

Southside Community Land Trust's New Providence Headquarters to Invest in Healthy Food

By Caitlin Faulds / ecoRI News staff
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A Union Studio rendering of the new Southside Community Land Trust headquarters at 404 Broad St. in Providence. (SCLT)

PROVIDENCE — A multimillion-dollar loan recently granted to Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) is set to improve the availability of healthy and affordable food in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and South Providence for years to come, according to an SCLT spokesperson.

SCLT received the \$2.158 million loan from the Healthy Retail and Commerce Fund, a fund operated by the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) and Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation (MHIC) that combines investments from hospitals, health systems, and foundations. The money will help finance SCLT's [new headquarters and Farm-to-Market Center](#) in Trinity Square.

“It takes vision and creativity to make healthy food available in places where it is hard to find,” SCLT executive director Margaret DeVos said in an Oct. 18 statement. “Our health insurance partners, along with the Healthy Retail and Commerce Fund, are showing just that kind of vision. Their investment today will improve health outcomes for many years to come.”

SCLT bought the two-story, 12,000-square-foot property at 404 Broad St. in 2018 for \$385,000. According to Jenny Boone, SCLT's grants and communication manager, the nonprofit is “nearing the end” of its GROW! campaign, which was started in 2018 to raise more than \$5.4 million for the acquisition and renovation of the property and the expansion of programming.

When renovations are complete — expected in spring 2022, Boone said — it will be a big change from SCLT's current headquarters, housed in an old Victorian on Somerset Street five blocks away.

The new headquarters will host a cold-storage warehouse that will collect, sort, and store farmers' produce before it is sold to wholesale buyers, a youth entrepreneurship center, a commercial kitchen, and three local “healthy food” businesses, according to Boone. Currently, she said SCLT's capacity is limited by a lack of cold storage for produce and a lack of dedicated programming space.

“This will be just a huge improvement, with the space planned to accommodate our actual needs rather than us having to accommodate the space,” Boone said. “We can't wait for it to be ready.”

[SCLT](#) was founded in 1981 by a group of South Providence residents, Hmong refugees, and Brown University graduates who created the neighborhood's first community garden. The nonprofit continues to run a variety of programs to help low-income and food-desert neighborhoods grow and source sustainable, culturally familiar food products.

As part of its programming, SCLT currently leases land to 30 urban and rural farmers and helps bring their produce to market. The organization also owns, manages, or partners with more than 50 community gardens in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Cranston, and East Providence.

Funds for the flexible five-to-seven-year loan were committed by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, and matched by the Kresge Foundation, a Michigan-based social investor and grantmaker. According to a statement by Aaron Seybert, managing director of social investment practice at the Kresge Foundation, the funds aim to “address the upstream factors that lead to unhealthy communities.”

“We know that healthy food is essential to good health, but too many people live in places where that food is hard to access,” Seybert said.

The Healthy Retail and Commerce Fund was launched by CLF and MHIC in 2018 to fill “a gap in access to capital” for businesses serving low-income communities and addressing social determinants of health. SCLT is the fourth recipient of the loan and the first in Rhode Island.

“Small businesses that serve low-income communities have been left to fend for themselves for too long,” Darrèll Brown, vice president and director of CLF Rhode Island, said in an Oct. 18 statement. “SCLT’s tireless work to make healthy food available to these neighborhoods is absolutely a mission worth supporting. This investment will lead to healthier communities throughout Rhode Island.”