



ShopRite owner Jeff Brown (left) chats with customer Rosamond Kay of Germantown in his new store on Fox Street in North Philadelphia. "I'm glad you put a big grocery store in my neighborhood," Kay said, shaking his hand. "I'm proud of you." RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Much-needed grocery store opens in a gritty former North Philadelphia food desert.

# WELCOME CENTER

By Maria Panaritis  
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**A** stunner of a shopping center that opened with a ShopRite a few months ago in a vast industrial pocket of North Philadelphia came about, you could say, through the cravings of a developer's mind and stomach.

One dreary day a couple of years ago, Michael Grasso was driving around Fox Street and Hunting Park Avenue in the winter rain to consider snapping up an old Tasty Baking Co. warehouse about to hit the market as the treats maker headed to new digs at the Navy Yard.

Grasso, president of Metro Development Co. of Ardmore, and vice president Greg Bianchi passed forlorn hulks from the city's manufacturing glory days — some in use, some vacant — along with modest homes tucked out of sight of the maze of industrial concrete and brick.

More upscale residential East Falls also was, invisibly, a few blocks away, as was an office stuffed with medical workers, and an on-ramp to the busy Roosevelt Boulevard expressway. But when Grasso wanted a cup of coffee, he and Bianchi hit a wall. "Where do these people shop?" Grasso wondered.

Two years later, the veteran retail



An aerial view of Bakers Centre in North Philadelphia, partly still under construction. The ShopRite opened Aug. 1.

developer has delivered this answer: Bakers Centre, a \$58 million, 235,000-square-foot shopping space with a 72,000-square-foot ShopRite in a onetime food desert. It is a gleaming complex that, only a few years ago, would have been a non-starter in this neighborhood.

Bakers Centre has risen where that Tasty warehouse once stood, in a neighborhood whose average household income — about

\$27,000 — had deterred retail development.

But Grasso had a plan: assemble 33 acres, including the old warehouse, and connect with a supermarket operator who could pull it off — Jeff Brown, owner of 11 ShopRites, some in once-abandoned zip codes, all remarkably successful despite surrounding poverty.

Tasty was looking to sell quick-See **SHOP RITE** on C3



Developer  
Michael Grasso

## IN-STORE FEATURES

- ▶ Giant fresh-seafood section.
- ▶ Krispy Kreme doughnut area.
- ▶ 12-foot-long grill pit where butterflied chickens are dished out.
- ▶ International foods store-within-a-store.
- ▶ Credit union and personal-finance services counter.
- ▶ Online grocery-delivery staging area.
- ▶ Walk-in health clinic.

# Shop Rite

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ly, and for cash. Grasso pitched a deal including bank loans, \$6.5 million in capital from him and his investors, a \$3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and a \$12 million state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program grant former Gov. Ed Rendell promised and the Corbett administration agreed not to scrap, he said.

With the full-throated support of a neighborhood desperate to divert its dollars locally, Grasso and Bianchi moved swiftly.

Councilman Curtis Jones Jr. and city officials pushed to change the Tasty parcel's zoning from industrial to allow for retail "even before we closed with

Tastykake" two years ago, Grasso said. Plus, he bought all the land before the rest of the deal was lined up.

(To compare: It took him seven years to complete a high-brow shopping center anchored by a Wegmans on Route 611 in Warrington, Bucks County.)

"This thing went incredibly well," said Brown, who credited Grasso, for one, for taking the risks to acquire land before everything else was settled.

Bianchi said the alacrity with which city officials granted approvals "was very instrumental" in the developers' success. He also spent hours driving skeptical retailers through the neighborhoods surrounding the forbidding warehouse area before persuading them to happily commit to leases.

Since opening Aug. 1, the Shop-Rite has delivered revenue "far,

far beyond what I expected," Brown said. The store, his second-largest, offers the uniquely tailored mix of affordable food and high-end offerings he's known for — but on a more ambitious scale:

A giant fresh-seafood section; a Krispy Kreme doughnut area; a 12-foot-long grill pit where butterflied chickens are dished out; an international foods store-within-a-store; a credit union and personal-finance services counter; an online grocery-delivery staging area; and a walk-in health clinic, among others.

"You're the owner, right?" asked retired Peco worker Rosamond Kay, 66, of Germantown, who ran into Brown in the



**Greg Bianchi**  
of Metro  
Development Co.  
of Ardmore

produce aisle.

"I'm glad you put a big grocery store in my neighborhood," Kay said, vigorously shaking Brown's hand. "I'm proud of you."

Such longing has been on State Sen. Vincent Hughes' constituent radar for years. His lower- and middle-income constituents and students from Philadelphia University wanted

a top supermarket nearby rather than having to trek afar to load up on groceries.

But in 2011, Hughes worried the project might not make it past planning — \$12 million Rendell earmarked for Grasso had not been disbursed by the time Gov. Corbett took over.

He had good reason to be concerned: Corbett's administration

publicly frowned on the grant program, for what it perceived as historically too-loose terms on what would be a qualifying project. Corbett has since trimmed the pot of available grants.

In early 2011, Hughes reached out to the governor's transition team, and even brought a leader of his economic-development team to Philadelphia for a tour of the planned site, hoping to smooth the way. Whether or not it had any influence, the project was spared.

When Hughes walked into the supermarket not long ago, he was beside himself. "My heart jumped out of my body," he said. "It was very emotional."

Construction on the 33-acre complex will continue through February, Grasso said.

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