



# FOOD AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Local enterprises aim to rebuild the food system in Birmingham, Alabama



**ChangeLab Solutions**  
Law & policy innovation for the common good.

**A**cross the country, people are working to create a stronger food system – one that makes healthy foods more accessible for everyone, protects our natural resources, and creates viable economic opportunities for workers at all steps along the way. ChangeLab Solutions went to Birmingham, Alabama, to learn about local efforts to build healthy food enterprises in the region and to glean lessons for other cities and towns.

Late in the summer of 2011, Birmingham residents gathered at an outdoor parking lot at Lawson State Community College to welcome an unfamiliar sight to the neighborhood: fresh produce for sale. Mayor William Bell and other local community leaders delivered speeches to a crowd of onlookers, as shoppers at this new outdoor market browsed tables offering an array of locally grown produce – collard greens, okra, peaches, green beans, and more.

This volunteer-led market is part of the Urban Food Project, a program initiated by REV Birmingham, a local economic development organization. In cities across the country, local businesses and economic development agencies are starting to work more closely with food and nutrition organizations to build a stronger network of healthy food retailers. But this type of work is relatively new to the southeast, and local residents are hastening to adapt.

Here in a region where some of the most important events of the Civil Rights Movement took place, advocates see tremendous potential for rebuilding the food system, contending that the right to safe and nutritious food is a social justice issue. But the region's history, culture, and politics also present some particular challenges, from the culinary tradition of rich, deep-fried foods to segregation's legacy of political fragmentation and distrust of government. "We're trying to figure out what models will work here in the South," says Taylor Clark, former food systems coordinator with the Health Action Partnership, a coalition of local agencies and community groups exploring ways to improve healthy food access.

A produce stand run by a resident in Birmingham's Grasselli neighborhood, who resells fruit he buys wholesale at Alabama Farmers' Market.



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# Untapped Potential

The history of the Grasselli neighborhood, where the market at Lawson State Community College is held, mirrors that of the city as a whole. Around the early 1900s, Birmingham grew rapidly, becoming a primary industrial hub in the South and earning it the nickname the “Magic City.” Grasselli was originally developed to provide housing for employees of nearby manufacturing plants, and over time it became the center of a thriving, well-to-do African-American community that was attracted to the neighborhood for its job opportunities and its modest, single-family bungalows.

Against a backdrop of the some of the most intense struggles of the Civil Rights Movement,

the city became increasingly segregated by race and class as middle-class and higher educated residents moved out of Birmingham to outlying suburbs. Today, economic and social conditions in the city suggest that these struggles for social justice are far from over. Since the 1960s the white population within central Birmingham has shrunk by about 77 percent, and the city has shifted from a majority white to a predominantly black community: in the 1960s the population was 60 percent white and 40 percent black, and by 2010 it had become 23 percent white and 74 percent black. Residents living within the city of Birmingham have fewer economic opportunities than their suburban counterparts – the poverty rate in the city is almost three times that of the rest of Jefferson County, and the unemployment rate is almost double.<sup>1,2</sup>

Birmingham, like cities around the country, has also seen retailers (including grocery stores) migrate outward

during this period as big box stores on the outskirts of urban areas have become the norm. While older residents in Grasselli can remember the neighborhood’s grocery stores where they once shopped as children, the only remaining food stores are restaurants and small corner stores that mostly sell packaged, frozen, and prepared foods. What grocery stores remain in Birmingham are unevenly distributed: there are 24 full-scale grocery stores serving a city of approximately 212,000 residents, but

more than half are confined to a single district, making it difficult for residents without cars (about 15 percent of households) to shop for groceries.<sup>3,4</sup> In fact, a recent survey of food retailers across the city found that over 40 percent

of Birmingham residents live in areas defined as “food deserts,” neighborhoods with extremely limited access to grocery stores selling healthy food.

Along with these geographic barriers, the stresses of poverty carry additional hardships. “We see families on general assistance surviving on a household income of \$600 a month,” says Ava Wise, director of Project Hopewell, a nonprofit organization serving the Grasselli neighborhood. “Healthy food is just not on their radar,” she notes, citing economic and social challenges that make healthy eating a low priority. These barriers to healthy living are mirrored in the area’s health statistics: Birmingham is the largest city in Jefferson County, where nearly three-quarters of residents are overweight or obese and more than 11 percent of adults have been diagnosed with diabetes (compared with national rates of 68 percent and 6 percent, respectively).<sup>6,7,8</sup>

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Residents meet outside an abandoned grocery store. In Birmingham, like other cities around the country, many food stores have shut their doors as smaller, family-owned markets have gradually been replaced by larger supermarkets on the outskirts of town.



If we can connect the small farmer in Alabama with the urban food desert, it's a win-win. The farmer gets a guaranteed base of consumers, and the neighborhood gets good food and local jobs. Right now it's a missed opportunity. **-ANDY WILLIAMS, FARMER**

Ironically, the city is less than 100 miles away from one of the most fertile agricultural regions in the country: the Alabama Black Belt, named after the richness of the local soil. Yet very little agricultural land is devoted to diverse crops for local sale. Alabama agriculture is dominated by large industrial farms that produce commodities for an export market, such as cotton, corn, poultry, eggs, and beef. Fruit and vegetable production is relatively limited: by way of comparison, neighboring Georgia is roughly the same size as Alabama but devotes over six times the acreage to growing fresh produce.<sup>9</sup> Shoppers in the Atlanta metropolitan region buy about 30 percent of their food from regional producers, while North Alabama residents purchase only about 9 percent of food regionally.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Andy Williams, a family farmer and a retired state outreach coordinator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, recalls the region's rich agricultural legacy and the Alabama farmsteads of past generations, each complete with their own "food security system": a diversity of crops and animals, compost piles to build the soil, and pantries for storing food during the off-season. He sees links to urban markets as key to preserving what small-scale family farms remain, and has begun partnering with REV Birmingham to sell produce at its public markets. "If we can connect the small farmer in Alabama with the urban food desert, it's a win-win," he says. "The farmer gets a guaranteed base of consumers, and the neighborhood gets good food and local jobs. Right now it's a missed opportunity."



A corner store in Birmingham's Woodlawn neighborhood that began selling locally grown produce at the request of local residents.

# Making Connections

With support from Mayor Bell, the city has explored incentive packages to attract grocery stores to underserved neighborhoods – first reaching out to national and regional chains, then looking to locally owned affiliates. When the economy took a turn for the worse and it was clear there were no takers, they began to talk to owners of dollar stores and other discount markets. Community members resisted this idea. “What we heard from people is that they want quality,” says Tracey Adams, director of Birmingham’s Office of Economic Development. “But the numbers say that a mainstream store will not survive in this community.”

Ellie Taylor, a spokeswoman for the Alabama Grocers Association, believes it’s the small, independent grocers that will ultimately have the best chance of succeeding in food deserts – not just financially, but also in terms of garnering long-term community support. She notes that their membership includes retailers who have experience working in underserved, urban communities, who would potentially be a good fit for efforts to expand grocery stores into Birmingham’s food deserts. But “they need assurance that these projects will work, from a business perspective,” she says. “The city can definitely play a role in making this happen, by providing incentives” – for instance, with support finding appropriate sites, tax relief, and help with neighborhood safety and transportation.

But even with these incentives – which may be difficult to secure in the face of shrinking municipal budgets – Taylor acknowledges there will be some places that just can’t

support a grocery store, either because they can’t find an interested retailer or simply because the population isn’t high enough to make the numbers work. In these communities, she says, developing a farmers’ market could help begin to build demand among residents and pave the way for future retail options.

With more and more urban agriculture activists, award-winning restaurateurs, and “foodies” in its midst, Birmingham has a growing community of people devoted to increasing access to high-quality, seasonal food. Local real estate developer Cathy Crenshaw is one, and she knows it can be a viable economic development strategy. A descendent of one of Birmingham’s early industrial families, Crenshaw has spent the last 30 years investing in revitalizing some of the city’s historic neighborhoods.

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At one of her company’s developments, a cluster of refurbished warehouses turned into a hub for local

artists, she helped found the Pepper Place farmers’ market, the city’s largest outdoor market. It draws thousands of visitors weekly and was recently named by American Farmland Trust as the nation’s fourth favorite farmers’ market. But “even this, the city’s most popular market, struggles to make a profit,” she acknowledges. The business plan for the market relies on vendor fees and sales of merchandise in order to fund ongoing operations, but these sources of revenue are rarely sufficient. “It has been wonderful for the image and economic revitalization of the neighborhood and for supporting local farmers, but in terms of actual revenue needed to operate the market, we are lucky to break even.”

Rev. Sally Allocca, Executive Director of Promoting Empowerment and Enrichment Resources (P.E.E.R., Inc.) an organization that oversees a farmers' market and several other food security initiatives in Birmingham's East Lake neighborhood.



That's the main goal – community stability and growth, because then the community can better make its own decisions. For people to see us on the news for gardens, not crime – it's great. –SALLY ALLOCCA, P.E.E.R., INC.

Crenshaw also acknowledges that the local food movement is not reaching everyone. Pepper Place serves a middle- and upper-income clientele that can afford to pay more for higher-quality food, and she expects that the challenges of bringing farmers' markets to underserved and low-income neighborhoods may be even greater.

The conundrum of how to bring fresh, high quality food to underserved communities at prices they can afford is one that Sally Allocca knows firsthand. Allocca directs Promoting Empowerment and Enrichment Resources (P.E.E.R., Inc.), a nonprofit organization originally founded to provide emergency food assistance to residents of the South East Lake neighborhood, which has run a Saturday farmers' market since 2005. "It seemed like an opportunity to provide a fun, safe venue and to improve food access," she says. "We started it with an educational and service intent, rather than a successful business intent."

For an organization that entered food retail without any knowledge of building a business, P.E.E.R., Inc. has made tremendous strides in increasing healthy food options in its neighborhood. In addition to the weekly farmers' market, the organization now offers a food drop-off

program for seniors, a community-supported agriculture program, a community garden, and a food service job training program run out of its commercial kitchen; the organization also just received a grant from the USDA to purchase a delivery vehicle and create a mobile farmers' market. All of these programs are heavily subsidized by philanthropic and public funds, but Allocca's goal is to move closer toward financial sustainability by developing sources of earned income. They've created a side business selling a line of jams and jellies, for instance, and local schools and organizations can rent the commercial kitchen or hire the food service students to prepare meals.

Allocca knows that complete profitability may never be attainable, given the comprehensive services they provide to the community. But she believes the benefits she's seen in South East Lake far outweigh the costs, and she is a strong supporter of REV Birmingham's work to bring markets to other areas of the city. "I've really been able to see the pride of the neighborhood grow," she says. "That's the main goal – community stability and growth, because then the community can better make its own decisions. For people to see us on the news for gardens, not crime – it's great."

Gwen Calhoun, Brenda Cotton, and Ava Wise at a food pantry operated out of Hopewell Baptist Church.



# Launching the Urban Food Project

Samuel Crawford manages the Urban Food Project at REV Birmingham, but he's relatively new to the field of healthy food retail. A Birmingham native, Crawford spent decades working on economic development and neighborhood revitalization efforts in Chicago before returning a few years ago to direct REV Birmingham's business development programs. He recalls being skeptical when he was initially asked to attend meetings of the Health Action Partnership, unsure that the group's work was relevant to his own. "A farmer finally made it clear to me that there was money and jobs in food," he says. Food was more than a public health issue, he realized: it could be a catalyst for business development.

He has now become an impassioned campaigner for healthy food retail in the city. He learned about the challenges farmers faced in

trying to tap into local distribution networks, met with city officials to encourage them to pass supportive policies and incentives, and worked with the Health Action Partnership to commission market studies to demonstrate unmet demand – from both a health and a financial perspective – for healthier food retail in underserved neighborhoods.

David Fleming, the executive director of REV Birmingham, knows that food deserts can be a hard sell for grocers, but he contends that the challenge is no different from the rest of his job. "I've spent the last 30 years trying to get people into places that people have been fleeing for decades." He sees the issue of food retail as completely aligned with the organization's mission of

reviving economically distressed neighborhoods, and he's committed to ensuring that their work is driven by community needs and ideas. "From our early attempts, we really learned that you need to have the community with you to create the market – you can't just make one and plop it down."

With these considerations in mind, in early 2011 the organization embarked on an ambitious plan to work with organizations around the city to introduce neighborhood "public markets."<sup>12</sup> The concept was to create a network of markets, each guided by feedback from local residents

on all aspects of operations – from marketing materials to site design to food vendors and offerings. The partnering organization would ultimately "own" the market and be responsible for conducting

outreach and identifying volunteers to help plan and run the market, while REV Birmingham would provide training, technical assistance, and connections to growers interested in selling at the markets.

Though the look and feel is much like that of traditional farmers' markets, the hope is that these small, flexible public markets can grow to serve as an incubator and catalyst for future jobs, perhaps even a bricks-and-mortar grocery store. Still, Crawford insists, "We want it to be what they think it should be, not what we think it should. I really try to put the responsibility on the people in the room and tell them that this will work if as a community you support the idea and you provide input."

Food was more than a public health issue, he realized: it could be a catalyst for business development.

Mayor William Bell meets Andy Williams and other farmers at the kickoff celebration for the Southwest Fresh Market, part of a collaborative effort between the Mayor's Office, REV Birmingham, Lawson State Community College, and community leaders.



We are working to instill trust into the equation...with residents involved in identifying problems and solutions we hope they can take ownership in implementing those solutions. —SAMUEL CRAWFORD, REV BIRMINGHAM

A sign for a produce stand run at a gas station parking lot in Birmingham's Grasselli neighborhood.



Of course, many of the hardest-hit communities in Birmingham will find it difficult even to rally people together and identify a common goal. Residents in lower-income neighborhoods, accustomed to having little political power and few public services, may not be inclined to get involved in civic processes – and the city's complex, fragmented political structure doesn't help. Birmingham, a mid-size city, is divided into 99 neighborhoods, each with its own elected board of officers who serve as the main point of contact between city hall and residents. In 2011, meanwhile, Jefferson County became the largest municipal government in history to declare bankruptcy. "The general attitude of residents in Birmingham and in Alabama is that government does not work well for them," Crawford admits. "But we are working to instill trust into the equation, with our public-private partnership approach which includes non-profits, business, government officials and community members. With residents involved in identifying problems and solutions we hope they can take ownership in implementing those solutions."

The Urban Food Project has had mixed success in implementing the initial round of public markets. Many community groups have approached them to ask for help starting a market, but only a few have been able to make a firm commitment to starting the planning process and managing the market in the long run. The market at Lawson State Community College has had a dedicated group of local volunteers and a modest, but steadily growing, number of shoppers – but REV Birmingham had to shut down another market due to poor attendance. Taylor Clark, who transitioned to working as the

organization's market coordinator, is both optimistic and realistic about the road ahead. "Ultimately, we've realized that developing a successful market takes time," says Clark. "It can take months – if not years – to build a loyal following, to understand buyers' needs, and to determine the perfect time and location."

Just as the relationship between vendors and customers takes time, so do the relationships needed to make these initiatives sustainable in the larger community. In recent years, many food and hunger organizations have seen these sorts of collaboration begin to flourish: the cross-sector Health Action Partnership has found growing receptivity among funders and policymakers to pursue new food access strategies. Meanwhile, the city's newly formed Food Policy Council will provide another space for dialogues on how to bridge gaps in the food system.

Sally Allocca from P.E.E.R., Inc. is thrilled to see the city uniting around this issue. "If there is one lesson that we've learned from our own successes, it's that partnerships and community are everything."

# Growing Healthy Food Opportunities in Your Community

## Lessons from Birmingham

REV Birmingham and its government, business, and community partners have an ambitious goal: rebuilding the infrastructure and relationships it takes to support a healthy, socially just food system, one that connects underserved consumers with small-scale producers and distributors.

The public market program is one component of their strategy to build a regional food network that supports entrepreneurial opportunities in food production, distribution, and retail. REV Birmingham also helps facilitate farm-to-institution connections, has begun investigating the possibility of a regional food hub (a central location where small- and medium-scale farmers may bring their produce for distribution to retail outlets), and partners with local and regional government to explore policy approaches to support healthier food systems.

Although it may take decades to fully realize this vision, some key strategies to strengthen the food system in Birmingham and beyond have emerged.

### Know your roots

Having a deep understanding of context is critical before designing any food system initiative. The public market project was inspired by a series of studies commissioned by the Health Action Partnership (a multi-sector working group of which REV Birmingham is part), which evaluated the number of Birmingham residents living in food deserts, assessed market demand, and outlined potential market models. The group found that these assessments greatly benefited from the input of diverse stakeholders, such as public health, food and farming organizations, businesses, and other government and community partners.

### Build cross-sector collaboration

Although Birmingham has a long history of people working for a healthier and more sustainable food system, locals agree that the surge of collaboration, awareness, and energy among these groups is a recent phenomenon. Nutrition and hunger organizations, small farmers, food startups, and economic development organizations used to work separately toward similar goals. New, stronger partnerships are helping to increase the reach and sustainability of these efforts. Key collaborations that have helped strengthen this work include the Health Action Partnership, the Farmers Market Alliance, and the relationship between REV Birmingham and the Office of Economic Development. The newly formed Birmingham Food Policy Council is another forum where connections can be made at a regional level.

Juanita Jones and Sam Cheatham prepare lunch in East Lake United Methodist Church's community kitchen.



## Lay the policy infrastructure

The public market program has focused on only a handful of communities so far, but REV Birmingham quickly realized that to make the program work, policy changes were needed at the city level (and even the regional and state level). For instance, to bolster market demand and ensure that programs reach the population in greatest need, REV Birmingham has been working closely with the city to help overcome barriers to accepting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits at markets. A new EBT system is currently being piloted at one of the public markets and at the East Lake Farmers' Market. Other policy strategies underway include farm-to-school and other procurement opportunities, and using economic development incentives to attract and expand grocery stores.

## Build community leadership

REV Birmingham realized early on that it would be critical to involve community leaders and organizations in all stages of planning the public markets. These stakeholders help create a greater sense of ownership in the community – recruiting residents to help with planning and implementation, generating publicity, and advising program planners on an appropriate product mix. REV Birmingham's model of participatory planning can be challenging and resource intensive, but often it's the only way to help develop market models that will work in communities that many food and grocery companies have overlooked.

## Establish accountability

It's important to ensure that roles and expectations are clearly defined. Even in a casual working culture, where agreements may be cemented with a smile and a handshake, REV Birmingham quickly learned the value of clearly discussing who will be responsible for all duties, big and small, in addition to setting up times for regular communication and troubleshooting. For instance, when planning the Mary Dorse public market, the planning group had a great reception from community leaders and assumed all the logistics were in place. But soon after the launch, it became apparent they had not designated enough volunteers to handle certain operational details, such as setting up and cleaning the site and distributing promotional materials. This created tensions within the group.

## Seek diverse resources

New food system initiatives almost always require additional funding and resources, especially in the start-up phase. Launching the public markets has required numerous volunteers, staff time from REV Birmingham and partnering organizations, and financial and in-kind support. It is worth noting that some projects may have to accept that they will always require some kind of ongoing funding. For instance, even the city's most popular market, Pepper Place Farmers' Market, requires some additional resources to operate. But the community reaps a wealth of benefits from this modest investment, including increased access to healthy food, a place for neighborhood gatherings, and economic revitalization.



Taylor Clark from REV Birmingham and Lisa Chen from ChangeLab Solutions shop at a produce stand run at a local gas station parking lot.

Grant Brigham, executive director of Jones Valley Teaching Farm. The farm is located next to a new mixed-use affordable housing development near downtown.



## Work toward sustainable business models

Initiatives to rebuild the local food system often juggle multiple goals – such as health, equitable access, and sustainability – but ultimately, most projects that seek to create systems-level change are working toward financial viability. REV Birmingham has a long history of business development yet realized that rebuilding the economic infrastructure for local food may require new, untested business models. Through the public markets and other food initiatives, the group is adapting its skills in financial planning, marketing, technical assistance, and building multi-sector collaborations to meet these new challenges.

## Reflect and adapt

After the launch of its public markets, REV Birmingham quickly saw the need for a way to receive feedback and make adjustments midcourse. For example, local senior citizens at the Lawson State Community College public market seemed to appreciate the vendors' offerings, but conversations with students revealed that many wanted additional grab-and-go products (such as fruit sold by the piece) in place of whole, uncut vegetables meant for home cooking. Although it was too late in the growing season for producers to make major adjustments, they did their best to accommodate these requests and used this information to plan for subsequent market seasons.

# Resources for rebuilding local food systems

The following resources can help you take the first steps toward rebuilding your local food system. For more information, strategies, and assistance on bringing healthier foods to your community, contact us or visit [www.changelabsolutions.org](http://www.changelabsolutions.org).

## Assessment

### **USDA: Food Environment Atlas**

[ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx](http://ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx)

### **USDA: Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit**

[ers.usda.gov/publications/efan-electronic-publications-from-the-food-assistance-nutrition-research-program/efan02013.aspx](http://ers.usda.gov/publications/efan-electronic-publications-from-the-food-assistance-nutrition-research-program/efan02013.aspx)

### **Community Food Security Coalition: What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment**

[foodsecurity.org/pub/whats\\_cooking.pdf](http://foodsecurity.org/pub/whats_cooking.pdf)

### **The Reinvestment Fund: Policy Map**

[policymap.com](http://policymap.com)

### **Crossroads Resource Center**

[crcworks.org](http://crcworks.org)

## Retail models

### **Wallace HUFED (Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development) Center**

[hufed.org](http://hufed.org)

### **Farmers Market Coalition**

[farmersmarketcoalition.org](http://farmersmarketcoalition.org)

### **Healthy Corner Stores Network**

[healthycornerstores.org](http://healthycornerstores.org)

### **National Farm to School Network**

[farmtoschool.org](http://farmtoschool.org)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Getting to Grocery**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/getting-grocery](http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/getting-grocery)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Understanding Healthy Procurement: Using Government's Purchasing Power to Increase Access to Healthy Food**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/healthy-procurement](http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/healthy-procurement)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Green for Greens: Finding Public Financing for Healthy Food Retail**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/green-for-greens](http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/green-for-greens)

## Policy development

### **USDA: Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food**

[usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER](https://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER)

### **WhyHunger: Food Security Learning Center**

[whyhunger.org/getinfo](https://whyhunger.org/getinfo)

### **National Good Food Network**

[ngfn.org](https://ngfn.org)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Establishing Land Use Protections for Farmers' Markets**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/land-use-farmers-markets](https://changelabsolutions.org/publications/land-use-farmers-markets)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Ground Rules: A Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/ground-rules](https://changelabsolutions.org/publications/ground-rules)

### **ChangeLab Solutions: Seeding the City: Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture**

[changelabsolutions.org/publications/seeding-city](https://changelabsolutions.org/publications/seeding-city)

### **Community Food Security Coalition: North American Food Policy Council Webpage**

[foodsecurity.org/FPC](https://foodsecurity.org/FPC)

## Additional resources for the Southeast US

### **Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network**

[asanonline.org](https://asanonline.org)

### **Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) Program**

[southernsare.org](https://southernsare.org)

### **Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG)**

[ssawg.org](https://ssawg.org)

## Endnotes

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11. Meter K. *North Alabama Local Farm & Food Economy*. Minneapolis: Crossroads Resource Center, 2011.
12. The term “public markets” was inspired by a market study of Birmingham, conducted by the Project for Public Spaces and commissioned by REV Birmingham. More information available at: [www.pps.org/projects/birmingham-public-markets-study](http://www.pps.org/projects/birmingham-public-markets-study).

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