

## AGENDA PRIORITIES

4. Provide outreach, training and technical assistance to launch new grocery stores and improve existing stores to better serve underserved people in urban and rural areas.

### MAKING PLACES WORK WITH GROCERY STORES THAT STOCK HEALTHY FOOD

James Hooks worked his way up from bagging groceries after high school in 1969 to owning his own grocery store by 1984 in his hometown of Detroit. More than 25 years later he's still investing in his city and neighbors at his current Grand River Avenue store, Metro Foodland.

During the 2012 growing season, for example, Metro Foodland will feature, at a farm stand in its parking lot, organic produce from D-Town Farm, a two-acre urban garden that the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network operates.

"We're going to have local, local produce," Hooks jokes.

Yet this step and others to connect shoppers with quality food options is serious for Hooks and partners like the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation (DEGC). "We can't have strong neighborhoods in Detroit without significant and strong grocery stores," said Mariangela Pledl, DEGC Business Development Manager. "We know, too, that grocery stores can attract other positive retail."

The DEGC's Green Grocer program supports innovators like Hooks as they invest in making their stores, and ultimately the city itself, more attractive. Since its start in 2010, the program has worked in some way with about one-quarter of the city's approximately 80 grocery stores, Pledl said.

"They tend to be older, smaller stores with some very diverse populations in terms of food interests," she said. Green Grocer provides technical and some financial assistance with store design and layout, product mix development, customer relations, and product handling and merchandising. For example, the Green Grocer program connected Hooks with the federal Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development Center for a small grant that helped Metro Foodland pilot the farm stand idea. Green Grocer also provided a small grant that helped Hooks implement Metro Foodland's successful Healthy Rewards program.

"Instead of having a loyalty program based on any purchase, our loyalty program rewards people for buying healthy items, like sugar-free and low-sodium," Hooks said. Low-income shoppers benefit as well as those who used to go to the suburbs to shop because they assumed they couldn't find organic and other specialty items in Detroit, Hooks said. About 35 percent of Metro Foodland's customers use public food assistance programs to buy groceries.

"Our program encourages people to think about how they're spending their money not just how much they're spending," he said.



*Photo courtesy of Detroit Economic Growth Corp.*

## Need

Four hours northwest of Detroit, the same need to improve grocery options for public health and local economic improvement plays out in Mesick, one of Michigan's many urban and rural "food deserts;" places where local residents do not have ready access to healthy, fresh foods.

Village clerk Debbie Stanton is interested in any support available for helping the two grocery stores in the village improve what they are able to offer and residents choose and use more healthy options. Local residents unable to travel far for groceries would benefit, as would the economy of the village, if Mesick were seen as a place to grocery shop, she said. "The closest option for a wide variety of really fresh produce is 30 miles away." Stanton also believes coordination between local farmers and grocery stores could bring strong sales for both. "We had one gardener last year who set up a stand and sold out all the time because of all the campers and canoeists headed to the rivers and woods here," she said.

## Opportunity

Support for healthy food improvements at grocery stores in underserved urban and rural areas can have a profound effect on the health of local residents and the ability of local economies to generate jobs and investment now and in the future.

Building attractive towns and cities, or placemaking, is one of the state's leading strategies to both keep and attract the residents it needs for a prosperous 21st century. Making communities work for all residents, rich and poor, is a signature part of placemaking, which calls for diversity across the board; diversity of interests, incomes, ages, tastes, and lifestyles. Michigan has an opportunity in urban and rural grocery development to make more communities attractive places to live, work, and play.

## Action

To seize this opportunity, local and state policymakers must look beyond just landing major supermarket chains to how they can help smaller independent grocery businesses in underserved urban and rural areas. Positive action on this front includes:

- *Adding healthy food retail development to local economic development agendas so that agencies involved will make a habit of thinking about ways in which existing business development efforts could apply. For example, agencies could invite local smaller grocers to a roundtable discussion about their needs and to review existing programs that might help.*
- *Learning from programs like Detroit's Green Grocer and others nationally about the no-cost and low-cost steps small grocers can take to improve their product mix and customer service.*
- *Examining the effectiveness and building on incentives for retail grocery improvements in underserved areas, as begun in Public Act 231 of 2008, an amendment to Michigan's Commercial Rehabilitation Code.*
- *Encourage local food producers, whether farmers or community gardeners, to hook up with grocers in need of fresher produce options.*

## 1-2-3 Go!

Adopt a grocery store! If they're open to it, talk with owners of smaller stores and learn what prevents them from stocking more produce and other healthy foods. It could be they just don't have time to do the market research, or perhaps some new shelving is all they need. Take initiative and take stock. Then see what you and your neighbors can do to ease the way and open some doors for a local entrepreneur, including calling attention to their potential within community economic development circles.