

The birth of a farmers market



By Michael S. Rohde

Eight years ago, while I was mayor, Dennis Barry paid me a visit and said, "I am recently retired from the State Department of Social Services and would like to volunteer to help the city." I jotted down some of the projects we were working on where we could use help and Dennis selected the Meriden farmers market.

The farmers market had been running for years in an obscure location on Butler Street and we were looking for activities and events to bring into downtown Meriden to encourage people to come to our center city. I decided we should move the market to the future site of the new park at the corner of the highly trafficked East Main and Pratt streets where the vendors would be more visible.

It turned out that Dennis Barry had an administrative role with the State Department of Social Services overseeing Connecticut's farmers markets, and he not only took the lead forming the Meriden farmers market committee, but also recruited two of his retired friends — Ed Peczynski and Mark Kosnoff — to join him. Dennis, Ed and Mark made countless phone calls to possible vendors, researched other farmers markets for new ideas, and added food offerings and a variety of vendors.

We also added new members to our committee: Pam Fields, executive director of the Meriden ARC

who took over as market master; Peter Burch, who took over our website and outreach duties, and Paola Mantilla from the Meriden Economic Development office who helped solicit market sponsors.

The committee met regularly to organize and implement the farmers market plan which we wanted to expand in a permanent location somewhere in the new park. Although the relocated market was an immediate hit and quickly outpaced the business at the previous location, construction plans for the flood control project forced us to move to Colony St. for two seasons. Construction on that site then forced us to move to Cedar Street as we awaited the final move to the new Meriden Green.

Once the Meriden Green opened and we were back near our original location, we noticed an immediate uptick in business as customers — both old and new — frequented the Saturday morning market. We had a success on our hands.

This year we added picnic tables as a convenience. These were constructed by a local trade school, CWI II, and the John G. Martin Foundation funded the materials. These tables have come in handy not only for market customers to enjoy while listening to the weekly live music (provided by Concerts for Causes) but also for the summer free lunch program where any child under 18 can receive a free nutritious lunch. This program is a partnership with New Opportunities of Meriden and the board of education. So far, over 80 chil-

dren each week have come to the market for their lunches. Local restaurant Nina's Cafe, another new addition to the market, has been providing fresh breakfast sandwiches and coffee to market customers. The market also offers fresh baked bread along with freshly picked fruits and vegetables.

A variety of vendors offer crafts and jewelry, bread pudding, fresh cut flowers, candles and fragrances, herbal gels, baby products, healthy recipe offerings. Non-profit organizations provide information booths on a host of health related topics. The Saturday morning farmers market has become an important place for small retail businesses to sell their wares.

Each year, the market offers theme days focused on attracting children and families. This coming Saturday, August 29, from 8:30 a.m. to noon, is a "back to school" themed day and will feature all the regular vendors plus a few more. There will be bouncy houses, face painting, a DJ, children's games with prizes and educational giveaways from the BOE and info booths about the upcoming school year. There will also be a special appearance by Batman and Batwoman along with a replica of the famous Batmobile.

This promises to be a great fun event for children, grandchildren and their families this Saturday morning. All the children's activities are free. We hope to see you there.

Michael S. Rohde is former mayor and city councilor of Meriden.