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'Gumbo of creativity': Group to try food-oriented projects to revitalize Lafayette community

Food-oriented projects aim to revitalize Lafayette community

By Kailey Broussard Special to The Advocate

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Advocate staff photo by LESLIE WESTBROOK -- A community heritage sign is displayed near the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church on 12th Street Tuesday, May 24, 2016, in the McComb-Veazey neighborhood of Lafayette, La.

One of Lafayette's oldest neighborhoods is one of roughly 20 low-income communities in the U.S. to receive a \$75,000 planning grant to revitalize the community through food-oriented projects.

The McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Coterie, a volunteer group formed in 2008 to restore life to a once vibrant community of the same name, received funding from the Kresge Foundation for its plan to create a Creole Arts and Culture District.

Coterie Vice Chairwoman Tina Shelvin Bingham said community members are encouraged to voice their opinions and begin gathering information about the neighborhood's past and heritage.

"Right now in these initial stages, the way the community can engage in the process is letting us know what they'd like to see in the community ... and just make a big gumbo of creativity," she said.

The neighborhood group — a joint effort among business owners, churches, city-parish government and residents — has been involved in several small revitalization projects in recent years, including tree plantings along 12th Street, a community garden at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church and heritage signs identifying the neighborhood.

The recent grant is for planning that might one day lead to a micro-farm network for residents to grow fresh produce and a farmers market or community-owned grocery store.

"Food and cultural expression are inextricably tied together and have been throughout history," said Stacey Barbas, senior program officer for Kresge's Health Program.

The Kresge Foundation grant is awarded to groups working to design neighborhood projects that demonstrate "creative, cross-sector visions of food-oriented development," according to the organization.

After the grant is completed, the neighborhood group can apply for implementation funds for the next two years.

"Even if we don't get implementation funds, out of this process we'll have a plan that we can move far with the community, try to revitalize our community and bring back those resources that we're lacking," Bingham said.

The neighborhood group was one of 500 organizations that applied for the grant, and 26 received funding.