

Addressing Food Deserts: Solutions for Greater County-Campus Sustainability

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Thesis

The city of Binghamton possesses an immense problem with food deserts. By diverting county funds to further support local markets, food shares, and co-ops, we are offering more nutritious and cost-effective food options to residents of food deserts across Broome County.

Background & Analysis

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food deserts, in their 2008 Farm Bill, as areas facing extreme inaccessibility to affordable, good-quality fresh foods for typically low-income residents.¹ According to the USDA Food Environment Atlas, two areas of the City of Binghamton are designated “food deserts,” the North Side and a portion of the First Ward near Ely Park, as well as parts of Johnson City -- south of Floral Ave -- and Endicott -- south of Main St and between Country Club Rd and Main St. This past summer, the City of Binghamton allocated \$4,950 to a North Side Mobile Market 14-week pilot program.² A partnership between CHOW (Community Hunger Outreach Warehouse), VINES (Volunteers Improving Neighborhood Environments), United Way of Broome County, the mobile market sells discounted and occasionally limited-variety free produce three times a week at two stationary locations, after which they make personal deliveries to residents of the North Side. VINES, which focuses on food sustainability across Broome County, has an extensive Farm Share program -- where subscribers make easy payments to local farmers who provide a weekly share of their produce; income-eligible households can receive up to a 50% discount on shares weekly.³ At Binghamton University, a small student-led farming coalition, known as BU Acres, works with campus food services to offer organic produce at one of three dining halls and even offers some internship opportunities for interested students.⁴

Talking Points

- ▶ The proposed development site for the North Side market, an investment promised in 2014, was put on hold due to environmental and engineering safety concerns.⁵
- ▶ BC Transit has enacted new baggage-limiting rules for passengers, a concern for many northsiders who rely on county transportation for market access.⁶
- ▶ Diverting \$3.5 million in Broome County reserved funds into three selective sustainability grants is a more economically feasible and eco-friendly alternative to combating food deserts.

- ▶ According to a new USDA finding, “Food store access, particularly as measured by proximity, has a limited impact on food choices.”⁷

The Policy Idea

Broome County must effectively, but properly, address its food deserts by diverting the \$3.5 million reserved for the North Side market development and establishing a more comprehensive plan.⁸ The best alternative and fiscally responsible allocation for the county’s reserved funds is the encouragement of the CHOW Mobile Market, farm shares, and co-ops throughout Broome County, support for the Binghamton University farming coalition, expansion of health education programs to better strategize how we can encourage cleaner eating, and incentivizing local entrepreneurs or retailers to establish markets in the North Side.

Policy Analysis

There is no easy, singular solution to the food deserts in the City of Binghamton and across Broome County. The authorized \$3.5 million proposed market in the Binghamton Plaza to combat the North Side food desert will not, by itself, be an effective solution, nor economically sound.⁹ While the impromptu establishment of a vendor has its merits and may address the needs of some residents, many similar proposals to food deserts cannot be sustained over time due to high operation costs, inadequate consideration for long-term maintenance and the economic incentive, and interest in stagnant dietary cultures make an independent market solution insignificant.¹⁰ In his research, Professor Steven Cummins found consistent evidence that supermarket additions to underserved communities improved people’s perception of food accessibility, but weren’t enough in itself to change people’s diets.¹¹ According to a new USDA finding, “Food store access, particularly as measured by proximity, has a limited impact on food choices.”¹² Their research confirmed Professor Cummins’, suggesting “Household and neighborhood resources, education, and taste preferences may be more important determinants of food choice than store proximity.” The actions of the Mobile Market alone will not address the issue, nor will expanding resources of BU Acres to have larger year-round crop yields that can be greater devoted toward campus dining halls and community food dispensaries, or teaching communities the merits of buying and cooking smart. We need an extensive long-term strategy that won’t just address food insecurity, but address the need for greater cooperation between elected officials, community members, and students, while fostering deep-rooted sustainability practices.

Key Facts

- ▶ The USDA designated the North Side and a portion of the First Ward (near Ely Park) of the City of Binghamton as food deserts, as well as south of Floral Avenue in Johnson City, and south of Main Street and between Country Club Road and Main Street in Endicott.¹³

- ▶ 17.2% of Broome County's population falls below state poverty lines, compared to a state average of 15.4%, while the poverty rate for children is at 47%.^{14,15}
- ▶ The North side of Binghamton has not had a full-scale grocery store since 1996, when Grand Union left the Binghamton Plaza.¹⁶

NEXT STEPS

An effective county-campus sustainability campaign encompasses three phases. Phase One entails the establishment of foundational relationships between the stakeholders and organizers of CHOW, VINES, United Way, and county farm shares and co-ops, along with the community, particularly residents of food deserts. Phase Two will initiate conversations on critical implementation plans focused on short/long-term cost-benefit analyses, proposals and goals, and priority actions. Phase Three will focus on persuading county government to divert \$3.5 million reserved for the proposed market development into three grant programs: a food desert elimination program expanding selective operations of participating farms, farm shares, and food co-ops; a campus sustainability fund for expanding current operations at BU Acres, pending an approved three-year strategic expansion plan and their participation in CSA programs two years after receiving the grant; a North Side market competitive start-up fund for either local entrepreneurs or retailers to be budgeted per fiscal year for a five-year period, in tandem with New York State tax breaks and grants from the New York Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative.^{17,18,19}

- ¹ Howe, Steve. "Food Deserts Present Challenges beyond Groceries." Pressconnects. Press & Sun-Bulletin. August 18, 2014. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2014/08/18/binghamton-food-desert/14255753/>
- ² Brockett, Megan. "'Mobile Market' Headed to Binghamton's North Side." Pressconnects. June 15, 2016. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/local/2016/06/15/mobile-market-headed-binghamtons-north-side/85938486/>.
- ³ "About Farm Share." VINES. Accessed December 02, 2016. <https://vinesgardens.org/>.
- ⁴ Scott, James. "BU Student Farmers Bring Locally Grown Options to On-campus Dining." Pipe Dream. September 17, 2013. Accessed December 02, 2016. <https://www.bupipedream.com/news/22946/farm-fresh-bu-student-farmers-bring-more-locally-grown-organic-options-for-on-campus-dining/>.
- ⁵ Megan Brockett, "Mobile Market' Headed to Binghamton's North Side."
- ⁶ "BC Transit Bag Limit Rule Affects Binghamton Northsiders." One News Page. October 12, 2016. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.onenewspage.com/video/20161012/5752901/BC-Transit-bag-limit-rule-affects-Binghamton-Northsiders.htm>.
- ⁷ Ver Ploeg, Michele, and Ilya Rahkovsky. "Recent Evidence on the Effects of Food Store Access on Food Choice and Diet Quality." Feature: Food Choices & Health. May 2, 2016. Accessed December 03, 2016. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2016/may/recent-evidence-on-the-effects-of-food-store-access-on-food-choice-and-diet-quality/>.
- ⁸ Steve Howe, "Food Deserts Present Challenges beyond Groceries."
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ McCracken, Vicki A., Jeremy L. Sage, and Rayna A. Sage. "Do Farmers' Markets Ameliorate Food Deserts?" IRP RIDGE Center for National Food and Nutrition Assistance Research, Spring/Summer 2012, 29, no. 1 (November 2011): 21-26. Accessed December 2, 2016. <http://www.irk.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc291f.pdf>
- ¹¹ Corapi, Sarah. "Why It Takes More than a Grocery Store to Eliminate a 'food Desert'." PBS NEWSHOUR. February 3, 2014. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/takes-grocery-store-eliminate-food-desert/>.
- ¹² Michele Ver Ploeg & Ilya Rahkovsky, "Recent Evidence on the Effects of Food Store Access on Food Choice and Diet Quality."
- ¹³ Steve Howe, "Food Deserts Present Challenges beyond Groceries."
- ¹⁴ "Population Estimates, July 1, 2015, (V2015)." Broome County New York QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/36007>.
- ¹⁵ Peixote, Julianne. "47% of Binghamton Children Living in Poverty." WBNG Binghamton. August 25, 2015. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.wbng.com/story/32876626/47-of-binghamton-children-living-in-poverty>.
- ¹⁶ Steve Howe, "Food Deserts Present Challenges beyond Groceries."
- ¹⁷ "What Is START-UP NY?" STARTUPNY. Accessed December 2, 2016. <https://startup.ny.gov/business-growth>.
- ¹⁸ "New York Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund." Empire State Development. Accessed December 2, 2016. <https://esd.ny.gov/businessprograms/healthyfoodhealthycommunities.html>
- ¹⁹ "Healthy Food Financing Initiative." Office of Community Services. Accessed December 02, 2016. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/community-economic-development/healthy-food-financing>.