

Residents petition for affordable grocery store in former Borders space

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A resident-led effort has emerged to attract an affordable, full-service grocery store to the former Borders building downtown.

The site, 700 New Hampshire St., lies at the center of a federally designated food desert, four adjacent northeast Lawrence census tracts with a combination of low-income residents and low access to fresh food.

“We see this as a social justice issue,” said David Crawford, one of a handful of Lawrence residents in the core group behind the Lawrence for Downtown Grocery petition and Facebook page. “We see it as a food access issue.”

At the same time it’s a business issue, contingent on securing the building, getting a grocery store operator to move in and, ultimately, succeed.

Crawford said that while a store such as Trader Joe’s may sound attractive, his group believes a discount store such as Aldi or Save-A-Lot would be better.

“People in and around downtown need an affordable store for it to be successful,” he said. “The realistic fact is that the 11,000 population here that are going to use this store are not in the upper-middle-class income range.”

Crawford said he and co-organizers think the term “food desert” has negative connotations and prefer to call the surrounding neighborhoods “underserved.” Their [petition](#), launched a week ago, has several hundred signatures. They are promoting the effort online at [facebook.com/groups/DTGrocery](https://www.facebook.com/groups/DTGrocery).

Crawford said he and other organizers were willing to invest money in a grocery store but not open or run it themselves, as none has a background in the grocery business. The group’s strategy is to organize community involvement and support for such a store, then convince the city commission to actively pursue a grocery store operator to move in.

“The city commission has the best track record of anyone here in Lawrence of bringing in new business,” Crawford said.

The city has yet to receive or consider the Lawrence for Downtown Grocery petition. Crawford said he hopes to present it to city commissioners within the next couple of months, with as many comments from residents and letters of support from neighborhood organizations the group can get.

Developers have talked about bringing grocery stores to other downtown or East Lawrence locations, but no plans have materialized to date.

In the Journal-World’s [recent series about Lawrence food deserts](#), Warehouse Arts District developer Tony Krsnich said he’d support a grocery there but that it would take an operator with a viable business plan coming forward. Developer Doug Compton, who has proposed or is currently constructing multiple mixed-use projects downtown, also has floated the idea of [a grocery store in one of them](#).

The Lawrence Public Library is expected to vacate the Borders building later this year.

Crawford said it's a unique opportunity for the site. "If another entity takes the site we'll have lost a once-in-a-blue-moon chance."

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