

Background Introduction: Case Studies and Precedents

The geography of food access can be best summarized as a function of socio-economic status, hitting minority and low-income communities most in rural and urban areas. With the risk for diabetes and obesity at an all time high in both child and adult populations, the need for high quality and nutritious foods is critical. Analysis of urban centers like Los Angeles and Philadelphia have revealed an alarming disparity between lower and higher income communities with regards to access to fruits and vegetables (www.TheFoodTrust.org). Consumption of fast food, and low quality foods that are often sold in corner and gas station convenient stores has increased. With almost 47% of food dollars being spent on "prepared foods" nationwide due to the lack of supermarket and/or community run grocery stores it is more than clear that the food economy and the opportunity for food choice must be seriously evaluated and remedied (www.TheFoodTrust.org). With little to no healthy food access in communities of low income, the risk of nutrition-related illnesses and general poor health is on the rise. Those who have the least amount of monetary resource are thus further challenged by the lack of quality food access. These vulnerable populations are in need of serious improvements in terms of access to fresh food, in order to improve diet and general well being.

The Supermarket Campaign is a nationwide coalition of city-based initiatives to address healthy food access issues within the nation's urban centers. The Food Trust of Philadelphia is actively involved in promoting and actualizing a variety of campaigns and initiatives to address food access issues in the city, such as the return of supermarkets, corner store initiatives and better access to farmers markets within Philadelphia's under-served communities. Projects like the corner store initiative are being echoed all over the country, like Cleveland's corner store initiative, recently implemented by the Cuyahoga Community Food Coalition. The Philadelphia initiative is an example of a successful project underway, providing economic and social incentives to corner store stores in the effort to promote the retail of fresh fruits and vegetables. Incentives come in the form of upgrades and installation of refrigerating systems (to be used for fruits and vegetables) and tax reductions. The program also aims to increase local employment through creating job opportunities within the community.

Communication: Evidence and Interviews

Food access in Oberlin can be explored by examining three economic groups: the upper and middle class (with transportation access), the working poor, and those reliant on emergency government aid. For car-owning residents, driving a few miles to the local IGA or Wal-Mart is routine. While driving may be inconvenient, it barely impacts their food access. However, as of 2000, 20% of Oberlin residents were below the poverty line with 14% relying on food stamps and 3.5% of residents unemployed (2000 U.S. Census). For these residents, finding healthy food in Oberlin is not so easy; their diets are dictated by accessibility—walking distance. For those living near IGA, walking can be frustrating but for those on the south end of town, a trip to IGA is difficult, often involving walking several miles. Unless willing to make this journey regularly, they must rely on what is nearby: Mickey Mart and Clark's convenience store. Although these stores sell calories, coffee, candy bars, hot dogs, alcohol, potato chips, and wonder bread are hardly a nutritious diet.

For those who cannot afford food, Oberlin offers 2nd harvest food options including the Boys and Girls Clubs of Lorain County's after school and backpack programs, weekday hot meals at local churches, monthly food distributions, and the Oberlin Community Food Services food pantry (Bonner Center). These resources assist many residents (including over 100 families who utilize the food pantry) (Oberlin Review 02/08/09). However, while great for short-term/emergencies they should not be relied on to supplement a convenience store diet.

Since the 2000 census, the economic situation in Oberlin has declined and negatively impacted food access. In fall 2007, Missler's grocery store closed and further complicated Oberlin food access (Oberlin Review 09/14/07). Resident's options are Gibson's, Mickey Mart, Clarks, and assorted fast food. Although Gibson's offers fresh/ frozen produce, bread, milk, and other staples of a nutritious diet, it is expensive and not easily accessible to everyone. In conjunction with Missler's closing, the economic downturn has decreased 2nd harvest resources. When Oberlin residents need quality food most, available resources are diminishing (Oberlin Review 02/08/09). Unless something changes, Oberlin residents must choose among long walks to IGA, junk food diets, and decreasing emergency food assistance.

This emergency food assistance has become increasingly sought after following the close of Missler's. South of Main Street, more and more Oberlin residents are seeking out Oberlin Community Services and Christ Church, two organizations that supply free emergency food. According to OCS employee Kathryn Burns, their organization offers a food pantry where residents can choose from cereal, proteins, soups, and canned fruit and vegetables. Burns says that Oberlin residents are making more frequent trips to their pantry, and adds that she sees many people walking several miles to IGA "in all kinds of weather." Christ Church functions differently; it supplies hot meals at dinner time Monday through Friday. Although the food is freshly prepared, Christ Church's "hot meals" program does not afford residents much autonomy in choosing what they want to eat. Furthermore, health codes prevent diners from taking uneaten food with them when they leave the church, a rule that highlights the purely temporary nature of this food source. Both of the aforementioned organizations help to ameliorate food insecurity in Southern Oberlin, but they cannot take the place of a supermarket or equivalent food supplier. Additionally, it's likely that residents who can afford to buy food are utilizing these emergency resources because of an inability to access a diverse range of foods in their neighborhoods, leaving fewer emergency supplies for those who are more needy. The installment of a supplier of produce, whole grains, and other foods located in the Southern part of town will help to reduce the strain on these essential Oberlin social services.

The Cleveland Corner store Project serves as a valuable model for comparable ventures in Oberlin because it addresses, similarly, the issue of growing food deserts that have left only "smaller 'corner stores' with limited healthy food options to fill the void" (CCSP website). Importantly, the dominant goal of CCSP is not to completely reform the city's food system, but rather to aim to "bring healthier food options to Cleveland neighborhoods." This is done by asking participating stores to carry food options that include fresh fruits, low-fat cereals, and skim milk (CCSP website). By utilizing pre-existing vendors, the CCSP can more quickly enact important changes to Cleveland's food accessibility level. Like the Corner store Project, this proposed Oberlin-based venture will offer incentives to participating stores and, ideally, help them to connect with local market gardeners with the intent of bolstering solid partnerships between the groups.

Solutions Framework

Our short-term goal is to develop market-based incentives (through education, marketing, and policy advocacy) to corner stores within Oberlin encourage retail of fresh food such as carrots, potatoes, onions, garlic and apples. Ideally, this project will align with an existing Oberlin-based initiative which has funding for public health-related ventures in Oberlin neighborhoods.

Long-term goals will integrate a three-part approach to further evaluating and remedying the lack of community access to affordable, healthy and sustainable fresh foods.

1. Utilization of the vacant Missler's Supermarket space for a community co-operative.

The Co-op will buy foods in bulk, eliminating the added costs that packaged products necessitate. Furthermore, community members will have the option to work at the co-op in exchange for discounts. The presence of a co-op will be helpful to Oberlin, economically and socially; it poses a realistic option for creating more opportunities for community access, education and involvement in the local foods scene within Oberlin. The Oberlin Cooperative Student Association as well as

the New Agrarian Center can serve as excellent resources and models for creating such a co-operative that is accessible to communities in need of a more stable and wholesome food stream.

2. Creation of a food-policy coalition.

The food-policy coalition would primarily work on linking Hot Meals and Oberlin Community Services with local farms and possibly employing lower-income residents to glean and transport this fresh food. The coalition would hold meetings during which the people working on the Oberlin corner store project and on the co-operative could network and exchange ideas. These meetings will be open to the public so that Oberlin residents can voice questions, concerns, and advice. This is an imperative component to evaluating the needs and desires of community members, as well as ensuring their input and participation.

3. Institution of tax subsidies and/or market incentives by city council on the city level, or on the district level.

This will help to offset startup costs incurred by the opening of the co-op, as well as provide helpful assistance to corner stores who choose to stock fresh food. Politically, this can occur in a variety of ways. Advocacy and policy support within the community will help to direct attention within Oberlin City Council towards these pressing issues. Lobbying should be done on the federal level to work for a re-allocation of Farm Bill funds towards food access, which would constitute support of food co-operatives and corner store projects.