

BUSINESS

Midtown Global Market 'not giving up,' set to expand cultural diversity

The slate of renovation projects include a culinary center concentrating on ancient grains of Africa, a professional Indigenous kitchen and training center, a salon and barbershop.

By Nick Williams (<https://www.startribune.com/nick-williams/7663002/>) Star Tribune |

FEBRUARY 12, 2022 — 8:00AM

In the next few years, the Midtown Global Market will add an ancient grains culinary center, a professional Indigenous kitchen and training center, and a beauty node for a new nail salon, hair salon and barbershop.

It's all part of a renovation plan to make the market — in many ways the epicenter of Lake Street's vibrant and diverse entrepreneurial scene — a viable operation for another 15 years.

Like the Lake Street commercial thoroughfare as a whole, the market has been greatly affected by COVID-19 and the riots following the murder of George Floyd. The market inside the Midtown Exchange building is still only operating at 50% capacity and has lost several tenants.

The renovation projects, when completed, will help drive traffic at the market "so that we can get back to sustainability and businesses can get those sales back to where they're more profitable," said Renay Dossman, president of Neighborhood Development Center, which owns the market with the Cultural Wellness Center.

"We're not giving up," Dossman said. "We are going to try everything in our power. We believe in that community. We believe in the resiliency and the spirit of that community."

Several business and property owners have announced multimillion-dollar renovation projects in the past six months to rebuild the economic corridor in south Minneapolis severely damaged in the aftermath of Floyd's murder.

It will cost an estimated \$250 million to restore Lake Street, according to the Lake Street Council. However, the several multimillion-dollar projects will make the area even more diverse than before the pandemic and riots, stakeholders say. They combine restaurants, economic and workforce development elements, cultural amenities and even housing.

For example, the 14,000-square-foot Center for Peace and Social Justice planned for 27th and Lake streets will house a rebuilt [Gandhi Mahal Indian restaurant with a theater, co-working and incubation space, a food bank and public plaza.](https://www.startribune.com/gandhi-mahal-owner-hopes-to-help-heal-lake-street-community-while-rebuilding-restaurant/600106188/)

(<https://www.startribune.com/gandhi-mahal-owner-hopes-to-help-heal-lake-street-community-while-rebuilding-restaurant/600106188/>)

At Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue, [the site of a former Wells Fargo branch that was destroyed during the riots](https://www.startribune.com/city-funding-solidifies-plan-for-50-million-affordable-housing-project-on-lake-street/600140301/) (<https://www.startribune.com/city-funding-solidifies-plan-for-50-million-affordable-housing-project-on-lake-street/600140301/>) will become a 110-unit affordable housing complex and small-business center planned in the nonprofit Project for Pride in Living development.

Inside the plan

At Midtown, the Indigenous Food Lab, created by North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, should be done this spring. The \$800,000 beauty node should be completed by the end of the year in the southwest corner of the market.

The Neighborhood Development Center (NDC) is close to reaching its goal of raising \$2.3 million, which would help pay for the beauty node, along with rent and grants funding to tenants, Dossman said.

While it won't be completed in the near future, the NDC also is planning to renovate storage space and a conference room in the market's 20,000-square-foot basement to make way for more merchant offices and production or fulfillment space.



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII, STAR TRIBUNE

The Midtown Global Center in Minneapolis has two construction projects, including the Cultural Heritage and the Indigenous Food Lab.

The center also is working with Allina Health, which is headquartered in the Midtown Exchange, to hopefully redevelop a large space that was part of the Allina Health Commons, according to an Allina Health spokesperson. On the table are a public fitness center or gym or more office and production space for neighborhood entrepreneurs.

The nonprofit health system also has plans to open the Allina Health Recruitment Center on the first floor of Midtown Commons where interviews and job fairs can be held.

Expanding nutrition culturally

The Cultural Wellness Center will open the ancient grains culinary center in partnership with the University of Minnesota Department of Food Science and Nutrition. The idea is to study how to infuse ancient African grains into healthy meals for people in the Twin Cities, specifically African Americans. The U students will study composition and nutritional benefits of the grains and will work with African American chefs to incorporate those ingredients.

A large area on the main floor of the Global Market that previously was the site of former restaurants is now being renovated for the kitchen, which will be called Culinary Heritage, said Atum Azzahir, executive director of Cultural Wellness Center.

It is envisioned that chefs will give demonstrations and teach attendees how to incorporate the ancient grains into their diets. The organization will also deliver those meals to the elderly, Azzahir said.

The introduction of culturally based ancient whole grains by African American chefs into the community will build on the success of the Community Health Hub, an initiative launched in 2008 through a partnership between Allina Health and Cultural Wellness Center, Azzahir said.

In 2019, more than 3,000 people participated in Community Health Hub activities, like walking, aerobics, meditation and yoga, with 85% of people engaging in health activities at least six times per month.

"With the kitchen, we will be focusing on neighborhood nutrition and how we deliver and support and begin to tie eating to culture and tie eating to health and tie eating to community engagement," she said.

Robert Taylor, Azzahir's son and executive chef of Culinary Heritage, and owner of Dreamland Co-Cafe, will work with CWC to develop education materials for in-person and virtual training resources for guest chefs. There will also be tasting events and cooking demonstrations, Taylor said.

"The market is in need of something brand new, some new energy," Taylor said.

Culinary Heritage, which the Cultural Wellness Center has been working toward for more than a year, is expected to open in March. After social unrest following Floyd's murder, the organization received a significant, anonymous donation. Those funds are being used for this renovation and "magnify and strengthen the community health hub and nutrition work," Azzahir said.

In the right direction

A few merchants of the Midtown Global Market welcome the upgrades and changes to drive more sales.

Anthony Simmons and his partners opened Soul To Soul BBQ at the market in January 2021. The market not only serves as an incubator for startup businesses, but as a place to dine and shop for nearby residents, Simmons said.

"It's an important piece of the community, and a lot of people in the community support that location," he said.

Manny Gonzalez, owner of Manny's Tortas, has had his restaurant at the Global Market since 2006.

Like Simmons, Gonzalez said the market's existence represents more than transactions. It attracts people who follow food trends, tourists and even celebrity chefs.

"We need to innovate," Gonzalez said. "We have to make this market more attractive."



(https://chorus.stimg.co/23226370/merlin_6648139?format=auto&compress&cs=tinysrgb&auto=compress)
RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII, STAR TRIBUNE

Vern Defoe, a chef at the Indigenous Food Lab, has a new space being created for classrooms/teaching at the Midtown Global Market in Minneapolis.



(https://chorus.stimg.co/23226382/merlin_6648138?format=auto&compress&cs=tinysrgb&auto=compress)
RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII, STAR TRIBUNE

The Culinary Heritage area is being built by the Culture Wellness Center.

Gonzalez would like to see more street signage and advertising to draw customers, and a bookstore or newsstand inside the market.

"This is a very magnetic place," he said. "That's why we have to keep this place."

Nick Williams is a business reporter for the Star Tribune.

nick.williams@startribune.com

NWilliams_Strib