



THE ZERO WASTE SOLUTION

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Three-Month Pilot of Reusables at Civic Center Farmer's Market Final Metrics Report to Zero Waste Marin

March 31st 2025

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1. Summary of Main Activities

Sparkl's journey at the Thursday Civic Center Farmers Market began when Zero Waste Marin (ZWM) approached Sparkl in July 2024 to explore interest in providing reusable dishware, collection, and dishwashing services at the market. At the time, Sparkl was in the midst of a similar pilot at the Rohnert Park Farmers Market, which we believe was the first large-scale deployment of reusable foodware at a California farmers market.

In September 2024, ZWM confirmed Executive Committee approval to fund a three-month pilot. Sparkl then submitted a proposal and a draft implementation timeline. On December 5th, ZWM introduced Sparkl to the Agricultural Institute of Marin (AIM)—the operator of the Farmers Market—for a walk-through and vendor introductions.

When Sparkl surveyed market vendors about container preferences, we found strong interest in reusable clamshells and coffee cups. Since most food vendors preferred clamshells over plates—the most expensive of our reusables—we proposed launching with a deposit model, charging a refundable \$5 for clamshells and \$2 for cups, the same model we used at the Rohnert Park summer market.

ZWM suggested we start by surveying customers about their interest in a deposit system for reusable food serviceware and their preferred container and cup materials. Over the next week, we secured a second team member to help with customer surveys, printed outreach materials, and set up an information table.

Mid-December marked the launch of customer surveys, with insights recorded and incorporated into updated versions. As we shared findings with ZWM and AIM, there was concern that the deposit model may be a barrier for some and hinder wider adoption. With that in mind, ZWM expressed a preference for Sparkl to implement a no-deposit model. Paul drafted financial analyses for this approach including cost implications of using alternative materials such as ceramic cups. In order to hedge against the risk of high cost to replace more expensive cups without a deposit, Sparkl settled on using our #5 polypropylene plastic cups with a sleeve and lid. Vendor and customer outreach continued through December, while Sparkl secured reusable inventory for the program's launch.

By early January, we transitioned from research to implementation. On January 2nd, we distributed reusable dishware and cups to vendors, installed signage and bins at the farmers market, and educated vendors on the process and best practices. Vendors were guided to start offering the reusables to their repeat customers first as a way to ensure higher returns and to warm up to promoting the program. Customer and vendor responses were positive, and we added a return bin at the Sunday market based on customer feedback. Additionally, an email sent by the County of Marin's Department of Public Works Public Information Office to all County of Marin employees led to a stronger turnout of employees requesting reusables, especially reusable cups from coffee vendors, early in the market day. (One of the main offices for County of Marin employees is the Marin County Civic Center, which is located on the same property as the Thursday Civic Center Farmers Market that is operated by AIM.)

As January progressed, we focused on increasing vendor and customer engagement and participation, promoting reusables for on-site dining, and brainstorming incentives to boost return rates. Despite slower market traffic, interest in reusables remained strong. We identified a preliminary 50% return rate, though one of the two coffee vendors has a 25% return rate. By month's end, participation and returns improved, with notable engagement from customers and vendors interested in purchasing reusables. Additional return bins were placed at the far ends of the market to enhance accessibility. We believe that one of the reasons for the lower return rate of the white cups was that particular vendor's strong social media presence, leading to many of their customers coming for drinks and directly going home, rather than walking the market.

Our work in February encompassed the following activities to further boost the program's impact. We strengthened vendor commitment by working with AIM to reinforce messaging with vendors around defaulting to reusables for on-site dining. Payment links for direct purchase of containers and cups were introduced with applications like Venmo and Zelle, as we had noticed growing interest in visitors who wanted to take reusable products home for ongoing personal use. Given the low return rate on some reusables (white coffee cups and clamshells), raffle flyers were finalized to boost engagement and help us to realize increased returns in the final weeks of the pilot (see below).

March saw key milestones in the program's success. Familiar faces stopped by the booth to say hello and thank you, and others—including a reporter, restaurant and refill shop owners, school administrators, environmental activists, and city leaders—came to learn more. Our first raffle winners were drawn, and vendors were encouraged to promote returns-for-tickets. Additional food vendors donated \$5-off coupons as raffle prizes, strengthening partnerships. By March 13th, an additional Sparkl staffer, Brendan, joined the team to help with earlier presence at the market, per AIM's request. Market patrons continued purchasing Sparkl reusable containers and cups for home and BYO use at other businesses. By March 20th, the raffle incentive had successfully increased return rates, especially for Sparkl containers, which saw a return rate of approximately 45% in January, increasing to 66% in March alone after the raffle had been deployed. Community appreciation for the program was evident, with many patrons looking for ways to support its continuation.

On March 27th, the final market day was met with rain, but the community spirit endured. Containers were still being returned, raffle winners picked up their prizes, and both patrons and vendors expressed deep appreciation for the program. Sparkl left prizes at the AIM booth for those unable to collect them that day, along with two return bins.

When Sparkl representatives returned the following week to collect remaining items, they repeatedly encountered customers arriving at the AIM booth to return containers and retrieve prizes—all while expressing enthusiasm and support. This underscored the program's success. We hope that the groundwork laid over these three months has positioned Sparkl for potential expansion and lasting impact in the journey toward a more sustainable market experience!

[List of the Participating Vendors](#)

- Zolo's Coffee Roasters
- Myriad Coffee
- La Esperanza Pupuseria
- Kinoko
- Pibil / Porchetta Toscana
- Rozmary Kitchen
- Mr. Dim Sum
- Wanna's Kitchen
- Fireswamp Provisions

2. Total Reusable Items Deployed / Single-use Items Prevented

Month	Cups Deployed	Clamshells & Plates Deployed	Accessories (sleeves, lids, utensils) Deployed	Monthly Total Reusables
January	169	96	185	450
February	60	11	111	182
March	76	113	119	308

3. Total Materials Used and Returned Throughout the Pilot

Item	Used	Returned	Lost Items	Return Rate
Green Cups	220	158	62	71.82%
White Cups	74	38	36	51.35%
Containers	226	154	72	68.14%
Plates	69	66	3	95.25%
Lids	249	137	112	55.02%
Sleeves	136	114	22	83.82%
Utensils	41	26	15	63.41%
TOTAL	1015	693	322	68.28%

Deployed, Returned and Missing



4. Customer Feedback

- 34 community members surveyed
- 50% had not heard of the program before being surveyed
- Question: What would make it easier to participate in the program?
 - More participating vendors
 - Easier return locations
 - More advertising around the community and farmers market
 - Clearer instructions on how the program works
- 75% of customers surveyed stated that reducing single-use waste was “very important.”
- 84% support continuing the reusable program
- Some customers did not like the material Sparkl’s serviceware was made out of (plastic). Customers would be more likely to participate and pay a deposit if the material were changed (ceramic or aluminum).

5. Vendor Feedback

- 7/9 participating vendors were surveyed
 - Rozmary Kitchen
 - Kinko
 - Myriad Coffee
 - La Esperanza
 - Wannas Kitchen
 - Mr Dim Sum
 - Fireswamp Provisions

- Question: How easy was it to integrate Sparkl's reusables into your operations?
 - 3 of 7 vendors said it was "very easy" to integrate Sparkl's reusables into their operations.
 - 1 of 7 felt "neutral" about integrating the reusables into their operations
 - 3 of 7 stated it was "somewhat difficult"
- Question: What was the biggest benefit of participating?
 - 56% said "Reducing waste and positive environmental impact" was the biggest benefit.
- Question: What were the biggest challenges?
 - Time and capacity were the biggest challenges for vendors.
 - When their business became busy, there was not enough time or staff members to explain the reusable program to every consumer.
- Question: Would you be interested in continuing the program?
 - 71% of vendors said "maybe"
 - 29% of vendors said "yes"
- Suggestions for future programs
 - More container options
 - Participation in both markets
 - Simple, captivating signage explaining the program

6. Other Program Information

- Raffle for returns was a popular incentive
- Plates had the highest return rate of all items deployed
- Return bins positioned at the far end of the market was a helpful addition
- Regular Sparkl check-ins helped remind vendors to offer reusables to customers
- Some vendors kept their inventory while others wanted it delivered every market
- A percentage of users kept reusing Sparkl cups instead of returning them to Sparkl booth.
- Better coordination during large group visits (camps and schools, etc) to prevent overwhelming the three bin system while also using it as a teaching moment for reusables.

7. Photos of customers participating in the program

Link to complete photo album [here](#)



Left: Cory Bytoff, Sustainability Manager, City of San Rafael, enjoying food from Mr. Dim Sum, **Center left:** A happy customer, **Center Right:** Children learning about reusables with Sparkl, **Right:** Marin Magazine journalist taking an interest in the program.

8. Sparkl Sustainability Metrics Digital Placard

Reusables Pilot at *Marin Civic Center Farmers Market* Avoided **1,015** Single-Use Products with **SPARKL REUSABLES!**

*Choosing reusables over disposables
equates to savings of..*



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WASTE
MARIN**

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AIM
AGRICULTURAL
INSTITUTE of MARIN