

# Farmers Market Advocacy and Policy

One of the many roles that farmers market managers take on is that of an “advocate.” Advocacy is many things, from representing your market in front of the city council explaining the impact of a proposed rule change on the market, the vendors, or shoppers, to testifying in Olympia about wine sampling, funding for food benefit programs, or writing a letter to a federal representative about the Farm Bill. Mostly it’s about developing relationships, effectively articulating what you want and why it is important to the policymaker or elected official, and participating in the process until a final decision is made.

Some managers may relish the opportunity to help change rules or policies while others may be more hesitant to enter the often confusing world of acronyms, protocols, special interests, meetings, and more meetings. Independent of one’s interests, market managers tend to have their hands full already and can rarely afford the time to work on policy issues. Fortunately, Washington State has some strong market leaders who are able to effect change in Olympia and actively participate in national dialogues.

In his book on farmers markets’ successes and failures, one of Garry Stephenson’s four recommendations is to focus “collective resources to address state and federal policy” (Stephenson, 2008: 182). By this, Stephenson suggests that it is more strategic to work as a group to address key issues rather than take them on manager by manager. One assumption, of course, is that managers are already operating with limited funds and staffing. This is not to say managers don’t have vital leadership roles. We depend on our “sentinel managers” who set priorities, provide data, have relationships with policy makers, and work to “inform other managers of state and national issues and apply group pressure on state agencies” (Stephenson, 2008: 182). The key is to work collectively and strategically to maximize our effectiveness.

Learning how to talk about your market in a way that catches the ear of policymakers and elected officials, while cultivating those relationships, is an essential part of doing business in your community. When things happen, such as a proposed increase in permit fees that may be too expensive for your budget, or a rule about A-boards or signage that negatively impacts your market, knowing “people in the right places” can help, and who knows, you may be able to influence the outcome!

## National Farmers Market Week

In Washington State, “Farmers Market Week” is the best statewide event that calls attention to farmers markets. Each August, WSFMA works closely with the WSDA to put out a press release and proclamation from the governor. This is when we report the aggregate estimate of all farmers market sales and any growth in the number of farmers market locations.

Inviting elected officials - local, county, state, and federal-- to celebrate your market is an excellent activity during Farmers Market Week. WSFMA has worked with farmers markets to sponsor and coordinate farmers market tours for policymakers. Such tours serve to increase the market’s visibility in their broader community and to highlight farmers markets’ contributions to the local economic and food system, especially in terms of access to fresh food. In addition, it’s an opportunity to personally thank policymakers for their support and introduce them to vendors, volunteers, and shoppers. All of this plays a part in relationship building, so that when the time comes to discuss policy issues with them you have a personal connection.

In addition to the National Farmers Market Week, there are two other events organized in Washington State:

### Washington Organic Week

WOW takes place in early September. Tilth Producers usually takes the lead on promoting this week and organizing activities.

### Taste Washington Day

The WSDA Farm-to-School Program and the Washington School Nutrition Association partner to sponsor Taste Washington Day, an annual celebration of Washington grown foods served in school meals in September.

## Key Partners for Farmers Market Advocacy

Many of the following organizations have developed strong relationships while working on statewide policy issues together, such as restoring funding for the WSDA Small Farms and Direct Marketing and Farm to School programs, farmland preservation, and food access. The fact that they represent a variety of constituencies is a political asset in that it shows legislators that there is broad support for the issues at hand.

### Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition, [www.wsahnc.org](http://www.wsahnc.org)

The Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition has a strong track record of advocating for state and federal public policies that address food, hunger and poverty in Washington. Over the years, the Coalition has succeed in securing strategic policies and state

appropriations to maximize federal nutrition programs, reinforce our community-based emergency food assistance system, and link local farmers with food access programs. One of the Coalition's core projects is organizing an annual "Hunger Action Day" in Olympia.



The Anti Hunger & Nutrition Coalition website has an excellent section with "Tools for Advocates," including one on developing your message: <http://www.wsahnc.org/tools-for-advocates/>

### **Farmers Market Coalition (national), [www.farmersmarketcoalition.org](http://www.farmersmarketcoalition.org)**

The Farmers Market Coalition is one of Washington State's best representatives at the federal level, working on everything from the Farm Bill, SNAP, FMNP, and grant opportunities like the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program. The FMC has an excellent Advocacy Toolkit with "how to" tools and easy to read overviews of policies that impact farmers markets: <https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/advocacy/>.

### **Good Food Coalition**

Coordinated by the Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network, the Good Food Coalition is an informal group of organizations representing a wide range of communities including farms, farmers markets, faith-based and anti-hunger interests. . Their goal is to advocate for policies that "build a sustainable and socially just food system that supports viable local farms, protects our air, land and water, and ensures affordable access to healthy food for all people in Washington State."

### **Tilth Producers of Washington, [www.tilthproducers.org](http://www.tilthproducers.org)**

Tilth Producers of Washington promotes ecologically sound, economically viable and socially equitable farming practices that improve the health of our communities and natural environment. For 40 years it has been one of the strongest groups representing Washington sustainable and direct marketing farms. They have an annual conference in November and offer year-round education, networking, and policy work. In 2016, Tilth Producers merged with Seattle Tilth.

### **Washington State Farm Bureau, [www.wsfb.com](http://www.wsfb.com)**

The Farm Bureau is one of the largest and best organized advocacy groups, representing the social and economic interests of farm and ranch families at the local, state and national levels. By providing leadership and organizational skills, Farm Bureau seeks to gain public support on the issues affecting farm and ranch families. They often have county chapters with strong, local membership.

### **Washington State Farmers Market Association, [www.wafarmersmarkets.com](http://www.wafarmersmarkets.com)**

The WSFMA supports and advocates primarily for state and county policies that expand opportunities for direct market farm businesses, support the farmers market industry, and contribute to vibrant communities. Over the past several years, WSFMA has

prioritized policies such as restoring funding to WSDA’s Small Farm Direct Marketing and Farm to School programs; maintaining and strengthening the WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs; and supporting and expanding wine/beer sales and sampling at farmers markets.



*The WSFMA’s “Advocacy Committee” helps set advocacy priorities and develop strategies with our partners. If interested in a specific issue or learning about advocacy, all WSFMA members are welcome to get involved. You don’t need to be on the board to be part of this team! Also, the Advocacy Committee is always looking for stories about Washington farmers markets’ experiences to help deepen their understanding of markets’ needs and successes.*

### **Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network, [www.wsffn.org](http://www.wsffn.org)**

“The Network” uses education, organizing and advocacy to advance sustainable food and farming programs and policies in Washington State. They organize an annual Food and Farming Lobby Day in February and work closely with the WSFMA on farmers market issues.

### **Washington State Grange, [www.wa-grange.org](http://www.wa-grange.org)**

The Washington State Grange is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of Washington’s residents through the spirit of community service and legislative action.

## **Tips on Working Effectively with Local Government**

In a presentation at the WSFMA conference in 2008, Greg Dohrn and Associates recommended thinking about “nine questions” when working with your local government. Dorhn’s advice is to prepare a plan and then do your best to follow it, adjusting as needed along the way.

### **Dorhn’s Nine Questions**

1. Why is your farmers market important?
2. What is the vision for your farmers market?
3. What are the goals for your farmers market?
4. What are the goals of your local government?
5. Who shares your vision?
6. What do you need help with?
7. Are you getting the support you need?
8. Why aren’t you getting the support you need?
9. What can you do to do be more successful?

Other specific advice includes:

- Look for common interests;
- Be supportive of others;
- Build a strong and diverse team;
- Become familiar with local (county or state) plans;
- Don't be "too needy" or "too greedy";
- Maintain realistic expectations;
- Be appreciative;
- Share your successes; and
- Be strategic.

### How to find your legislators

There is an easy, interactive website set up to identify your legislators to both the state senate and house of representatives and to congress. Just type in an address and you can get their names and contact information: [app.leg.wa.gov/DistrictFinder/](http://app.leg.wa.gov/DistrictFinder/) or Google legislative districts Washington State.

## Advocacy and Non-Profit Organizations

There is a perception that non-profit organizations, especially federally incorporated 501(c)3's, risk their charitable status if they engage in any advocacy or policy work. It is always best to get your own legal advice, specific to your particular market organization. However, the bottom line is that most non-profits are allowed to do advocacy work and even lobbying, but there are limits. Typically, non-profits can allocate up to 20% of their expenditures. Please note: federal grant dollars usually cannot be used for lobbying or political activity. This may apply to some private grants as well, depending on the funder. When in doubt, it is always best to check with a professional.

The Farmers Market Coalition has a clear, one-page overview on [lobbying](#) in their Advocacy Toolkit. The Children's Alliance also has an overview called "Nonprofits Can Lobby" <http://www.childrensalliance.org/sites/default/files/nonprofitscanlobby.pdf>.

Ellen Gray, from the Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network, recommends reviewing materials from the Alliance for Justice (based in DC and Oakland) to learn more about how non-profits engage in advocacy work. Find them at: <http://bolderadvocacy.org/>.

### References

Stephenson, G. 2008. "Farmers' Markets: Success, Failure, and Management Ecology" Cambria Press.