

FOOD DESERTS, from page 10

"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.

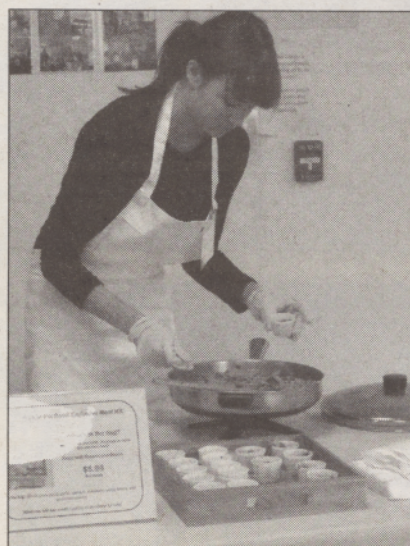
"It's a wonderful idea," says Alberta Simmons, 78, the namesake of Alberta Simmons Plaza. Simmons does not have a car and no longer drives. She relies on her children to take her to the Fred Meyers on N. Interstate and Lombard. That, she says, "has its good moments and its bad."

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.

Income and the high price of food were the highest barriers to buying food.

"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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