



PETER LEE, RECORD FILE PHOTO

Cambridge market one of Canada's 10 best

Recognition from Best Health Magazine comes as city hears suggestions to attract more customers

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As it recovers from two years of construction next door, the Cambridge Farmers' Market has won national praise.

It's one of the top 10 farmers' markets in Canada, Best Health Magazine, a Reader's Digest publication, says in its summer issue.

"It speaks volumes about the Cambridge farmers' market," Coun. Ben Tucci said this week at council, after the Top 10 list, with one market from each province, was read out.

But council heard recently that the 171-year-old market in downtown Cambridge needs an image makeover and more self-promotion. It could also use more contemporary hours, a retail expert says.

Regular shoppers love the red-brick landmark beside historic City Hall, but the building needs an interior renovation to meet customer demands for clean, bright places to shop, Allan Ramsay said. The city hired his marketing and communications firm to create a five-year strategic plan for the market. The contract was for \$29,000.

The city and the farmers' market committee also need to "aggressively market the market," Ramsay said. This includes advertising prices on the Internet and hunting for new vendors. "You need to create a brand for the farmers' market," he said. "We need to win a share of heart as well as win a share of business."

It costs \$235,000 a year to run the city-owned market at Ainslie and Dickson streets. The market generates annual revenue of \$71,900, so taxpayers cover the remaining \$163,300 cost.

Ramsay said the image remake might take five years and could be done within the existing market operating budget.

But council would have to come up with the cash for interior renovations. The inside isn't as bright or easy to use as modern supermarkets. And it lacks adequate washrooms and handicapped access, Ramsay said.

The report was accepted without debate by council this week. Renovation costs will be calculated and brought back to council as part of 2009 city budget proposals.

Tucci said the farmers' market deserves steady city support to help with downtown renewal.

"Every community has one. It's a vital component in our municipality."

Over the last two years, market business suffered while a \$30 million city office building was constructed next door, blocking pedestrian and vehicle access. Work finished in February, so vendors hope spring weather leads to a year of recovery, with hundreds of new parking spaces open nearby and a civic square with public events 20 metres away.

Shopper and telephone surveys found regular shoppers are big market supporters, even during rough times, but "some people have forgotten the market," Ramsay said.

"Some didn't know Cambridge had one -- but knew St. Jacobs does -- or didn't know where it was. Some felt it was nice, but it didn't fit their lifestyle."

The surveys also found health and environmental issues are key for shoppers "so the market is more relevant now than in the past."

Ramsay said the "market must be perceived to be competitive" to attract quality vendors and customers used to specialty food stores and supermarkets open around the clock.

Saturday hours start at 6 a.m., but most shoppers don't shop that early anymore. Ramsay suggested the market open later and stay open later in the afternoon. It could also open on different days.

Making the summer Wednesday fruit and vegetable market, which runs June 17 to Sept. 18, more attractive to potential customers is another thing to consider, he says. This year on Wednesdays, vendors will try opening from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., instead of 6 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Other suggestions include offering customers samples of food or bringing in food experts, such as cookbook authors, to talk to shoppers who want to learn about what they're buying.

Ramsay said the city must start tracking sales and customer data, which its competitors already do.

This would allow council to make decisions based on sound business information, not anecdotal evidence.

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