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Farmers market test a winner

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A shopper has lots of veggies to choose from at Saturday's Montpelier farmers market, which was moved to State Street between Main and Elm streets. The area was closed off to

motor vehicle traffic in the first of a series of "pedestrian-friendly" markets. PHOTO BY SARAH MILLIGAN

MONTPELIER — The premiere of the Farmers Market on State Street on Saturday was well-received, although for some "the jury is still out."

The move from the nearby parking lot next to Julio's restaurant was part of a trial run to promote the city as more pedestrian-friendly.

The plan by the newly formed Sustainable Montpelier Coalition also calls for two more markets to be held on State Street — between Main and Elm streets — on Sept. 30, and Oct. 7, over the Columbus Day holiday weekend when more visitors are expected.

Support for the move to State Street was strong on Saturday, with blue skies and warm temperatures drawing large numbers of people downtown.

Mayor John Hollar and Councilor Ashley Hill both spoke positively of the experiment.

"I think the layout works," Hollar said.

"There's plenty of room on the sidewalks for people to access existing retail merchants but also buy their produce. I

think this works and
I hope it becomes something we continue.”

“I absolutely love the setup,” Hill added. “I love that the local businesses are here, and you can stop in, grab some lunch, grab a coffee, come back out and do your grocery shopping.”

Also enthusiastic about the State Street switch was Jane Ketchum of Gracious Earth, of East Calais, who was selling a range of tie-die shirts, handmade jewelry and crystals.

“The farmers’ market on the street is absolutely delightful,” said Ketchum. “It’s so beautiful and warm and welcoming. I think people love it and are really enjoying it.”

Dan Jones, the new executive director of the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition, said it was “going great so far,” as he mingled with shoppers. “Some of the farmers — because some of the farmers tend to be more conservative — said ‘I don’t know ...’ but in general everyone is saying can we do this every weekend.”

Jones said his dream was to move toward a more “pedestrian friendly” downtown.

Jones said a similar 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. market would be held this Saturday. On Oct. 7, he said, it is hoped to extend the hours of the street closure to 7 p.m. to allow for artist shows to be displayed and live music through the afternoon and early evening.

Jones said the market street closure was inspired by a broader concept he called "a happy space," similar to what Burlington has done with Church Street.

"Can we pull it off here? Do we have the population?" Jones asked. "I don't know, but a lot of people seemed to be enjoying themselves today."

There were, however, some mixed reviews from market vendors and shop owners about the State Street experiment.

"I think the jury is still out overall, but I'm very open-minded about the future of this," said Josh Karp, of Cate Hill Orchard in Craftsbury. "There's a lot of logistical challenges or things that we could have done better, but there are a lot of people here."

Hannah Blackmer, of Field Stone Farm, said she had problems with the configuration of

some vendors facing in opposite directions, but otherwise she liked being on State Street.

“There’s energy up here, we’re part of the community, and not hidden away in a parking lot. And being close to the businesses, it does create a sense of (foot) traffic,” said Blackmer.

Cool Jewels store owner Willis Backus said he also liked the extra foot traffic and saw his business increase.

“I’ve done about 25 percent more business today, but then it’s a gorgeous day,” he said.

Lauren Andrews, a clinical aromatherapist with Aromed Aromatherapy, added: “I think the jury’s still out for me. ... I’ll have to see what our sales figures are like, but I like the atmosphere on the street. I’m hopeful it’s going to be positive for both the people participating in the market and the shopkeepers.”

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