

# REPLENISHING OUR FOOD

In tightly packed urban neighborhoods and isolated rural areas, fresh and healthy food is unavailable to many Americans. Lawmakers hope to remedy that.

BY MARK WINNE

Whether you live in an urban or rural community, access to fresh produce and meat is a basic need," says Pennsylvania Representative Dwight Evans in sizing up an issue that is finding its way on to the agendas of America's state legislatures.



**REPRESENTATIVE  
DWIGHT EVANS  
PENNSYLVANIA**

As traditional food stores have disappeared over the last 40 years, millions of Americans find themselves living in so-called "food deserts"—places that, compared to more prosperous communities, are underserved by affordable, high quality retail food outlets. And like a host of problems that affect a community's economic well-being and the health of its residents, legislatures have begun searching for the most appropriate policy remedies.

Although the problem may be universal, the solutions are not. "People who live in areas where not everyone owns a car or must travel long distances to reach a good food store, are keenly aware of the need for accessible and affordable food markets," Evans says. But trying to "re-store" poor urban neighborhoods or sparsely populated rural counties requires significantly different approaches.

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Private advocacy organizations have joined forces with businesses and lawmakers to find creative solutions.

Solutions often begin with those closest to the problems. That was the case in Philadelphia where the nonprofit organization, The Food Trust, conducted a study in 2002 that found that the city's low-income neighborhoods needed at least 70 more supermarkets. Being so dramatically underserved had two major consequences. The first was that diet-related illnesses were significantly higher in low-income communities. This was due in part to the residents' difficulty in traveling to affordable stores that stocked quality fruits and vegetables. The second impact was economic. Lower income residents' food purchasing dollars were "traveling" or "leaking" to other areas rather than staying in neighborhoods that desperately needed the economic activity.

"At first, the Food Trust was more interested in the health issues," says the organization's communication director, David Adler. "But we began to see the lack of supermarkets as an economic development issue that expanded our idea of what constituted a healthy community."

Indeed, evidence from community redevelopment efforts over the last 10 years does suggest that supermarkets help communities that have been hurt by the loss of businesses, a high concentration of poor households, and a decline in public services. Supermarkets create jobs and bring foot traffic and lighting to previously dormant commercial areas, making them safer. Often they anchor downtown revitalization efforts.

A study by The Reinvestment Fund, a development finance corporation playing a major management role in Pennsylvania's supermarket restoration efforts, found that

every \$1 spent on supermarket construction and operation generates \$1.50 in additional economic activity. Supermarkets also give an immediate boost to property values of between 4 percent and 7 percent.

When the Food Trust first brought its report to the attention of Philadelphia city government, it caught the eye of Representative Evans. As co-chair of the Governor's Task Force on Working Families, he broached the idea of a publicly supported supermarket financing initiative. The Pennsylvania legislature created the Fresh Food Financing Initiative in 2004.

"The initiative is an innovative and creative use of public and private funding that is a sterling example of sound public policy," Evans says. "It is a partnership that is supported by The Reinvestment Fund, The Food Trust and the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition." At this stage, the state has committed \$30 million that The Reinvestment Fund is using to leverage other public and private funds to make loans for supermarket development across the state of Pennsylvania.

The early results have been impressive: The Fresh Food Financing Initiative has committed resources to 28 projects that so far have produced more than a million square feet of retail food space and 2,500 new jobs.

The justification for this kind of public investment goes back to the initial cause of the problem: the inability of conventional financial institutions to finance new or existing supermarkets that wish to operate in economically distressed communities.

"I don't think the industry has abandoned areas so much as the areas were no longer profitable enough for them," Evans says.

As the Hartford Food System, a Connecticut nonprofit organization working on food

# DESERTS



access issues, said in a 2006 report, “Like any other industry, supermarkets are in business to make money. Chains usually build stores in places where the profit-making potential is the greatest. Any effort to change this must tip the economic variables sufficiently to bring a supermarket into an area where it might not otherwise have been built.”

## CLOSING THE RURAL FOOD GAP

It’s hard for most of us to imagine driving miles to buy our groceries. But that is often the case in many parts of rural America. In Mora County, N.M., with a population of 5,000 people spread over 2,000 square miles, the closest major supermarket is 35 miles

over winding mountain roads.

Mora County is not alone. A 2007 report by the Rural Sociological Society identified 803 “low-access” rural counties where 50 percent or more of the residents live at least 10 miles from a supermarket. More than half of these counties were also defined as “food deserts” which means that all of their residents lived more than 10 miles from the nearest supermarket.

New Mexico Representative Brian Moore understands both the cause and impact of rural food deserts. As the only member of the Legislature who owns and operates a supermarket, he knows how his constituents struggle to get to affordable food stores and

how difficult it is to make a profit in rural communities. “Many small towns in northeast New Mexico (his district borders Texas and Oklahoma) can’t get fresh fruits and vegetables,” Moore says.

Moore has owned his grocery store in Clayton, N.M., for 20 years. As a town of



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**BRIAN MOORE**  
**NEW MEXICO**

## MORE WAYS TO RE-STORE COMMUNITIES

A full-line, modern supermarket may not always be the answer to a food desert. When Assemblyman Mark Leno visited Vince's Third Street Produce Store in San Francisco's Bay View neighborhood for fresh produce, he couldn't help but notice that the low-income residents of Bay View did not seem to be sharing in the bounty of California's famous fruits and vegetables. Obesity and obesity-related diseases cost the Golden State some \$20 billion a year, and Leno was concerned that "the current health-care system could be overwhelmed," unless proactive measures were taken. Leno believes that affordability and access are the two main hurdles to a good diet for many in food deserts, with affordability the key roadblock in this case.

The California Food Policy Advocates ([www.cfpa.net](http://www.cfpa.net)) had conducted an investigation of the role that small neighborhood stores play in meeting the needs of low-income communities. What they found wasn't surprising. Small urban stores—corner stores, mom 'n' pops, bodegas—were plentiful, but mostly sold a wide selection of unhealthy food. To that end, Leno, with the assistance of the California Food Policy Advocates, introduced a bill to create the Healthy Food Purchase Pilot Program in 2006. The bill passed and the pilot program will eventually be active in seven diverse counties. The program addresses the access problem by building on what is already present in communities, by providing money for produce coolers for corner stores and by providing store operators with training and technical assistance. To tackle the affordability issue, the program will offer financial incentives to food stamp recipients to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.



**ASSEMBLYMAN  
FELIX ORTIZ  
NEW YORK**

In New York, Assemblyman Felix Ortiz was concerned that the lack of healthy, affordable food stores in his Brooklyn district was contributing to the soaring obesity and diabetes rates

among his constituents. Ortiz introduced legislation that gave New York farmers a personal property tax abatement on farm equipment if they sold at farmers' markets in underserved communities. Now, farmers are parking their pick-up trucks in Brooklyn's Red Hook and Sunset Park neighborhoods selling tomatoes, collards and cilantro. "Underserved communities like mine didn't have access to the same quality of groceries as higher-end communities," Ortiz says. "Now things are moving in the right direction."

The Connecticut legislature is considering how it can use the personal property tax to stimulate the development of supermarkets. Because most of the Nutmeg State's inner-city areas lack high quality food stores, Representative Christopher Stone introduced a bill that would allow municipalities to abate up to 100 percent of a supermarket's personal property tax for its machinery, equipment and furnishings. Abating property taxes helps supermarkets in poor neighborhoods where operating expenses are higher than they are in the suburbs. The bill passed Stone's General Law Committee, but was withdrawn this year in order to be reworked and resubmitted in 2008.

2,500 people that also draws tourist traffic from the nearby state highway, Clayton has a sufficient customer base to support his operation. That's not the case, however, in the town of Logan, also in Moore's district. With only 1,100 residents, it can barely support one convenience store that carries very little fresh produce and some packaged meat.

"Store start-up costs are high, and equipment such as coolers for produce is expensive," Moore says. "Many of these stores are also too small to be serviced by the region's only independent food wholesaler, Affiliated Foods in Amarillo, Texas. If a store doesn't have a loading dock, for instance, it's just too costly for a semi-truck to deliver to them."

After New Mexico's Food and Agriculture Policy Council delivered a report to the Legislature in 2006 that revealed the extent of the state's rural "food gap," lawmakers passed a joint memorial to establish a food gap task force. Representative Manuel Herrera



**REPRESENTATIVE  
MANUEL HERRERA  
NEW MEXICO**

says the task force will look for ways to improve access to healthy and affordable foods. The policy council's director, Pam Roy, says the task force will "bring

together public and private interests who have a stake in the problem and the expertise to develop workable solutions."

What those solutions might be is too early to say (the task force's recommendations will be presented at the 2008 legislative session). Herrera doesn't envision anything as ambitious as Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing Initiative. But along with his colleague Moore, he foresees a state-financed revolving loan fund that helps cash-strapped store owners in rural areas purchase produce coolers or even loading docks to take advantage of Affiliated Foods wide product selection and lower prices.

### A STORE GROWS IN NORTH PHILADELPHIA

The hard work of committed advocates like the Food Trust, legislators like Dwight Evans, and professional business developers like The Reinvestment Fund is bearing fruit in North Philadelphia. In this previously underserved community, the Fresh Food Financing Initiative is helping redevelop the nation's oldest African-American-owned shopping center. Built in 1968 by civil rights leader Reverend Leon Sullivan, Progress Plaza had fallen into disrepair since losing its supermarket in 1998. With a \$250,000 grant and \$2.3 million in loans from the Fresh Food Financing Initiative, Progress Plaza has launched a major redevelopment effort that will be anchored by a new, full-service Fresh Grocer that will provide 240 jobs. Although Evans acknowledged that the original mission of this investment was to make affordable groceries available to the neighborhood, "the bonus is that it has cleaned up that neighborhood and added a sense of pride and accomplishment to the people who live and work there."

The lessons learned so far suggest that when responsible public investment meets sound business practices, communities prosper, livelihoods are created, and healthy food becomes available to all. ■