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TRANSPORTATION BENEFITS ON THE MENU

A New Hub Of Urban Life

Transportation Benefits On The Menu

By [William Lyons](#) | Aug 30, 2015

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The Boston Public Market opened last month to great fanfare. The opening of the market has been a breath of fresh air for the city of Boston – and a dose of healthy living as well. All of the products available at the market are locally sourced from farms throughout central and eastern Massachusetts, grown using sustainable farming practices. The produce and meats available are of exceptional quality and freshness. All of these healthy food choices are a boon for the residents of the city. It is also good for our local farms, which are realizing a substantial economic benefit, which in turn helps the local economy.

One of the little-known benefits of farmers markets in general – and the Boston Public Market in particular – is the reduction in demand on our transportation system. Most consumers do not think about the impact that food shopping choices have on our transportation system. We typically shop for groceries at the supermarket for the best price at the level of quality we expect. However, when food is shipped across the country instead of locally from farm to table, the transportation impacts are very significant. These impacts include substantial environmental and economic considerations.

Much research is currently being conducted to quantify the environmental and economic impacts of food transportation. One approach is to calculate food miles, which takes into consideration the quantity and cost of fuel needed to transport produce and meats from their origin to their destination. This approach relates the cost of fuel to the cost of produce and correlates food process and fuel prices. While this research is complex and has to account for many factors, it is not hard to see how food shipped from Hardwick, to Boston results in less air pollution than if that same food is shipped from California.

For example, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 87 percent of produce consumed in Boston is grown in California. This is a staggering percentage. That means 87 percent of our produce has to cross the entire country to get from the farm to our dinner table. The air quality impacts associated with the congestion from the truck traffic alone is hard to imagine. But the problem is much deeper than air quality. Trucking produce across country has a substantial impact on our economic wellbeing as well.

The Cost Of Time

All of the truck traffic transporting food results in congestion and delays for the truck as well as for other motorists. Not only do these delays cause more air quality impacts, they cause substantial inefficiencies in our road network. Increased delay means lost productivity for the economy. According to TRIP, a private nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues, traffic congestions costs the average Boston area driver an additional \$1,147 annually in lost time. Imagine if that amount was added to everyone's food bill. We would all sit up and take notice. But some of that cost really should be factored into the cost of food.

In addition to the costs from congestion, the average consumer does not consider the costs associated with maintaining our roads when they make food shopping choices. Every truck that travels down the road has a disproportionate impact on the road system than an automobile. These impacts come in the form of pavement that deteriorates due to heavy loads. The frequency of resurfacing our roadways is directly related to the amount of truck traffic on the road.

Since the maintenance of our roadways is mostly paid for through fuel tax revenues, the increased frequency of roadway resurfacing results in increased demand for fuel tax revenues. These costs are passed on to the consumer as fuel taxes. But those fuel taxes may as well be added to the cost of food that is transported from California to Boston.

In truth, there are many transportation-related costs associated with our long-distance food supply chain. These financial factors include environmental costs, such as air pollution from vehicle emissions, water pollution from petroleum products and pavement surfaces, and soil and water contamination from the pesticides and chemicals needed for mass production of agricultural products and stabilization of the products over long shipping routes. Economic costs include lost productivity costs due to congestion, roadway maintenance costs for heavy truck volumes, and health costs due to increased incidence of

asthma. The cumulative impact of all of these costs result in substantial financial burden that is not paid for at the cash register, but the bill is ultimately paid by the consumer.

As society contemplates the various ways food transportation impacts our environment and our economy, there is one obvious conclusion. We should be frequenting our farmer's markets. It just make sense. To that end, the Boston Public Market has arrived at just the right time.

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