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## Amid a 'food desert,' East St. Louis is getting a farmers market

By Georgina Gustin

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**EAST ST. LOUIS** — The first customer walked in, just before 8 a.m. Saturday, and walked out a few minutes later with an armful of beans and greens.

A promising start.

In a depleted city with mostly fast-food restaurants and produce-starved corner stores, the East St. Louis Farmers Market is an anomaly. But one, organizers believe, that could eventually change the way East St. Louisans eat and live.

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"This farmers market, it's a beginning for them," said Gerald Higginbotham, the market's founder. "It's their renaissance."

Higginbotham, an airline pilot, community organizer and St. Louis resident with a couple of doctorates in religion, speaks in biblical tones and with no small aims about the market's capacity to change a community where many residents are stuck in unhealthy eating patterns and suffer the consequences.

"It's more than just the farmers market, it's a whole movement," he said, adding, "To have a better community, you have to have healthy citizens, mind, body and spirit."

For more than two years, Higginbotham has worked to convince community health groups, residents and city officials that a market here will not just thrive, but boost the city's long-decimated economy. On Saturday he stood inside the neglected remains of a shuttered Buick dealership on State Street, the market's home, with bigger aspirations.



Mae West Dale of East St. Louis buys cucumbers, corn and squash during the debut of the East St. Louis Farmers Market on the site of a former car dealership at 19th and State Streets. (Elie Gardner/P-D)

### GALLERY

- PHOTOS: East St. Louis opens a farmers market

"It's going to be like Souldard one day," he said. "It will be an engine to help sustain the community."

Like hundreds of urban areas across the country, parts of East St. Louis are a "food desert" where residents have limited access to healthy, affordable food, and where the most convenient options are often fast-food restaurants and stores where food is cheap but laden with fat, salt or sugar.

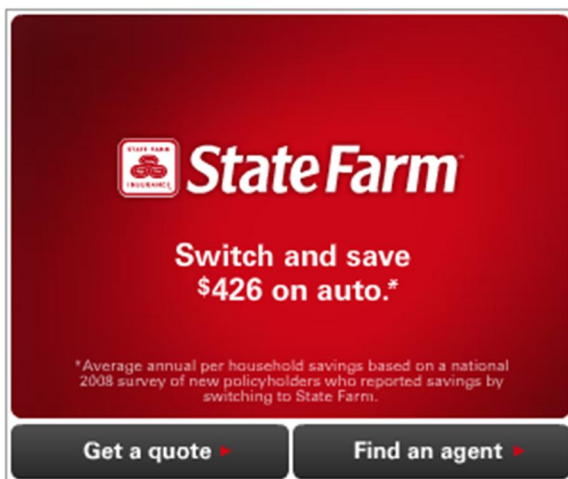
"There's just not access to healthy choices," said Cheryl Kelly, a public health professor at St. Louis University, speaking about food deserts in general. "In some cases there are grocery stores, but there aren't always healthy options, and, on the flip side, there are lots of fast-food restaurants."

This lack of access affects the poor and minorities more. One study found that only 8 percent of blacks live in an area with a supermarket, compared with 31 percent of whites. In several American cities, studies have found that stores in low-income, minority communities stock less healthy food, particularly produce and dairy. Nationally, one study found, low-income ZIP codes have 30 percent more convenience and liquor stores, which tend to carry more processed, shelf-stable food.

East St. Louis has two supermarkets, but not everyone can reach them easily, and their produce selection can be limited, some say.

"It's not as wide a variety as you'd have in other stores," said Elizabeth Patton-Whiteside, head of the East Side Health District. "The two in East St. Louis are on the bus line, but you know how difficult it is to carry groceries and catch the bus."

Over time, this lack of access has become one of the primary causes leading to higher rates of obesity and diet-related diseases in low-income, minority areas. In East St. Louis, for example, nearly half the high school boys and more than half the girls are overweight, according to the health district.

A red rectangular graphic for State Farm. At the top left is the State Farm logo, which consists of a red square with a white border containing a red tractor icon and the words "STATE FARM" above "INSURANCE". To the right of the logo, the words "State Farm" are written in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below the logo and name, the text "Switch and save \$426 on auto.\*" is centered in white. At the bottom of the graphic, there is a small line of white text: "\*Average annual per household savings based on a national 2008 survey of new policyholders who reported savings by switching to State Farm." At the very bottom, there are two dark grey buttons with white text: "Get a quote" on the left and "Find an agent" on the right, both with a small white arrow pointing to the right.

"Kids are raised on fast foods, on food that families can afford," Kelly added. "The kids get used to that as their taste buds develop and continue to eat that way over their lives. That increases the likelihood of obesity, Type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer."

Changing these entrenched habits will be a battle.

"You can't put a market in the middle of a community and expect things to change right away," said Nicky Uy, manager of the farmers market program for the Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based organization that works to get healthy food to underserved areas. "Some people say we've lost two generation of cooks."

Education will be critical.

"It's not just about fresh produce. It's also about educating people on healthy eating," said Joyce Coleman, who helped Higginbotham with the project. "We know that's going to be an uphill battle."

To that end, the market's organizers say they plan to have cooking demonstrations and recipes to help engage people with unfamiliar foods. They also plan to accept the new version of food stamps and government-subsidized vouchers for fresh produce.

The goal for this year is to reach 500 families. And in coming years, organizers hope that residents will not only buy produce from the market, but learn to grow it in some of the city's vacant lots and sell it.

"This is the nucleus for this community to grow," said Philamina Johnson Edwards, manager of the market. "We want to make sure we're here for the long term."

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