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Lower Ninth Ward coalition releases food access action plan

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Contributing Writer

The Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood does not have a grocery store, however residents and community organizations are working on changing that.

What that has led to is a 48-page plan that describes what neighborhood residents would like to see regarding grocery stores and other solutions to increase fresh food access.

Members of the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition, which comprises individuals and other community groups, shared that plan with the public during a news conference Saturday at All Souls Episcopal Church.

“The access to fresh and nutritious food is critical to the health, sustainability and economic redevelopment of the Ninth Ward,” said Jenga Mwendo, Food Security Coordinator for the Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development. “These beliefs are at the core of our struggle for food access in the neighborhood.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as any low-income area that has at least 500 residents and no grocery store within one mile. The last grocery store in the neighborhood closed in 1987 and the closest grocery store to the neighborhood is in neighboring St. Bernard Parish. According to the 2010 Census, there were 5,556 residents in the neighborhood with an average household income of \$34,246.

Neighborhood residents aren’t the only group that could benefit from a grocery store in the Lower Ninth Ward. A 2010 study by the University of New Orleans stated that approximately 35,000 vehicles crossed the St. Claude Avenue bridge daily.

Maurice Cox, Tulane City Center Director, said the opportunity to increase fresh food access in the Lower Ninth Ward is fertile ground for a new way, and that is what the coalition has in mind for solutions.

The coalition identified mobile grocery store as it’s most feasible short-term solution. This would be a retailer of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other items that would be sold on a bus. The intermediate solution was a corner store that sells items like low-fat milk, fresh fruits, and vegetables. An example of the coalition’s desired corner store concept is the Healthy Bodega initiative, which was implemented by New York City government. It involves city government working with corner stores to increase the supply of a variety of fresh foods and offering nutritional education by working with community groups. The long-term solution was a school-based grocery store. This facility would be student-operated and also potentially allow students to learn business skills. The city of Leeton, Mich., used this particular concept when a recession led to the closing of multiple businesses, including the town’s sole grocery store.

The coalition has already been attracting attention to this initiative and its first effort at that was through a grocery store for a day event. This involved a pop-up location serving as a grocery store with the purpose of drawing attention to the poor food access in the neighborhood.

“It seemed to bring some cohesiveness to our community and our neighborhoods,” said Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development Executive Director Arthur Johnson.

There are also a variety of federal and local incentives for vendors detailed in the plan. One of the incentives is the Fresh Food Retailer Initiative launched in 2011 by the City of New Orleans, a financing program that aims to improve the availability of fresh food by increasing the number of fresh food retailers in low-income and underserved communities in New Orleans.”

“This is a monumental endeavor,” Johnson said. “This is just the beginning of things to solidify, and work within our community.

A full copy of the plan can be found at sustainthenine.org.

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