

Whole Foods Market work begins on North Broad Street

By Richard A. Webster, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune
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The ReFresh Project, featuring a [Whole Foods Market](#) anchoring a 60,000-square-foot development on North Broad Street, broke ground in [New Orleans](#) on Thursday. City leaders hailed it as an important first step in revitalizing the economically depressed corridor.

The project is being developed by Broad Community Connections, a local non-profit, and L+M Development Partners, a New York-based firm that specializes in low-income and market-rate housing.

"Over the past three years, our vision for this project has been to create a development that will deliver not only the highest quality fresh foods, but also create a transformative economic and community development project for a community that has been underserved even in the decades prior to Katrina," said Jeff Schwartz, executive director of Broad Community Connections.

Whole Foods will occupy less than half of the property at the intersection of [Broad and Bienville streets](#). It's moving into a space that previously housed a Robert's Fresh Market and Schwegmann's grocery but that has been vacant since Hurricane Katrina.



The other tenants will include Liberty's Kitchen, a nonprofit that provides culinary training to at-risk youth and meals to public schools, and [Tulane University](#)'s Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine, one of the country's first teaching kitchens associated with a medical school. Goldring will teach residents, students and doctors how to use healthy cooking to avoid food-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity and hypertension.

"Part of a growing realization is that the kitchen is almost as important as the clinic in keeping us healthy," said Tulane spokesman Keith Brannon.

ReFresh also will provide indoor and outdoor community space for gardening, fitness and education classes.

The city of New Orleans, through its Fresh Food Retailer Initiative, loaned \$1 million to Broad Community Connections for the project, with as much as \$500,000 forgivable. The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority added \$900,000 through its Commercial Corridor Revitalization program, with additional money coming from new market tax credits, Goldman Sachs, Chase, the Foundation for Louisiana, Newman's Own Foundation and La Raza.

The Fresh Food Retailer Initiative launched in March 2011 with the goal of expanding access to healthy food and revitalizing neighborhoods. The city and its partner Hope Enterprise Corporation provided \$14 million in Disaster Community Development Block Grant funds to the program.

Since its inception the initiative has awarded more than \$2.1 million to three projects including ReFresh, Circle Food Store and DaFresh Seafood and Produce in Central City.

Whole Foods currently has two stores in the New Orleans area on Magazine Street and Veterans Memorial Boulevard. It expects to open its Broad Street location in December.

Rachel Diller, vice president of the Urban Investment Group with Goldman Sachs, said the investment banking firm's decision to provide \$6 million in loans and equity to the ReFresh project fits into its larger strategy of focusing on entire neighborhoods and not just individual projects. Goldman Sachs provided economic assistance to the redevelopment of the Lafitte housing complex a few blocks from where Whole Foods will be located.

"There are folks living in Lafitte who can't afford a car, and they might struggle to find a grocery store close by that meets their needs," Diller said. "That we have the ability to participate in a project like ReFresh, which will benefit the residents in our existing project, how can we not do it?"

The current economic state of the Broad Street corridor would not allow developers to charge the rents needed to cover the cost of the project, so public and private subsidies were essential, Diller said.

"The expectation is that if the public makes this investment today and if that investment is as catalytic as we expect it will be, the subsidy will be paid off down the road," Diller said. "It will prove to be a good investment because it will help to revitalize the neighborhood and that will cause rents at the property to go up and in the surrounding community increasing the tax base. It's classic public investment in areas that need a kick start."