



PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

# Making Portland's complex food deserts grow green

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Not having a grocery store near North Portland's New Columbia neighborhood after Big City Produce closed in 2007, "was sad," says resident Trevon Oliver.

Oliver, who has lived in New Columbia for four years, says people had to travel at least two and a half miles to the nearest grocery store, a Safeway in St. Johns neighborhood. Oliver traveled 12 miles to the WinCo on NE 102nd because food prices there were cheaper.

Grocery shopping became stressful. "A lot of people around here do not like to travel," Oliver says. Two TriMet bus lines serve New Columbia, but only one runs regularly. Many in the elderly population who can't drive relied upon friends or family for transportation. And some of New Columbia's immigrant community — representing 22 countries and speaking 11 languages — are not fluent in English, and unfamiliar with Portland's transportation system.

That changed when Village Market, a non-profit full-service grocery store operated by the social-service agency Janus Youth, opened in May. Tucked into a small corner lot next to a WorkSource Oregon location and other social services, Village Market offers fresh fruit and vegetables, bulk dry foods, meat, dairy and other basic essentials.

As a nonprofit, Village Market can keep food prices affordable compared to other small groceries: garlic is "priced to move" at three cloves for one dollar. Bartlett pears are 89 cents per pound. Fresh bundles of kale are 75 cents each.

And you won't find cigarettes, Lottery tickets, or alcohol. "Instead of a big rack of crappy beer, you see an amazing display of veggies," says Michael Tetteh, the store's manager.

With Village Market's opening, New Columbia ceased being a "food desert", a geographic urban or rural area, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), where the nearest full service grocery store is more than one mile

or a twenty minute walk away.

"They affect whether people can access food," says Marion Kalb, the technical assistance director with the Community Food Security Coalition, a Portland-based advocacy organization.

Even in a city with a nationally recognized public transportation system and farmer's markets, portions of North, Northeast and outer East Portland are considered food deserts, according to the USDA. In other cases, the grocery stores in the neighborhood are too expensive for the residents' food budget.

"What we're finding in Multnomah County is that the academic definition does not necessarily play out, but we still have serious, significant concerns about access to healthy, affordable and culturally relevant food," says Sonia Manhas, the manager of Multnomah County Health Department's community health and wellness programs.

A livability and equity problem, people living in food deserts also face a higher likelihood of experiencing health problems related to not eating a nutritious diet: decreased energy and concentration, having high blood pressure or cholesterol, being obese or overweight, and acquiring type II diabetes or heart disease later in life.

Multiple community-driven programs and initiatives are underway in Portland to address food deserts. Whether it is trying to lure big grocery stores into store-less areas, coax corner bodegas to carry a wider and healthier selection of food, or mapping where stores are located in relation to where people live, the effort is to understand the extent to which food access impact low-income residents in Portland.

"We're at a time when there are so many innovative things happening," says Noelle Dobson, project director with the Oregon Public Health Institute's Healthy Eating, Active Living program. "Hopefully we land on a handful of things that meet the needs of Portland."

The first thing most people think of to solve food access problems is luring in major grocery store chains like Safeway or

Fred Meyers. But Dobson and others say the profit and business-driven nature of national chains make it unlikely that companies will decide to open a store in low-income areas that are food deserts.

"Their business model says they're not going to be profitable," Dobson says. "The market is just not going to support a full service grocery store."

If grocery stores are a piece of the puzzle to addressing food deserts, she says, they are a long-term one. It takes time for the stores to find suitable land, build a store, and open. "In terms of building food into a neighborhood," she says, "you need other approaches."

Earlier this year, Multnomah County's Health Department launched the Healthy Retail Initiative, an effort to convince and assist convenience store owners to broaden their store inventory to include healthier and fresh food.

"These are the places where people of low socio-economic status shop," says Yugen Rashad a community health worker with the county working with the Healthy Retail Initiative. "They're in proximity to where they live."

But, Rashad says, the first things people see when they walk into a convenience store are indicative of a typical convenience store's limited inventory: lottery tickets, copious amounts and types of alcohol, potato chips and candy. "Convenience stores are certainly not always healthy," he says.

It is not always in a convenience store's best interest to carry fresh and perishable fruits and vegetables. It can be difficult to find a distributor that can sell products at a low price and in small enough amounts to sell before the fruit or vegetable rots. If convenience stores do carry fresh fruits or vegetables, they can be anywhere from one to three times more expensive than at a larger grocery store. "It's economics," Dobson says. "The corner store owners are making a lot of money off candy and cigarettes and soda. There's not a high profit margin on fruits and vegetables."

And with tight budgets, people more likely to shop at convenience stores because of physical proximity aren't likely to

purchase those food items. "The question becomes, why would a person of low socio-economic status spend a \$1.50 on a Fuji apple when they can go to McDonald's and get a full meal?" Rashad asks.

The Healthy Retail Initiative aims to help storeowners through some of those challenges by providing mini grants — between \$4,500 and \$15,000 — to store owners desiring to carry healthier food and make some changes to their store to do so.

Rashad and another outreach worker visited stores throughout the county, asking store owners what challenges they faced carrying fresh and healthy food, and what it would take for them to change their store's selection. Some of those changes might include adding or rearranging shelving, refrigeration units, and finding food distributors selling fruits and vegetables at a lower price.

"We're not trying to tell you what to sell, or how," Rashad says. "It's what do you need to make your store able to provide healthier foods."

To be eligible to apply, a corner store must already carry at least eight healthy products. Rashad says those products could be anything — juices, nuts or some canned food.

A pilot project with 21 participating stores began during the summer, and the first round of grants was awarded in September to four stores. Many of the stores in the pilot project are owned by members of the African American, Middle Eastern and Latino communities.

Rashad says the program is currently developing a way for storeowners to track the amount of healthy food they sell. It will take time for storeowners to notice differences in what customers buy, and if the stores attract any new customers.

Sizzling and the smell of cooking garlic fill the air in the community room of Alberta Simmons Plaza, a North Portland independent senior living facility, during the afternoon of October 26. Amelia Pape, wearing an apron but otherwise ordinarily dressed in jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt, stands behind a portable cooking pan and serves pasta with greens and beans into small sample cups. "She put spinach in it," comments a resident. "Smells good, doesn't it?" says another.

Long cafeteria tables line two sides of the room, showcasing a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole wheat grain products, and healthy canned food such as black beans and tuna. In front of each item is a small note card advertising the product's price.

Residents of Alberta Simmons can buy as much of the food as they want, and Colin Gallison, Pape's business partner, rings them up at a portable cashier station. They can also buy "meal kits," which include all the ingredients and a recipe for a simple, home cooked meal. The kits, which can include everything from vegetables, dairy products, and grains, cost less than \$10.

This is the pilot phase of Fork in the Road, a new business that will use a van to go to food deserts in Portland, and to communities facing a difficult time getting to grocery stores, and sell healthy and fresh food at affordable prices.

Pape expects Fork in the Road to be in business by early next year. Currently, she and her colleagues are hoping to receive around \$10,000 in donations from a Kickstarter campaign for the van, which they hope to be around the size of a UPS truck.

For the pilot phase of the business, Fork in the Road has been visiting affordable housing complexes, senior living facilities, and other locations in areas considered food deserts. The purpose of the pilot project, Pape says, is to show potential customers the food Fork in the Road will offer and sell, and to get a better sense of what potential customers are willing to buy, and at what price.

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“We’re trying to get their feedback,” Pape says. “People will tell us what we’re missing. I’ve gotten really good responses so far.”

Two years ago, Pape began studying urban food deserts as part of her graduate work at Portland State University’s business administration program. The business model she and Gallison have developed is designed specifically to address food deserts. “It’s a model built to solve a problem,” she says.

“It’s a wonderful idea,” says Alberta Simmons, 78, the namesake of Alberta Simmons Plaza. Simmons does not have a car and no longer drives. She relies on her children to take her to the Fred Meyers on N. Interstate and Lombard. That, she says, “has its good moments and its bad.”

She says being able to rely on Fork in the Road “is great.” Some of the food she buys from the business is also cheaper than what she may find at the grocery store.



PHOTOS BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

*Vegetables and fresh produce are laid out for purchase in the common area of Alberta Simmons Plaza, an elderly assisted-living facility in North Portland, during a pilot site visit in October. At right, Fork in the Road founder Amelia Pape prepares a sample meal of pasta, veggies and beans during a site visit at Alberta Simmons Plaza.*



Last spring, geographers from Portland Community College teamed up with Adriana Voss-Andreae, healthy foods program manager for Portland Community Reinvestment, Inc. (PCRI), a low-income housing developer, to create the Healthy Foods Access Initiative, which seeks to understand whether low-income North and Northeast Portlanders have adequate access to healthy, fresh and affordable food, and what barriers exist to having food access.

The project focuses on those two geographic areas of Portland because Portland Community Reinvestment, Inc. and the initiative’s partner organizations are located in North Portland. Manhas adds the confluence of transportation options, the walkability of the neighborhoods, number of fast food and convenience stores, and demographic diversity of North and Northeast Portland create the perfect storm of problems with food access. “This is not as random as we might think,” she says.

Numerous studies suggest lower-income and minority communities are disproportionately affected by lack of access to healthy food. According to a 2009 United States Department of Agriculture study, Oregon is the second hungriest state in the country, and the first when it comes to the percentage of children not eating three meals a day – close to a third. The Urban League of Portland’s “State of Black Oregon” study found that Oregon ranks 47th in the rate of diabetes and obesity in the African American population.

The initiative partnered with some of the major low-income housing providers in North and Northeast Portland: Hacienda CDC and the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA). The initiative determined the number and location of housing units operated by PCRI, Hacienda, and NAYA in North and Northeast Portland.

The initiative then mapped the location of 39 full-service grocery stores and gathered information on each store’s inventory and the food prices. “We were most interested in the affordability of grocery stores,” says Voss-

Andreae. A typical family spends approximately 10 percent of its income on groceries. That directly impacts which stores families are able to afford to shop at.

A market-basket survey was compiled listing 42 healthy food items and how much each item costs on average – 82 cents for a pound of carrots, for instance, \$1 for a pound of tomatoes, \$1.20 cents for a pound of apples. Voss-Andreae says the market basket is intended to be representative of all the food items an individual would need to eat a healthy diet. To buy everything on the list – a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, healthy canned goods such as black beans, and meat and dairy products – would cost approximately \$63.30.

The map created by Voss-Andreae and Christina Friedle, a geography professor at PCC, showed that grocery stores exist in a two or three clusters in North and Northeast Portland. Some areas, such as St. Johns, have more than one store. Other areas, such as the residential Boise-Eliot neighborhood along North Mississippi Avenue, don’t have any. The nearest grocery store is a Whole Foods store, which many cannot afford to shop at regularly.

“There are more and more places in North and Northeast Portland where people live further away from stores where they can afford healthy food. It’s a different type of food desert,” she says. “There is the access issue of affordability in the sense of being a food desert for them.”

“Just because you’re located near a grocery store doesn’t mean you can afford it,” Dobson agrees.

The final piece of the puzzle was

understanding how people’s income, access to transportation, and eating habits affected their access to food. An eight-page questionnaire was distributed to residents of Hacienda, NAYA, and PCRI housing units, surveying those residents on their income, how often they eat fresh fruits and vegetables, and their access to grocery stores. Approximately 300 people responded.

By analyzing the locations of people’s homes and the stores, food prices, and taking into consideration income and transportation options, the initiative was able to get concrete answers to why people face barriers to accessing healthy food.

80 percent of survey responders belonged to communities of color; the median income was between \$10 and \$13,000 year. Over half of them are on food stamps. The survey revealed that approximately 60 percent of respondents have a diet-related health condition, such as being overweight or obese, or having type II diabetes. “Many of our residents have a higher rate of diet related health conditions and diseases,” Voss-Andreae says.

“Affordability is the biggest barrier,” Voss-Andreae says. Other factors included transportation, distance, and the temptations to eat unhealthy food or eat out.

Half of the respondents said they are unable to walk to the grocery store they use the most within 20 minutes. Most of the survey participants said they would like to eat more fruits and vegetables, and nearly all said it was important or very important to have access to those foods in their neighborhood. Based upon those results, Voss-Andreae thinks it is likely that people who currently don’t buy fresh food would if it were closer and more affordable.

Betsy Breyer is picking up where Voss-Andreae left off. She and some fellow geography students at Portland State University have founded GroceryCartPDX, an effort to understand the intersection of geography and food access in the greater Portland area.

Breyer is using the same market basket survey Voss-Andreae used to compare food prices in North and Northeast Portland and documented the location of stores and food prices in all of Portland, Gresham, Beaverton, Forest Grove, Lake Oswego, Damascus, Milwaukie, and other parts of the metropolitan area.

Breyer and her colleagues have visited 91 stores within the metro area’s urban growth boundary and cataloged the food prices of the market basket’s food items. The stores with the most expensive food, she says, are stores that are independently owned, health food or organic food stores, and co-ops.

Voss-Andreae and Breyer both think one of the biggest opportunities to provide food in food deserts is increasing the number of farmer’s markets. Compared with supermarkets, Breyer says, the farmer’s market prices are the same, if not cheaper. “There’s a perception that farmer’s markets are more expensive than supermarkets,” she says. “Our evidence suggests that’s not really true.”

Some Portland farmer’s markets accept food stamps and match up to \$10 spent. Expanding that program, Breyer says, would do much to encourage lower-income individuals to shop at farmer’s markets. Voss-Andreae thinks there is a lot of opportunity to expand community gardens into food deserts but notes the long waiting lists of people to join gardens, which runs into the thousands, according to the city’s Parks and Recreation Bureau.

Ultimately, the maps created by Voss-Andreae and Breyer reveal a clearer picture that the existence of food deserts are as much related to various socio-economic factors as it is about the presence of grocery stores. Eradicating food deserts from Portland, Voss-Andreae emphasizes, will take more than just food.

“You can’t talk about food deserts and food access without talking about the unbelievable economic inequities we have right now,” Voss-Andreae says. “It paints a bleak picture of where we are.”

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