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## Wanted: Inner city supermarkets

**A Pa. House report cites a link between diet-related diseases and a lack of grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods.**

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**HARRISBURG** - Citing a link between a lack of supermarkets and diet-related disease, a legislative report to be released next month calls on state government and municipalities to find ways to attract full-service grocery stores into low-income urban neighborhoods.

The report, prepared by the House Committee on Health and Human Services, said the state Department of Community and Economic Development and local governments should create economic incentives to bring supermarkets back to urban neighborhoods and eliminate existing tax and regulatory barriers.

Hannah Burton, program director for the Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit nutrition advocacy group, said this was the first time supermarket availability had been singled out as a problem that state government should help solve.

"I know of no other state that has identified a role for state government," she said. "It's groundbreaking and exciting."

Burton said the report underscored the need for Mayor Street and his administration to make food retail a priority in his massive redevelopment plan, the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.

Without such planning, a catch-22 exists, Burton said. Supermarkets will not locate in areas without a stable population base and potential residents are reluctant to move to a neighborhood without a supermarket.

But a city official said supermarkets were indeed part of Mayor Street's plan to revive the ailing neighborhoods.

"One of the first things we identified was the need to assemble large parcels of land and the need for community development - supermarkets being high on the list," said Cynthia Bayete, assistant director of the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.

The House Committee on Health and Human Services began investigating the lack of supermarkets in urban areas earlier this year after the passage of a House resolution.

Kevin Ortiz, spokesman for the Department of Community and Economic Development, said there were no economic development programs designed specifically to attract supermarkets to urban areas.

Still, the report found that the department had provided funding in the past to help open two supermarkets in rural areas of Pennsylvania.

Ortiz said he could not comment on the report because the agency was still reviewing it.

Declining populations and rising crime rates helped drive supermarket chains out of inner cities in the 1960s and 1970s. In the last decade, large supermarket chains and high-end food markets, such as Trader Joe's and Whole Foods, have returned to Philadelphia, but are thriving in higher-income neighborhoods.

Supermarket industry officials say they recognize that more stores are needed in low-income urban areas, but that companies face a host of obstacles: high taxes; zoning regulations; a shortage of large, vacant and affordable parcels of land; and crime.

A 1995 study by the University of Connecticut found that Philadelphia ranked second to last among metropolitan areas in the number of supermarkets per capita. Today, of the 78 supermarkets in Philadelphia, only six of the 33 large supermarkets and 15 of the 45 small supermarkets are in the city's poorest neighborhoods in central North Philadelphia, according to recent survey by Drexel University.

In response to longtime concerns about the shortage of supermarkets, the city established a Food Marketing Task Force last year, made up of food retail representatives, city officials, health professionals and community advocacy groups. It expects to release recommendations in January.

In recent years, community groups have become more active in trying to prevent the proliferation of fast-food outlets in their neighborhoods and seeking ways to attract supermarkets.

One such effort paid off in June when a New Jersey-based supermarket chain, Supremo, opened its first store in Philadelphia in the Nicetown-Tioga sections.

The store was aided by a \$6.5 million investment from Triumph Baptist Church. Owner Ernest Trujillo is so pleased with its success that he is exploring three other Philadelphia locations, Burton said.

Without adequate public transportation to reach suburban supermarkets, inner-city residents are forced to shop at high-priced, junk food-filled corner stores and fast-food outlets. That has taken a toll on their health, according to a 2002 study by the Food Trust.

The study found disproportionately high levels of heart disease, diabetes and cancer in low-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

Supermarket industry officials say they are prepared to help underserved communities, but that simply building more supermarkets will not help solve entrenched socioeconomic problems.

"The problem is much larger than outlined in the [House] report," said David McCorkle, president of the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association. "There are complex issues of poverty, health care and education."

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