

Tending to a Rochester jewel

By KERRY FELTNER

For 40 years, James Farr has been a champion of Rochester, helping the city's parks and public market thrive by connecting the right people to the right project, all united under one vision.

As director of the Rochester Public Market, Farr has seen the market through decades of changes. He and his team, which includes four people and contract security, anticipate that the market's \$8 million renovations will be completed this summer.

The work includes a 13,000-square-foot indoor or winter shed; a covered outdoor shed that has been completed; and new food stand structures. The Rochester Public Market attracts some 2.7 million visitors annually.

Farr, 61, who lives in Charlotte, joined the city in 1977 after getting married. With a daughter on the way, he looked for a stable role and found one in the city Parks and Recreation Department.

His first city job, a ground equipment operator who moved lawns and maintained parks, was ideal for him, Farr says.

"In some ways, it was the best job I ever had," he says. "In the summer, you would start at 6 and go home at 2:30 and you had nothing to worry about."

He started at an entry-level position with the city and rose through the ranks by addressing any obstacle with optimism and a strong work ethic.

Farr, who grew up in Gates and attended Spencerport High School, says he got that work ethic from his grandfather.

"When I was going to school in high school, I had most of my credits when I was a junior but they didn't have any real programs to get college credits so I started working when I was 16," he says. "I used to work at Sears cleaning the floors in the morning, and then I was supposed to go back to school, and some days I would and some days I wouldn't."

After graduating high school, he worked for his grandfather and tended bar. His grandfather owned a coal and fertilizer business and Farr was a loyal employee by default.

"I learned a really good work ethic (from his grandfather)," Farr says. "I was in my teens in those days. I'd go over to Geneseo with my buddies and he'd wake me up at 6 a.m. He didn't care what time you got home."

Once he started working for the city, Farr took on different projects and embraced opportunities presented to him. In the '80s and '90s, Monroe Community College provided city workers the opportunity to get their college degrees. Farr jumped at the chance.

He earned his associate degree in business administration at MCC before continuing his education at SUNY College at Brockport. He received a bachelor's degree in labor relations and economics, after 10 years of night school, in 1989.

Farr's career success has come from knowing how to bring people together.

"I've been very fortunate to have a lot of different opportunities in the city," he says. "A lot of it is just knowing how to get things done, who to call and how the procedures and things work, because it's a whole different world when you work in government."

"I didn't ever think I'd be here 40 years, but it's been a very good career."

The market

Within the parks and recreation department, Farr held a variety of roles from foreman to parks operations manager. In 1995, Bob Whiting, the now retired deputy commissioner of parks and recreation and a longtime friend and supervisor of Farr, gave him a chance to run the public market.

He thought Farr would be the right person for the job based on his past successes and can-do attitude.

"He never stops," Whiting says. "He will do anything and everything for the employer and mostly for the citizens of Rochester. It's just unbelievable what he will do and what he can do."

"He's willing to take the project on. He's willing to do anything that has to be done to get it done. He's very good with working with people. I think that's how he



James Farr, director of the Rochester Public Market, has worked for the city for 40 years

Photo by Kimberly Simpson

can accomplish what he does; everybody just loves him."

Once in that role, Farr never looked back, Whiting says.

"He looked at (the public market) as a challenge, and he took the vendors on, and within a year he was working well with them. He put together a program for advertising, which was one of the things that they said was lacking in the market," he says. "He got into it and he loves it."

Just as Farr embraced the market, so did citizens across the country. The 1990s saw a resurgence in interest in public markets, which helped Farr to create the kind of market he and his team envisioned.

"I was lucky there was a renaissance in interest in markets in the late '90s. So I happened to be in the right place at the right time," Farr says. "The nice thing in Rochester is we have had a market here continuously operating since 1827."

Once Farr was in charge, he led his team to see the market in a new light. Their vision included expanding its hours, adding activities and events and updating the look. The team also hoped to encourage revitalization of the surrounding areas of the market.

Some projects were not well-received until they were completed.

"We came in and did a lot of underground work, but also built the gateways to the market that are there

now," Farr says. "That was kind of controversial because people were saying, 'There's so many things to be done here—why are you working on the gates and the entryways?' Now they've become kind of iconic to the market, and it also has that sense of arrival that you're in someplace special."

In addition to making physical changes, Farr helped the community see the market differently, Whiting says.

"He took a market that was very popular and kind of stagnant, and people saw it as a place to go get cheap food, and now they see it as a destination with events and activities," he says. "There's development of a lot of private businesses around the fringe of the market—he's really developed the market into a catalyst for that whole development scene over there."

City Councilwoman Loretta Scott has known Farr for over two decades. She worked with him while she was Commissioner of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Human Services. Scott found him to be relentless in his pursuit of improving Rochester.

"It was a pleasure working with Jim," she says. "His energy and dedication to improving the services and activities never waned. I was always amazed at that. Sometimes you see people a ball of fire and they go for a little while and then they slack off, but Jim never did."

When tasked with a challenge, Farr elects to face it

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head on.

"I would say, 'yeah, why not? Let's give it a try,'" he says. "Not that I get bored, but I always like something new and a change, and I've been fortunate that these opportunities have come along. I've worked in the same department for 40 years, but I've done a lot of different things over the years."

Due to the public nature of his role, decisions do not always sit well with everyone. That is something Farr has gotten used to.

"It can be stressful: the older I get the less it bothers me," he says. "It's hard because whatever you do, there's going to be as many people that don't think it's the right thing to do as there are that do. A lot of the projects that we do in the parks are things that you would never think bother somebody, (but they) bother somebody."

Luis Burgos started working for the city in 1982 as director of recreation and leisure services. He has known of Farr for a long time, as his father worked with Farr as well.

Supervising Farr was not a challenge, Burgos says.

"He's a very creative person. He's a self-starter and extremely productive," he says. "This is a man who didn't have to be managed that much; you'd point him in a direction and he would take the ball and run with it."

Community efforts

Outside of work, Farr continues to contribute to the Rochester community. He is on the boards of multiple organizations, including the Ontario Beach Park Program Committee, Farmer's Market Federation of New York, National Association of Produce Market Managers and

James Farr

Title: assistant director of recreation for the city of Rochester Department of Recreation and Youth Services; director of the Rochester Public Market

Age: 61

Education: A.S. in business administration, Monroe Community College, 1983; B.A. in labor relations and economics, SUNY College at Brockport, 1989

Family: Wife, Joan (deceased); daughter, Jessica; granddaughter, Delanie

Residence: Charlotte

Interests: Bicycling, travel, gardening, golf and spending time in the Rochester community

Quote: "I was lucky. There was a renaissance in the interest of markets in the late '90s so I happened to be in the right place at the right time."

the Erie Canal Heritage Association. He is the former president of the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County and now serves as the president of the organization's foundation.

He is among a group of people who started the Rochester Youth Sports Foundation in recent years to provide resources for city youth sports.

As a member of the World Union of Markets, Farr has traveled to Europe and Asia to see how markets operate worldwide.

"I didn't know a ton about markets and operating markets and so the city was supportive of me joining those organizations to learn more about the industry," he says.

Farr takes pride in Rochester's market history and continues to learn about the

city as much as he can.

"The work that he does, it's more than just a job," Burgos says. "He's just passionate about the city, about the parks and the market, and the importance and the role that it plays in the quality of life of city residents. He doesn't just do it as a job; in many ways it is his life."

The end of the decade-long upgrade project at the market is something Farr is anticipating.

"Along the way, we always wanted to do something with the indoor space and really improve it," he says. "I feel like I'm

"The nice thing in Rochester is we have had a market here continuously operating since 1827."

on vacation once this project is done. It's been a long time. It's been a lot of planning and a lot of different variations, because it couldn't be done for one reason or the other—we couldn't get the budget, or we didn't have the money; so luckily everybody has been very supportive."

The project has taken patience and a dedication to a long-standing vision.

"His greatest love has been the public market," Scott says. "When you have a vision and you've got a champion you can get it done. That is exactly what happened with that market. With Jim's commitment to seeing it through—we've done pieces at a time but now we're full steam ahead. I attribute a lot of that to Jim Farr, to his dedication and staying on task with that through three administrations."

The market's renovations were made to keep up with the changing industry. Customers have so many choices now for food—that is why upgrades and differentiation are important, Farr says.

"Last year I think there were 27 or 28 farmers markets just in Monroe Coun-

ty—that's a lot of farmers markets," he says. "And you have the great programs that Wegmans has and you have Tops and you have PriceRite; there are so many options. The experience is a big part of the markets. I don't see Wegmans really as competition—we work together."

"All of the grocery stores used to come here and buy ... before they started doing their own warehousing so they have a great connection to the market."

Coordinating others and finding creative ways to make things happen are skills that Farr has and executes well. Farr's drive has strengthened throughout the years—he continues to push projects forward.

"His stamina is legendary," Burgos says. "He takes a lot of pride in his work and the volume of work that he does. He takes a lot of pride in his physical stamina. The man does not get sick. It goes without saying we wouldn't have been able to accomplish everything we've accomplished at the public market without him."

Farr plans to continue to work for a while. There is still so much to do despite the city's progress downtown, he says.

"I think there are a lot of positive things going on right now downtown," Farr says. "Three-quarters of the city is really on the upside, but we still have that challenge of extreme poverty in certain neighborhoods. (We are) trying to find a communitywide solution; it can't be just the city's problem. The anti-poverty task force—there's a lot of good energy, and there's so much opportunity."

"We have to find some way to make sure that all our citizens can take advantage of all the opportunities that are coming. I'm optimistic, and I plan to work another several years."

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