

Grocery to fill N.O. Borders shell
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An upscale North Carolina specialty grocer called The Fresh Market will open at the site of the former Borders bookstore at 3338 St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans.

The location is now listed on the company's website. Fresh Market Inc. did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Stirling Properties, the manager of the property, said it is not authorized to speak about the project until it is announced by the company.

Late last month, a construction worker at the site said the renovation of the building would take about eight months. That would mean the store would open in spring 2012.

Fresh Market, which is based in Greensboro, N.C., made an initial public offering on the stock market in November and has been expanding at a rapid clip.

The company operates 102 stores in 20 states, including locations in Mandeville, Baton Rouge and Lafayette. It uses a "small-box" format of less than 21,000 square feet, while typical full-service grocery stores are 50,000 to 60,000 square feet. The new Winn-Dixie planned for Mid-City, for example, is 53,000 square feet.

The Garden District location of the new store means that it could become a new competitor to Rouses, Winn-Dixie, Whole Foods, Walmart and Robert Fresh Market.

David Livingston, a Wisconsin site location consultant who follows the grocery business closely, said that because Fresh Market specializes in fresh produce, meat and prepared foods, its impact is most likely to be felt in those departments of local supermarkets.

But because Fresh Market's stores are small, the competitive impact is limited. And because Fresh Market is a specialty store, it tends to draw new business from farther away rather than siphon lots of customers from nearby markets.

"The impact nearby won't be devastating," Livingston said. "These stores tend to draw from a greater distance."

Livingston said Fresh Market locations in Mandeville and New Orleans could bring about another one in the suburbs. "It wouldn't surprise me if they did something out in Metairie the way Whole Foods did," he said.

Select Properties Ltd., the owner of the former Borders location in Metairie, didn't return a call seeking comment.

The grocery market in New Orleans right now is quite active.

A new specialty market in the Warehouse District featuring local and organic produce, the Poeyfarre Market, opened during the summer. The New Orleans Food Cooperative is expected to open in the Healing Center on St. Claude Avenue in November. And actor Wendell Pierce has pulled together a development team to open a 25,000 square foot grocery store in the Holy Cross section of the Lower 9th Ward.

Meanwhile, the city's Fresh Food Retailer Initiative, an effort to bring healthy food to areas of the city without enough grocery stores, is taking applications.

A new Rouses grocery store location in downtown New Orleans has been delayed because of the extra care required in opening in a historic building. Rouses originally hoped to open its 45,000 square foot store this month in the old Sewell Cadillac building in time for the start of Saints tailgating season, but it is now shooting for November.

Donny Rouse, managing partner of the grocery chain, said the downtown store will have a lot of fresh food and wine. "It's something special for the downtown area," he said.

Rouse said he's not worried about the Fresh Market coming to town.

"When a competitor comes to town, it usually makes everyone around them stronger," Rouse said. "Fresh Market doesn't currently offer anything that we don't already offer."

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