

EAST BAY TIMES

Commentary: West Oakland foods cooperative defies odds, serves people



Mandela Foods Cooperative employee Bryan Daniels holds some local Oakland product sold at the Oakland grocery store near the West Oakland BART station. Mandela MarketPlace, which launched the locally sourced, community-based food cooperative in 2009, is planning to open a new grocery store, food hall and retail concept in a 2,141-square-foot, ground-floor retail space in Ashland Place, an affordable housing development next to the REACH Ashland Youth Center. The retail space is now under construction and is set to open in late summer 2017. (Paul Kuroda/Bay Area News Group)

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Ten years ago, residents and organizers in West Oakland began negotiations with affordable housing developer Bridge Housing to secure a 10,000 square-foot retail space to house a community-owned and operated grocery store.

Mandela Foods Cooperative, was designed and is owned and operated by community members. Despite widespread neighborhood support of the cooperative, during the final hours of negotiations, Bridge Housing decided to lease the space on the historic 7th Street to big box retailer 99 Cents Only; leaving a much smaller retail space for the community-supported business.

Mandela Foods Cooperative is the only full-service grocery store in West Oakland, and it serves a much larger purpose than just being a place to shop for healthy fruits and vegetables. MFC provides jobs, boosts the local economy by creating business ownership opportunities for residents and creates a place for new local entrepreneurs to retail-test their products.

Despite opening during a deep nationwide recession, in 2009, workers and owners saw sales grow by 20-30 percent each year and by 2015, MFC was turning a profit. Not only has Mandela Foods Cooperative created a space for healthy food options, it also proves that residents can come together to successfully create, open, operate and own successful businesses.

MFC serves the community — the new residents and long-timers — while also honoring a historic West Oakland culture in the midst of rapid gentrification.

Conversely, the big-box retailer that originally beat Mandela Foods Cooperative out of the large space on the corner of 7th Street has now chosen to leave the neighborhood.

Ten years ago, many saw Mandela Foods Cooperative as the store that was a risk, and saw 99 Cents Only Store as the sure thing. Now, 99 Cents Only is pulling out — and Mandela Foods Cooperative is looking to expand.

Mandela Foods Cooperative has generated more than \$6 million in revenue that it has pumped into the local community and economy. MFC serves as a job-training center and provides local youth, formerly incarcerated individuals, and other residents with jobs and stable incomes.

Through its purchases of locally sourced goods and produce, Mandela Foods Cooperative has created more than \$200,000 in new income for marginalized farmers and has helped more than 42 businesses secure retail space for locally produced products.

Zella's Soulful Kitchen, located in Mandela Foods, launched a café-style restaurant that features freshly-prepared soul food, continuing a West Oakland tradition of sharing family recipes with neighbors.

Finally, Mandela Foods Cooperative has contributed more than \$45,000 in property taxes to Alameda County.

Today, Mandela Foods Cooperative continues to serve the local community. The store's commitment to community is visible — the store showcases local talent, authors and businesses; provides healthy food purchase incentives to residents of Mandela Gateway and families using food stamps; and serves as a center for health education, local culture and fresh, affordable healthy foods. Additionally, Mandela Foods Cooperative has banked with the community-initiated Community Trust Credit Union since MFC began operation in 2009.

Now, with the 99 Cents Only store leaving, Mandela Foods Cooperative can confidently expand into a larger storefront — increasing its benefit to community culture, community economy and community health. With so much done in a small space, what these business owners can accomplish in a larger space can only be imagined

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