

Much-needed produce market comes to West Oakland

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By: Blanca Torres

Instead of waiting for an outside retailer to bring a much-needed grocery store to West Oakland, the **Mandela Foods Cooperative** grew like a fruit tree from the ground up and will now open the neighborhood's only produce store on June 6.

The 2,500-square-foot store will offer basics like produce, meat, dairy and bulk food items to a neighborhood where it is much easier to buy a pint of liquor than a fresh banana.

The store, located at 1430 7th St., took space in the Mandela Gateway, a mixed-used retail and residential project developed by Bridge Housing, that is directly across the street from the West Oakland BART Station. Its neighbors include a 99 Cents store and Subway.

"Grocery stores didn't want to come into a low-income community," said Dana Harvey, executive director of Mandela MarketPlace, the

nonprofit organization that created the co-op. "We don't need to invite in a grocery store. What we'd like to see happen is investment in the people who live in the community to help them start their own business to meet the needs of the community."

The store was started with \$750,000 in funding from various sources including a loan from Oakland Business Development Center, a \$100,000 from Oakland City Councilwoman Nancy Nadel's discretionary fund, and grants from several foundations such as the Walter & Elise Haas Foundation. The store's landlord, **BRIDGE Housing**, provided tenants improve-ments and an affordable rental rate.

Harvey said the project has been several years in the making. Her organization started by providing business training programs for West Oakland residents and

eventually formed a group of eight people who received more than two years of training and are now the co-owners of the store.

The store is starting out in a small space, Harvey said, but could expand once the business is established for several years.

Richard Fuentes, a West Oakland resident and policy analyst in the office of Councilman Ignacio De La Funte, said he hopes the store can generate enough buzz to stay open. He recalled a Latino-owned grocery store that opened last fall and closed after only a few months.

"(The co-op) is something that we do need in the neighborhood and something we have been waiting for," Fuentes said. "It will bring that additional storefront that we need to make this neighborhood into a real transit village."