

Best Practice

Swift Current Market Square

CONTACT

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THE PRACTICE

The development of Market Square was inspired in part by Swift Current's Council: "To be a growing, vital, thriving city, the choice location in which to live, work, invest, visit and play". One strategic thrust that supports the City's vision is to promote it as a prosperous business, cultural and recreational center by encouraging and facilitating co-operative community development; promoting tourism; supporting community based cultural initiatives; supporting existing businesses to ensure retention and expansion; promoting development of a sense of pride in the city; and continuing to support ways to revitalize the downtown area in order to be attractive to investors and new residents.

Six years ago City Administration and some businesses took steps towards revitalizing downtown, the outcome of which will support the City's vision and strategic thrust as outlined above. The development of Market Square was envisioned as a strong component to support downtown revitalization, one that would create a sense of excitement in the city core and provide a vibrant venue for attracting residents and visitors alike each Saturday. It was also designed as a vehicle to engage key stakeholders-the Chamber of Commerce, malls and other businesses on the city's periphery, local farmers, the cultural community, artisans, and City Administration- to work collaboratively on economic development for Swift Current.

A Vibrant, Revitalized Downtown: From June through September every Saturday a section of downtown known as Centennial Plaza is transformed into a hustling and bustling community: Market Square, a vibrant and thriving backdrop for the revitalization of Swift Current's downtown. As a community hub and social gathering place it hosts 1,000 to 2,000 visitors each Saturday, attracting people from Swift Current and the surrounding communities as well as other parts of Saskatchewan and Canada. Patrons arrive early to listen to non-stop live, local entertainment, learn about Swift Current history, and shop from the diverse groups of merchants who are comprised of local farmers, producers and artisans as well as merchants from as far away as Medicine Hat, SK; Saskatoon, SK; Red Cliff, Alberta; and Osoyoos, BC!

Collaboration: In keeping with the collaborative process initiated when developing Market Square, this initiative has brought together diverse groups to work with City Administration around a common goal. Stakeholders involved include Granma Bep and the Farmer's Market, Hutterite farmers, organic food growers, local crafts people, small home-based merchants, downtown businesses, business sponsors, the Living Sky Casino and the Broncos Hockey Team to name a few- all working together in some way through Market Square. Establishing and evolving Market Square is the beginning of a planned, on-going community engagement approach to developing our city which has

been an amazing metamorphosis from skepticism to enthusiasm with an ever-increasing circle of collaboration and co-creation.

THE PROCESS

City Council was instrumental in implementing this venture by approving it, providing funding on an annual basis and supporting the time commitment needed to dedicate to the project- City Administration - in order to realize the dream and vision. From the beginning the City has been, and continues to be to this day, the key driver in supporting and growing Market Square by defining and providing a framework for the operation, establishing health and safety guidelines, sourcing and providing support to vendors, supplying overall infrastructure and facilities, organizing entertainment and events, and ensuring funding, both in terms of City funds and securing sponsorship dollars. The City budget has increased since the first year and the results and excitement throughout the community have been phenomenal. It is anticipated that future budgets will have continued financial support from City Council and an increase in that provided by the community, especially businesses across the city, not just downtown.

City Staff: In addition to the support and vision of City Council Senior Administration were and continues to be, extensively engaged in the project. The Administrative departments provide assistance. With their labour and dedicated time to the Market Square, it has become a resounding success. Staff helped in a variety of ways, from phoning potential vendors and entertainers to being present at the event and physical setting up and taking down the tents, seating, tables, signs and anything else required to make the Market a success. Every week a variety staff members and volunteers hand out popcorn, toys, stickers and balloons to children attending the Market and make certain that Market Square continues to be a success.

Administrative staff spends a great deal of time organizing and arranging for vendors and entertainers and promotes the event to ensure that there is a substantial turn-out on a weekly basis throughout the entire season. They also develop various advertising pieces and promote ongoing communication with the community through various media including newspaper ads, posters, online media, and other media outlets. Tim Marcus, Marlene Johnson, and other city employees are at the Market every week, mingling with patrons and trouble-shooting as needed.

As this initiative was developed to create excitement in downtown Swift Current, help revitalize the area and ultimately help to increase sales within the local downtown stores, it was critical to have the support, enthusiasm and marketing efforts of the business community. Initial interest was not strong; however, several key businesses were excited and became involved, some to the point of providing sponsorship of the event. Through tireless efforts on the part of the City supported by the incredible evolution of Market Square, support from businesses this has become the most successful and important ongoing event in downtown Swift Current.

Market Square Advisory Committee: Market Square has been a work in progress. It was initiated by City staff, however, we soon realized we needed more people on board! The Swift Current Market Square Advisory Committee was formed after the completion of the first year. The formation of this committee was a key step and critical in the expansion of Market Square. It was a vehicle to engage some downtown businesses as well as other key stakeholders to share their energies, ideas and/or concerns. Arts and Culture organizations and City Staff from several departments were included. Consequently, people were appointed to the following positions: Market Manager, Entertainment Coordinator, Communications and Advertising Coordinator, Vendor Bookings and Operations Coordinator, Arts and Culture/History Coordinator and a Farmers' Market representatives. We also recruited volunteers.

The Farmer's Market: We learned a lot during that initial start-up year. We had not had dialogue with the existing Swift Current Farmer's Market, which had been held at the Wheatland Mall and the Swift Current Mall over the years

on Thursday evenings and on Saturdays. We realized in hindsight that we should have engaged the Farmer's Market in our planning. We invited the Farmers Market Committee to meet with us and explore a partnership. Well the rest, as they say, is history! Once we included this group in Market Square, we expanded beyond our expectations. Market Square would not be what it is today without them and the partnership has been strong and of benefit to everyone!

Funding: It was imperative to ensure that adequate financing was available from the City, particularly in the first year as the initiative is established. Additionally, every effort was made to engage sponsors, both "in-kind" and financial. Revenue from vendor involvement is additional funding but is not a significant source of income as these costs, especially in the first few years, must be kept reasonable in order to encourage participation. As of today, the event has become a huge success- by this point strong partnerships have been formed, and both sponsorship and in-kind donations have increased, playing a vital role in keeping costs to a minimum.

Sponsorship: We have been fortunate to secure several key sponsorships for this event- a critical element in on-going success, Standard Motors has taken over as our Presenting Sponsor and has committed to substantial support. Innovation Credit Union, our Stage Sponsor Other businesses have provided support. Southwest TV News has provided advertising at a reduced rate. Over the years we have added a "Business of the Day" to engage downtown and other business. This has proven a very successful venture. It provides them with a great way to advertise and have a presence at Market Square. Some distribute free cupcakes and coffee; others provide face painting and gift draws. Businesses are seeing that involvement pays off!

Staffing: Many hours were, and continue to be, needed for the Market Square initiative. Our planning meetings started in January and continued until it started in June. Initially all effort was City-driven with the involvement of staff and volunteers and strong involvement from City staff continues. Proper staffing and strong organization has been a major element in our success. As revenues increased, we were able to hire a few Market Square Staff: a Manager and Market Maggie, the hostess. It was also critical that City Public Works and other departments were committed to Market Square.

Marketing: The City of Swift Current has provided advertising to promote this initiative. This includes brochures, signage, light standard banners in the downtown core, articles in the Leader Post and advertising in various magazines, newspapers, radio and other media outlets. This includes Fine Lifestyles Magazine, Country Register, local and surrounding area newspapers, digital signs at key locations in the City, a billboard on City Hall and local radio stations. We included billboards along the TransCanada Highway. Fortunately, production costs are a onetime expense and were supported by our Presenting Sponsor, Standard Motors.

Key Steps:

- work with City Council and Administration to get approval and support for the venture
- secure space, speaking with merchants in the area to minimize any potential difficulties with the location
- source vendors, ensuring contact with both willing and skeptical prospects
- undertake essential start-up improvements and strategies for drawing in vendors and participants
- source entertainment
- advertise the event
- source City staff and volunteers
- we were fortunate to establish an excellent working relationship with the Farmers Market

Critical and Central Factors

- A continued desire and commitment to addressing and responding promptly to the needs of both vendors and patrons. Whether acquiring tents to shield vendors and patrons from the elements, setting up portable

hand-washing stations, or providing extra seating for patrons, success has hinged on the fact that both the CAO and up to 4 other City staff are at the Square all day each Saturday to act as hosts, mingle with vendors and patrons, and respond immediately to emergent needs- whatever they may be.

- Continued response to patrons needs in terms of services and entertainment that appeal to a cross-section of people, including children, youth and seniors - continuing to expand the vendor base to provide an array of consumer choices
- Continuing to reach out to businesses in the community that are outside of the downtown core to engage them in the Market Square in ways that will benefit them
- Maintaining a personal connection with everyone and ensuring that City staff, including the CAO, are engaged and visible at all times

THE RESULTS

Effects on the Community: Market Square has become well known in the City of Swift Current, southwest Saskatchewan, and even attracts consumers and vendors from beyond provincial borders. It brings diverse groups together in a welcoming, friendly atmosphere and generates traffic and excitement in the downtown core, supporting its revitalization

Promoting Diversity: Market Square has brought an exciting array of experiences to the city core and a wonderful synergy between the arts and culture and commerce.

Community Spirit: Connecting and Collaborating The vibrant atmosphere created by Market Square has cultivated an indescribable “Community Spirit”. A social gathering place in downtown Swift Current, it is a weekly focal point for all: grandparents and grandchildren; families and teenagers; locals and tourists; those who have lived in the community since birth, those that have returned, and newcomers from across Canada and the world; city leaders and politicians; as well as business people large and small, local and from other communities.

Fueling the Economy: There is strong indication that Market Square is beginning to have an impact on the economy of Swift Current.

LESSONS LEARNED

To start this type of initiative, you need strong committed leadership from Mayor and Council, senior administration (CAO), staff, volunteers, and business. It is critical to engage many stakeholders and form strong partnerships (with the arts and culture community, businesses across the city and area producers, as well as suppliers in order to maximize success and minimize costs for the City. We learned that clear, convincing and effective communication is critical- with prospective partners, sponsors, vendors, suppliers and patrons. And finally, it is critical to have good sponsors!

We also learned that other factors were critical to success including timely and advertised street closures, adequate power supply and a quick response from City staff in the case of power problems, assistance with set up of major equipment, and additional staff to assist during adverse weather. Additionally, it is imperative to actively engage the community during the event by maintaining a significant City presence. This sends the message that the event is important to the City and also gives opportunity to address issues on the ground and respond in a personal and timely fashion. Ongoing networking and connecting with the business community is critical in order to grow the event.

Finally, we learned that it is critical to engage the whole community by having something for everyone and that ongoing entertainment sets a positive and festive tone which attracts all demographics!

There are several things we would do differently. These include establishing critical partnership as early as possible in the process. For example, we would have done well to contact Swift Current Farmers Market before the start of year one. We would have liked to have had a more established downtown business-based partnership. We also would have benefited from stronger relationships with organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and Swift Current Tourism- something we are working towards. In retrospect it may have been advantageous to have a designed "Event Coordinator" for all the organizing, but then again we would have missed all the fun and exciting learning opportunities: the "trial and error" approach.