Nonprofit leaders discuss southeast Canton market plans

CANTON – Construction of a grocery store and health center in southeast Canton could begin as early as this summer or fall.

There have been various partners and plans for a southeast grocery store since 2014, and community members who attended Thursday's meeting to discuss the latest iteration were cautiously optimistic.

"The question is, 'How many times have we been down this road?'" Pastor Walter Arrington said.

He described the current stage as a "wonderful opportunity" for people to get involved and ensure the project is completed in a way that best serves the southeast community.

Representatives from Canton for All People, StarkFresh and My Community Health Center hosted the meeting at Patrick Elementary on Sherrick Road SE. They plan to open a grocery store and health clinic at 1318 Gonder Ave. SE, which is currently owned by the Stark Metropolitan Housing Authority.

"Just this month, we will finally have ownership," said Don Ackerman, lead pastor of Crossroads United Methodist Church and head of the church's nonprofit development arm, Canton For All People.

The building, which SMHA constructed in 1975, has been vacant since YWCA childcare services ended there about eight years ago. The process to transfer it from SMHA to Canton for All People began in April, and Ackerman said the transfer should be complete in the coming weeks.
Canton For All People and StarkFresh plan to create a grocery store in half of the building. My Community Health Center will offer health services in the other half.

Lemmon Development is working with Canton For All People to develop the center. Ackerman said the current completion target is spring of 2023.

"It's going to take some time," he said.

**How the grocery would operate**

Crossroads United Methodist Church, Church of the Lakes, Faith United Methodist Church, and the Tuscarawas District of the United Methodist Church will cover overhead expenses for the grocery for 10 years.

During that time, the market's estimated $80,000 to $90,000 a year profit will be deposited in a community development fund. The fund will be managed by a yet-to-be-established advisory board.

Area charities and foundations and the city of Canton, which committed $1 million, also are funding the project.

"We are 110% behind it," said Councilwoman Chris Smith, who represents the city's southeast Ward 4.

Tom Phillips, executive director of StarkFresh, presented plans for what would be the Southeast Community Market. He said it would be a cross between StarkFresh's grocery store on Cherry Avenue NE and Canton For All People's downtown markets.

"It'll be a regular grocery store with some items for free," Phillips said.
Terry Regula, CEO of My Community Health Center, said services at the southeast center will increase in phases with patients.

"It depends on how busy we are," she said.

The first phase would include a family medicine nurse practitioner, behavioral health counselor, medical assistant and receptionist. The second phase would add a physician, women's health care, and additional clerical staff.

Community wonders if the project will happen

A little over 30 people attended Thursday's meeting in the school gymnasium.

After a 30-minute presentation from the nonprofit representatives, community members asked questions and made suggestions. A common concern was whether the plans would come to fruition and be sustainable.

Pastor Michael Pressley, of Mount Zion Church of God in Christ, said he helped put the meeting together and believes the most recent plans have promise. His main question, though, is what will happen after 10 years.

Pressley said he doesn't necessarily want a seat on the development fund's advisory board for himself, "but we would like to see some clergy on the committee."

Attendees also suggested that the nonprofit leaders involve more Black pastors in the area, include more women's services in the center's first phase because of racial disparities in health care, and hire health care staff who are culturally competent.
Plans for another community meeting later this year — the date to be determined — were announced at the end of the night.