

Supermarkets elude borough

By: DAN KELLEY , Times Herald Staff 12/13/2003

NORRISTOWN - Easy access to plenty of amenities - such as ice cream shops, variety stores or a deli - is one advantage of living in the borough.

But for most people in Norristown, a supermarket is not readily accessible. Genuardi's family markets, a company that got its start in the borough, has plenty of stores with a Norristown mailing address, but there isn't a store within walking distance for many borough residents. The Thriftway on Dekalb Street, while accessible to pedestrians, is generally considered too small to offer the product diversity and deals offered by larger operations.

Residents have begun complaining about the lack of an accessible supermarket in the borough. They have joined advocacy groups and politicians from Philadelphia and across the state to address this issue. They all cite the importance of the link between access to a supermarket and the availability of fresh, nutritious foods.

"We don't need to shop at the dollar store. With these small stores selling high-sodium foods, and our population," said borough Councilwoman Rochelle Griffin-Culbreath, "we'll end up with diabetes and heart problems."

Patrick Druhan, food and nutrition specialist for CADCOM, said several studies have shown that inner city nutrition improves when residents have access to fresh food.

Those trying to get a supermarket located in the borough say that grocery companies measure profitability by the square foot.

Since margins on groceries are extremely low, stores must be large to be competitive. The chairman of the Pennsylvania House Health and Human Services Committee, state Rep. Frank Oliver, D-195th Dist., unveiled a series of recommendations on Dec. 3 intended to help bring supermarkets to disadvantaged neighborhoods. The committee conducted a six-month study to investigate whether the state can lure more grocers to cities with tax breaks, grants, or eased regulations.

In Norristown, those clamoring for a new supermarket have learned that luring one starts with the realization that there is no "one size fits all" supermarket. Druhan would like to see an indoor farmers market with a number of different vendors. Griffin-Culbreath looks to the model of Supremo, a chain of grocery stores that recently put a store in North Philadelphia that serves the Hispanic population. Hannah Burton, a program coordinator with the Food Trust, a non-profit organization that works to provide affordable and nutritious food to low income areas, said there is no single solution to getting better food. Burton cites programs in cities like Austin, Texas where officials changed bus routes to lead to supermarkets. In California, grocery stores have developed shuttles to ferry people into their stores.

She said a lot of the decisions supermarkets make rely on national marketing data that ignore local features. "Public subsidies will help, but there is a real need for marketing information," Burton said. In some situations, Burton said, communication between companies and municipalities has changed siting decisions.

Oliver's committee also called on the state to establish a grant pool to fund the creation of supermarkets in urban neighborhoods and help assemble parcels of land for their development. Griffin-Culbreath wants to start putting listings of available lots on the borough's website and sending out requests. Potential sites for a new market, according to Griffin-Culbreath, include the Logan Square Shopping Center at Markley Street and Johnson Highway.

A representative of a supermarket could not be reached for this article.

Dan Kelley can be reached at dkelley@timesherald.com or 610-272-2500, ext. 207.