

Food Desert Oasis

South Memphis Farmers Market adding year-round greengrocer

By Jennifer Johnson Backer

Most urban neighborhoods in Memphis don't have access to a traditional grocery store that offers fresh and affordable food.

While these urban areas lack grocery stores, fast food restaurants and convenience stores are often plentiful.

Kenneth Reardon, a professor and director of the graduate program of City and Regional Planning at the University of Memphis, discovered that only seven out of 77 low-income census tracts in urban Memphis have access to a full-service supermarket.

Studies show that people who live in communities without supermarkets, often dubbed food deserts, have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, renal failure, cardiovascular disease and other diet-related health problems, says [Curtis Thomas](#), deputy executive director of the Memphis-based nonprofit [The Works Inc.](#)

Thomas said in recent years there has been a renewed focus on increasing access to affordable, healthy and fresh foods in urban communities. That national focus has provided increased funding opportunities for local nonprofits that focus on food security, he explained. Already, several long-term efforts are underway in Memphis.

In May, Saint Patrick Community Outreach, the Vance Avenue Collaborative and the University of Memphis graduate program in City and Regional Planning launched the Green Machine, a mobile food market that sells fresh, affordable produce at 15 city locations throughout the city.

In late June, city community leaders and South Memphis residents celebrated the completion of a new building that will eventually house a year-round greengrocer at the South Memphis Farmers Market. A new space for cooking classes and demonstrations already is open and fully operational.

"People really loved the first cooking demonstration," Thomas said. "We are already getting so many requests for people to sign up for the classes."

The South Memphis Farmers Market opened in 2010 as a collaborative organization run by South Memphis residents, The Works and the University of Memphis. While the outdoor seasonal market has been widely popular with local residents, Thomas said the market's outdoor location limited its ability to provide healthy and affordable food during the winter



In January 2014, the South Memphis Farmers Market at Mississippi Boulevard and South Parkway will add a year-round greengrocer, thanks to \$1.2 million in funding from The Plough Foundation and other groups.

(The South Memphis Farmers Market)



In recent years there has been a renewed focus on increasing access to affordable, healthy and fresh foods in urban communities.

(The South Memphis Farmers Market)

months.

Beginning in January 2014, South Memphis residents will be able to purchase healthy produce and food at the indoor greengrocer. Thomas said the greengrocer will sell food from a mix of local farmers and producers as well as national suppliers.

Local organizers saw an opportunity to capitalize on the market's location in a U.S. Department of Agriculture-designated food desert and the increased national focus on food security and access, Thomas said.

The \$1.2 million community effort relies on funding from The Plough Foundation, The U.S. Department of Agriculture, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and various local agencies and organizations.

Roshun Austin, president and CEO of The Works, said the South Memphis Farmers Market helps eliminate a food desert, while also supporting the redevelopment of the South Parkway commercial corridor.

While the greengrocer phase of the South Memphis Farmers Market won't open until January 2014, The Works has teamed up with the University of Tennessee Extension to offer free cooking demonstrations in the newly

redeveloped facility at [1400 Mississippi Blvd.](#)

"Last year we had a lot of demand for canning demonstrations so that people could preserve their fresh tomatoes when there were a bunch and they were much cheaper," Thomas said.

Eventually, the South Memphis Farmers Market will offer series of classes that focus on a broad range of topics like the dietary needs of residents with diabetes and heart disease, cooking with children, organic eating, preparing food for the elderly and shopping on a budget.

The new cooking demonstration area can comfortably seat 30 participants and also houses four cooking stations for hands-on classes.

"Once we establish a schedule, I think we are going to have trouble keeping up with demand," Thomas said.

The South Memphis Farmers Market will continue operating every Thursday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the corner of Mississippi Boulevard and South Parkway.