



## Creating Vibrant Neighborhoods through Placemaking in the City of El Cajon

### Intervention Summary

The fifth-largest city in San Diego County, El Cajon, is a diverse and vibrant community with approximately 60,000 refugees from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and African nations. While rich in diversity and culture, El Cajon has the highest poverty rate in the county. Further, the median household income per capita in El Cajon is nearly \$45,000 compared to the county average which is \$64,000.<sup>1</sup> Due to this economic reality, more than 50% of residents' income goes to living expenses, such as rent and utilities, making it more difficult for them to access healthy food options. Despite these challenges, the *Live Well Community Market Program (LWCMP)* is providing support to El Cajon to increase access to healthy, affordable food, and increase social connectedness.

The *LWCMP* works collaboratively with small community markets and residents to understand economic, social, and health equity concerns in order to improve access to healthy food. The *LWCMP* is a program of *Live Well San Diego: Healthy Works Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Program* and implemented by the UC San Diego Center for Community Health. This project supports *Live Well San Diego*, the County's vision of a region that is building better health, living safely, and thriving.

The *LWCMP* aims to improve and promote access to healthy affordable foods throughout San Diego County by providing technical assistance to small community markets to assist with, including but not limited to, the following:

- Increase the availability of fresh and healthy foods.
- Redesign and revitalize markets to promote and sell healthy foods.
- Connect with community stakeholders to build a healthier food environment for all San Diego residents.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts San Diego County and El Cajon City, (2016). Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sandiegocountycalifornia,elcajoncitycalifornia/PST045216>

Since June of 2016, the *LWCMP* has partnered with Rema Halal Foods in El Cajon to make healthier food options more accessible in the community. Although Rema Halal's produce selection is limited by the size of the market, the owner Alaa Alsadoon, has built a vibrant display of fresh produce.

Alsadoon is originally from Baghdad, Iraq, where he owned a Halal meat market. After arriving in America, Alsadoon wanted to provide a similar service to El Cajon residents and opened up Rema Halal. The *LWCMP* surveyed shoppers at Rema Halal market to better understand why customers were shopping there and what else they would like to see at the market. As a result, Alsadoon used this feedback to add additional products and/or change what he was already offering. Most of Rema Halal's customers are there for the quality of meats, and surveys suggest an interest in other quality groceries, including produce, bread, and rice, to complement their purchases.

The *LWCMP* also facilitated partnerships with stakeholders to improve the exterior of the store. One of the facilitated partnerships was with a graphic design professor and her students from San Diego State University's School of Art and Design to provide pro bono design services to market owners. At Rema Halal, a pair of design students worked directly with Alsadoon over five weeks to develop a new exterior façade and branding concept with accompanying marketing materials to promote the growth of his business.

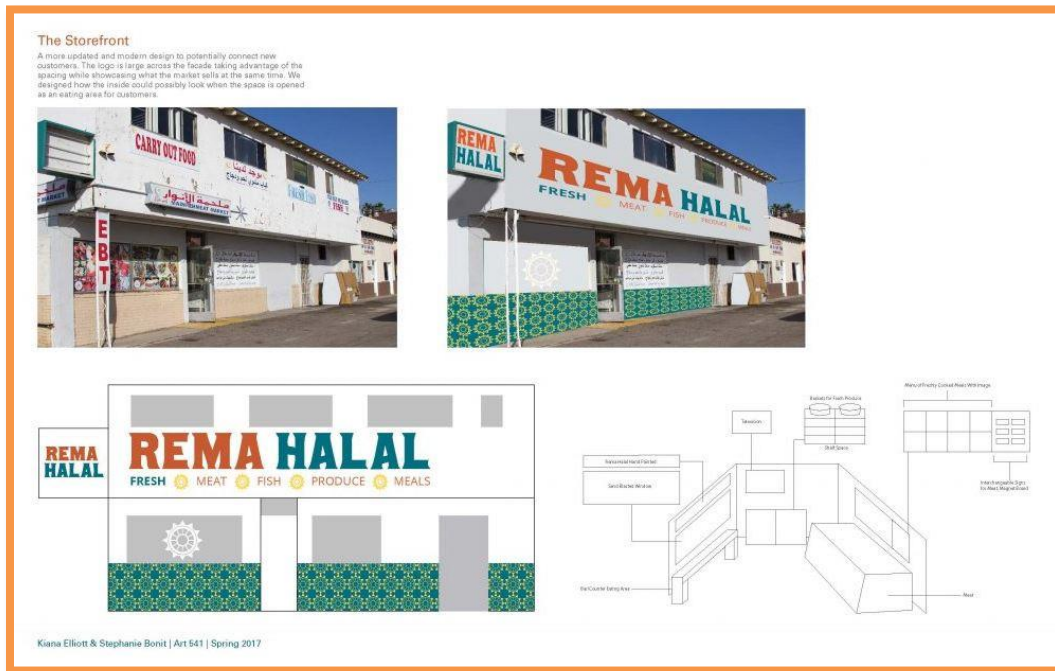


Figure 1 San Diego State University School of Art and Design student's final design

On August 25th, 2017, the *LWCMP* staff organized and facilitated a community visioning meeting to see how the new market designs resonated with the community, and to solicit feedback for how else the market's exterior façade could be improved. Alsadoon will

implement the changes in 2018. Specific suggestions from community members and shoppers include:

- More lighting
- Paint
- Shade
- Produce displays outside of the market
- Signs in Arabic
- Plants and greenery
- New door
- Bike rack

## Description of Barriers Encountered and Identified or Proposed Solutions

Most market owners participating in the *LWCMP* do not own their property and instead are renters. Therefore, any changes to the property needs to include direct communication with the property owners to authorize and help financially support (when possible and willing) necessary structural improvements. The *LWCMP* staff developed a budget to Alasoon and helped to identify sources of funding for the improvements, including from the property owner, donations, and leveraging other funds to afford materials and supplies.



*Figures 2 and 3 Community Visioning Meeting at Rema Halal Foods*

## Future Directions/Sustainable Success

Short-term goals for Rema Halal in the upcoming year include:

- Increase the variety fresh produce to appeal to more shoppers.
- Apply community feedback into market improvements.
- Connect the market owner with competitive produce distributors and/or local urban growers.

- Create a wider social media platform to increase relevance in community and improve sales.
- Install a bike rack for shoppers to improve active transportation for cyclists.

Long-term goals include:

- Rework the prepared foods take-out and catering menus to provide shoppers with healthier options.
- Improve the market interior and exterior to attract more shoppers and build on existing economic development activities in the City of El Cajon.
- Outreach, organize, and train more resident leaders as community health equity advocates.

## Contact information about this Narrative

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