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# Lansing's food desert:

June 2, 2004 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1670

## PULSE:NEWS&OPINION :: JUNE 2, 2004

Lansing's food desert:

Inner-city residents campaign for a grocery store

By DANIEL STURM

Rebecca Bahar-Cook said she loves living in downtown Lansing, where she raises her 3-year-old son and 17-month-old daughter. But the self-employed mother really wishes there were a grocery store. "I need to drive to East Lansing to get good meat and fresh and healthy food," she said.

The lack of a regular grocery store motivated Bahar-Cook to join a downtown Lansing and Westside initiative to enhance people's access to nutritious and affordable groceries.

Volunteers at the North West Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative are discussing possible options such as grocery stores, food co-ops, farmers' markets, buying clubs and restaurants.

"There is not a single full-service grocery store in the area," said Initiative director Ron Whitmore. He said that the existing party stores don't offer the variety of fresh foods that people typically look for. The closest full-service stores are several miles away.

Whitmore said he believes many people in the area aren't eating well because they're eating highly processed foods. He said the initiative plans to launch a door-to-door canvassing project this summer, hitting at least a 1,000 of 7,500 households, to verify this assumption and find out more about residents' grocery needs.

The lack of a grocery store has an especially harsh effect upon downtown Lansing's 25 percent low-income population, some of whom depend on public transit, Whitmore said. But he emphasized that wealthier residents were also being underserved. People were forced to drive their cars perhaps more than 10 miles in order to shop at the less expensive Save-A-Lot chain store, or the Food Co-op or Better Health Food store in East Lansing.

Bahar-Cook, who lives one block south of Lansing's St. Lawrence Hospital, said she would prefer walking a mile to get fresh foods to putting her kids in the car and driving all the way to East Lansing. She said that she occasionally takes her children for a walk to the City Market. However, this was no solution because the product selection was too small. "It's fun to walk with my children," Bahar-Cook said. "We walk and talk, and we look at things, whereas in the car I have to concentrate on driving."

Brian Thomas, a Michigan State University doctoral student in sociology, said researchers have coined the term "food deserts" to describe the problems of inner-city neighborhoods. Thomas said the trouble of accessing food is often exacerbated by a disability, the lack of childcare or the lack of a reliable car. He said food insecurity was more often found among low-income individuals and renters, rather than homeowners. Moreover, research shows that proximity to a grocery store impacts the amount of fresh vegetables and fruit people consume.

After analyzing survey data provided by the Allen Neighborhood Center in the summer of 2003, Thomas was able to prove that the neighborhood had a problem with "food security." The U.S. Department of Agriculture tracks food security as a measure of people's access to food, ranging from zero percent (best) to 100 percent (worst).

Thomas found that roughly 30 percent of Allen Neighborhood residents are "food insecure," compared with an 8 percent average in Michigan, and a 10 percent average in the United States.

The sociologist said it's difficult to determine how many northwest Lansing residents are food-insecure without having access to survey data. From looking at northwest Lansing census data, Thomas said this area appears to be more diverse than the Allen Neighborhood, because more residents had higher incomes.

Whitmore said that he thought improving access to fresh and healthy foods might be difficult due to this socio-economic diversity. During the last several weeks, food task force members have debated the issue but haven't yet found a solution: Should they aim for a store that sells locally-grown and perhaps higher-priced food items or a chain store carrying less expensive products that are industrially processed and less nutritious?

Whitmore said he believes it's important to balance these interests, given that one in four area households are below the poverty line. Ideally there would be several grocery stores, of which at least one was organic. "You need to find a way to meet the grocery needs of both of ends of the spectrum," Whitmore said.

Other members expressed doubts as to whether recruiting a grocery chain that carried less expensive products would be worth pursuing, given the health implications associated with many "cheaper" processed foods.

Marty Heller, a Research Associate for the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems in Lansing, said he believes this is a chicken-and-egg problem. Heller said that with a little culinary knowledge and some time at home, one could easily eat cheaper and healthier with simple whole food ingredients. But Heller admitted this becomes an added challenge when people don't even have access to unprocessed whole foods.

In an effort to tackle such educational challenges, both the North West Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative and the Allen Neighborhood Center have applied for and received grants from Michigan State University's C.S. Mott Sustainable Food Systems Group.

Barbara Mutch, the group's program leader, said that the chair of her department has formed partnerships with 12 projects in Michigan, located in Lansing, Detroit, Ypsilanti, Grand Rapids and on the Upper Peninsula.

Mutch said the best educational approach for improving people's access to healthy food would be to conduct a food security assessment, and then launch practical projects, rather than preaching to people.

Mutch said children are often rejecting their school lunches when vegetables appear on the menu, because they're no longer familiar with them. But if community gardening were part of their curriculum, for instance, children would quickly embrace the idea of eating something they'd actually grown. And there's another benefit to this approach. "Some children will take the seeds home, and their parents will support the project and perhaps turn their backyards into gardens."

More community gardens is one of many ideas discussed by the North West Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative.

Roberta Miller, who directs the Greater Lansing Community Gardens Project, agreed that the North West Lansing area doesn't have enough community gardening space, given that there is only a small 12-member project on the corner of Martin Luther King Boulevard and Oakland Street.

Miller, who runs 20 community gardens in Lansing and East Lansing, said she's already begun to identify additional

locations and would like to finalize land arrangements quickly, so that there can be more community gardens next year.

Garden space will be available for everyone who doesn't have a garden at home. The program is especially aimed at urban residents whose property lots are small, making gardening often impossible due to lack of proper sunlight.

Miller said that it's very possible to compensate for the lack of a grocery store by growing one's own produce. "It's wonderful to have fresh produce in season that's tasty and nutritious. You can walk out to harvest lettuce, and then walk back to the house to make a sandwich or salad that's pretty fresh."

The Garden Project charges a \$5 donation for people who want a second plot. It's funded by the City of Lansing, the City of East Lansing, Ingham County, the Crop Walk and the Greater Lansing Food Bank. The project provides everything home gardeners need to grow and raise their own food, such as seed, seedlings, hoses, tools, organic fertilizers, tilling and garden plots.

The concept of urban farming is increasingly endorsed by communities across the United States. During the past 20 years, New York City has opened a thousand community gardens on public land and 18 public markets in which to sell their produce.

In addition to creating community gardens and attracting one or more grocery stores, neighborhood activists are discussing the possibility of establishing a food co-op in downtown Lansing. Whitmore said the advantage of a food co-op is that it could meet the needs of the entire spectrum of residents because it would be owned and controlled by its members. "You can offer the high end products that wealthier people want and at the same time put in place a sliding scale pricing system, or offer lower-priced processed foods to meet the needs of lower income residents."

Whitmore said that even though the East Lansing Food Co-op's current priority is to expand in East Lansing rather than open another store in Lansing, he believes ELFCO could undertake small steps with the long-term goal of establishing a branch in downtown Lansing.

"They could open up a small branch at the City Market, help a group get started with a buying-club in the area, or they could do a once-a-week delivery," Whitmore said.

Attracting more local farmers to sell their produce at the City Market was another idea for improving the quality of life in downtown.

Phil Throop, the owner of Wildflower Organic Farm, welcomed the City Market's new rent arrangement that offered parking space for a reasonable \$10 per lot every Saturday: "That's pretty inviting for local growers." He suggested providing the City Market master with a list of growers so that he could send out letters to invite local farmers.

Throop delivers produce to the Meridian Farmer Market and restaurants and grocery stores, but said he's considering the City Market option. The Bath organic farmer has also begun signing people up for a farm produce subscription. Participants purchase a share of the season's produce for \$425 and pick up their weekly 10-pound dividend at the farm. If a customer doesn't need 10 pounds per week, he or she can split this share with another person.

The North West Lansing Healthy Initiative supports the idea of community-supported agriculture. Whitmore said that the Giving Tree Farm CSA recently established a drop-off site at the Letts Community Center on 1220 W. Kalamazoo St., where subscribers can pick up their fresh produce once a week.

At their last meeting, group members discussed the possibility of attracting a Mobile Market to Lansing, such as the truck converted into a grocery store by the People's Grocery in Oakland, Calif. People are invited to share their creative ideas at the next meeting on June 16. The taskforce is still in the information-gathering process.

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**Lansing City Pulse (MI)**

**Date:** June 2, 2004

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