

# conversations

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the free or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. THE FIRST AMENDMENT*

## OUR OPINION

# Cooking up something good

Food isn't just for sustenance. It's also a window into a culture and a table around which people as close as family or as distant as strangers can gather to share nourishment and create memories. On the city's Northwestside, food also may be the recipe for rebuilding a neighborhood.

The Lafayette Square area, once a thriving center of commerce, is now a concrete desert marked by deep urban blight. In recent years, however, something remarkable has been quietly unfolding around Lafayette Square.

Without fanfare, Peru settled in next to Ethiopia, and Cuba, Vietnam, India, Mexico and El Salvador set up shop around the corner.

Now, about 140 ethnic restaurants operate in Pike Township, many in the blocks around the long-struggling Lafayette Square

Mall. Ethnic grocery stores and markets have opened to support the nearby restaurants and a diverse population.

The influx of businesses has caught the attention of city leaders and community activists. This week, the Indiana Humanities Council sponsored Chew on This, a stimulating evening of food and conversation at 10 ethnic restaurants near the mall. The Lafayette Square Area Coalition and the city's Department of Metropolitan Department will provide residents with an update on the International Market Place Gateway Plan at 6 p.m. next Thursday at the Service Center for Contemporary Culture and Community. Supporters hope to transform the area into a destination spot for travelers and residents.

The story behind the Service Center shows just how far creativity and a willingness to take reasonable risks can go in reviving a failing neighborhood. The Service Center takes its name from its past life, as a

Firestone Tire & Service Center near the mall. Firestone moved out years ago; a local arts group, Big Car, moved in recently with plans to turn the building into a community center and art gallery.

The campaign to rebuild Lafayette Square around international food certainly faces challenges. One is that the sprouting of ethnic restaurants and stores has been a largely organic process. City and community leaders need to nourish that growth, but not overwhelm it. Another is that the strip malls were built for the car culture. The international businesses are spread out and are sometimes hidden by chain stores that sit on prime locations. The lack of density and visibility will make the area harder to market to uninitiated visitors.

Still, the drive to revive Lafayette Square deserves strong community support, and the business of those Central Indiana residents who possess even a mild sense of adventure.