

First lady promotes healthy food in California

February 1 2012, By CHRISTINA HOAG , Associated Press

(AP) -- Michelle Obama says a proposed new supermarket in the middle of a blue-collar Hispanic neighborhood in Southern California is an example of how the effort to bring healthy foods to low-income communities is paying off.

The first lady on Wednesday visited the site of a future Northgate Gonzalez Market in Inglewood.

The new market is being financed by a public-private partnership called the California FreshWorks Fund, which is aimed at bringing grocers to areas spurned by traditional supermarket chains.

Mrs. Obama says these types of initiatives are helping to make a dent in the high rate of obesity and weight-related illnesses that plague [inner cities](#).

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information. AP's earlier story is below.

Northgate Gonzalez Markets may be the biggest Southern California supermarket chain you've never heard of.

That's set to change after first lady [Michelle Obama](#) visits the site of the grocer's future store in Inglewood on Wednesday to showcase efforts being made to draw grocers to low-income neighborhoods.

Obama, who is on the second day of her two-day visit to the Los Angeles area, is making the stop as part of her "Let's Move!" campaign to boost [healthy food](#) and fitness.

Part of the campaign includes promoting initiatives such as the \$264 million California FreshWorks Fund, which finances grocery businesses willing to open in areas spurned by traditional supermarkets.

One of the fund's first projects was a \$20 million loan to Anaheim-based Northgate, which operates 34 supermarkets around Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, to build three stores in heavily immigrant neighborhoods.

The FreshWorks Fund is one of a mushrooming number of initiatives by governments, non-profit organizations and some [private companies](#) to tackle so-called "food deserts," which are mostly urban areas where conventional supermarket chains are reluctant to operate because of the low-income customer base and safety concerns.

Nutrition experts point to food deserts as a key reason why obesity and weight-related ailments such as diabetes and hypertension beleaguer inner-city residents, since they must buy much of their food at overpriced corner stores that sell a lot of highly processed packaged foods and snacks but little fresh produce, meat and dairy items.

Some big grocery chains, however, have not had success in urban locations. British retailer Fresh n Easy earlier this month said it was closing seven stores in Southern California - some in urban neighborhoods in Los Angeles and Orange counties - due to slow sales.

The FreshWorks Fund, which is a partnership of The California Endowment, banks and health organizations, was launched last July at the White House.

Besides Northgate, other projects include financing a farmer's market near a housing project and a food delivery service for outlying rural communities, said Tina Castro, director of impact investing for The California Endowment, a Los Angeles-based foundation that focuses on health issues.

"Health really happens in neighborhoods," she said. "We're looking for those small to medium-sized, independent grocers to give them access to capital and real estate."

Northgate opened the first of the three new markets last fall in the City Heights area of San Diego. The next will be a renovation of a long vacant supermarket building in Inglewood, which is set to open in the summer. The third will be the construction of a store in South Los Angeles, slated for completion next year. Each store creates about 120 jobs.

The locations match the company's three-decade-long focus of providing quality, affordable foods in low income neighborhoods, which primarily comprise Hispanic immigrants but also include black and Asian residents, said Carl Middleton, president of Northgate Gonzalez Real Estate Co.

"We provide that homeland experience for immigrants," Middleton said. "We also want that busy mother to be able to pick up foods she can prepare that are flavorful and fresh."

The stores typically offer tortilla and taco counters, as well as products from Mexico and Central America, including Coca-Cola made in Mexico, as well as fresh produce, meats, seafood, dairy and bakeries. It also caters to its immigrant customers by providing payroll check cashing and wire transfers.

Part of the company's mission has been to promote nutrition by providing lean cuts of meat, preservative-free baked products and good quality fruits and vegetables, Middleton said.

The chain has launched a "Viva la Salud" (Long Live Health) campaign, which puts a special tag to denote healthy foods, such as olive oil rather than lard, and holds cooking classes in stores. A new campaign will bring in high school students to develop healthy school lunch recipes.

"It's good for business, too," he said. "We sell twice as much fruit and vegetables as conventional supermarkets."

Northgate is an immigrant success story.

The company was founded by Mexican immigrant Miguel Gonzalez in 1980, who came to the United States after his shoe store burned down in Jalisco. After working for several years in various jobs, he had saved enough to buy a small grocery store in Anaheim.

Seeing a niche in catering to fellow immigrants, he expanded the business with the help of his 13 children. It now employs 5,000 people.

The company is still largely a family affair. Many of the stores are managed by family members, who meet every Wednesday for lunch.

Obama's visit is a recognition of the family's hard work and business savvy, Middleton said, adding "they've really lived the American dream."

After the Inglewood event, Obama was scheduled to appear on The Ellen DeGeneres Show and to deliver a luncheon speech at the Democratic National Committee. On Tuesday, she taped The Tonight Show with Jay Leno and addressed the DNC.

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