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FEATURED

Community conversation focused on Bloomington Farmers' Market

By Ernest Rollins The Herald Times Dec 9, 2019 Updated 12 hrs ago



Demonstrators stand in front of the Schooner Creek Farm booth Saturday at the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market. Authorities determined the masks constituted a sign and were asked to not display them. The demonstrators stopped with no incident. (Rich Janzaruk / Herald-Times)

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Fear and safety concerns were some of the issues raised as part of a community conversation on Sunday to discuss the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market.

The event was hosted by The Purple Shirt Brigade and No Space for Hate Bloomington at Bloomington City Hall. In the council chambers, some residents gathered together privately in small groups to share their experiences at the farmers' market and to discuss concerns regarding the presence of Schooner Creek Farms, a vendor with ties to white supremacy, as the community grapples with what to do next year.

Schooner Creek Farm owner Sarah Dye said she rejects white supremacy and is a self-described identitarian and aligned herself with the American Identity Movement's mission to "staunchly defend the preservation of America's historical demographics in the face of mass immigration, and are opposed to the demonization of and discrimination against America's white majority."

Jean Capler, one of the facilitators of the private discussions, said the dominant themes of the conversations were fear, pain and an overall concern of a lack of safety at the market for vendors, visitors and protesters. She added many of the conversations the city has led about the issue do not allow for a real public dialogue which they feel is necessary if the community is going to move towards a positive solution.

That being said, she added the session did not end with many concrete actions. Kate Blake, a member of The Purple Shirt Brigade, a group that has led boycotts against Schooner Creek Farms this summer, said the group would like the city develop a proposal on how it plans to keep the market safe next year and allow opportunity for the public to meaningfully weigh in on what they come up with. The hosts of Sunday's event hope to have more community conversations about the market in the future.

Melanie McQuinn, horticulturist and general manager of Shawnee Hills Farm in Greene County, said she has been following the developments at the Bloomington Farmers' Market this summer with much interest as she intends to apply to be a vendor at the market next year after moving her farming business from Texas to Indiana.

She does not agree with Schooner Creek Farm owners' ideologies and agrees that there should be a forum for people to protest at the market but it should not disrupt commerce at the market.

"My fear is that the protesters, on both sides, are compromising the underlying purpose of the market, which is to provide a safe place for folks to access food and conversations food," McQuinn said. "I think it's important that people be able to protest, but I feel that they should have a designated place for them to protest. They shouldn't be doing it in front of particular vendors, disrupting commerce."

Market rules currently allow people to protest or hand out flyers within permitted areas at the market such as Information Alley along Eight Street.

McQuinn said the city should evaluate its rules to ensure that they comply not only with the law but they take into account the safety of the vendors and attendees. In addition, she said along with setting clear rules for the market officials must also have the gumption to enforce them evenhandedly.

Alex Goodlad, Bloomington resident and a member of The Purple Shirts Brigade, also thinks the city should take a look at the rules, specifically in regards to the ability to protest to ensure their actions are not unconstitutional.

Goodlad said he also wants to see some bold action from the city to hold white supremacy accountable. Goodlad said the group does not want Schooner Creek Farm to be at the market and feels there are ways to remove them legally or possibly not accept their application next year at all, even though the city and legal scholars have different opinions on the issue. In a panel on Saturday, legal scholars stated it would be against the law to remove anyone from the market based on their individual beliefs. They added this could potentially lead to lawsuits.

Blake said people felt unsafe attending the market once they learned about Schooner Creek farm's connections to white supremacy. She added this is connected to a larger systemic issue with respect to how the city manages the market. Some of the solutions briefly raised on

Sunday include the city getting out of the farmers' market business and letting some other entity run it. She said this solution is interesting, especially if attending the market becomes a public safety issue, adding the group is open to discussing any solution that doesn't restrict their own rights to boycott.

She said the city spent extra in security measures this summer in response to the friction at the market. Blake said they do not feel the extra measures are working as intended.

Blake said some arguments against their efforts has been that it disrupts the market and hurts vendors. She said the group does not view singing, dancing and wearing purple shirts to call attention to their boycott as hurting commerce, but rather it is the presence of Schooner Creek and the city's indecision to take action to address it. Blake said because it is a public space the city can't infringe on First Amendment rights to protest or use time, place and manner restrictions to make a boycott less effective. She added the group wants to be able to bring signs to their boycott and they don't think it would be effective without being in front of the Schooner Creek farm stand because of the way people purchase items at the market.

However, McQuinn said the protests are disrupting commerce. McQuinn said vendors report losses of 30%, adding Schooner Creek Farm is likely to be feeling that impact as well.

"So, I know that when I go in as a new vendor next year I'm already looking at a 30% loss," McQuinn said. "That impacts me but I still think it's important to participate."

McQuinn said she has attended farmers' markets where the vendor next to her was a far-right person who carried a concealed handgun who frequently shared their perspectives that were opposite to her own. She did not necessarily appreciate it but stayed and respected their right

to have those views and to be at the farmers' market.

"I encouraged that person to stay within their booth," McQuinn said. "That's their business. In my booth I maintain my business ... and provided the vendor does not disrupt my relationship with my customers I am OK with being there."

McQuinn said if she were to take her ideologies and tried to sell produce in a more conservative county she could be in a reverse situation where she is at risk of being kicked out because of her beliefs.

"There is a Constitution and there are laws in place that protect us, all of us, regardless of persuasions and we need to not forget that whether we live in a blue county or red county," McQuinn said.

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