

THE REFRESH PROJECT

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Developing with healthy food as a focus to drive improved neighborhood health outcomes

LESSONS

- A grocery store is essential in providing access to healthy food, but nutrition education services are equally important in improving health outcomes.
- Assembling a group of like-minded tenants that are focused on providing locally grown food, job training, and youth and community outreach services can aid in attracting a retailer that offers a wide range of healthy food products.
- A market exists for high-quality grocers in low- and moderate-income areas, provided that stores take advantage of opportunities to partner with others on community programming that increases local knowledge of health and nutrition.

QUICK FACTS

Location

300 North Broad Street, New Orleans, LA 70119

Project type

Retail/nonprofit

Development team

Broad Community Connections,
L+M Development Partners

Project cost

\$20 million

Project size

3.2 acres (1.3 ha); 65,000-square-foot
(6,039 sq m) commercial building

Project status

Completed in 2014

Financing

New Markets Tax Credits financing (JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs), Goldman Sachs, Healthy Food Financing Initiative, Foundation for Louisiana, New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, City of New Orleans Fresh Food Retailers Initiative, Newman's Own Foundation, self-financing

Equity partner

Broad Community Connections,
L+M Development Partners



This page: The grouping of organizations that focus on local food access and nutrition education at the ReFresh Project helped attract a Whole Foods Market to the site. (Jeffrey Schwartz)

Next page: The ReFresh Community Farm features on-site programs to educate local residents about how to grow and use fresh produce. (Matt Kleinman)

THE REFRESH PROJECT is a fresh-food hub located between the Tremé and Mid-City neighborhoods of New Orleans, Louisiana, that opened in 2014. The development, spearheaded by local community development organization Broad Community Connections (BCC), was created on the site of a former supermarket that had been vacant for five years. The project houses a 27,000-square-foot (2,508 sq m) Whole Foods Market and a number of nonprofit organizations focused on improving community nutrition and health.

Features and Innovations

- **Grocery store in a former food desert:** The ReFresh Project includes a Whole Foods Market, which was attracted to the site because of the mix of like-minded, health-focused tenants who were willing to collaborate on programs to improve health outcomes.
- **Nutrition education services:** The Tulane University Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine operates a teaching kitchen at the ReFresh Project. It was the first U.S. medical school to require culinary and nutritional education classes for its students; the curriculum is now being used by over 20 percent of medical schools in the United States after just two years. The Goldring Center also offers multilingual classes on cooking skills, meal planning, health, and wellness for area residents, medical students, and practicing medical professionals.
- **Community teaching farm:** The on-site ReFresh Community Farm is coordinated by SPROUT NOLA, Faubourg Farms, and local community gardeners and features on-site programs to educate local residents about how to grow and use fresh produce to reduce and prevent diet-related illness.
- **Youth employment training kitchen and café:** Liberty's Kitchen is an on-site social enterprise that provides hands-on food service and life skills training for area youth, which includes preparation of healthy meals for use in nearby schools. An on-site café offers nutritious foods, with proceeds funding youth development programs.

Creating Value: People, Planet, Profit

By rehabilitating a vacant supermarket site and grouping a retailer and service providers focused on healthy living, BCC and the ReFresh NOLA Coalition—a partnership among community stakeholders—are working to advance effective strategies to improve health outcomes.

Jeffrey Schwartz, BCC's executive director, explains: "The community wanted to see that investment on Broad Street served a diversity of residents with a mixture of local and national retailers and service providers. By being deliberate about creating a tenant mix that includes a grocery store and organizations that provide services around health, food access, and workforce and economic development, the ReFresh Project



“A grocery store is necessary, but not sufficient in moving the needle on diet-related chronic diseases. Wrap-around services that demonstrate the link between food and health—like classes that teach cooking, nutrition, and meal planning skills—are just as essential.”

Jeffrey Schwartz, Executive Director,
Broad Community Connections

has been able to contribute positively to the quality of life of the surrounding area.”

It is too early in the life of the project to determine long-term health outcomes, but the Prevention Research Center at Tulane University is studying changes in the level of awareness of healthy food and eating behaviors in the immediate area, as well as assessing a number of other local health indicators.

The ReFresh Project's community well-being focus was central in Whole Foods' decision to open a store in the neighborhood and has been a key component of the store's financial success. Schwartz explains: "By putting together a group of like-minded tenants focused on health, we were able to attract Whole Foods to the project. A major factor in their decision was having a group of partners ready and waiting to collaborate on addressing issues around food access and health outcomes in an underserved market.”

Schwartz adds, "There is absolutely a market for high-quality grocery stores in low- to moderate-income areas. Sales at the Whole Foods store at the ReFresh Project are several times higher than what was projected, and the store is in the upper echelon of sales per square foot for the company.”

The development of the ReFresh Project underscores BCC's view that an opportunity exists to layer services that can lead to long-term positive health impacts into real estate development. BCC sees this model as an evolution of how community development organizations do their work, with implications for public agencies, institutional organizations, and for-profit firms as well.