CHAPTER 10

The Food Trust: Increasing the Availability of Healthy Food

Will Bunch

Editors’ Introduction

Even to those familiar with the situation, the extent and health consequences of obesity in the United States are shocking. More than one out of every three adults in this country is obese, up from one in ten fifty years ago. One in six children is obese, up from one in twenty only thirty years ago. Obesity-related illnesses, particularly diabetes, have risen dramatically, straining the health care system and causing untold personal tragedies to families. Equally important, obesity has become a byproduct of economic and racial disparities: it is far more prevalent in poor communities and among minorities.

Much of the problem, it is clear, has to do with the environment in which people, especially low-income people, live. If playgrounds or streets are dangerous, or after-school programs are not available, children will stay indoors and watch TV. If fresh fruits and vegetables are not easily available, families won’t buy them. Hence, many of the obesity-reduction interventions favored by government and philanthropy focus on changing the environment so that healthier foods become more accessible and physical activity more easily available.1
One of the more promising approaches is bringing supermarkets to poor, inner-cities neighborhoods whose residents have little access to the kinds of healthy foods that supermarkets can easily stock. The Food Trust, which started more than twenty years ago, has been a pioneer in developing the approach in Pennsylvania. Based on The Food Trust’s apparent success in bringing supermarkets and other healthy food outlets to underserved areas, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded several million dollars, beginning in 2006, to expand its activities to eight additional states.

The process may sound simple, but in practice, it is a very difficult one that involves zoning codes, complex financing transactions, and local politics, among other elements. Perhaps most important, it involves developing partnerships between government agencies and the private sector, something that is relatively new for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In the past, the Foundation has worked extensively with government, but it has little experience collaborating with business and has been proceeding cautiously. Its work with The Food Trust is giving the Foundation experience in collaborating with a new, and in today’s world, increasingly important partner.

In this chapter, Will Bunch, a journalist with the Philadelphia Daily News and most recently the author of October 1, 2011: The Battle of the Brooklyn Bridge, tells the story of The Food Trust from its beginning in Philadelphia’s Reading Market to the present day. In addition to telling the story of The Food Trust, Bunch examines one of the current controversies in the field—whether inner cities really are “food deserts” whose residents are deprived of healthy food choices—and how it affects the need for supermarkets in inner cities.

Note

In 1992, Duane Perry, a thirty-seven-year-old graduate of Penn State with a master’s degree in city planning from Harvard University and a track record of working with nonprofits, had just won a battle to save Philadelphia’s landmark Reading Terminal Market, the century-old market located beneath what was once an iconic central rail terminal. Its rows of stalls selling farm-fresh produce, butchered meats, and the day’s catch filled Center City with a rich aroma that was considered as much a part of Philadelphia’s fabric as the Liberty Bell or cheesesteaks. As head of the market’s merchants’ trade association, Perry wanted to pay the city back for its support of his efforts to keep the market open as the new Pennsylvania Convention Center renovated the train shed overhead. And he had a lot of energy to channel into a new cause.

“I thought it would be great if the market did more,” recalls Perry. Around that time he read a series of articles in the Wall Street Journal about urban neighborhoods that were without supermarkets—and the kinds of fresh foods readily available in the Reading Terminal Market. So he established the Reading Terminal Farmers’ Market Trust as a kind of a win-win—creating new customers for the market’s vendors and also providing a valuable public service to the urban poor. “Many of the vendors I worked with were passionate about providing food to people, so this resonated with them,” he says. The initial farmers’ market created by Perry’s venture was at the Tasker Homes, a crime-ridden public housing project southwest of Center City.

Over the next decade, Perry expanded the one-day-a-week farmers’ market to half a dozen locations, but customers made it clear they really wanted the everyday convenience and selection of a full-service supermarket in their neighborhood. “What we were hearing from people,” says Yael Lehmann, the current executive director of The Food Trust who has worked for the nonprofit since 2001, “was, ‘Well, it’s great that you’re here for one day a
week for four hours, but this isn’t really cutting it.” By the early 2000s, Perry’s effort had been rebranded as The Food Trust to reflect a broader mission that included opening new food outlets, especially supermarkets—as both a source of nutrition and also as a driver of job creation in poor neighborhoods.

The Food Trust Develops in Pennsylvania

By the dawn of the new millennium it was clear that the lack of urban grocery options—a trend that had begun in the 1960s and 1970s—had passed a point of no return; one 1998 study revealed that urban neighborhoods now had about 55 percent of the supermarket square footage found in the suburbs, and the Department of Agriculture says that today 23.5 million Americans do not have a supermarket within a mile of their home. Experts had no simple explanation for why this happened. Rather, the death of the urban supermarket seemed to be the result of a perfect storm of negative factors: higher costs for security and job training, inability to sell more lucrative luxury goods, consolidations and bankruptcies in the food industry, and a push for more profitable superstores of forty-five thousand square feet or more, or close to double the typical city supermarket footprint. In an industry that typically thrives on high volume and a low profit margin (just 1 or 2 percent), these negative factors led to a downward spiral in which supermarkets fell into grime-coated disrepair and then shut down altogether.

“For a long time, population declines and the general neglect of urban areas made things harder,” says Jeff Brown, the CEO of Brown’s Super Stores, which operates ShopRite markets throughout the Philadelphia region. “And because the picture looked bleak, nobody invested in the stores.” In 2002, The Food Trust and the United Way invited Brown and other Philadelphia-area supermarket executives to join a Food Marketing Task Force on how to bring stores back to these “food deserts,” as places without access to healthy, affordable food have come to be known.
Brown—a fourth-generation grocer whose family then owned four suburban stores—recalls being shocked at the cynicism expressed by some of the other attendees. “Look, we know this can’t work,” he recalls an executive from a major local chain whispering to him before the first meeting. “Just smile and nod your head.”

Instead, the meeting inspired Brown. Calling the defeatism about the urban food system “practically un-American,” he was moved to take a closer look at a problem he hadn’t given much thought to before that day. First, he paid a visit to a poverty-stricken stretch of Southwest Philadelphia, which is in the flight path of the city’s airport, where the particularly cynical executive’s chain ran an underperforming grocery that was about to close. Despite discouraging reports about gun crime in the parking lot and widespread community distrust, Brown was determined to buy the location and come up with creative answers to its long-standing problems.

He convinced about two hundred residents to attend a community meeting. The meeting was quite heated at times. But the white supermarket CEO won over his predominantly African American future customers by promising to address their concerns—for example, cutting back the rarely used deli and greatly expanding fish offerings. “They had a Starbucks and a sushi bar,” Brown says. “It made no sense.” His idea for the crime problem was completely outside the box; his Southwest Philadelphia ShopRite would sponsor a gun buyback. The first one took about four to five hundred firearms off the streets; then, as Brown expanded his Philadelphia locations, the running total grew exponentially—and his stores have been largely free of serious crime.

Brown had a laundry list of other ideas—stricter gun laws and improved mass transit, for example—but when he presented the list to State Representative Dwight Evans, an influential Philadelphia lawmaker and advocate for urban development, Evans chuckled. “Governments aren’t good at fixing things,” he told Brown. “What we are good at is putting money aside.”
Such discussions fed into the work of the Food Marketing Task Force that Brown served on with forty other key stakeholders. The task force recommended a statewide initiative to fund fresh food retail development. Evans championed the recommendation. The result was a successful legislative push for something that had never been tried elsewhere in the United States: the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, a $120-million public-private partnership. Its innovative formula included $30 million in seed money from the Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development and $90 million through The Reinvestment Fund, which comprised funding from banks including JPMorgan Chase, PNC, and Wachovia; the federal New Market Tax Credit Program; and a variety of other public and private sources. The Food Trust played, and continues to play, a critical role in administering the program by soliciting grocers and other key players to get involved and then prescreening applications to ensure they go to the areas of greatest need.

Authorized by the Pennsylvania legislature in 2004, the Fresh Food Financing Initiative provides grants of up to $250,000 and low-interest loans ranging in size from $25,000 to $7.5 million to reduce start-up costs for supermarket projects and other healthy food outlets in underserved locales across the state—not just in urban areas such as Philadelphia but also in the depressed former steel towns of western Pennsylvania and the remote rural areas in between. The projects selected receive grants and loans that can be used for feasibility or market studies; land assembly, acquisition, and other predevelopment costs; equipment and construction; and start-up expenses such as employee recruitment and training. ShopRite’s Brown, who now travels widely to advise community leaders and supermarket entrepreneurs, said the seed money to reduce start-up costs is often the difference between losing money and making a 1 percent profit.

The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative benefited from its vision and its good fortune—an enthusiastic and powerful political backer in Evans; a ready-made private partner
in the Philadelphia-based Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution; the on-the-ground experience of The Food Trust; and some socially conscious grocers like Brown.

Since its creation nearly a decade ago, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative has funded eighty-eight projects across the state, ranging from small greengrocers to farmers’ markets and from natural-food cooperatives to large, full-service supermarkets. Typical of the way that the program has expanded to include all kinds of healthy food options is a $25,000 grant for refrigeration so that a small Korean grocer in Philadelphia’s Logan section can now sell fresh foods. Officials claim that the funding helped to create or retain more than five thousand jobs while creating 1.67 million square feet of retail space.3

Equally important, the Pennsylvania experience provided The Food Trust with a template that it would seek to apply to other states, as publicity and concern over food deserts grew. The process involves two phases. In the first, The Food Trust uses grant money to create task forces, or food marketing groups, in targeted states. These task forces bring together stakeholders including public health officials and experts, grassroots activists, grocery executives, and political leaders—usually for the first time. The groups meet four or five times over the course of about a year, identify the areas most in need, and develop a plan of action. In most cases, the goal is a second phase similar to the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative—a public-private funding mechanism. The entire process takes several years before markets can be built or renovated.

--- Expanding the Model

In the early 2000s, at the same time as The Food Trust’s Supermarket Campaign was getting started, health policy experts were becoming increasingly alarmed by what Philadelphia activists had long been seeing in their neighborhoods: America was facing
a growing crisis of obesity and obesity-related illnesses, most alarmingly among children. The greatest increases in obesity were found in the same communities that had been largely abandoned by the supermarket industry—those housing the urban and rural poor, especially African Americans.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Support of The Food Trust

In 2003, shortly after Risa Lavizzo-Mourey became its president and CEO, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation made reversing childhood obesity, especially among the poor, one of its strategic priorities. In April 2007, it raised the ante by announcing a commitment of $500 million to reverse the upward trend in childhood obesity by 2015. The program staff at the Foundation developed a wide-ranging strategy to address the environmental factors leading to childhood obesity; increasing access to healthy, affordable food through supermarkets and other outlets was a component of this strategy.

The staff identified The Food Trust as an organization that was ahead of the curve when it came to increasing access to healthy food. Officials at the Foundation were impressed with both the vision of The Food Trust and its methodical approach of bringing together stakeholders. Judith Stavisky, a Foundation program officer at the time, lived and frequently shopped in Philadelphia, including at the Reading Terminal Market; she knew all about The Food Trust’s supermarket efforts and immediately saw the potential for a partnership. “There was a sense of urgency but also a sense that we had to do things thoughtfully,” Stavisky recalls.

In 2004, the Foundation awarded a small grant to The Food Trust to promote healthier food choices in corner stores. Two years later, it made a grant of approximately $400,000 to replicate the Pennsylvania model of supermarket development in Louisiana and Illinois. In 2008, it awarded $475,000 to develop supermarkets in the Foundation’s home state of New Jersey. Even as these efforts were gaining steam, the Foundation increased its support,
awarding The Food Trust an additional $1.7 million in 2009 to develop supermarkets in low-income areas of eight states: Arizona, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. Then in 2012, the Foundation awarded $12 million to The Reinvestment Fund to administer funds for the New Jersey Food Access Initiative. The initiative, initially seeded by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, is supporting the development of supermarkets and other sources of healthy food throughout the Foundation’s home state, with The Food Trust playing a key role.

**New York State’s Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund**

In New York State, The Food Trust partnered with the Low Income Investment Fund, Goldman Sachs, and others in establishing a $30 million fund for supermarket development. The Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund made it possible to develop supermarkets in communities with little access to healthy food, be they in the inner city or in the countryside. Just fifty miles north of New York City, for example, the small, leafy village of Highland Falls—wedged between steep mountains and a majestic bend in the Hudson River and abutting the historic gates of the United States Military Academy at West Point—is not a place that you would think of as a desert in any traditional use of the word. But when a moderately sized, rundown Key Food supermarket finally closed in 2009, Highland Falls joined the growing list of American food deserts.

For more than two years, residents with cars planned out the trek “over the mountain”—up steep winding roads to a large Walmart some eleven miles away, while village officials scrambled to offer van services to a large community of senior citizens. The only local food options were a small deli or the McDonald’s and pizza joint near the entrance to the military academy. It is no wonder, then, that the October 2011 grand opening of the MyTown Marketplace was welcomed in Highland Falls not so much as just another store but as an oasis.
Albert Rodriguez, a veteran of the large food markets in the Bronx who had moved to the Hudson Valley with his wife, Lisa Berrios, a decade earlier, saw an opportunity at the sixteen-thousand-square-foot market that the larger chains had missed. They decided to buy it. Now the couple practically lives inside the brightly lit, completely overhauled store — there’s a big couch in the office. Its large wooden bins, hand-built by Rodriguez and a friend, now teem with produce including apples from nearby farms. But the energetic couple never could have pulled off the expensive overhaul of the store without the start-up financing from the New York Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund.

Their vision for Highland Falls had encountered deep skepticism from banks, food wholesalers, and others. “When you’re out of the business, nobody wants to do anything with you,” Rodriguez says. After the couple learned of New York’s new financing fund, they quickly applied and theirs was the first project approved. It was the public-private partnership that “made it happen,” Rodriguez says. Besides giving Rodriguez and Berrios access to low-interest loan financing, the grant money allowed them to refurbish the store, which now glistens with bright lighting, sleek shelves, and even a freshly paved parking lot.

Berrios is practically giddy as she shows off an entire aisle devoted to gluten-free foods or the shiny walls that her husband put up, but nothing gives her more pride than the large produce corner near the front of the store. “The old store didn’t have any of these things . . . ginger, shallots, dried red chili peppers, tarragon,” she says. “Everything just moves,” her husband adds, holding up variety packages of vegetables sliced for grilling. “We don’t have much waste at all. Packages like these, I can’t keep them on the shelf.”

**The U.S. Government’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative**

Childhood obesity has become a front-burner national issue, boosted by the decision of First Lady Michelle Obama to make it
her signature issue. Mrs. Obama invited ShopRite’s Jeff Brown as one of her guests at the 2010 State of the Union address. In July 2011, the White House announced that leading retailers such as Walgreens, Walmart, and SuperValu had agreed to open at least 1,500 new stores in food deserts, home to as many as 9.5 million Americans.

In 2011, the federal government set out to implement a nationwide program patterned closely after The Food Trust’s program in Pennsylvania. The White House’s goal, which has been proposed in the last three budget cycles and is backed by proposed legislation in Congress, would create a Healthy Food Financing Initiative with roughly $285 million (in the latest version) to be administered by the Treasury Department, the Health and Human Services Department, and the Agriculture Department. That more ambitious plan has faltered on Capitol Hill, particularly after fiscal conservatism took root in the 2010 elections.

But the administration has been able to carve out smaller amounts to launch the Healthy Food Financing Initiative. In the fall of 2011, twenty-eight community-development programs received $35 million in grants from federal agencies for supermarkets and other healthy food projects. The administration’s most recent plan takes a different approach, with $250 million in healthy food financing through the already existing New Markets Tax Credit Program. The various proposals in Washington offer the possibility of a major expansion in the type of program pioneered by The Food Trust.

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**Implementing the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-Funded Supermarket Campaign**

The Food Trust’s campaign to develop supermarkets in eight states, which is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, began operating in 2010. Brian Lang, who directs the Supermarket Campaign, says that in trying to develop supermarkets in these states through the task force process, the campaign has run into a
variety of hurdles. “For every state, there are a few issues,” he notes. In a progressive, activist state such as Minnesota, for example, supermarket development must compete with a slew of other legislative priorities. In conservative states, the backlash that played out in the 2010 midterm elections makes any role for government-involved, taxpayer-funded solutions politically problematic. Here is how the project is playing out in a sampling of states.

Maryland

From the rough-hewn streets of Baltimore to the rural rolling hills on the state’s western edge, officials have mapped a number of areas where statistics show a high rate of obesity and a paucity of supermarkets. One is a desolate neighborhood of Baltimore called Cherry Hill, where residents have little reason to hope that a modern supermarket like the Hudson Valley’s MyTown will locate there any time in the near future.

Perched on a hilltop that overlooks Baltimore’s skyscrapers but is geographically cut off by the Inner Harbor and an elevated stretch of I-95, Cherry Hill has not had a grocery store in years. As a result, the Baltimore City Health Department chose it as one of six locations for its online virtual supermarket, or Baltimarket. Here, two young staffers show up with a laptop once a week for three hours, taking grocery orders that will be forwarded to Santoni’s, a popular supermarket several miles away; the orders will be delivered to Cherry Hill’s public library the following day.

On this particular afternoon, Laura Fox, Baltimarket’s coordinator, arrives at the library at 12:30. Spreading a bright red-and-white plastic cloth over a front table, she sets out today’s sample—a cabbage salad spiked with raisins and pineapple—in small plastic cups. Soon Fox is joined by one of the regulars, Betty Bailey—“Miss Betty,” as Fox calls her. Now sixty-five, Bailey lives around the corner, alone and unemployed since she lost a job as a cashier three years ago. Before she found out about the Baltimarket program, Bailey had to call her daughter in suburban
Glen Burnie for a ride to a supermarket. Now she comes in every two weeks and orders roughly $40 worth of groceries each time, roughly equal to how much she receives in food stamps. Spurred on by a $10 discount for healthy items on the initial order, Bailey says she finds herself more likely to order fruits than before, especially blueberries. “My great-grandson likes to reach over and pick them up while I’m eating them,” she says, laughing. “He’s eating them faster than I am and he’s not even two, so he’s learning how to eat healthy.”

Elsewhere in Maryland, Larry Hentz, a business development specialist in the Prince George’s County Economic Development Corporation and a key member of the Maryland supermarket task force, admits he stumbled onto the issue when a Safeway store serving Hillcrest Heights, a middle-class, predominantly black Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., abruptly announced it was shutting down in thirty days. Safeway officials told Hentz the store had been losing money for a decade and that the chain had found it impossible to make a profit on the East Coast unless a store is at least forty-five thousand square feet, or nearly double the footprint in Hillcrest Heights. Hentz called a meeting of community residents. “There was a lot of anger,” he says. “People said, ‘Where am I going to get my essentials?’” That’s when Hentz realized that a supermarket was more vital to the everyday life of a neighborhood than any other development project he’d worked on before.

After that, he worked with local churches to launch a van service to the nearest open supermarket several miles away while he scoured the eastern seaboard for a successful urban supermarket company looking to expand. Hentz learned that the owner of Evergreen Supermarket had been eyeing the D.C. region, hoping to develop a new chain of small grocery stores that would complement the county’s larger supermarkets. Hentz promised the owner that he could streamline the elaborate approval process to allow for an opening at Thanksgiving and the more profitable holiday season, and he devoted much of his workday toward achieving
that target. The Evergreen Supermarket in Hillcrest Heights opened on November 23, 2011—the day before Thanksgiving.

**Arizona**

In Arizona, The Food Trust and its allies decided the political situation was too toxic to move forward with the task force process. “Folks whom we could usually count on to be with us in an advocacy campaign are busy trying to put out other fires,” says The Food Trust’s Lang. “Like trying to get funding restored for children’s health insurance.” So The Food Trust elected to work with a supermarket company called Bashas’, which operates grocery stores on Indian reservations in Arizona. Officials agreed that the fastest and simplest way to increase healthy eating among rural Native Americans is to increase offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables and lower-calorie products in Bashas’ stores. The healthier product lines will be aggressively marketed through in-store marketing such as colorful displays, and the impact on diet and health will be compared to outcomes at five control stores.

**Mississippi**

Mississippi poses unusual challenges. For one thing, the state lacks a grocer’s trade association, which in most other states has been a key player in The Food Trust’s efforts. Perhaps even more important, the very character of the food-access problem is different in Mississippi—one of America’s poorest states, where poverty in rural communities is widespread. According to Sandra Shelson of The Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi and one of the leaders of the state’s task force effort, while their urban counterparts often buy food in corner stores or bodegas, Mississippi’s rural poor typically shop instead in convenience stores. “They are these little hole-in-the-wall places where a lot of people go to get their food, but the prices are higher,” says Shelson, lamenting that the aisles of these small stores are typically lined
with every manner of sugary drinks and fatty foods. Meanwhile, there is usually a counter where such high-fat staples as fried chicken and potato logs are served to customers with limited public-assistance budgets.

The Mississippi task force also faces a problem with density, Shelson says. “Many of these isolated communities are impractical sites for a large well-stocked supermarket.” Much of the group’s discussion, therefore, has focused on how farmers’ markets could augment the convenience-store diet while tapping into the agricultural bounty of a crop-producing state.

Shelson also notes—as have Supermarket Campaign task force members in other states—that the experience of bringing together public health officials with grocers and food wholesalers has been a valuable learning experience for everyone involved. Shelson is optimistic that the task force’s recommendations and its subsequent promotion of them will result in public backing for new markets, even in an era of Tea Party–inspired fiscal conservatism. The idea would be to play up job creation, since economic development is one role for government that Mississippians have continued to support. “We have to be very strategic. The public health perspective is not where a lot of people are coming from,” Shelson says.

**Tennessee**

“It’s not in the portfolio of the health department to be speaking about small business development,” says Tennessee task force member Kenneth Robinson, a physician and public health policy adviser to the mayor of Shelby County, which includes Memphis. Speaking as the Tennessee Grocery Access Task Force was nearing completion of its work, Robinson says it was a new experience bridging public health worries with the issues and concerns of a for-profit industry.

He believes that the discussions between the competing stakeholders may lead to some innovative solutions. For example,
grocery representatives told the task force that it is difficult to stock fresh produce because of the uneven demand created when so much benefit money is distributed around the first of the month. The group may recommend that Tennessee stagger payments so that supermarkets can expect a more dependable stream of customers. Robinson says that the task force is also looking at how to encourage food stamp (now known as SNAP) clients to use their benefits to purchase fruits and vegetables.

**Boston, Massachusetts**

Ronn Garry, one of the third-generation owners of Tropical Foods in Boston’s impoverished Roxbury section, has an ambitious plan to expand the bustling market that his grandfather, a political refugee who fled Fidel Castro’s Cuba, started in 1974 as a small corner shop called “El Platanero,” or “The Banana Man.” But Garry’s proposal to build a modern twenty-thousand-square-foot market on two acres in what is now the dusty parking lot of his current property has been held up by bureaucratic red tape for close to six years. “Unless you’re one of the big guys, the city doesn’t really help you out,” he says. Because of his concerns, Garry was an enthusiastic participant in the Massachusetts task force that was established through the Supermarket Campaign.

Indeed, Tropical Foods seems to be bursting at the seams on a spring morning early in the month when many in Roxbury have received their benefit payments. Lines at the cashiers run to ten-deep. Other customers circle past bright Caribbean-themed murals on their way to the store’s fresh produce department, which is not large but is well stocked with vegetables that are popular with shoppers from the islands or Latin America—a rarity at chain supermarkets. “Malanga, malanga, malanga,” one Spanish-speaking customer mutters with delight as she passes a bin overflowing with the brown shaggy root that is a staple in places like Cuba and Puerto Rico. “We reflect the community that we serve,” Garry says proudly.
Despite Tropical Foods’ expansion woes, the store still offers Roxbury residents substantially more square feet of supermarket than exists in the urban core of Springfield, western Massachusetts’ largest city. That’s why activist Frank Robinson, from Partners for a Healthier Community, raced to Boston on a recent afternoon to attend the final meeting of the state task force. Hoping that the momentum from the Supermarket Campaign and more governmental support would lead to the supermarket he’s been promoting for over five years, “I think the task force has raised awareness around the issue. Robinson says, It’s created the beginning of mobilization.”

For roughly two hours, Robinson, Garry, and about thirty others from an array of community and food-industry groups, plus state government aides—most of them strangers to one another little more than a year earlier—sat in a plush wood-paneled conference room at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and spoke of a shared vision for more supermarkets and healthier residents. The draft of the task force’s final report contained a number of recommendations, including a commitment to partnerships for workforce training, affordable transit options, and giving priority to supermarkets and other healthy food stores in the urban planning process. But the most important goal is also the one that will be the hardest to attain: creating a Fresh Food Financing Fund modeled after the public-private partnerships in Pennsylvania and New York. As the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s grant money wound down in 2012, most of the other task forces created through The Food Trust were expected to call for similar funding mechanisms.

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**Encountering—and Countering—Skepticism**

In recent years, with the high-profile push from the federal government embracing the supermarket-development cause pioneered by The Food Trust, skeptics have emerged in the scientific and public health communities. They note that although many of the
urban neighborhoods targeted by programs like the Supermarket Campaign may be “deserts” when it comes to affordable fruits and vegetables, they are also “food swamps” for “takeouts”—heavy on fast-food outlets, snack-laden corner stores, and takeout foods like fried chicken and burgers. These critics cite evidence that low-income Americans will continue to seek out foods that are high in fat and sugar—because less healthy, processed foods cost less and are heavily marketed by the food industry, and also because our bodies are genetically programmed to crave foods that are no longer good for us.

Advocacy groups like The Food Trust counter that an overwhelming preponderance of the research that has been done over two decades does suggest a strong link between access to a supermarket and better health outcomes. “We’ve collected one hundred thirty-two studies from the last twenty years,” says the Food Trust’s Yael Lehmann, “and every one shows a positive impact.” She cites the studies of Akihiko Michimi as examples.

Michimi, an assistant professor at Western Kentucky University, studies relationships between geography and public health. Using extensive data on obesity and eating habits compiled from telephone surveys of U.S. citizens conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Michimi and coresearcher Michael Wimberly initially noted a significant correlation between where people lived and their risk for obesity. They found a generally higher risk for obesity in rural areas, especially in the Midwest and South. Michimi and Wimberly decided to delve into the data to factor in the proximity to a large supermarket. What the researchers found, according to a 2010 report, was somewhat surprising: distance to a supermarket did not affect rural obesity rates, but made a difference in urban areas.

“Distance to a supermarket really matters in the urban areas,” Michimi says. He notes that transportation could be a factor, as residents of an urban food desert are less likely to own a car than their rural counterparts. “If you have enough income, you could still drive a couple of miles to the supermarket, but poor people in
urban areas don’t have this option.” Still, Michimi admits there’s a need for much more research into the complicated relationship between diet, supermarket access, and socioeconomic factors.

That is the chicken-or-egg conundrum. Do people fail to eat fruits and vegetables because there are no supermarkets nearby? Or are there no supermarkets nearby because people who live in urban food deserts prefer to eat processed food and fast food because it is cheaper, tastes better, or is more appealing? The latter alternative offers profit-driven grocery stores little incentive to set up shop.

In the spring of 2012, with the national obesity crisis in the news and with Food Trust-led task forces working to create funding mechanisms and governmental support for new supermarkets, two academic studies made news by suggesting that the link between grocery access and a healthy diet was at best overstated and possibly nonexistent. Because the concept of “food deserts” had become so entrenched in the public health conversation, these contrarian reports hit the front page of The New York Times, ensuring national controversy.5

One paper, based on research from the RAND Corporation and published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine in February 2012, analyzed self-reported data on weight, height, and diet from roughly thirteen thousand California schoolchildren, and correlated the children’s addresses with nearby supermarkets and other food outlets.6 One of the researchers, Roland Sturm, reported he could find no connection between childhood obesity and proximity to a market.

Meanwhile, Helen Lee, a researcher at the Public Policy Institute of California, also used a large pool of data—from a national survey of nearly eight thousand children—along with mapping information about the location and size of food outlets. Lee reported that while lower-income neighborhoods had more fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, as expected, they also had a higher density of supermarkets and other large food outlets than more affluent zip codes did.
Both researchers told the *Times* that the evidence suggests that lack of access to healthy food is not a primary cause of obesity. Sturm told the newspaper that poor urban neighborhoods often have an array of food outlets including fast-food restaurants and takeouts, and should be called food swamps—not food deserts. He said that his study did not find a correlation between where children lived, nearby food outlets, and obesity.

Barry Popkin, a professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina, is a leading skeptic when it comes to blaming obesity on lack of access to fruits and vegetables. He chaired an Institute of Medicine and National Research Council committee that reviewed the available research on food access and community health, including several studies from the United Kingdom. The National Academy of Sciences panel concluded that “food retail is only one component of the total food environment that affects how people eat” and that evidence that a supermarket in the neighborhood leads to healthier eating is lacking. Popkin says that poor urban residents typically find that the best produce is out of their price range. Furthermore, they have a fundamental lack of knowledge about how to prepare healthy meals or even what comprises a beneficial diet. He also believes the current obesity crisis is largely a creation of human beings’ calorie-craving biology and rapid advances in food-industry technology. “It takes a lot to change a diet,” Popkin says. “It isn’t just having carrots in the front of a store.”

The backlash led, not surprisingly, to a strong response from advocates for supermarket access. For one thing, experts noted that in attempting to develop large data pools, the contrarian researchers had used questionable methodology. Allison Karpyn, director of research and evaluation for The Food Trust, questions the reliability of self-reporting by teenagers about their diet, which was at the core of the RAND study. She also notes that the Public Policy Institute of California study had started out with a much larger group of kids—roughly twenty thousand (before whittling the sample down to eight thousand kids)—and that children who
The Food Trust stayed in one location and were included in the final study tended to come from higher socioeconomic households. That could skew the findings.

But the most significant criticism of the research of the supermarket skeptics is that they are attacking a “straw man,” because groups such as The Food Trust have never stated that access to healthy food alone was enough to change health outcomes in poor or isolated communities. “Supermarkets are part—and only part—of the solution to a deeply rooted and complex problem,” says Jamie Bussel, the program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation who oversees the Foundation’s grants to The Food Trust. “That’s why the Foundation has taken a broad approach to reducing childhood obesity and why The Food Trust supports bodegas and small grocery stores as well as supermarkets and works in rural as well as urban areas.” Chicago-based researcher Mari Gallagher, whose work helped popularize the term “food desert,” wrote, “To my knowledge, no one of any credibility has ever suggested that access was the entire solution or that anything involving the complicated relationship between diet and health is simple.”

Experts like The Food Trust’s Karpyn say another problem is that most skeptics’ research takes a secondhand approach of mapping public health and store locations and inferring linkages from large samples of data. “I’m as frustrated as anyone that we don’t have better studies,” says Karpyn.

The Food Trust and its supporters are awaiting the results of firsthand studies directly addressing the question of whether and how the arrival of a well-stocked supermarket affects eating habits and health. The researchers hope to gain significantly more knowledge when two studies in particular, both taking place in The Food Trust’s home state of Pennsylvania, are completed.

The first is a RAND study that involves surveys conducted before and after a supermarket opens in an urban, low-income neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The opening is currently scheduled for spring 2013. An almost identical study is partially completed
in Philadelphia, where a Penn State researcher designed a project around the reopening of a supermarket in North Philadelphia’s Progress Plaza, an iconic development with roots in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Both studies involve extensive research on neighborhood residents, their eating habits, and their health about six to nine months before and after the opening of the store.

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**Waging Battle One Kale Salad at a Time**

When policy experts look at the frontlines of the urban obesity war, they see well-stocked supermarkets as one of many battles. They look at activists like Joyce Smith, the executive director of Operation ReachOut Southwest in Baltimore. When Smith moved back into Southwest Baltimore about two decades ago, her native neighborhood was so overtaken by abandoned factories, boarded-up homes, drug-dealing, and gun violence that it would become the setting for David Simon’s 1997 book *The Corner*, which in turn would inspire an HBO mini-series. In real life, The Corner at Fayette and Monroe is now largely cleaned up, and Smith realizes that more of her neighbors are dying from burgers than from bullets. Her current crusade for healthy eating was inspired by 2008 data from the Baltimore City Health Department, which revealed that the life expectancy of residents of Smith’s corner of the city is twenty years shorter than that of residents of an upscale neighborhood called Roland Park.

“I noticed that people were eating to address hunger,” says Smith, speaking at her office inside a Southwest Baltimore community center. “They weren’t eating to address health.” So when a new Food Depot, one of just two supermarkets owned and operated by a longtime Baltimore food wholesaler, opened two years ago in an abandoned location in the nearby Westside Shopping Center, Smith worked with local groups like the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University to make the retailer responsive to the community. The store’s owner has launched a shuttle bus service and led “Shopping Matters” tours
to teach residents skills like finding the best price for produce or identifying whole-grain breads. Smith also continues to operate a small farmers’ market at the MARC rail station in West Baltimore on Saturday afternoons. That gives Southwest Baltimore residents another healthy food option.

It also gives the talkative grandmother a chance to do what she does best: evangelize for a healthier lifestyle. Smith says that access to fruits and vegetables means more when urban residents understand the consequences of their food choices. She asks her neighbors if they have a relative with diabetes or who died young of a heart attack, and she tries to explain it was probably a consequence of what they ate. In a world where celebrations are often equated with a bucket of fried chicken, Smith raises eyebrows by bringing fresh greens, or water instead of soda. “I remember I made a kale salad at one of our celebrations and this lady came up and said, ‘Miss Smith, the kale is cold!’ I said, ‘It’s a kale salad; it’s supposed to be cold.’ She’d never seen a kale salad.”

Smith knows instinctively what many public health experts have come to realize over the years: U.S. communities need markets with fresh produce and whole-wheat bread, but that is just one piece of the puzzle, along with education, more effective anti-poverty programs, and other solutions. “It has to be multiple pronged,” Smith says. “Having access is part of it, but it’s also changing habits.” It’s a battle she wages one kale salad at a time.

Notes


