us love to eat seasonal foods, like melons and sweet corn, “sometimes we forget that some people don't have access to fresh food.”

The West Side is beginning to see the market bear such fruit, literally and figuratively, said Tracy Power, resource coordinator at Roberts Academy, which has a diverse student population in which more than 40 percent of its students are learning English as their second language.

With a Kroger store less than 1½ miles away, it's not as much about creating an oasis in a food desert (a problem with which other parts of the city wrestle) as it is providing options and encouraging the community to forge relationships with their neighbors and the school, Power said. Each week the market has volunteer translators on hand to encourage such interaction.

“We want to re-establish our schools as hubs in their neighborhoods,” Power said. “The market is perfect for that.”

To organizers' surprise, the farm stand is almost breaking even, which was not anticipated, Kahle said. It cost \$15,000 to start, \$10,000 of which came from an anonymous donor. Findlay Market currently pays the \$100-a-week gap between sales and labor costs, Kahle said, a price they're willing to pay while aiming to eventually break even.

The market drew the attention of East Price Hill resident Heather Wigle, whose kids attend other CPS schools. She set up a stand with free water and is selling T-shirts sewn into sturdy shopping bags.

"It's not about making money," Wigle said, with a chuckle. "This is my fourth week and I think I've sold three bags.

"Price Hill has gotten a bad rap, but most of the people who are giving it a bad rap are either part of the problem or don't want to be part of the solution."

She wants to see the market grow and decided to do her part, but also sees value in buying local foods that contain fewer chemicals and leave a smaller carbon footprint.

People are beginning to expect the seasonal, locally grown options, said Jenni Holthause, a third-grade Roberts teacher from Cheviot, who has made a habit of picking up a few things each Tuesday.

"The only downfall is when they close (for the winter) we'll be spoiled by the quality and the convenience," she said.

For now, Findlay plans to keep the Price Hill farm stand open as far into the month of November as possible, Kahle said, and is excited about opening a second farm stand in Bond Hill next summer.

"We're really happy with it," Kahle said. "We said, 'Hey, let's try this' – and we did it. Sometimes ideas like this get talked about for years and never happen." ■