

## **Andrea Otto Testimony for 3SquaresVT Awareness Day 2025**

Hello, and thank you for your time today.

My name is Andrea Otto, I am a resident of Peacham, and I am here on behalf of the Caledonia Farmers Market Association, which operates two farmers markets in Southern Caledonia County: Danville, and St. Johnsbury.

I am here today to ask you to support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

The Crop Cash coupons match 3SquaresVT benefits dollar-for-dollar up to \$10, so if a person takes \$10 out of their 3SQUARESVT account, they also get an additional \$10 in Crop Cash coupons to spend. The customer receives \$10 from their 3SquaresVT EBT card in the form of wooden tokens that can only be spent on food purchased at the Farmers Market. The Crop Cash coupons, which can only be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables, act as an incentive effectively doubling the purchasing power of the 3SquaresVT benefits. Crop Cash provides currency to purchase fruits and vegetables, and frees up money for other staples, like eggs, meat, milk, or bread. Not only does this encourage healthy food choices, but it brings in a customer base that does not always consider the market as an accessible option. With \$500,000 in base funding from the State of Vermont, Crop Cash (Plus) could allow folks to add meat and eggs to their purchases, as well.

I would like to share my experience with the Crop Cash program, and how it has made our farmer's markets better, by providing more access to local food, and supporting local farmers and small food producers.

I assist the St. Johnsbury Farmers Market on Saturdays from April through October. The market is located right in the heart of downtown, in a parking lot owned by the town.

For 50 years, the farmer's market has been an essential resource, providing residents of St. Johnsbury and surrounding towns with a place to buy locally grown food, and a way to pay those farmers and food producers directly for their goods.

The Farmer's Market is not only benefitting local health and the local economy; it's also building social capital. As I'm sure many of you know, Farmer's Markets are social events! They are places for community members to talk to each other, talk to their farmers, ask questions about how to prepare a new vegetable, or how to cook a new cut of meat. Much of this community-building takes place at the 3SquaresVT and Crop Cash table, set up under a hand painted sign made by one of the farmers and her children saying, "Welcome to the Farmer's Market!" The Farmers Market purchased a

card reader and pays for card transaction fees. NOFA-VT provides the Crop Cash coupons, and handles reimbursing the market for the wooden tokens used as currency when folks use their 3SquaresVT EBT cards.

We have a mother and daughter that comes to the market, and the daughter brings a new recipe with her. After getting their wooden tokens and Crop Cash, the daughter makes her way around the market, clutching her new recipe, learning how to cook, how to purchase local food, and also learning about what foods grow in which season here in VT.

We have farmers who rely on 3SquaresVT to feed their own families and are happy to spend some of those dollars right there at the market, literally spreading the wealth and keeping federal dollars right here.

Some of the folks who use the 3SquaresVT and Crop Cash program at our market are seniors. In downtown St. Johnsbury we have a number of senior housing apartments that are within easy walking distance of the Farmer's Market. Many of these folks don't have their own transportation, and there are no grocery stores downtown, so the Farmers Market is providing an essential service to them. In the fall, many of them start using their Crop Cash almost entirely for winter squash, onions, and potatoes, things that will store for the winter, so they don't need to go out as often or have to arrange transportation for frequent grocery store trips.

In conclusion, the Farmer's Market has benefited tremendously from this important work by NOFA-VT. Through this partnership we are providing access to healthy food to our friends, neighbors, seniors, and families with small children, keeping federal dollars here in our communities, directly impacting our most local economy: our small farms and food producers. Please support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

Thank you for listening.