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# Market Forces: Reviving the Public Market

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# MARKET FORCES:



Or Hi CN#015185



Photograph by Nathan Meszaros

*A vendor from an earlier Portland farmers' market and one circa 2003.*

# REVIVING THE PUBLIC MARKET

An Interview with Ron Paul by Matthew Kauffman Smith

**R**on Paul worked in the restaurant business for 18 years, including 15 as the owner of Ron Paul Charcuterie. Then, as chief of staff in Commissioner Charlie Hales' office in 2000, Paul assembled a citizens group that began to explore the feasibility of a public market in the city. He now leads the effort for the Portland Public Market, drawing upon both of his career paths from the last 20 years.

Paul, who works in the Bureau of Planning, talked to *Metro* about the history of public markets in Portland, the ongoing effort to build the year-round market, and why such an endeavor will benefit the city.

Updates on the current project, including location options, are available at:

[www.portlandpublicmarket.com](http://www.portlandpublicmarket.com).

*Q: Farmers markets are doing very well here in downtown Portland, in neighborhoods such as Hollywood and in towns such as Lake Oswego. Did that have something to do with the idea of a year-round public market?*

*A:* They're very much related, but they're also on ends of a spectrum of promoting and supporting local agriculture and other value-added food products. As a restaurateur, I had been involved in the whole renaissance of Pacific Northwest regional foods. Along with that, came supporting farmers markets. Seeing their success certainly helped fuel the concept of the year-round public market. But interestingly once we got going we found that Portland had an amazing history of public markets, dating back to its founding in the mid 1800s. So we were motivated not only by the renaissance of regional foods and the farmers market, but by being able to connect with that rich history of true public markets that were incorporated into Portland's founding.

*Q: When was the last time a public market existed in Portland?*

*A:* It's been two generations. That market was constructed between 1931 and 1933 and had a very brief history. One of the things that was imperative

in our efforts was to learn from that effort. Here you had this major civic development and it was so short lived that there had to be some fundamental reasons why it went awry. We found several, including the fact that it was born out of a back room City Hall land-speculation deal. It did not have the support of the local vendors who would populate it, and as a result, it didn't have the customer base to support it. It was a volatile question then – and it should rightfully be an important question now so that we don't repeat history and so that we learn from those before us and recognize that public markets seem to be an easy panacea for economic redevelopment and place-making urban revitalization. But they are very delicate retail-sighting decisions.

*Q: So, location, location . . .*

*A:* And location, in ways that a traditional retail developer would look at location, location, location, but also in the ways that a public stewardship of funds would also look at it. Let's use the example of Pioneer Place. Pioneer Place was a local redevelopment effort that required millions of dollars of public subsidy at an important time in Portland's rebirth. But what did it net for us? We have two multi-story blocks with three locally owned retailers in that complex. In terms of its net benefit to the community, some would say that it kept us competitive with other downtowns. Others would say it makes us look identical to other downtowns. The public market is designed to support local businesses and to incubate them to create wealth, not just jobs. The goal of the public market is to steward those funds



This 1933 photograph depicts Portland's first public market on SW Front Street. This building later became home to Portland's other daily newspaper, *The Journal*. OrHi #12710

for urban redevelopment where it will do the most good and where those small, locally owned vendors will thrive in an area that, but for that reinvestment, would probably not have the catalyst to develop.

*Q: I know you've looked at several locations. What is the latest information?*

*A:* The latest information, which by the time this is published may change, or may be confirmed, is looking at Ankeny Square and the Skidmore Fountain building. And that requires a little bit of a domino effect to happen. If you picture that area, the fire station is on the southern end of Ankeny Square. Then on the north flank between the square and Burnside Bridge is the historic Skidmore Building, and Saturday Market is on the parking lot to the east of the Skidmore Building. The fire station moves into Old Town, and those negotiations are underway. The fire station footprint becomes housing and is market-rate housing right along the river parkway with glorious views of Mount Hood and the river. And then the market would be constructed using the renovation of the historic Skidmore Building, with new construction coming east to Naito Parkway and north to about the

Burnside Bridge. So, you have the historic core in the Skidmore Building and then new construction that provides the market pavilion. This site has many amenities, including being right on MAX, being right along the river in the historic area where right across First, the New Market Theater building was one of Portland's early markets in the 1860s and 1870s. And so there are a lot of reasons why this location is appropriate and one that we are interested in pursuing. The real estate negotiations, working cooperatively with the Portland Development



**Pike Street Market, Seattle.**  
Courtesy of Pike Street Market PDA.

Commission in figuring out the pieces in the puzzle, are all part of what needs to be accomplished, including finding the appropriate home for Saturday Market if they are not going to continue on the parking lot that they have called home for quite a while. They are certainly supportive of the addition of the public market to their neighborhood, but understandably, they want to make sure that they have the appropriate site to relocate to.

*Q: Two well-known public markets in the Pacific Northwest include Granville Island in Vancouver, B.C., and Pike Place in Seattle. Did you look at these places as models?*

*A:* Pike Place is what people immediately think of when they conjure an image of the public market. And it's not the best comparison to use for what our efforts are. In part architecturally, there isn't a central focus in terms of a market hall to Pike Place Market, and the fact that the food portion of the Pike Place Market is actually a smaller percentage of their total square footage than what the Portland experience will be. Portland, because of the magic of Saturday Market, can have its market focus exclusively on foods or food-related crafts. You go



**Seattle's very successful Pike Street Market.**  
Courtesy of Pike Street Market PDA.

to Pike Place Market and you'll find T-shirts and tchotchkes and crafts of all sorts, whether they're related to food or not. So the comparison to Granville Island, with its market halls and its steadfast support of food products, is much more in line with the comparisons I would use for the Portland Public Market.

*Q: In order to be a local venue, who all is eligible to be a retailer at the public market?*

*A:* There will be a competitive process. It won't be pre-ordained, but the rules of the road will specify that they need to be locally owned businesses, including locally owned chains, but franchises of national – or even regional firms – would not be included. What we want to appeal to is to the full complexion of Portland, from the small ethnic Latino vendors, to the Russian community, to the Hmong community and others. We want them to be able to have a showcase of their culture and their foods among the market. We also want to showcase those of the majority of culture in showcasing the regional foods and wines. The mantra is: locally owned.

*Q: You mentioned different ethnic groups. For the market to work, you most likely have to have a universal appeal. How will the public market appeal to people of all income levels and all backgrounds?*

*A:* It will not be a Yuppie shopping experience. There are plenty of venues that fulfill that need. The price-value axis is what we're looking at. You can't judge a market and its goods by price alone. We want people to feel always that they are getting full value for the price they pay. I'll use the example of farmers markets. Typically, you'll find the prices to be somewhat higher than discount retailers at a farmers market. But there's no question among the people buying those products that the quality they're receiving is equal to the price – if not greater than – the price they are paying.

*Q: In addition to featuring local vendors, how will the Portland Public Market be an active part of the community?*

*A:* Its other missions are important to understand. First among those is education. The market, as it's being formed, understands what that role is. For kids, it is teaching nutrition and where your food comes from. For younger and older adults, it's to understand the opportunities of working with food and how food intersects with the community in so many ways. Sustainability is another agenda that the mar-

ket has. Not only will we look at creating the best green building for a green market that we can, but we'll also want to have the internal ecosystem reflect that same ethos. We'll be working with shelters, food banks and others to make sure the food has its most appropriate home at every step along the food chain.



**Portland Farmers Market at the Portland Park Blocks.**  
Photograph by Nathan Meszaros

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*Q: Have you received predominantly positive responses from the public so far?*

*A:* On both the vendor and the customer side. If anything, there is a frustration that we would have to wait approximately four or four and a half years from now for the market to open. Most people say, "Well, I want to go shop there by this holiday season." Sorry I can't do that, but having been in the world of private development in my career as a restaurateur, I know that you can move much more quickly in the private sector than you can in the public sector. But for the enduring results that the market has, it will be worth the wait.

*Q: So, the best-case scenario is 2008?*

*A:* 2008 would be a reasonable best-case scenario. If you think of the trajectory of our major civic endeavors, such as the process to create Pioneer Courthouse Square or the Classic Chinese Gardens, any of those major civic improvements and statements all took in the range of eight-to-ten years. As

long of a trajectory as we have, it is par for this type of urban development.

*Q: What is the breakdown of private and public funding?*

*A:* If we anticipate the Ankeny Square site being approximately a \$15 million project, our initial estimates are that one-third of that, or approximately \$5 million dollars, will come from private sources, and the rest would come from a combination of government sources: city, state and federal. It's a very positive investment for the community, but it's positive only if the market succeeds and thrives. The way to ensure that is for the funding plan to acknowledge from the beginning that the market must be built debt-free. And if there are the normal debt-service costs that private developers are accustomed to, the weight on the vendors will be such that they will not thrive in that environment. As a public facility, the investment is up front in paying for it from the beginning, so it carries no debt. And the rent that the vendors pay is sustainable, and it is not going towards either private profit or to paying down debt service.

*Q: I imagine that getting the community excited about the project is a key to the success of the project.*

*A:* It is, and my sense is that once the market opens, Portlanders will feel like it's been here a long time and that we have connected those ancient historic dots, something that most Portlanders couldn't articulate because they haven't necessarily tracked the history of public markets in Portland. But once it's here, it will belong so fundamentally to the community, in the same way that Pioneer Courthouse had that feeling from close to the day it opened. We couldn't imagine anymore what the parking lot that used to be on that block looked like. We can only imagine Pioneer Courthouse Square being there. My sense is once the market develops and Ankeny Plaza revitalizes, that will be the abiding memory of most people.

*Q: Have there been any negative responses so far?*

*A:* There have been legitimate questions: what is the relationship of the public market to the farmers market? Those legitimate questions have led to long soul-searching discussions and an understanding among the farmers markets in the metro area and the public market effort that we are a continuum that supports local agriculture. Part of the supermar-

ket community is perhaps a little concerned. Are we replicating what they are already doing, but using public subsidy to build the market in order to accomplish that? The authenticity of buying from locally owned specialty vendors is something a supermarket, regardless of its ambitions, cannot really deliver. Plus, traditionally public markets have captured such a small traffic niche, compared to the volume of food shopping that goes on in regional supermarkets, that it's not really a threat.

*Q: So is this venture more an extension of the farmers markets than a replacement?*

*A:* It gives the farmers market community an opportunity to expand, to have one more venue if they would chose, but it isn't a replacement. The fact that it goes seven days a week is a way of allowing farmers to participate more regularly than on a one-or-two-day-a-week basis with the existing farmers market. If you, as a farmer, had six or seven bushels of tomatoes and it was on a Thursday and the next scheduled farmers market for you wasn't until Saturday, you knew your tomatoes were at risk. To be able to come on a Thursday and Friday, to be able to sell those tomatoes, is one of the benefits of having a year-round market.

*Q: The farmers markets are generally seasonal markets, usually running from around May to October or November. Will a year-round market stretch farmers agriculturally to start experimenting with greenhouse-grown vegetables? What can we expect in agriculturally lean months such as January?*

*A:* There's a movement called "farming the backside of the calendar," and it's more prevalent in climates that are sunnier and often colder. But local farmers are beginning to experiment with passive



**Portland Farmers Market at the Portland Park Blocks.**  
Photograph by Nathan Meszaros



solar and with greenhouses to be able to keep greens and other rotational crops growing on a year-round basis. The role of a public market, though, is qualitatively different than a farmers market in that we've established the ground rules that all of the vendors are locally owned. But unlike the farmers market, public market vendors need not sell

only what they themselves produce. Let me use an example. I was talking with a group of Astoria fishermen who are very interested in looking at how they can have a presence in the market to sell their fish on a year-round basis. Of course, the selection changes with the catch, and that's part of the beauty of being able to have that kind of direct sales from the fishery. But if you, like me, enjoy cooking that fish with lemon or lime or orange, even with global warming it's going to be a long time before the Willamette Valley produces a citrus product. So, the public market would have not only the local fish, but also the citrus for cooking it. A farmers market wouldn't have that full range. There will be truth-in-labeling laws for the public market, so that the origin of every product will be accurately and consistently labeled as to where it came from or whether it's organic or not. But at the same time, that's an extension, really, and a difference from what farmers markets go through.

*Q: We've been talking about produce, and you mentioned fish and wine. What else can we expect?*

*A:* Meat, everything from beef, lamb and pork, and the full range of seasonal items from the mountains, from wild mushrooms to fern fronds and all sorts of things that are extremely seasonal. If you think of the radius of the market, including what I would call a foodshed, we have not only the Willamette Valley but the Columbia Basin in southwest and parts of southern and eastern Washington. It will all come together in the Portland foodshed basin. The goal of

the public market is to capture as much of that as we can. So, you think of the apples and pears of the Hood River Valley and the potatoes of eastern Oregon and Washington and being able to have fresh-milled flour that is grown from wheat in those areas as well. You have that in addition to the ranches, the fisheries and all of the other food products either in their natural initial state or value-added. With the value-added products you have sausages instead of just pork, you have smoked salmon instead of just fresh salmon. You have dried morels and porcinis instead of just fresh mushrooms. You have pâtés. There's a continuum of value-added products leading up to and including having restaurants be a part of the market as well.

*Q: You've talked about the local vendors and local products, which will undoubtedly give the market a Portland flavor. But is there anything else that will give the public market an undeniably Portland feel?*

*A:* There are implicit and explicit parts of the market. Explicitly, you have the vendors that create the commerce and a certain amount of buzz. Implicitly, you have a chance to create a place and what I would describe as a room in Portland's house. As we have thought in the past of Pioneer Courthouse Square being the city's living room and having transformed a parking lot into that living room, I think of the public market as the city's kitchen and pantry. We go about then transforming a more run-down and less desirable area into a sense of place for Portland. And yes, as we do that we will attract visitors and tourists. But are we building it for the tourist trade? No. Look at Portland's history, compared to Seattle's as our sisterly neighbor. Seattle will build the Space Needle, Experience Music Project, and other so-called civic amenities to shout, "Hey, we're a world-class city." Portland will rebuild Tom McCall Waterfront Park to be a pedestrian-oriented focus of the city. We'll create Pioneer Courthouse Square. We'll invest significant sums to renovate the historic public library instead of inviting Rem Coolhouse to build a new one. In all of those statements, what we're saying is that Portland is important to its local residents, and we're not reinvesting or investing in our community just to be a showcase as Seattle would proclaim ourselves as a world-class city. But you know what? As people visit Portland and come to love it, they treasure those amenities that we've built for ourselves. ■

*Matthew Kauffman Smith is a local freelance author and writing instructor.*