

Despite Being Drive-Thru Only, Other COVID-19 Restrictions Doesn't Stop Successful Opening Day Of Downtown Alton Farmers Market Season

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ALTON - One of the surest signs of spring and summer in the Riverbend area is the opening of the annual Downtown Alton Farmers and Artisans' Market, where local merchants sell organically-grown foods and other items of interests.

And despite new restrictions, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Farmers Market had a very successful opening day on Saturday at its traditional site of the corner of Landmarks Boulevard and Henry Street.

During the opening month, the market will operate on Saturdays only from 8 a.m.-noon, and is drive-thru only, where customers can drive up to their selected merchants' tent and buy their goods from a distance. And everything on opening day went off with nary a hitch.

"We are really excited to be here at opening day of the Alton Farmers and Artisans' Market 2020 season," said Alton Main Street Executive Director Sara McGibany. "Obviously, things are a little bit different this year, with everything going on with the COVID situations, so we are a drive-thru only. But even so, everybody has been really excited to get out. It's wonderful to have something to look forward to, we are really thrilled to still be able to provide an outlet for people to shop for locally grown and made food. All the farmers have crops growing, and people are needing these fresh fruits and veggies, and other handmade and homegrown products. So we're really excited to be here, welcoming everybody back for the season."

Instead of having a traditional open-air market, as is usually the case, the drive-thru format will be used for at least the opening month.

"So the way it works is that we have the vendors set up all around the perimeter of the parking lot," McGibany said, "and you will take a right turn in, and we have all sorts of volunteers posted around to make sure everyone's going in the right direction. We have maps to hand out to everybody of all the vendors that are here every Saturday. And then, if you see something that you would like to purchase, you just pull out of the line of traffic, and pull right up into the front of the booth and place your order."

One of the featured booths is K and M Hydro, which grows hydroponic lettuce by using water-based growing methods instead of soil-based techniques.

"We grow hydroponic lettuce," said Kathy Carter of K and M Hydro. "There are six different kinds of head lettuce, and we have swiss chard and basil, and we also do microgreens, and lettuce mix and stuff. Everything's hydroponically grown in water, with nutrients, and no herbicides, no pesticides, it's never seen soil, been in water from start to finish. And it's pretty good; it's a lot better than stuff you get in the grocery store."

Carter enjoys the camaraderie between the vendors and customers, and although things are different to get started, making new friends and seeing old ones really helps make a difference.

"We like coming out here," Carter said, "just meeting the people, making new friends, and it's a good experience coming out here. It feels pretty good to be back, and it's a little different with the situation going on, but we all like doing this, it's a lot of fun, and we're glad to see everybody."

And both spirits and enthusiasm were very high for opening day, even with the restrictions in place.

"This has been a super opener for the Farmers' Market," said Steven Johnson of Bunkhous Joe Coffee. "I didn't expect such a high-energy crowd, even though they're in their vehicles, the energy level is here for a typical Farmers Market kickoff (and) Mother's Day weekend. It puts things into place when you're able to see your customers, even though it's at a social distance. It helps reinstate all the good things that's going here at the market, and it gets you into the right frame of mind to pour it on."

And there's also a great reason why vendors like Bunkhous Joe and others return year after year to the market.

"The motivation behind this is the good people which are here in Alton," Johnson said. "And actually, they travel in from other counties. We have a wonderful customer base, and that customer base is shared with these other vendors. It just draws great people, which is just good and perfect things that surround the market."

McGibany talked about how the market would operate to get the season started, and advised customers about how to keep up with updates as things continue.

"So, we are going to be drive-thru only for the month of May," McGibany said, "so, stay tuned to our Facebook page and website for more announcements on when we could start to return to a more normal format down here. But we will be here, regardless, every Saturday morning from 8 a.m until noon until mid-October."

The website for the market is www.downtownalton.com/events/alton-farmers-artisans-market/farmers-market.



