

Turnpike Farm Markets Debut Friday

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HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — The more than a million holiday travelers expected to hit the Pennsylvania Turnpike this Memorial Day holiday weekend are to have two brand new farm markets at which to stop and shop.

According to Sharon Fulginiti, state Department of Agriculture coordinator for a pilot program for establishing roadside farm markets along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Friday, May 26, is to be the grand opening of two farm markets on the Pennsylvania Turnpike — one at the Allentown Service Plaza in Lehigh County, and the other one at the Sideling Hill Service Plaza in Fulton County.

The markets are to be open Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Exact times were not certain at presstime, but bylaws tentatively set the markets for opening for business at 11 a.m. Fridays and Sundays; 8 a.m. Saturdays and Monday-holidays.

Fulginiti is with PDA's Commodity Promotion Division of the Bureau of Marketing Development and has been working with Pa. Turnpike Commission staff to develop the pilot program markets.

The Turnpike Commission operates the toll highway and a number and variety of rest and service stops along the route.

Early last year, state Rep. Sheila Miller, R-Berks, introduced legislation to authorize a program whereby the state's agricultural producers could directly market to the millions of travelers and tourists who use the tollway.

While that bill was killed under the then Democratic-controlled House, the administration picked

up on the idea and initiated the pilot program without the legislation.

This year, with a Republican-controlled House and Senate and administration, Miller reintroduced the legislation as House Bill 844, which the House passed.

Currently it has received first consideration by the full Senate. A bill can only be passed by the Senate upon third consideration.

With the Senate scheduled to be back in session on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, it's possible the bill could be forwarded in the legislative process, but very unlikely that it would be passed and signed into law in time for the grand opening of the pilot markets.

Miller's bill would allow more market access, as would be determined is safe and reasonable.

In a recent news release, Miller praised the alliance between the Turnpike Commission and the PDA that occurred after she introduced the concept.

"This is proving to be a very positive alliance. Travelers along the Turnpike will experience the rich agricultural history of our commonwealth in its most direct and simplest form.

"Furthermore, our farmers will tap into an extraordinary market of interstate travelers along the turnpike," she said, adding that, "This will provide farmers with an opportunity to boost revenue while showcasing and promoting the variety and quality of Pennsylvania's agricultural products."

The reason Miller has pushed for legislation to authorize the farmers markets is to prevent the possibility of possible partisan politics from hurting the program, or in other words, to maintain continui-

ty in the program.

And she said she wants the program to grow as big as it will through the initiative of the farmer-participants themselves, not through a government-created and mandated program.

In the meantime, the pilot program has developed with the organization of groups specific to each of the two pilot farm market sites.

Each farm market group has 10 approved members and a set of bylaws that the farmer-producers created for themselves.

The bylaws outline general business conduct, responsibilities, qualifications for vendors, hours of operation, a minimum number of people working the markets, and products approved for sale.

While the two sets of bylaws are slightly different, both are generally the same, and require that member-vendors must be Pennsylvania producers who grow not less than 50 percent of the products marketed through the turnpike service area markets.

Furthermore, the products must be grown in Pennsylvania.

For those who run short of their own state-produced product, the bylaws allow them to supplement with additional stocks, as long as they are Pennsylvania-produced.

While business activity that results from the pilot program is envisioned as being complimentary and representative of the state and its agricultural producers, the nature of the actual markets is expected to evolve as customers and vendors conduct business.

According to the section in bylaws concerning the Pennsylvania-grown products approved for sale at both the Allen-

town and Sideling Hill markets, vendors are to be allowed to sell: vegetable (no slices); cider (not less than ½ quart); flowers; canned goods; baked goods (whole pies, loaf bread, etc. no slices, cookies or scones); fruits (no slices); preserves (in jar); bedding plants; honey products; eggs; nuts; herbs; fruit baskets; potted plants; maple syrup products; melons (may be sold in halves); and ornaments, such as gourds, corn shucks, etc.

The Sideling Hill market is to also offer meats, but no single servings.

The reason for some of the restrictions on how the products are to be packaged or in what amounts they are to be sold is to prevent the farmer markets from competing with the snack shop and convenience meal franchises already operating at the service centers, and to encourage vendors to promote and market whole Pennsylvania products that consumers take home, or along on vacation.

Also, the bylaws make clear that all food safety, sanitation, health permits and labeling issues that apply to items being sold must conform with the requirements of the law.

Also, state sales tax is to be collected on products which are not eatable, as is required by law.

Facilities at the two sites are to start off simply, with pole supported pavilions.

On Wednesday, Bill Capone, assistant director of marketing for the Turnpike Commission, said that simple pavilions are to be constructed this coming week, just in time for use.

He said that the commission intends to upgrade the facilities as needed and as the markets evolve.

For now, both facilities are to be open-sided, 30-foot by 60-foot structures located in grassy areas in front of restaurant buildings at the two service centers.

Capone said the siting of the pavilions was done so as to not interfere with regular center visitor traffic, but also to allow easy access. There will not be any special parking sections for the opening weekend, and none planned, unless the situation warrants a change.

"The reason for these two areas," Capone said, "there are lot of grass areas and we had a lot of room to work with.

"At most of the other (service centers), with a couple of exceptions, it's difficult to find safe, convenient locations, that are attractive and appealing as well."

The commission is absorbing the cost of building the facilities, with an estimated cost of \$8,000 at Sideling Hill to \$12,000 at Allentown.

Capone said eventually the pavilions may get electric hookup and water, and "Down the road there may be other things, rain gutters, maybe walkways, lighting ... we will address things as we get into it. We're willing to enhance the buildings as we go along, to try to keep them as attractive and functional as we can."

Another reason for selecting the two sites for the pilot program was because they are accessible from both directions of traffic. The majority of service centers along

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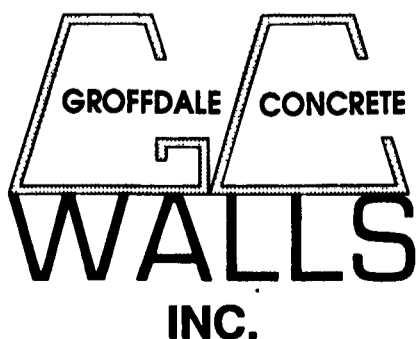
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