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The downtown farmers market debuted its expanded offerings on Wednesday.

Expanded farmers market welcomed by many

Farmers Market

By JORY JOHN

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SANTA CRUZ — Amidst scattered showers, the Santa Cruz Community Farmers Market celebrated its 20th anniversary downtown Wednesday, with musical performances, cooking demonstrations, speeches and approximately 25,000 square feet of new space.

The market, founded in 1990 as Santa Cruz was recovering from the Loma Prieta earthquake, also featured an Earth Day celebration.

As the clouds parted and the weather improved, so, too, did the crowd, as hundreds of people showed up to sample a wide variety of food, dance to live music, gather information from local non-profits and stroll about the

adjoining two parking lots behind Toadal Fitness that now house the market.

Market operations manager Nesh Dhillon — who coordinates the market, as well as farmers markets on the Westside, Scotts Valley, Felton and Live Oak — said he was happy with the turnout, despite the intermittent rain. Dhillon said the approximately 20 additional booths and performance stage would remain.

“We’re totally committed to making a world-class farmers market for this community, and now we have the real estate to do it. We’ll run this as a pilot program until the end of the year, when we evaluate how it’s doing,” he said.

Dhillon, who recently hired three employees to help with the added work,

said there wasn’t a downside to having more space, even though it’s more for him to manage. The arts and crafts component, as well as a full roster of musical acts, is a boon to an already burgeoning market, he said.

Jerry Thomas, founder of Thomas Farm based in Corralitos, said he has been exhibiting at the downtown market since it started.

“We really like the dynamic and the mix of people who come to this market,” said Thomas, standing behind a colorful variety of flowers for sale. “Each market has its own personality. I’m looking forward to seeing how it evolves.”

Tina Quaintance, representing Wilson Farms, said the business had been a part of the farmers market since the beginning. Quaintance

— who was selling large tomatoes, among other produce — said while she was a fan of the weekly gathering, she had her concerns about the expansion.

“We go to a lot of farmers markets and this market is the most eclectic, wonderful group of people,” she said. “It just fits with Santa Cruz. I do worry, though, that the expansion takes away parking for customers. They took away half of the parking lot. Also, in these tough times, it might be difficult to divide up the pie even more.”

Santa Cruz resident Mark Muhlhausen said he attends the farmers market every week.

“I think it’s the most awesome part of Santa Cruz,” Muhlhausen said. “And now it’s even better.”