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Bringing relief to food deserts in Baton Rouge

Pantries, gardens help, but grocers needed in underserved areas

BY SKIP DESCANT

Advocate business writer
July 07, 2012

2 COMMENTS

They came for onions, celery, grapes and sweet corn. Also for the taking were bread, juice, eggplants, oranges and more.

On a recent Saturday morning, the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank distributed more than 15,000 pounds of fresh produce from St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Scotlandville in

"We're trying to rebuild the community that can sustain itself." Walter Monsour, president of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority



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north Baton Rouge.

“I got everything they offered me,” said Donna Jackson, 62, who held a box loaded with fruit juice, bread, produce and other items. “And we’re going to thank God for it.”

To get foods like these, Jackson usually would head up to the Wal-Mart in Baker. Scotlandville has no shortage of convenience stores, but a true grocery store is hard to come by for this community of about 18,000 residents, according to Census data. And about 89 percent of these people live a mile or more from a true supermarket, said Edgar Cage, a member of St. Michael’s and Together Baton Rouge, which has taken on the task of leading initiatives to make healthy foods more accessible to neighborhoods plagued by “food deserts” — whole communities where a grocery store is absent.

“Scotlandville is the largest food desert in Baton Rouge,” Cage said.

People like Jackson feel that shortage.

“We need a grocery store in Scotlandville,” she said. “We don’t have one, and we have to go way out to shop.”

The food desert phenomenon is common in inner-city neighborhoods where poverty is high. The median 2010 household income in Scotlandville was \$21,700, according to Census data. Groups like Together Baton Rouge have tried to lure a major grocery retailer to the area, but have had no luck.

“We were real close with a possibility of an investor, but the deal was not consummated,” Cage wrote in an email. “We are pursuing other possibilities and will not stop until we are successful. The residents of Scotlandville deserve better and Together Baton Rouge is working diligently to make it happen.”

The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority is also doing what it can to encourage a grocery store in the area, but no matter the incentive, basic economics can’t be ruled out and the store has to make money, say officials.

“The bottom line is always going to be, can you make an appropriate business proposition? Because there is no organization that will go in and create a grocery store that serves fresh vegetables and fresh foods and produces a product for the food desert without the ability to make money,” said Walter Monsour, president and CEO of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority. “How much money they make, obviously our experience from studying other areas is that they need to be heavily incentivized, and probably the operator has to have some degree of passion and community sensitivity to ultimately, maybe accept a little bit less on their return on investment. Or accept maybe a little more risk than they would normally take in their typical business model,” he said.

One of the newer incentives available for investors are New Market Tax Credits, which allow individual and corporate investors to receive a tax credit against their federal income tax return in exchange for making investments in specialized financial institutions called Community Development Entities.

A CDE is an organization certified by the U.S. Treasury that acts as a

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financial intermediary through which investment capital flows from an investor to a qualified business located in a low-income community. Low-income communities are generally defined as those Census tracts with poverty rates of greater than 20 percent and/or median family incomes that are 80 percent or less than the median income in the area.

In February the program awarded \$3.6 billion to 70 organizations across the country — five of them in Louisiana, totaling \$295 million.

Locally, Stonehenge Community Development LLC, an imprint of Stonehenge Capital Co., a Baton Rouge financing company, received \$85 million in tax credits.

Eight percent of the tax credits are intended for what's known as Healthy Food Financing Initiative projects. It's unclear what projects Stonehenge might be helping to finance or where those projects are located. Officials did not return calls and emails seeking comment.

"Examples of healthy food financing projects could include supermarkets, food co-ops, community-owned stores and other smaller retailers, as well as farms, ranches, fisheries or even food processing and distribution," said Kimberly R. Beauman, a legislative and external affairs specialist with the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund.

Other incentives include state and federal grants along with private organizations, Monsour said.

However, incentives are only part of the puzzle when thinking about attracting a grocery store, he added. For one, population in an area should be on the rise.

In the 70807 ZIP code, the area making up Scotlandville, population fell nearly 8 percent from 2000 to 2010.

Grocers and other retailers also like to see other healthy economic societal indicators like rising personal income and low crime — two other challenges for Scotlandville. So retail development is really part of the larger picture of community redevelopment, Monsour said.

"The trends have been, and continue to be, a declining population, in terms of the actual numbers of people," Monsour continued. "And secondly, a decline in the disposable income."

"And part and parcel to that is what security measures do I have to take in an area that's in decline and therefore probably has a higher crime rate than others?" he added.

"I hate to keep harping on the business proposition, but that's where you've got to start."

The RDA is working to bring more residents to the area, which means more affordable housing, as well as boost income and job opportunities, said Monsour.

"We're trying to rebuild the community that can sustain itself," he added.

The hope is food bank mobile pantries, like the one at St. Michael's, and other public policy leads, like the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, might all help to bring affordable fresh food to communities where

scarcity and high prices are all too common.”

“I shop most of the dollar stores, and like Wal-Mart, where I can get a value,” said Margaret Walker, 73, who lives in north Baton Rouge, and was getting groceries from the mobile food pantry. She receives about \$147 a month in food stamps.

Doris Gage generally shops at the Hi Nabor Supermarket on Winbourne Avenue, and also would like some more grocery options and lower prices.

Other residents in neighborhoods like Old South Baton Rouge between downtown and LSU are increasing access to healthy natural foods the old-fashioned way: They’re growing it.

The neighborhood is home to about eight community gardening plots. Five of the plots began in 2010 as fresh-food initiatives by the Center for Planning Excellence, with the idea that these could also work within the larger matrix of community redevelopment.

Since then, two to three others have sprouted up, said Tara Titone, a project manager at the Center for Planning Excellence.

Also, students from LSU’s School of Human Ecology and the Department of Food Sciences have been working with the YMCA in the area to teach programs on healthy eating and assist with the YMCA’s community garden.

“They’re introducing foods that the children have never had before: healthy, fresh snacks and food. And then there will be a lesson around that food,” Titone explained.

Over time, residents have assumed more ownership over their gardens, taking the lead from CPEX when it comes to planting, maintenance and other needs. Three of the gardens now have regular workdays, Titone added.

This is not to say some degree of hand-holding is unneeded or that inner-city garden plots are the answer to food deserts.

“And when we slack, we notice that the gardens do somehow suffer,” said Titone. All told, the gardens are actively used by only about 50 residents.

“But the fact that you’re getting to a percentage of the population, it’s better than what was there before,” she added.