

Incentives Aim to Bring Grocers Offering Healthier Fare to Baton Rouge's 'Food Deserts'

BY TERRY L. JONES | STAFF WRITER UPDATED NOV 19, 2019 AT 5:10 PM



Mayor President Sharon Weston Broome, left, chats with Together Baton Rouge lead organizer Perry Perkins, right, before a press conference announcing the Baton Rouge Healthy Food Retail Initiative Tuesday Nov. 19, 2019, in Baton Rouge, La. The innovative financing program was created to attract supermarkets, grocery stores or other fresh food retailers into designated food desert areas of EBR parish, with the goals of 1) increasing access to affordable healthy foods; 2) promoting the sale and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables; and 3) expanding economic opportunity and keeping dollars circulating in the community. STAFF PHOTO BY BILL FEIG

The city-parish's efforts to address food deserts in north Baton Rouge and other parts of the city has reached what Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome called a major milestone through the launch of the Healthy Food Retail Initiative.

Broome on Tuesday announced her administration has partnered with Hope Enterprise Corp. to provide incentives to grocers to set up shop in some of the city-parish's underserved communities — similar to what the financial organization did in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

“The overall goal is to close the grocery gap. That process has a lot of components in the equation,” Broome said in an interview. “This takes more than just phone calls asking someone to come to your neighborhood.”

Broome and others have said convincing businesses to locate in areas like north Baton Rouge takes the kind of incentives the state and other municipalities use to attract industry.

Broome was joined by an array of community partners during the announcement Tuesday, one being Together Baton Rouge, which has been working to bring more affordable, healthier food options to parts of the city where grocery stores are scarce.

Edgar Cage, a spokesman affiliated with the faith-based organization, said 23% of the parish's population live in areas with little choice for healthy food. The national average is 7%, he said.

Together Baton Rouge claims the most vulnerable residents affected by the parish's food deserts are 19,000 children and 7,000 seniors.

"Early on we knew there needs to be infrastructure created to make things happen," Cage said.

The issue is one that carried over from the previous administration. Some earlier efforts could never get enough traction to make headway.

Tuesday's announcement comes a year after the city-parish received nearly \$2 million from Humana Foundation and the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation to jump-start healthy food initiatives in the city's underserved neighborhoods.

Those funds were earmarked for community gardens, a mobile market and other initiatives that have already been implemented in the 70805 ZIP code area through collaborations with Top Box and Grow Baton Rouge.

Top Box, a New Orleans-based nonprofit, over the past year helped supply existing corner stores in the area with nearly 4,000 units of fresh fruits and vegetables, according to a report tracking spending on the grants.

The Grow Baton Rouge mobile markets sold more than 8,000 units of fresh produce to 70805 residents, and hundreds of volunteers helped Baton Roots establish a community farm at Howell Park that produced an 485 pounds of fresh-grown fruits and vegetables, the report says.

"The 70805 area served as a pilot program to see how we could close the gaps of residents not having access to fresh food," Broome said. "This is the long-range, ultimate goal: to have a physical grocery store in disinvested communities."

Broome said the administration has a shortlist of developers and retailers interested in utilizing the financial incentive packages Hope Enterprise Corporation will craft as part of the Healthy Food Retail Initiative.

Rowdy Gaudet, one of Broome's assistant chief administrative officers, said those retailers will do their own due diligence and market research that Hope Enterprise and the city-parish will use to build the incentive packages.

Officials at Hope Enterprise said they'll be hiring a full-time loan officer dedicated to working on the city-parish's initiative.

Jerry Jones, executive director with the Baton Rouge North Economic Development District, his organization will soon implement a recruitment component to aid in the outreach.

"This gives us the tools we need when meeting with developers," Jones said.



*As Edgar Cage, right, a leader of Together Baton Rouge, watches, Mayor President Sharon Weston Broome, left, delivers remarks during a press conference announcing the Baton Rouge Healthy Food Retail Initiative Tuesday Nov. 19, 2019, in Baton Rouge, La.
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