

Three markets join forces to make local food more accessible in Northwestern Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

In rural Northwestern Pennsylvania, three independent markets, each with a similar mission to provide their community with local food, have been working together since 2022 to aggregate and distribute locally grown and made products among their markets. This case study highlights how these markets continue to work together to support producers in accessing markets and to provide their own customers with more local products.



Edinboro Market (Erie County) is a nonprofit entity founded in 2017 and uses a consignment model with its farmers and producers. The market is run by the founders, Marti Martz and Curtis Hals. Edinboro Market operated in a rented 900 square foot space from 2017–2025, and recently expanded into a purchased 3,450 square foot building. Educational classes on topics related to food preservation, farming, cooking, and gardening have been offered year-round since its inception.



Core Goods (Venango County) is a private LLC owned by Ashley Sheffer, and first opened in 2018. In 2022, the market moved to a 2,000 square foot building, doubling its footprint. Core Goods purchases its products wholesale and provides house-made “grab and go” meal options, incorporating local food and reducing food waste from its retail floor. In September 2024, Core Goods also renovated and opened their Community Space, connected to their store, where they host a variety of classes around food and sustainability.



The Meadville Market House (Crawford County) is municipally-owned by the City of Meadville, operating in the same 3,250 square foot building since 1850. A full-time market manager, Jesse Pane, oversees all activities within the market. In recent years, it has operated with a dual consignment-wholesale business model. In addition to the indoor space, the Market House hosts a weekly outdoor farmers market May–October.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

All three markets employ several part-time staff to help with retail, but none have full-time positions beyond the owners/managers.

These three markets face similar challenges of procuring a wide variety of local foods in a region where driving distances are far, and small producers are often less inclined to deliver products to a small market themselves. In 2022, the market managers and owners together applied for and received a USDA Healthy Fresh Financing Initiative grant to pilot a collaborative distribution model.

With this funding, they were able to purchase coolers for transportation and additional walk-in refrigeration for holding goods prior to distribution, as well as reimburse their travel mileage from transporting goods between markets. With the addition of two farmer collaborators, who both sell to all three markets, the group takes turns weekly driving among the markets to pick up and deliver products. Farmers and producers know that they must deliver to the market of their choice by a specific time in order to have their products move to the other markets along the distribution route.

CHALLENGES

While the group has been coordinating product distribution among the three markets for almost three years, the collaboration hinges on an informal agreement among several dedicated individuals. The markets operate independently of one another, and do not have shared finances.

Weekly coordination for which products will be available and need to be moved among the markets takes place via a shared Google Sheet spreadsheet, as well as additional follow-up texts and phone calls. The physical transportation of products is done directly by the market owners or managers (with occasional help from staff and volunteers) with their personal vehicles.



REFINING THE PLAN

In April of 2024, the group received financial support from Pasa Sustainable Agriculture and the Richard King Mellon Foundation to explore and develop a cooperative business plan with guidance from Good Roots (formerly Kitchen Table Consultants). The intent of this work was to formalize the distribution model and provide a mechanism for shared financial responsibility.

However, over the course of several consulting sessions to explore first steps toward this goal, the group determined that a joint business was not the solution they were seeking, at least for now.

The primary reasons they identified were:

1. Limited financial resources among all three markets to contribute toward a joint business venture and expenses such as hiring a driver for weekly transport
2. Challenges in identifying baseline financials due to varied bookkeeping and different business models (non-profit, for-profit, and municipally-owned)
3. Other separate, competing priorities of the individual markets (e.g. Edinboro Market was simultaneously renovating a purchased building for expansion)

To address these challenges, the group decided to pivot the opportunity to work with Good Roots toward individualized financial consulting for each entity.

Over the course of thirteen sessions each, the markets received input on reorganizing their accounting practices, modeling future cash flow based on different scenarios, pricing products more strategically, and making decisions that impact the business, as well as marketing strategy.

INSIGHTS

The three markets initially thought a joint business plan would best support their ongoing collaboration. However, their decision to instead maintain an informal distribution system and strengthen their individual financial positions provides key insights for other markets.

While the informal system relies on individual collaborators to carry out and continue the weekly distribution of goods, the informality also serves as a strength. Last minute challenges such as weather or illness can be addressed flexibly and markets are able to easily adapt which products they want to offer in their own stores. Additionally, each market can introduce the others to outstanding new products as they come online in their own location; co-marketing promotes a regional promotion of the breadth and depth of small farms and food producers in an area with a fairly short growing season.

The customized financial consulting improved practices at each individual business, better positioning each market to continue their collaborative aggregation and delivery efforts. The group has continued to increase the total number of producers served through the distribution (each market receives products from between 11–20 businesses on the weekly route), and all three markets reported that sales of products that they were able to offer specifically because of the collaboration increased over 40% from the previous year.

By strengthening these three individual markets, the informal collaboration has become stronger and continues to grow the local food system throughout northwestern Pennsylvania.

For more information, please visit www.findnwpafood.com.



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