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## West Oakland welcomes co-op's healthy foods

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"I'm 39 years old, and I've lived in the area my whole life," said Holloway, a homemaker. "I think it's great to have a place within walking distance with so many healthy selections."

That place is the Mandela Foods Cooperative, which opened June 6 across from the West Oakland BART Station in the Mandela Gateway affordable housing complex. At 2,300 square feet, it's not much bigger than the liquor stores that dot the neighborhood, but its inventory is dramatically different.

Mandela is stocked with bins of fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts and grains sold in bulk, snacks that eschew high-fructose corn syrup, organic dairy products, hormone-free meats and an array of grocery items. Canvas bags and T-shirts created by a local artist hang on the walls.

Its business model is different too. It's a worker-owned cooperative. Eight local residents are worker-owners who make all the store's business decisions and perform all its functions - including cashiering, stocking shelves, cleaning, taking inventory and ordering.

"I'm happy to use my energy for my neighbors," said Antonio Sanchez, one of the owners, as he rang up a customer's purchase of nuts and tortillas. "Because we live in the neighborhood, too, this is more comfortable for our customers; they know us. The kids know they can ask us to taste the raspberries or cherries."

The owners earn a living wage and eventually will share in two-thirds of the store's profits. One-third of the profits will be returned to the community as matching funds to people who open accounts at the credit union next door.



Natasha Sampson and Shomane Evans select fresh goods in the organic produce section of the Mandela Foods Cooperative.

"The more profitable the store is, the more money goes into the community," said Dana Harvey, executive director of Mandela Marketplace, a nonprofit that acted as an incubator to get the store launched by providing technical assistance and seed funding.

Startup funds of about \$640,000 were donated by foundations and local economic improvement groups and largely went toward building out the space. Some grants will be needed to help with cash flow in the next couple of years. The store's business plan projects profitability in its third year - and that's despite reducing its margins to make the food more affordable for customers. Bridge Housing, which runs Mandela Gateway, is renting the storefront to the co-op at below-market rate for five years.

The co-op has drawn about 300 shoppers a day, and has rung up sales that exceeded expectations.

Numerous studies show that people who lack access to fresh, nutritious food have an array of health problems from diabetes to obesity to high blood pressure.

"There is a proliferation of junk food and fast food in West Oakland, as well as other parts of the inner city," Harvey said.

Harvey has been on a multiyear quest to improve West Oakland's access to culturally appropriate, healthy, affordable food. She helped bring a well-received Saturday farmers' market to the BART parking lot six years ago.

Many of those farmers also now sell to the co-op.

"I love the whole concept," said Paul Buxman, who owns Sweet Home Ranch in Tulare County and sells stone fruit to Mandela. "The idea of opening in an area which is not posh, which does not have wealthy clientele. My hat is off to those folks."

Within the next few months Mandela will set up a demonstration kitchen to offer classes on nutrition, presentations by farmers, information on food stamps and other events. It's currently seeking sponsors. An expanded deli section and outdoor cafe seating also are in the offing.

But the co-op's founders have an even larger vision. Once they prove its model can succeed, they hope it can expand to a bigger space, and serve as a model for similar approaches at other redevelopment projects.

"We're on the right track," said Dennis Terry, one of the owners. "We're getting very positive feedback; people are glad there is a store like this in this neighborhood."



Ren Green, 3, helps Angie May and brother Miles Green, 7 months, with some fresh beets at the Mandela Foods Cooperative.