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Bronzeville Community Market opens with local support, fresh food—and hope

'Options for groceries are limited in the neighborhood. It's close to being a "food desert." '

By Robert Mitchum

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In the grassy field along South Cottage Grove Avenue where a giant concrete high-rise once loomed, friends Felicia Beckett, Carmen Mahon and Doreen Barrett sat and compared their day's purchases. Rustling through several bags at her feet, Beckett listed off her bounty: grapes, spinach, strawberries, apples, salsa.

"And sandals," Beckett, 42, said, showing off her new footwear. "Don't forget the sandals."

Beckett was one of many enjoying the first Bronzeville Community Market, which organizers hope will become a new Sunday afternoon staple for residents of the neighborhood and surrounding areas.



Conceived as a "hybrid market," combining traditional farmers market fare with antique vendors, prepared food, booths from local stores and live performances, the event's first day drew curious and enthusiastic crowds despite threatening skies and high winds.

"This is so great for the community," said Inona Hunt, 50, who grew up blocks away from the market site and was back selling bakery goods for Indiana-based Rice & Roll Bakery. "Everyone wants better health, and this is bringing it to the people. Where else could they have gone?"

The lack of weekend farmers markets in the area and grocery stores with full produce sections was the primary motivation for launching the new market, executive director Bernita Johnson-Gabriel said. A nearby market, held for years on King Drive near Dunbar High School, closed last year because of dwindling participation from local farmers, Johnson-Gabriel said.

"Options for groceries are limited in the neighborhood. It's close to being a 'food desert,' " said Johnson-Gabriel, using a term coined by social scientists to describe areas with few or no grocery stores.

At the market, "here we're talking really fresh food. It was just picked the day before," she said.

The market also was designed to draw attention to new stores in the neighborhood along Cottage Grove, 43rd Street and 47th Street, Johnson-Gabriel said, part of the historically African-American neighborhood's revitalization.

Faye Edwards, who owns faié, a gallery of African art on Cottage Grove, worked a booth displaying brightly colored sun hats from Madagascar and thread art from Kenya and Ghana.

But Edwards also played the part of happy customer at the market, bringing back a bulging plastic bag of produce to her booth.

"I bought the biggest Fuji apples I have ever seen," she said. "And tomatoes I love fine-grown tomatoes."

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