

Philadelphia Needs More Supermarkets

Duane Perry

The recent protest over the proposed development of a McDonald's in the shuttered supermarket at 27th and Girard raises the perennial question of how can we attract more supermarkets to Philadelphia?

Let's be thankful, as we belly up to tables laden with turkey and the fixins' bought from our local supermarket. Many other families will have pieced together their Thanksgiving meal - like every meal- from corner and convenience stores, since there are no supermarkets in the community where they live.

The lack of supermarkets is a problem that impacts Philadelphians as well as those in older cities and towns, throughout our region, from Coatesville to Camden. The fact is many low-income communities in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware no longer have enough supermarkets to meet the food needs of their residents.

The problem is especially severe, here. A special report issued by The Food Trust, called "Food for Every Child", disclosed that low-income communities in this region have significantly fewer supermarkets per capita than similar communities in other major metropolitan areas.

When there are no supermarkets nearby, people are forced to shop at corner and convenience stores to feed their families. Most food from these stores is high in fats and sugars.

The Food Trust reports a correlation between the rates of diet-related disease, and the lack or presence of supermarkets in any neighborhood. People living in neighborhoods without access to supermarkets suffer from diet-related deaths at a rate higher than that experienced by the population as a whole.

These conclusions are reinforced by a University of North Carolina study, published in this month's American Journal of Public Health. It found that people ate better when supermarkets were located in their community.

We need to invest in the development of food retailing in communities, to help combat an epidemic of diet-related diseases that is threatening adults and children. Our children's future depends on good nutrition. Poor nutrition among children is leading to physical, behavioral, and developmental problems that are affecting their long-term health, cognitive ability, and academic performance.

The overall costs of the resulting diet-related problems are staggering. The economic costs of unhealthy diets and physical inactivity add up to almost \$100 billion per year.¹

The protests at 27th and Girard are echoed throughout the region, as community residents and health professionals speak out about the link between access to nutritious food and the health of the community. In Pennsylvania, Governor-elect Rendell's community revitalization and public

health policies might focus on developing new supermarkets in small towns and urban communities.

What is needed is a 'Marshall Plan,' directed at developing new supermarkets to serve underserved communities. As Philadelphia's success in attracting new hotels demonstrates, a concerted effort, combined with strong leadership and modest public subsidy, will succeed in leveraging private sector investment.

A Food Marketing Task Force is convening to develop recommendations to accomplish that. Co-chaired by Christine James-Brown, President and CEO of the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and Walt Rubel, Director of Acme Markets, the task force is composed of health professionals, food retailers, nutritionists, food advocates, business experts and community leaders.

What can be done?

The development of supermarkets, like other economic development initiatives, requires leadership and strategic investment in land, infrastructure and buildings. We need to convene leaders, and charge them with developing a strategy to create more supermarkets in underserved communities. All of our children need access to affordable, nutritious food.

Finally, we need to hold ourselves accountable and engage the city, state and federal governments, and the food retailing industry in a highly visible new public-private partnership. Strong leadership can reverse the tide and attract new supermarket investment to areas where it is needed most.

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ⁱ Wolf AM, Colditz GA. Current estimates of the economic cost of obesity in the United States. *Obesity Research* 1998;6(2): 97-106.