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## Grassroots grocery aims to fill a niche in Detroit

By Greta Guest

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Two Detroit grocery stores that opened with much fanfare last year are closed now, but there is hope for one in the works.

Zaccaro's Market in Midtown lasted 10 months, shutting down in the spring. Downtown Foodland in Lafayette Park lasted five months, closing a few weeks ago.

So what are the chances that a community coalition can operate a grocery store in the former Farmer Jack on Jefferson?

Brad Wilson, a spokesman for the coalition working to open the store, said he thinks his group can succeed where chains and smaller, specialty grocers such as Zaccaro's and Downtown Foodland failed.

"We see ourselves as being different," Wilson said. "The niche we will fill is for people looking to do their weekly shopping. That's one of the things we see missing in Detroit -- a full-line grocery store."

Detroit has a host of successful independent grocery stores, but some neighborhoods are underserved. Wilson said that a survey taken at a community meeting about the store in May found that some people were driving more than 30 miles to do their grocery shopping.

Bringing fresh food to urban areas is getting more attention, said Bob Gorland, vice president of Matthew P. Casey & Associates in Harrisburg, Pa. The key to making it work is strong store management, he said. Gorland worked for A&P in Detroit and said that it can cost a lot more to operate an urban grocery than a similar store in the suburbs because of increased security, insurance rates and other costs.

"A 45,000-square-foot store in the suburbs with a breakeven of \$300,000 in sales a week will often need \$400,000 in sales to break even in the urban setting, due to these other cost issues," Gorland said.

Other challenges in the urban store, he said, include retaining good employees. "There is often a high turnover," Gorland said. "While there is often very limited competition, and that is the biggest plus, the negative is you have to have the right management mentality, the right employees and attitude."

The Detroit store chosen as the pilot site has been vacant since 2007, when Farmer Jack ceased operations in Michigan.

The Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength, or MOSES, Supermarket Taskforce is a coalition of community groups, churches, unions and residents planning to open the store to strengthen the community. It said that hiring is still months away.

Once the group completes its business plan, it will begin fund-raising in a few weeks to fund the store's opening, Wilson said.

Cindy Warner, owner of Zaccaro's, said she would advise the coalition to set up the store as a nonprofit and use it to train people in nutrition, food preparation and grocery operations. "That could help keep their labor costs down," she said. Another idea is to join a co-op to gain purchasing power, she said. Warner said she wishes them luck. "The only failure is in not trying," she said.