

PEDALING for PRODUCE

By Ted Villaire



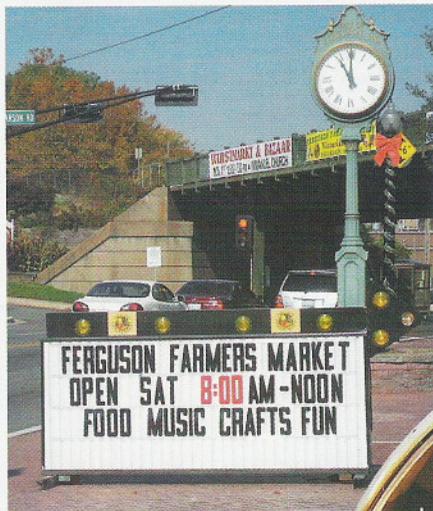
Once Lee Ristow and her husband discovered a farmers' market along a rail-trail near their home, they were hooked. Now nearly every week during the market season Ristow and her husband cycle along the Old Plank Road Trail from the outskirts of Joliet, Ill., to that farmers' market in the village of Frankfort.

"It's a great way to combine our love of bicycling with our interest in eating healthy foods," Ristow says. "When we stop at the [Frankfort] market, we buy some fresh produce, we have lunch and take a break." Ristow, who plans to retire soon, looks forward to the 20-mile round-trip ride and seeing familiar faces at the market. Even more important, she says the steady regimen of exercise and good food has contributed to improved health for her and her husband. Ristow believes farmers' markets and rail-trails are natural allies in the effort to get people outdoors and to increase healthy habits.

This alliance is not just good for the body, it's good for the environment, too, by reducing consumption of fossil fuels. Locally produced food requires less transportation to reach buyers, and hopping on a rail-trail to get to a farmers' market likely means one less car on the road. Another appealing feature of this alliance between farmers' markets and rail-trails is the spotlight it casts on local encounters. Whether you're chatting with fellow community members at the market, exploring unfamiliar neighborhoods along a rail-trail or enjoying the taste of locally grown produce, local flavor is front and center.

Weekend Oasis

The 21-mile Old Plank Road Trail stretches from Joliet east to the small suburban community of Park Forest. At its halfway point,



TIMOTHY MERELO

the trail bisects Frankfort's historic downtown and passes under a 132-foot-high grain elevator—a monument to the community's agricultural roots. Frankfort's quiet downtown streets, peppered with attractive architecture from the late 1800s, stand in stark contrast to the surrounding suburban landscape that leans toward big shopping malls and wide roads with fast-moving traffic.

Each Sunday from June to October, the farmers' market brings a festival-like atmosphere to Frankfort's compact downtown

area. In the flower-fringed village green beside the market, musicians entertain audiences from a small amphitheater. After shopping at the market, some people relax on the grassy lawn and listen to the music, their bags stuffed with produce, bread and blossoms. Others picnic on bratwurst, sandwiches and pieces of pie from the market. Throughout the day, cyclists, runners, dog walkers and parents with strollers briefly abandon the trail to survey the vendors' offerings.

"If people were just driving by, it's unlikely they would stop in at the market," says Diann Moore, who sells her organic produce and meat from grass-fed livestock at the Frankfort market. "But if they happen to pass by on the trail, it's so easy for them to stop in. The trail brings in many people from

(Left) A sign welcomes visitors to the Ferguson Farmers' Market north of St. Louis, Mo. The market is accessible via the local Ted Jones Bike Trail.



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the neighboring communities. It helps spread the word about the market.”

Moore says she's thrilled to see farmers' markets around the nation benefiting from a growing awareness that locally produced food tastes better, cuts down on the use of fossil fuels for transportation and typically offers more nutritional value. Indeed, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that in the past 15 years the number of farmers' markets around the country has jumped from 1,755 to 4,685.

Conversation Starter

Spend some time at a farmers' market and you'll hear a steady flow of casual conversation. (It's not your imagination: Researcher Robert Sommer estimates people have 10 times more conversations at farmers' markets than at grocery stores.) The outdoor setting and direct contact with growers and producers set the stage for social interaction. At

some markets, interest in providing a venue for establishing connections in the community is as strong as the desire to offer good food. That's the case in Susanville, a small northern California town where organizers want their market and an adjoining rail-trail to serve as a social hub.

Susanville is known for its three prisons. An inmate population of more than 11,000 far outnumbers the 7,000 town residents. And nearly half of Susanville's adult residents work at the prisons. Unfortunately,

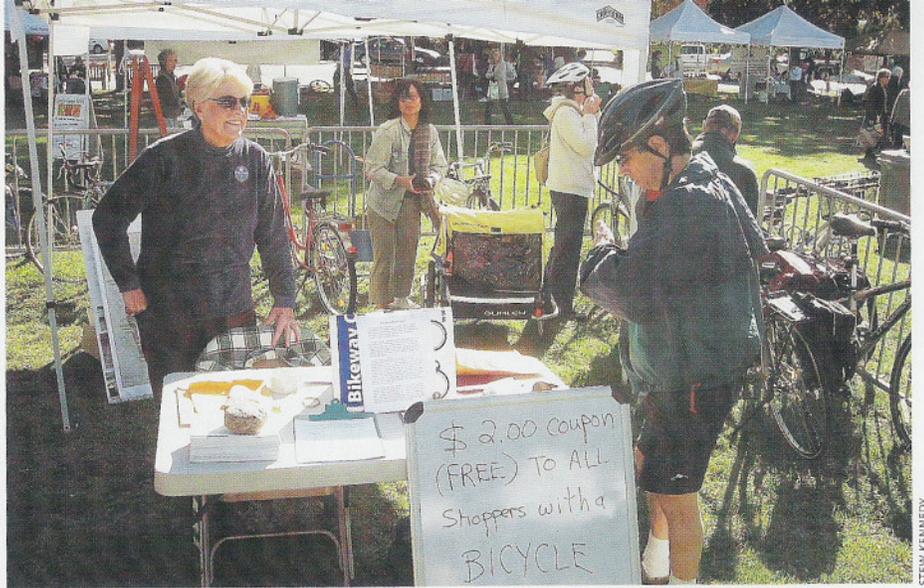
the prisons create a transient work environment in which many townspeople don't get to know their neighbors, says Matt Sayles, executive director of Lassen Land & Trails Trust, the organization that oversees Susanville's farmers' market and the refurbished train depot that serves as the trailhead for the Bizz Johnson National Recreation Trail. Prison staff, he explains, regularly receive transfers or promotions to work at other facilities. People who move to Susanville to be close to their loved ones who are incarcerated come and go as well.

Sayles and his staff firmly believe the Bizz Johnson trail can help fix the holes in the town's social fabric. Since it opened 20 years ago (and soon became Susanville's most popular tourist destination), the 25-mile trail has provided residents with a place to exercise and soak up the drama of the surrounding

high-desert landscape. But the trail and the depot—containing a small museum and visitor center—also offer a locale where a variety of people come together.

Every Saturday morning for the past 10 years, residents have crowded the depot parking lot for the summer farmers' market. Dave Sowers, manager of the Susanville market, says that, for a small, somewhat isolated town in the Sierra foothills, he's impressed by the number of people who arrive at the market via the rail-trail, located about 40 feet from the market. He expects even more will take advantage of this partnership in the next few years as the trail extends through a more residential part of Susanville.

Sowers says he works at cultivating a comfortable atmosphere at the market so visitors will linger and chat. He sets out chairs and keeps the coffee brewing. And he invites local nonprofit groups to set up booths at the market. Sowers suspects that half of the market visitors come for shopping and half come for socializing. Patrons talk about the latest happenings in the community, about their



In Lexington, Mass., organizers hand out coupons and host a bike valet for shoppers who pedal to the farmers' market.

families and about the best ways to prepare the market vegetables grown in the nearby Sacramento Valley. "The market has become a great place to hang out and get to know other people from the area," says Sowers.

Doing its part to bring disparate segments of the community together, Lassen Land & Trails Trust has organized a roster of community events at the trailhead, such as an annual rail-trail festival and a series of film nights. "Big parts of the local population are isolated from one another," observes Sayles. "We want to change that."

From Trail to Market

In Lexington, Mass., waves of visitors descend on the farmers' market on Tuesday evenings from the beginning of summer into fall. Some shoppers come by car. Some walk from Lexington's small but bustling historic downtown. Others arrive on the 10.4-mile Minuteman Bikeway—one of the busiest rail-trails in the country—which brushes against the north side of the market.

Getting people to show up at this market never posed a problem. The challenge, as former board member Carolyn Siccama puts it, was getting more people to use the bikeway to get there. Siccama recalls lamenting the amount of time the board of directors spent discussing the market's parking problems in 2007. "It was then I realized that we needed to think about encouraging people to bike to the market," she says.

Siccama recruited fellow members of the Friends of the Minuteman Bikeway to organize a series of Bike to Market Days. They started small, holding one event in 2007 and two events in 2008. For each Bike to Market Day, the organizers handed out coupons for bicyclists to use at the market, hosted a bike valet service, and enlisted a local bike shop to display panniers and bike trailers and provide simple bike checks. Getting the bike shop involved proved to be a key element, says Siccama, who has moved away from the area. "People need good advice about carrying groceries on a bike," she explains. "That lack of knowledge can hold some of them back."

Given the bustling nature of the Minuteman Bikeway, Stew Kennedy wasn't surprised the Bike to Market Days generated strong interest. He surely was pleased, though. "I love to see cyclists on the trail discover the market," says Kennedy, a local cycling advocate and a Bike to Market Days organizer. Conversely, he adds, "it's great



Produce on display just off the Old Plank Road Trail in Frankfort.



TWO FOR ONE

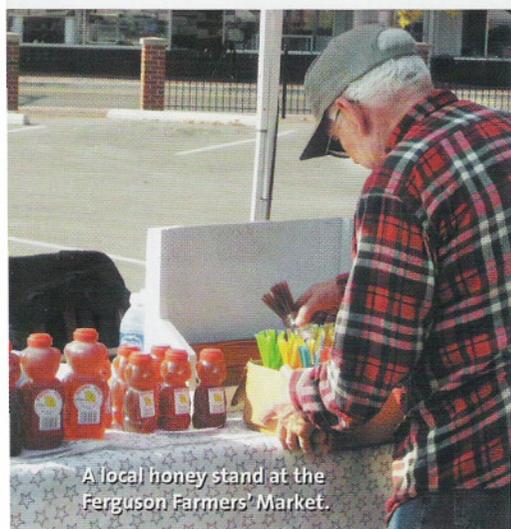
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to see people shopping at the market learn about the trail for the first time.” After only three Bike to Market Days, Kennedy and other organizers have seen more people arrive at the market on bikes, but they have yet to see substantial improvements in the local parking problem. Kennedy is optimistic that long-term education efforts will change that. “As more people learn how easy it is to use the bikeway to get to the market, more people will get out of their cars.”

Kennedy enjoys the Minuteman’s wooded parkland, its ponds and the historic attractions along the way, such as the Lexington Battle Green where the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired. (Both the Minuteman and the Bizz Johnson are recent inductees into Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s



A local honey stand at the Ferguson Farmers' Market.

TIMOTHY MERELLO

Rail-Trail Hall of Fame.) He also looks forward to stopping by the Lexington Farmers' Market for friendly conversation and a few grocery items.

Kennedy believes using a rail-trail and visiting a farmers' market complement each other well. “When biking to the market ... we produce no extra carbon dioxide, help to support local agriculture, get fresh air and exercise, meet friends, and put flavorful and healthful food on our tables,” he says. “It’s a winning practice all the way around. It just can’t be beat.”

Ted Villaire, author of *60 Hikes Within 60 Miles: Chicago*, writes about outdoor excursions in the Midwest at www.tedvillaire.com.

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