



PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

Making Portland's complex food deserts grow green

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
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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 two 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 nonprofit 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 dollars for one pound. 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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