

Royal Oak Farmers Market a turnaround success

Manager of Royal Oak site is now looking to retire



By **BILL LAITNER** - Free Press Staff Writer

The boss of the Royal Oak Farmers Market is retiring after 11 years of helping to turn an aging structure slated for demolition into a regional hit.

Gwen Ross, who spent years restoring the building, said she'd like to leave by April 24.

"I want to see my grandchildren," said Ross, 69.

"Gwen's going to be a tough act to follow," Royal Oak Mayor Jim Ellison said.

"She's been a true advocate of the market and the merchants of the market, and she's done a very good job of diversifying this as an asset of the city. It's much more than a farmers market now," Ellison said.

In February, city officials plan to post a Request for Proposals for individuals or management teams to bid on the market master job Ross does for \$62,000 a year -- rising at 3 a.m. to greet farmers and working 60-hour weeks, she said.

The market building, erected in 1927, was owned 60% by Oakland County and 40% by the city when county officials suggested razing it in the mid-1990s, records at the Royal Oak Public Library show.

But preservation buffs prevailed, and Royal Oak bought out the county in 1997 -- the year Ross, a part-time antiques vender at the farmers market, quit her General Motors insurance job to run the place. Through grants and revenues from rentals, she and city officials spent the next dozen years restoring the building, ultimately gaining building-code approvals to host fund-raisers and weddings.

"We've started having Chamber of Commerce expos and big dinners for various service organizations," said Greg Rassel, Royal Oak director of Recreation and Public Service.

Although the recession dented revenues, the city hopes the market someday will turn a profit, Rassel said.

The farmers market roughly breaks even each year after reinvesting revenues in improvements. In 2010, after installing a gleaming new commercial kitchen for \$125,000, the market lost \$7,600 on revenues of nearly \$350,000, City Manager Don Johnson said.

The market hosts farmers year-round selling Michigan produce each Saturday. The building's restoration came just in time for the blooming locavore movement, in which city dwellers strive to get close to food sources. In 2010, U.S. farmers markets grew in number by 16%, with Michigan in the top five states for growth, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Where else can you meet the person who grew the tomato you're buying?" City Commissioner Patricia Capello said. "You see a lot of people bringing their children and teaching them about food. It's a place that harkens back to a more gentle time."

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