

Fresh Grocer supermarket opens in New Brunswick, addressing 'food desert' challenge

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By [Katie Eder](#)

After several delays in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, public- and private-sector groups were finally able to enjoy the fruits of their labor today with the opening of a new full-service fresh food supermarket in New Brunswick, which represents the urban center's first successful grocery store development in more than two decades.



The new 50,000-square-foot Fresh Grocer is part of Wellness Plaza, a mixed-use redevelopment project by New Brunswick Development Corp. that includes a 60,000-square-foot fitness center, a 1,275-space parking garage and, eventually, an elevated walkway connected to the train station.

According to Devco President Christopher J. Paladino, Wellness Plaza is the second phase of a three-part plan to redevelop New Brunswick into a transit village. In February, Devco completed the plan's first phase — a \$150 million project to open 650,000 square feet of mixed-use commercial and residential space — and the development firm expects to complete the third phase — an affordable housing complex with street-level retail — in December, Paladino said.

"Through Fresh Grocer, we're investing in infrastructure that is attractive to corporate and residential tenants and buyers, whereas most other (developers) are trying to catch up with that kind of infrastructure after they build a new office building," Paladino said. "We have a plan to develop and add 1.5 million square feet of office and residential space right around New Brunswick's transit station, and we'll be able to do that with Wellness Plaza. It has put real infrastructure in place, so now we can say to a prospective corporate tenant that we already have the parking and the direct connectivity to the train station available for them, and they don't need to worry about putting in their own fitness center or cafeteria for their employees."

Leveraging Wellness Plaza, Paladino said Devco has leased all 80,000 square feet of retail space, and 33,000 square feet of the 57,000 square feet of office space constructed in the first phase of the transit village development project within the past six months.

Aside from encouraging commercial and residential leasing activity, Paladino said the Fresh Grocer store will "fill a vacuum for city residents, commuters, students and visitors," as the urban center has lacked a full-service supermarket for more than 20 years, and the site is located less than a mile from one of the area's largest food deserts.

In a statement, Lt. Gov Kim Guadagno called the supermarket "another important step in the ongoing revitalization of New Brunswick."

"The opening of Fresh Grocer helps address two very important priorities of the (Gov. Chris) Christie administration: Jobs for city residents and access to fresh and healthy food for local families," said Guadagno, who has been [advocating for more supermarket developments](#) throughout so-called fresh food deserts in New Jersey, like New Brunswick, Atlantic City, Camden, Newark and Jersey City.

Like the Fresh Grocer project in New Brunswick, those supermarket developments are being funded by a state program called the New Jersey Food Access Initiative, which was [launched in late March](#) with a \$12 million infusion from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

To get the project to today's finish line, Devco collaborated with public-sector and nonprofit partners like the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, New Brunswick officials and community advocates, Paladino said.

Fresh Grocer President and CEO Patrick J. Burns said the new store will provide nearly 90,000 people access to fresh food and create more than 300 new jobs in the local community — 70 percent of which are already filled by New Brunswick residents, with another 20 percent of the employees living within 5 miles of the site.

Features in the 24-hour supermarket include a garden salad bar, natural and organic groceries, artisan brick oven pizza and more than 400 varieties of fresh produce.

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