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Fresh food fund helps open grocery store in Waukegan 'food desert'



By **Denys Bucksten**
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A cheery, well-lit, Save-A-Lot grocery store — featuring fresh produce, low-cost cereals and meat packaging on site — opened this month on Waukegan's southwest side, an area officials called a "food desert" for underserved residents.

The store employs 35 local residents and plans to hire two assistant store managers soon, said Save-A-Lot district manager Thomas Hill, after a dozen officials toured the 10,000-square-foot facility Saturday morning.

A large fresh produce section just inside the front door features many fruits and vegetables geared to local cultures, including collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, cilantro, various squashes, mushrooms and green onions. The featured produce aisle also has potatoes, red and yellow peppers, celery, carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, strawberries, hearts of romaine lettuce, grapes, oranges, limes, lemons, pears and apples.

At the end of the first aisle, high on a wall, is a large multicolored sign labeled "Meat & Poultry Nutri-Facts," which details dietary information based on 3-ounce servings of beef, chicken, lamb, pork, turkey and veal.

Save-A-Lot, a wholly owned subsidiary of [Supervalu](#), calls itself a "hard-discount" grocer with over 1,300 stores in 37 states, serving over 5 million shoppers weekly and offering savings of up to 40 percent on groceries, compared with conventional stores.

The \$3.5 million Save-A-Lot in Waukegan is one of six being developed or financed by Chicago-based nonprofit IFF through the Illinois Fresh Food Fund, a statewide healthful eating initiative targeting underserved communities. The Illinois Fresh Food Fund, launched in 2012 with \$10 million, also draws on federal funding.

The Lake County Health Department plans to partner with local groups to educate shoppers on healthy food options and enroll residents in health care plans during on-site visits, said Mark Pfister, director of the health department.

"This store is a great location," Pfister said, "because in Waukegan and North Chicago, we have the highest obesity rates in Lake County. From a health perspective, if you don't have access to healthy foods, that is directly correlated to higher obesity rates.

"We have a children's program just a half mile away, at the Lake County Health Department, and we can bring (health department) clients to this store, show them how to eat more nutritiously and to find the foods that will help their children and themselves."

Save-A-Lot's lower prices are derived from store brand Kiggins products, said Hill, the district manager.

Kiggins breakfast cereals, with prices ranging from \$1.69 for a 12-ounce box to \$2.50 for a 28-ounce bag, are comparable to main brands, said store officials. The large wall of cereals, just past the fresh produce, also offers General Mills Honey Nut Cheerios in an 18-ounce box for \$3.99.

The store has a long counter just beyond the checkout lines, for self-bagging in various sizes of sturdy plastic bags for pedestrians and shoppers bustling onto buses.

Janete Lopez works 30 hours a week as a cashier at the store.

"There's an excitement about opening a new store," she said from behind the checkout counter. "There's something different about (shoppers) coming into a new, nice clean store all stocked up. People are coming here and just enjoying meeting (store staff)."

Touring the store over the weekend, state Rep. [Rita Mayfield](#), D-60th, U.S. Rep. [Bob Dold](#), R-10th, and Waukegan officials Mayor Wayne Motley, City Clerk Maria LaCour and Ald. Patrick Seger all had plenty of good things to say about the new store's potential.

The officials agreed that the store's access to public transportation on major arteries — Lewis Avenue, Belvidere Road and Washington Street — is a major plus.

"The southern end of Waukegan has always been a food desert," Mayfield said. "Once we lost Pick 'N Save, there was practically nothing south of Grand Avenue. You had the small Ma and Pas and the dollar stores, but there was no grocery store individuals could go to."

There are several small Hispanic food stores in the area, but Mayfield said there was still a need for "a full-access grocery store, where you have all the departments represented, where you do have name-brand products, products that appeal to a wider range of individuals."

Mayfield said the difference between the smaller stores and Save-A-Lot is found in the inner aisles. There, she said, Save-A-Lot has a larger variety and selection of canned and packaged goods.

"That was the biggest complaint from our (constituents)," Mayfield said. "That they wanted a selection of things they want to eat, not just a small selection of what a store wants to sell them."

Song Neal and 14-year-old daughter Ileycia, of North Chicago, drove the one mile to the store Saturday.

"We saw the signs before the store was built," Neal said. "Absolutely, we've had our eye on this store coming here. I like the prices; they have a good variety and we shop here now instead of driving (several miles) to Wal-Mart. This is much closer."

The store opens daily at 8 a.m., closing at 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 9 p.m. on Sunday.

Denys Bucksten is a freelance reporter for the News-Sun.

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