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Combating Food Deserts: A Civic Engagement Case Study

A great deal has happened since I published my February 2014 health newsletter on food deserts, defined as low-income areas where a significant number of residents are far from a supermarket (i.e., 1+ miles in urban areas and 10+ miles in rural areas). I want to revisit this issue in light of recent American Heart Association (AHA) polling data from North Carolina and proposed legislation introduced in the North Carolina General Assembly. Not least, I want to share a powerful case study on the food desert issue.

According to the AHA poll, which was conducted in November 2014, 90 percent of registered voters see childhood obesity and unhealthy eating as a serious problem, and half view the lack of grocery stores in low- and moderate-income areas as a major problem. Cost was cited as the most significant barrier to healthy food access. This mirrors what we are hearing from North Carolinians about healthy choices in the Emerging Issues Commons.

Regarding possible solutions, 76 percent of poll respondents favor efforts by state and local government to provide training and incentives to encourage owners of corner stores to stock and sell...
more healthy foods and beverages.

Just last month, the Healthy Food Small Retailer/Cornor Store Act was introduced in both the North Carolina House of Representatives (House Bill 250) and Senate (Senate Bill 296). The Act would create a Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund to provide up to $5,000 to independently-owned corner stores and small retailers for refrigeration equipment upgrades and employee training. The goal is to help these stores sell healthy, nutrient-dense fresh fruits and vegetables in food desert zones.

The Power of a Community: Southeast Raleigh as a Case Study

Proposed legislation is just one of the many efforts to eliminate food desserts across the state. Many local communities are engaging around the food desert issue. Southeast Raleigh’s story is a great case study of the many positive impacts of civic engagement at the local level. Here’s a snapshot of the community’s broad engagement effort to attack the food desert challenge:

November 2012: Following the announcement that Southeast Raleigh’s two large grocery stores would close because of unprofitability, local residents form the Committee to Respond to Raleigh Food Deserts.

December 2012: The Committee to Respond to Raleigh Food Deserts and Raleigh-Wake Citizens Association partner to host a community forum at Martin Street Baptist Church. More than 100 people attend, including Rep. Yvonne Holley (D-Wake) and members of the Raleigh City Council and Wake County Commission.

February 2013: NC State University’s Voices Into Action, funded by the US Department of Agriculture, hosts community workshops to improve healthy food and fitness options in Southeast Raleigh. Voices Into Action later provides mini-grants to groups working on the food dessert challenge in the community.

April 2013: Rep. Yvonne Holley introduces House Bill 957, designed to provide tax incentives to small businesses to encourage the delivery and availability of nutrient-rich foods in food desert zones. The bill does not advance.

October 2013: The Legislative Research Commission approves a study commission on Food Desert Zones,
drawing bipartisan support. Majority Leader Rep. Edgar Starnes (R-Caldwell) and Rep. Chris Whitmire (R-Henderson/Polk/Transylvania) serve as co-chairs.

April 2014: The commission releases its report and recommendations, which include: 1) sharing the commission’s findings with the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) during the public comment period of the Food Safety Modernization Act, which the commission feared could intensify the problem of food deserts in North Carolina; 2) encouraging Local Education Agencies to increase school breakfast participation; 3) expanding the NC Farm to School Program; 4) appointing a Joint Legislative Food Desert Zones Study Committee; and 5) passage of legislation to require the NC Department of Health and Human Services to enter a contract to implement SNAP-ED with NC Cooperative Extension and to require reporting to the House Agriculture Committee.

May 2014: Two churches launch Galley Grocery, a Southeast Raleigh food ministry. The ministers are aided by a Whole Foods Market team leader who advises them regarding basic store operations and also helps source shelving, coolers, and furniture.

July 2014: After two years of planning and preparation, Southeast Raleigh’s multi-stakeholder Fertile Ground Food Cooperative begins soliciting members. The cooperative, which aims to boost access to healthy, affordable foods and foster collective ownership, today has 111 members and now hopes to open a store in the next 18 months.
Civic Engagement Matters

These highlights from Southeast Raleigh’s experience suggest the possibilities when community residents, faith leaders, businesses, and policy makers work together around a serious challenge. This story unfolded in our urban, capitol city, but similar efforts are underway in cities and towns of all sizes across North Carolina. People are connecting to more and different members of their communities, to new information, and to resources. Instead of one person leading change, we’re increasingly seeing whole communities of change makers - all doing their part to support one common goal and inspiring an ever-wider circle of civic engagement.

Robin Emmons, executive director of food security nonprofit Sow More Good, at the 2015 Emerging Issues Forum (see sidebar for more details).

Civic engagement matters. That’s the core message of IEI’s new 2015 North Carolina Civic Health Index, which emphasizes the societal and economic benefits that result from higher levels of engagement by citizens, businesses, organizations, and policy makers. As the Southeast Raleigh example demonstrates, great things can happen when key stakeholders work together to continue to strengthen North Carolina’s future.