



Everything New Orleans

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Outdoor Freret Market makes its debut today It is part of a plan to revitalize the city

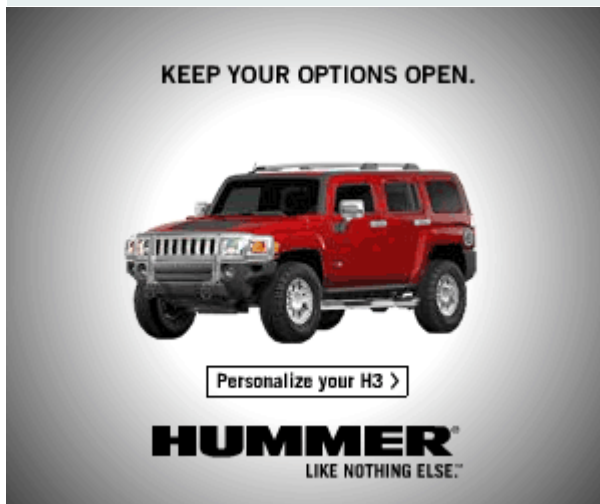
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By Coleman Warner
Staff writer

As he hustled about the Freret neighborhood, preparing for today's opening of a once-a-month public marketplace, Peter Gardner looked for an immediate boost for the area. He wants more street and sidewalk traffic, new faces to bring new money to a slowly recovering section of Uptown.

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"I was tired of all the talking; there's too much talking going on, and not enough action," said Gardner, 28, a Tulane University graduate and leader of a Freret Street property owners' group. "It's a venue to help revitalize the street."

But if the Chicago native and developer sees the future as the Freret Market opens in a city-owned lot, others see a bridge to the past, to an era when public markets defined many New Orleans neighborhoods.

Thirty-four public or quasi-public markets were established in New Orleans between 1784 and 1911, according to one analysis published by the journal Louisiana History. A Census Bureau survey in 1918 showed that New Orleans at the time had more public markets, with 28, than any other city in the country.

Including the Freret gathering, at least seven public vendor food markets now operate in New Orleans, including the established Crescent City Farmer's Market, with locations in the Warehouse District and Uptown, a produce market in the Vietnamese community in eastern New Orleans, and a market on Harrison Avenue in Lakeview. The St. Roch Market on St. Claude Avenue might reopen after renovations to that historic city-owned building. And a new farmer's market is about to open in Broadmoor.

Markets are pivotal

The city of New Orleans provided a \$10,000 loan to help with start-up costs of the Freret outdoor market and will help pay for renovations to the St. Roch Market, according to Ed Blakely, director of recovery management. Details for a broader St. Roch initiative that includes a restored market, a fresh neutral ground walkway and the conversion of an old school to a health center will be announced in coming weeks, he said.

The two markets are pivotal to plans to include Freret and St. Roch among 17 strategic areas of the city targeted for spending on infrastructure repairs and will help reconnect communities to a pedestrian-friendly past, Blakely said.

"What I'm trying to do is bring back the old New Orleans," he said. "It's more sustainable and interesting."

Offering fresh produce, art, antiques, clothing, live music and food from Dunbar's Creole Cooking - an iconic eatery driven from the 4900 block of Freret Street by the storm and now located at the Loyola Law School -- the Freret market will open the first Saturday of each month from noon to 5 p.m., rain or shine. For its first offering today, the market will feature about 50 vendors, including a palm reader, organizers said.

Renewed interest

The Freret Market will be run by the Freret Business and Property Owners Association, with Gardner serving as the market's unpaid director. Other support for the marketplace comes from Neighborhood Housing Services, a Freret-based homeowner training agency that opened a resource center for local residents after Katrina.

The newest collection point for food vendors and artists will tap a rejuvenated local interest in public marketplaces.

Before Katrina, a cluster of public markets in New Orleans served as important conduits for fresh produce or as social gathering points, but their mission carries more urgency now, said Darlene Wolnik, deputy director of marketumbrella.org, a Loyola University program that runs the farmer's markets in the Warehouse District and Uptown.

Residents who years ago expressed a desire for "something fun" in a public marketplace now can be heard to say that "we don't have any food in our neighborhood," Wolnik said.

They also tend to feel a need to reconnect with people they haven't seen much, if at all, since Katrina scattered the population, she said.

Catching investors' eyes

A 2006 survey of customers at the two Crescent City Farmer's Markets furnished evidence that spending by crowds during shopping trips -- before, during and after visits to the actual markets -- resulted in a \$6.7 million yearly economic impact, Wolnik said.

And a public market creates an opportunity for catching the interest of investors who might not otherwise visit the neighborhood, she said. "It's a quick version of a store, of a little town square, and every one of those businesses represents what could be a storefront."

The Church of the Annunciation on Sept. 20 will launch a Thursday farmer's market in Broadmoor, using the parking lot of another church, to bring neighbors together and fill a gap left by a closed supermarket, said the project's coordinator, Rusty Berridge. "We'll be selling healthy food for dinner," she said.

Leaders of Lakeview's Beacon of Hope organization were stunned Aug. 15 when more than 2,000

people turned out -- easily double the expected number -- for the first Harrison Avenue Marketplace, a food and craft market in the parking lot of a closed grocery store.

The event highlighted the absence of a full-service grocery for returning residents. But St. Paul's Beacon staff member Merri Kay Graves said the huge crowd also illustrated a basic public desire to come together.

"A lot of people are hungry for activity," she said. "It was wonderful -- laughter, old friends who haven't seen each other for a while. It was hot, but nobody seemed to care."

An N.O. tradition

The Louisiana History article about "The Origin and Spread of the Public Market System in New Orleans" was published in 1981, at a time when public markets -- aside from the French Market, dating to the late 1700s -- had virtually disappeared, with few building relics, such as the St. Roch Market, left behind. But its author, Robert Sauder, celebrated the persistence of public markets well into the 20th century, when such free-form establishments were giving way in other cities to private grocery chains.

New Orleans' geographic isolation -- a city surrounded by water -- and resistance to chains run by Northerners influenced the attachment to open-air markets. So, too, did a simple resistance to change infusing the Creole culture, Sauder wrote.

For one guidebook writer in 1845, more than a century and a half ago, public markets represented a "prominent feature" of the city, a treat for visitors.

"They are numerous and dispersed to suit the convenience of citizens," Benjamin Norman wrote. "The greatest market day is Sunday, during the morning. At break of day the gathering commences -- youth and age, beauty and not-so-beautiful -- all colors, nations and tongues are commingled in one heterogeneous mass of delightful confusion."

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