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City Market's top priority: Filling all those vacancies

WHEN ARTISTS AND ART LOVERS ALIKE descend on the Indianapolis City Market this month for the Gennesaret Free Clinic's annual Art for Beds fund-raiser, they will find themselves in an idyllic setting which has been an anchor of Downtown activity since the 1880s.

Idyllic, from an artistic and historic perspective. Idyllic from a business standpoint, not so much.

The Indianapolis City Market is at a crossroads – a familiar situation for the historic marketplace which has struggled for several decades to find its place among a world in which produce-growers no longer bring their wagons to the heart of Downtown every day.

A year after the completion of an agonizingly drawn-out renovation project that tested the mettle of City Market vendors (and scuttled a few) foot traffic remains slow at the venerable institution. The much-publicized \$2.7 million facelift was part of a larger master plan to broaden the market's appeal by ending its modern-day image as a "lunch counter." Hours would be longer, more fresh goods would be sold, Saturday hours would be emphasized – enticing not only Downtown workers but also Downtown residents to shop.

The idea, however, failed to take hold. Renovation delays cost the City Market one major new vendor who would have specialized in wine and gourmet foods. Another fresh-food producer, Moody Meats, opened in a prime location at the front of the Historic Market House, only to close a few months later.

Only Constantino's, a long-time produce stand returning to the market by relatives of the original owners, has stayed open in the middle of the Market House, surrounded by those "lunch counter" people who have been relocated to the perimeter of the structure where improved infrastructure serves their food-service needs.

Into this scenario has come two familiar faces – Jim Reilly, who served as the market's executive director from June 1994 through April 2000, and who returned to that post late last year; and Stevi Stoesz, who worked alongside Reilly for several years



◀ The Indianapolis City Market is currently marred by numerous empty stalls, including three prime locations at the front of the historic Market Hall.

and has returned as director of business development and public relations.

Much has happened since Reilly's departure nine years ago – but not much has changed, he said.

"We have a building that's brighter, with a new floor, but a lot of the old maintenance issues," said Reilly, who pointed out that the major renovation

still didn't address heating and air-conditioning issues. Still, Reilly said he was flattered to be asked to return, adding that his first move was to call Stoesz, who was particularly important in resurrecting the Original Farmers Market on summertime Wednesdays. (The 2009 Farmers Market will begin on Wednesday, May 6, with Stoesz promising some "old favorites" to return to the weekly lineup.)

Getting Downtown lunch-goers and shoppers back into the City Market isn't the pair's only problem. City budget problems has brought a more urgent issue. Historically, city government has covered the market's annual utility bills, which run from \$250,000 to \$275,000. Last year, that support was cut \$100,000; same for this year. Reilly expects city funding to be non-existent by next year, or perhaps 2011.

"We have to explore, create, manufacture other sources of

revenue,” Reilly said. “We’re even exploring naming rights,” a strategy he fully understands will be opposed by many. “But right now, we have to do some creative thinking.” Reilly said the business slowdown caused by the 2007 renovation hurt vendors, who he said are now “into their savings, their retirement plans. I felt their pain; they’re my friends.”

Reilly and Stoesz believe the market is a perfect host for special events such as Art for Beds, or the recent “Venetian Carnevale” Italian Mardi Gras. The mostly vacant East Wing and the Market Hall’s picturesque Mezzanine are both fitting venues for such goings-on. “We want entertainment, and to especially support local artists,” said Stoesz, listing corporate events, small receptions and even pilates classes as possibilities.

Still, the higher priority is to get those lunch-time shoppers back into the building. Reilly and Stoesz know the economy is part of the problem, but also many Downtown workers found lunch alternatives during the renovation – and have stuck with those alternatives.

“Before, the place was alive, a lot of fun,” said Stoesz, who added that vibe ended when City Market vendors became depressed during the renovation. “They were anxious to get going again, and it affected the culture of the standowners. Now, attitudes are getting better. We’re starting to see there is light at the end of the tunnel.”

Whether there is actually an end to that tunnel is another question. With Reilly’s return and the perfect storm of economic events swirling about, the strategy has shifted, once again, to lunch-counter business.

“We’re surrounded by thousands of people,” Reilly said. “We’ve got to figure out how to get them here.” He is not so much worried about the master strategy to move away from the lunch-counter business, although the broader approach still applies.

“We’re not abandoning that goal,” he said of the effort to bring more fresh foods to the market, “but we’re in a business crisis right now. We have to generate income.” He added, “Ideally, this should be a fresh urban market – but I see the place is half-empty.”

Reilly said he wants to fill those vacancies with the “best vendors” he can. Later, as leases expire, he will be more aggressive about fresh-food options. “It’s not happening overnight,” he said, “because that’s a drastic cultural shift.”

Added Stoesz, “We will strongly encourage the retail component.” Encourage, not mandate.

Reestablishing the City Market as a hub for fresh produce faces several obstacles – not the least of which is the perception that there is no parking. Not true. Since the demolition of Market



▲ Lunch business is increasing again, after setbacks caused by the year-long renovation.

Square Arena, a sizable (albeit gravel) parking lot has existed just across Alabama Street. Both Reilly and Stoesz understand that the Market has not done enough to promote the fact that the space is available, very cheaply, for City Market shoppers.

“Parking has been a problem for 50, 60 years,” Reilly said, adding that it will go back to being a major roadblock when the Market Square Arena site is finally developed.

Stoesz also believes the City Market’s hours – generally 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays and 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays – doesn’t work, especially if the market is to ever evolve beyond the lunch-counter concept. “Six-to-six doesn’t do it for Downtown residents, who may not get home until 6,” she said, proposing that vendors should stay open until 8 or 9 p.m., and move away from the breakfast hours, when business has slowed considerably. Delivery and pick-up should also be promoted, Reilly added.

There are plenty of clouds on the City Market horizon, but there are rays of sun as well. Stoesz sees a growing Downtown residential base, one filled with people who are concerned about what kind of food they eat.

“People are getting back to the basics,” she said. “There’s a social consciousness. Buy fresh, buy local,” a trend which she said bodes well for small business incubators found in the City Market.

Reilly admits that some days, “I wake up at 5:30, stare at the ceiling and say what the hell did I get myself into.” That is not to say he is fatalistic about the future of the City Market. “We did not come back here to fail,” he said.