

Getting Outside the Supermarket Box

Alternatives to “Food Deserts”

Megan Horst, Subhashni Raj, and Catherine Brinkley



Megan Horst examines the relationship between planning and food justice as an Assistant Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University.



Subhashni Raj is a doctoral candidate and studies the impacts of climate change on the food system as a Research Assistant in the Food Systems and Healthy Communities Lab at University at Buffalo, State University of New York.



Catherine Brinkley teaches Community Governance and studies healthy food access as an Assistant Professor in Community and Regional Development at the University of California, Davis.

This article is based on a presentation at the recent conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP). A special thank you to the panel participants, including Branden Born, Elizabeth Ortega, Kareem Usher, and fellow panel organizer Ben Chrisinger.

SUPERMARKETS are often proposed as a solution to “food deserts” – places where access to healthy food appears limited. In places as diverse as New York City and Portland, Oregon, planners have incentivized supermarkets to locate in these under-served areas. However, there are some serious problems with both the notion of food deserts and the promotion of supermarkets as the answer. As an alternative, we propose that planners and their colleagues focus on community-based solutions, rather than strategies that mostly benefit corporations.

A Contested Supermarket

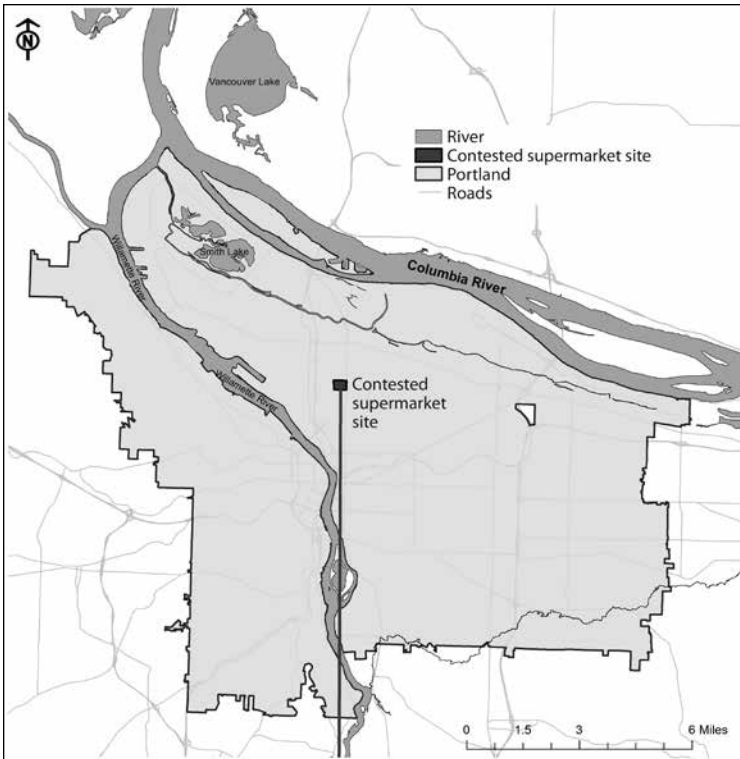
In Portland, a supermarket proposed as a solution to the lack of food access met with community opposition. The Portland case is unique for the national media attention it received. There are similar stories from across the country of governments attracting supermarkets and facing strong protest from local residents.

This case involves a two-acre parcel on a busy intersection in the Albina neighborhood, several miles north-east of downtown Portland. The neighborhood has historically been

the center of the African American community. In the 1960s, African Americans were displaced from the neighborhood by urban renewal. Gentrification, including the influx of affluent and largely white residents, has since become the new displacer of Black households.

Portland’s elected leaders have brought attention to food deserts in speeches, studies, and local initiatives. In 2011, Mayor Sam Adams launched the Grocery Store Initiative to “explore ways to make grocery stores financially feasible in under-served areas.” The mayor and the Portland Development Commission (PDC) repeatedly called the Albina neighborhood “under-served” – a tactic subsequently used to justify the rationale for bringing a national grocer to the area.

In the fall of 2014, the PDC secured an agreement to bring a Trader Joe’s to the property. The property was to be sold for about \$500,000 – a significant subsidy given its estimated worth of \$2.5 million. The planned project included a 15,000-square-foot store, 100 parking spaces, and an adjacent building for additional smaller retailers.



Project protesters and reporters gathered at the project site in February 2014.

Within a few weeks, the Portland African American Leadership Forum (PAALF) publicly criticized the deal. PAALF argued that the organization “is and will remain opposed to any development in N/NE Portland that does not primarily benefit the Black community.” The national NAACP chimed in with an editorial in the *Huffington Post*, calling it a “case study in gentrification.” Shortly thereafter, Trader Joe’s pulled out of the deal.

Not everyone agreed with PAALF’s stance or its approach. However, their argument is important because it points to some of the challenges planners will continue to face if the real causes of poor food

access are obfuscated, and community-based solutions are ignored in favor of corporate supermarkets.

PDC subsequently acknowledged the agency’s role in contributing to displacement in historically Black neighborhoods, and committed itself to better community engagement in the future. At the same time, PDC continued to seek a supermarket. In 2014, PDC announced that Natural Grocers, a Colorado-based chain, would move to the site. As part of the negotiated agreement, PDC is building 45-75 affordable housing units about one mile away. One could interpret the result as a compromise among the various parties. But it also is another triumph of capitalist economic development over community development and further obscures the causes and solutions to ensuring all people have access to healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food.

Food Deserts: From a Helpful to a Problematic Concept

While there are many ways to define a food desert, the United States Department of Agriculture’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative considers a food desert “a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.” The concept of a food desert is useful for highlighting one dimension of place-based inequality. Low geographic access to grocery stores is especially experienced by poor people and people of color, though people of all incomes and backgrounds live in food deserts. Food deserts also tend to be a bigger problem in rural areas, where people have to travel far distances to find healthy food. Those who live in food deserts often have poorer diets and are at a higher risk of developing obesity or chronic diet-related disease. But the term is also problematic.

One problem with the focus on food deserts is the way they are described. While personal health data is highly protected, maps of supermarket coverage are easily created. The ease of access to supermarket data for researchers has led many to confound ‘healthy food access with grocery store access.’ Moreover, maps can be misleading and incomplete. Measuring proximity to identified food retailers ignores other sources of food in neighborhoods (such as unconventional stores and gardens). It ignores how people actually shop. Many

people travel far outside their neighborhoods to go to their preferred food store. The food desert concept also ignores other dimensions of access, including prices and economic access, culturally relevant food for diverse communities (e.g., Halal meat or indigenous plants), and the capacity to be able to use fresh foods.

A second issue is that it is not clear that geographic access to grocery stores has much influence on healthy eating. Other factors like income, access to a personal vehicle, and education appear to have stronger influences on healthy eating than physical proximity to a grocery store. Also, studies of recently opened supermarkets in food deserts indicate that few residents shop there or change their eating habits.

The most important problem with the term “food desert” is that it obscures the underlying causes of and solutions to poverty and hunger. The label “food desert” evokes a paternalistic view of communities, along the lines of “oh, these poor people in these poor food deserts.” The blame is focused on poor neighborhoods, rather than on structural drivers of poverty, including redlining in lower-income neighborhoods. For these reasons, “food desert” is a term that should be dropped from the vocabulary of planners.

Corporate Supermarkets: The Wrong Solution

Despite these conceptual problems, food deserts continue to attract attention from government actors (including First Lady Michelle Obama), the media, and corporate grocers. Like other municipalities and states, California recently announced a loan fund of almost \$300 million to lure grocery stores and other healthy food retailers to under-served communities. Three of the largest grocer chains in the US – Walmart, Supervalu Inc. and Walgreens – have announced plans to open stores in food deserts. The Walmart Corporation website announces that Walmart has opened 224 stores in food deserts since 2012.

Supermarkets do have some benefits. Among the many shoppers in the nation, there is a perception (though contradicted by research) of greater choice and lower prices. Supermarkets also can serve as a neighborhood stabilizer and land-use anchor, sup-

porting nearby businesses by attracting foot and other traffic. Especially in rural areas, supermarkets may be the only place to buy food. However, corporate supermarkets are neither the only nor the best response to concerns over healthy food access.

First, the luring of a supermarket to a food desert is a one-dimensional approach to a complex problem. While a new store will increase geographic proximity, it does nothing to address the structural drivers of food insecurity, like poverty, low wages, food pricing, segregated land-uses and inadequate and inequitable transportation options. Nor will a new store address factors that influence eating choices, such as the heavy marketing of processed food, particularly to youth and people of color.

A second problem is that corporate supermarkets do not always connect with the preferences of diverse residents. In the Portland case, Trader Joe’s is known for low-cost snacks and alcoholic beverages, rather than healthy produce or whole food options. In another case in Baltimore, a produce grocer went out of business in two years because of a lack of comfort food options customers desired. In other neighborhoods across the US, grocers like Whole Foods are selling, as one food justice activist put it, “\$8 kale,” which is neither affordable nor culturally relevant to many people. Thus Whole Foods has become to many a beacon of gentrification, not healthy food access.

Finally, corporate supermarkets are part of the problem. The rise of the large-sized corporate supermarket, especially on urban fringes but increasingly in inner urban neighborhoods, has contributed to the decline of locally-owned, smaller and more dispersed food retail. Supermarkets are becoming increasingly consolidated, with five corporations controlling 50% of grocery retailing. Supermarkets, whose priority is profits, have also been charged with squeezing suppliers, underpaying workers, restricting unions, forcing nearby businesses out, reducing retail diversity, selling processed and unhealthy food, and fostering poor environmental practices. Additionally, supermarket ownership is overwhelmingly white, with very low rates of ownership by people of color. And their profits leave the communities where they operate instead of being reinvested locally.

Planning Outside the Big Box

Planners can help elected leaders and colleagues in public health and economic development, among others, recognize that solving food access issues is about more than just building a store. It is about focusing on community development.

First, improving food access means starting with anti-poverty and anti-hunger strategies. Period. These complex problems aren't easy to solve, but that is where the conversation should start. At the city and neighborhood level, this could mean raising minimum wages and creating affordable housing, among other strategies.

Second, rather than focus on food desert maps, planners can engage community residents (particularly those with the greatest barriers to food access) in identifying appropriate interventions. When asked, residents in Delridge, Seattle (an identified food desert), wanted living wage jobs, affordable housing, affordable health care, and access to appropriate transportation more than a nearby supermarket.

Third, planners can bolster existing community-based solutions. In many "food deserts," curbside vendors, ethnic businesses, buying clubs, and convenience stores are already meeting at least some of the residents' food needs. In some neighborhoods, neighbors organize shared transportation to preferred stores. In east Portland, residents are organizing food buying clubs, while in Oakland, Black activists established a food co-op. In one Midwestern town, a drive-thru liquor store began selling whole produce from its drive-thru windows. In tribal communities in New Mexico, Hopi elders are teaching youth traditional growing and cooking methods. In Milwaukee and other cities, urban farms sell directly to neighbors. In St. Louis, local entrepreneurs retrofitted a bus and are selling produce at or below cost in low-income neighborhoods. Planners can ask the leaders of such initiatives how they can help out.

Some planners in government have heard the call. For example, Minneapolis gives grants to convenience stores to sell more fresh produce, and Indianapolis subsidizes low-income shoppers that shop at farmers markets. Seattle funds community

gardens in low-income neighborhoods and in affordable housing complexes. The Baltimore County Health Department has launched a "virtual supermarket" program, using libraries, churches and other community centers to deliver food.

Fourth, planners can support locally-based entrepreneurs, including minorities and women, instead of corporate-owned supermarkets. Detroit Black, a Black-led organization focused on food access, asks city leaders for their help to identify and eliminate barriers to African-American participation and ownership in all aspects of the food system, and help to develop entrepreneurship and low-cost loan programs. Planners can also prioritize worker or owner-led food cooperatives rather than corporations. Cooperatives are arguably more accountable to the local community and support a range of values rather than pure profit motives. Without support, such stores struggle to compete in the capitalist economy.

Finally, when supermarkets do locate in our communities, planners can pursue community benefits agreements or other strategies to demand that they build quality facilities, hire employees (including at management levels) from the neighborhoods they serve, pay living wages, offer culturally relevant, healthy and affordable food, and employ responsible environmental practices. Planners can also work with store managers to facilitate flexibility in their format and approach – for example, stocking Halal meat in areas with Muslim residents, and including onsite child care, credit unions, health clinics, and space for social service organizations. However, CBAs have their challenges. They may be difficult to negotiate in areas where the private market is not as eager to develop. CBAs are often difficult to enforce and are dependent on transparent oversight and monitoring.

At the heart of the critique of the supermarket response to food deserts is a broader critique of how cities and economic development agencies approach community and economic development. Their approach is premised on luring outside capital, rather than on supporting community-focused development. In the case of addressing food access, it is time for planners to get outside the corporate supermarket big box. **P²**