

# Healthy Food Retail



## Background

### Definition

Healthy food retail supports access to fresh food purveyors, including grocery stores, farmers markets, and healthy corner stores. Healthy food retail includes incentives for grocery development in underserved areas, actions to support farmers markets, and policies and programs to support fresh food at corner stores and other, smaller outlets.

Jurisdictions can establish goals and policies that support healthy food retail, along with taking action and developing programs that can encourage more choices at the neighborhood scale. Policy goals can focus on establishing land use policies that explicitly support healthy food access or encouraging healthy food purveyors, such as grocery stores and farmers markets, to locate close to housing and transit facilities.

### Health, equity and sustainability considerations

Healthy food options are limited in some low-income communities. In many communities, unhealthy food is pervasive and supermarkets and other healthy food purveyors are scarce. Healthy food retail needs to be accessible in terms of cultural relevance, cost and location. Community members also need to feel welcome at healthy food retail stores. A [2014 study](#) of food access in the Delridge neighborhood of Seattle found that many low-income residents felt unwelcome in higher-income markets, regardless of cost and location.

Residents' fruit and vegetable consumption increased **32%** in census tracts with a newly opened full-service grocery store.

In a [2008 report](#), Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity outlines a few of the health, equity, and community sustainability policy outcomes of meeting the demand for grocery stores in areas where they do not exist.

"Bringing supermarkets to low-income areas and helping smaller groceries expand their stock of healthy and affordable items, is a win-win situation for communities and residents who gain:

- Access to healthy foods
- Increased potential to reduce obesity through healthy eating
- New jobs
- Increased revenue
- Increased potential for commercial revitalization
- Capacity-building of community organizations and coalitions"

## Program and Policy Examples

### Program examples

Noted below are a variety of ways to improve community food access.

*Grocery.* The [NYC FRESH program](#) (Food Retail Expansion to Support Health) provides a national example of a grocery store incentive program with various development, zoning and other incentives. Development incentives for locating new food retail in certain neighborhoods include real estate tax reductions, sales tax exemptions, and property tax deferral. Zoning incentives include additional development rights, parking requirement reductions, and larger allowed stores in certain districts. Other program incentives include the New York Healthy Food & Healthy Community Fund and NYSERDA Energy Efficiency Benefits.

In addition to providing access to healthy, fresh food, grocery stores' hiring and sourcing practices can benefit a community. Whole Foods Market, a national chain grocer, opened a store in Detroit in 2013. To ensure that the market benefited as many community members as possible, the Equitable Detroit Coalition worked with Whole Foods Market staff to negotiate a [Community Benefits Agreement](#). The agreement outlines local hiring and food sourcing practices, and programs to make the store economically and culturally relevant to Detroit residents.

Mobile grocery stores are another innovative approach to increase access to healthy food in underserved communities. Mobile grocery stores are most commonly temperature-controlled trucks that bring healthy, affordable food to communities with limited mobility, including low-income and aging residents. Several cities have passed [regulations allowing mobile grocery stores](#) to sell food from the street, including Minneapolis, Minnesota.

*Farmers markets.* The City of Seattle encourages shopping at farmers markets through the [Fresh Bucks program](#), which incentivizes purchase of fresh produce by doubling the value of SNAP (food stamps) transactions up to \$10. The City of Seattle piloted the Fresh Bucks program, in partnership with the Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance, in 2012 with funding from JPMorgan Chase and the Seattle Foundation. With continued funding from JPMorgan Chase and the Seattle Foundation, in addition to City General Fund support, the program expanded in 2013 from seven to 15 Seattle markets (all markets in Seattle). The program offers the benefits of bringing more shoppers to neighborhood farmers markets, as well as promoting healthy food and increasing food access for low-income shoppers.

*Healthy corner stores.* In 2012, Los Angeles County created the [Healthy Corner Store Conversion Program](#), a private-public partnership that works to bring nutritious and fresh foods to communities that lack it. The program is administered by NCB Capital Impact in conjunction with the California FreshWorks Fund. The fund received almost \$250 million in capital from industry, nonprofit, and government partners to finance new and upgrade existing grocery and corner stores in underserved communities.

### **Performance evaluation**

Distance-based measures of food access are common ways to assess performance. Equity kNOW, a collaboration between Public Health—Seattle & King County and Futurewise, has created a countywide map of access to grocery stores and farmers markets. King County has resources available that measure food access, available at [King County AIMs High](#). USDA also maintains the [Food Access Research Atlas](#). Programs to encourage more healthy food outlets could also track number of new outlets taking advantage of incentives or change in the number of outlets overall. The [City of Seattle Food Action Plan](#) (2012) is

currently monitoring and releasing annual reports on a variety of access measures including distance and food diverted from the waste stream.

Resources are available to help local jurisdictions evaluate food access in their communities and potentially establish quantifiable measures to track changes. Several jurisdictions have found the Retail Food Environment Index (RFEI) to be a useful indicator of the availability of healthy and unhealthy retail. The RFEI is calculated by dividing the total number of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores by the total number of supermarkets and produce vendors. More information and state-by-state maps of the Retail Food Environment Index are available [online](#).

## Implementation

### Developing policy language

Jurisdictions can establish goals and policies that support healthy food retail, along with developing programs that can encourage more choices at the neighborhood scale. Policy language can focus on establishing land use policies that explicitly support healthy food access or encouraging healthy food purveyors, such as grocery stores and farmers markets, to locate near housing and transit. Some jurisdictions have developed numeric goals to achieve equitable food access.

Examples:

Promote food security and public health by encouraging locally-based food production, distribution, and choice through the support of home and community gardens, farmers or public markets, and other small-scale, collaborative initiatives. (*City of Edmonds Comprehensive Plan - Community Sustainability Element, Goal F.3*)

The City should consider access to food in the context of downtown land use decisions and support the creation of a permanent farmer's market as a catalyst project (2.1C.1). (*City of Tacoma Comprehensive Plan – Downtown Element, Policy 2.3E.B*)

Provide opportunities for shops, services, recreation, and access to healthy food sources within walking or bicycling distance of homes, work places, and other gathering places. (*City of Redmond*)

Bring 75% of Philadelphians within a 10-minute walk of healthy food. (*City of Philadelphia*)

Ensure that more than 75 percent of the households in the city live within a half-mile of a full-service grocery store, fresh produce market, an ethnic market, or a convenience store that stocks fresh produce. (*City of Richmond, CA*)

To implement programs promoting availability of healthy food, an early step is defining eligibility for programs. If offering incentives to locate in underserved neighborhoods, it is important to define those locations and the types of operations eligible for incentives. It is also critical to understand the economic development and financing strategies available as they vary by project type and local ordinances and development regulations.

*Grocery.* ChangeLab Solutions has a 2009 publication, [Getting to Grocery](#), which helps community leaders identify and overcome challenges to attracting grocery stores to underserved communities. The guide also explores several economic development proposals, with guidance for putting together an incentive package. Grocery incentive programs have been critiqued for providing tax preferences for grocery chains. Jurisdictions should holistically consider their overall objectives in designing a program to attract grocery stores.

Policylink's 2007 resource guide, [Coordinated Grocery Store Attraction Strategies](#), provides extensive documentation on ten steps to attract grocery retail to underserved communities. Components of strategies include stakeholder identification and outreach, financing and incentive opportunities, market analysis, and community marketing.

*Farmers markets.* Jurisdictions have adopted a variety of strategies to support location of farmers markets in their communities. Farmers markets are generally not significantly profitable for the organizations that run them, so additional incentives are helpful to locate and sustain farmers markets. Beyond location of markets, the cost of food at farmers markets can be a barrier for some shoppers. Programs to incentivize or offset the cost for shopping at farmers markets can be beneficial for both markets and low-income shoppers.

- Identify farmers markets as allowable uses in specific zones, including a range of market sizes.
- Provide clear guidance on how markets can locate on public land and start in your community.
- Provide financial support or sponsorship of markets.
- Support farmers market food assistance programs.
- Partner on developing permanent space for markets.

Developing marketing and community support to ensure a customer base at farmers markets can be an important component for their success. See the [Food Policy Blueprint on Farmers Markets](#) for additional detail and local examples for some of the strategies.

*Healthy corner stores.* Healthy corner stores have launched in several cities. The [Healthy Corner Store Network](#) provides examples of successful stores. The Los Angeles Food Policy Council's 2012 report [Creating Healthy Corner Stores](#) provides information on the best practices and necessary factors to convert corner stores to sell fresh fruits and vegetables.

Healthy corner stores are promising programs for healthy food access, but have had mixed success in their execution. Achieving long-term sustainability for these programs is an important factor to consider when launching a program – several resources are available to help develop a successful program.

#### **Considerations for local implementation**

There are a number of equity considerations for healthy food retail programs including location and access, food prices, and sustainable business models. There are multiple strategies to address healthy food access. It is imperative to select a strategy that best fits with the needs and sentiments of the jurisdiction. Entering the policy development process with a clear understanding of current conditions will help to guide the selection of a strategy.

Action by jurisdictions can take other forms. Beyond bringing healthy foods to underserved communities, jurisdictions may also consider transportation strategies that can be employed to support access to healthy food. These can include financing shuttles to grocery stores and encouraging transit planning or transportation project prioritization that considers food access.

Incentivizing healthy food retail is just one approach to increase access to fresh food. Education opportunities, skill sharing, and community events can also serve as tools to promote healthy eating habits.

For healthy corner store projects, Urban Food Link has developed a [tip sheet](#) for development of a successful project. Two other local resources include the [Delridge Healthy Corner Store Project: A Toolkit for Community Organizers and Store Owners \(July 2009\)](#) and [Healthy Foods Here: Recommendations for Future Programming](#).

Local jurisdictions can also use zoning to reduce the density of fast food restaurants in certain areas, including the restriction of fast food restaurants being constructed within a certain radius of schools. A [2009 study](#) on the relationship between fast-food restaurants near schools and obesity among middle and high school students in California found that exposure to poor-quality food environments has important effects on adolescent eating patterns and weight. The study recommends policy interventions limiting the proximity of fast-food restaurants to schools, which could help reduce adolescent obesity. ChangeLab Solutions' [Model Healthy Food Zone Ordinance](#) (2013) provides more information on model policy language and best practices for developing and implementing new zoning ordinances.

### **Challenges to implementation**

Grocery, farmers markets, and healthy corner stores all face different challenges to implementation. Stimulating private development is challenging, and an incentive program may not bring the intended results.

*Grocery.* The United States Department of Agriculture identifies several challenges to improving food access in their report [From Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences](#). These challenges include local regulatory approval processes, assembling land, environmental remediation, higher operating costs in urban areas, lower traffic flow and less space for parking, and local politics, where officials and groups may have competing goals for development.

*Farmers markets.* The business models and economics of farmers markets require unique circumstances for market viability. A farmers market requires a fixed location with good access, high visibility, committed vendors and shoppers, and a skilled operator, among other qualities, to succeed. King County profiles some challenges faced by local farmers markets in its [King County Farmers Market Report](#).

*Healthy corner stores.* Sustaining healthy corner stores can prove difficult, as smaller stores do not have the purchasing power of grocery stores, and cannot pass cost savings along to consumers. Additionally, stock turnover may not be fast enough or stores may be unequipped to handle perishable food items.

Food access has multiple components, and distance to healthy food outlets is just one factor. Access to culturally appropriate foods, food prices and quality also impact choices, so developing easier-to-reach locations is only one element of food access.

## Resources

Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) Healthy Foods Here's [GIS Baseline Assessment of the Food Retail Environment for Healthy Foods Here, a CPPW-funded Project in King County, Washington](#) (2010)

Centers for Disease Prevention and Control's [State Initiatives Supporting Healthier Food Retail: An Overview of the National Landscape](#)

[Healthy Corner Stores Network](#) (2013)

Healthy Food Access Portal's [Grocery Stores Resources](#) (2014)

King County: [Community Health Indicators](#) (2010)

Project for Public Spaces' [Farmers Markets as a Strategy to Improve Access to Healthy Food for Low-Income Families and Communities](#)

Seattle Women's Commission's [Seattle Women and Food Access](#) (2014)

UW Northwest Center for Livable Communities' [Food Access Policy and Planning Guide](#) (2011)

Washington State Department of Health's [Growing Nourishing Food Systems: A Guide for Local Governments to Improve Healthy Eating in Washington State](#) (2012)

Washington State Farmers Market Association's [Resource Center](#) (2014)