

Access Denied

An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts To
Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food



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Executive Summary

Most Americans believe that access to safe, nutritious and affordable food is a basic human right and that, in this land of agricultural abundance, no one should be hungry or unsure of their next meal.

In 1991 more than 30 million Americans reported that they do not always have enough to eat. The same study found more than 1.23 million hungry children in Texas alone¹. These people are hungry despite the growth of government and private food assistance programs designed to help them. Ten years of anti-hunger activism have created many effective emergency food programs, but millions of families remain dependent on those programs and are not able to ensure that their children will receive a consistently nutritious diet.

This study describes a neighborhood food system and shows how it fails to meet community needs. Why do hard-working families regularly depend on government food assistance? Why do some families participating in food assistance programs still go hungry? How have charitable food donations become such a crucial part of survival for so many Americans? The answers to these questions reveal a loss of food security in our city and offer solutions to help low-income consumers become more self-sufficient for food.

To put food on the table, families must have resources at their disposal that most of us take for granted: sufficient income, transportation, a good food store that is convenient, knowledge about how to buy and prepare the foods that they want to eat and that are nutritious, and time to shop and cook. In East Austin, and in low-income communities like it across the country, many families do not have these resources, with the result that they are often hungry and not secure about their prospects for putting food on the table.

The concept of community *food security* provides a framework for understanding the causes of hunger and for identifying the changes necessary to prevent their occurrence. While hunger defines an individual's unfulfilled needs, food security is a prevention-oriented measure involving access to an acceptable, nutritious diet through local, non-emergency sources.

An analysis of the food system of East Austin reflects the characteristics of a community in which access to nutritious, affordable food is difficult for many residents. For them, the Eastside does not offer food security.

- There are just two supermarkets in East Austin. Both are smaller, and one is more expensive, than similar stores in other parts of town.
- Many low-income shoppers rely on expensive corner convenience stores for food when they cannot get to a supermarket.
- Securing transportation to food stores is often difficult, and many residents must take taxis to buy food at the supermarket.
- There are 38 convenience stores on the Eastside, but only five stock the ingredients for a balanced meal. While all the stores stock alcohol, only 18 carry milk.
- Wholesale grocery companies rarely serve these smaller stores, which forces owners to charge higher prices and offer limited selection.
- There are 20 agencies that distribute emergency food on the Eastside.

Together, these shopping realities on the Eastside and in other low-income neighborhoods limit consumer selection and increase the cost of food for people who can least afford it.

The situation can be remedied. The research of the Sustainable Food Center shows that resources do exist to improve the food system in East Austin and to overcome obstacles to getting good food. The problems in East Austin's food system are concrete, and, with a bit of creativity and cooperation, solutions may be easily implemented.

Effective options include:

- Incorporation of food system planning into plans for neighborhood revitalization through a Food Policy Council.
- Financing and technical assistance programs targeted to food stores in low-income communities. The formation of grocer coops that could offer group purchasing and shared warehousing for small store owners.

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- Local food production through community gardening programs and urban farms.
 - Neighborhood food-buying clubs.
 - Support for farmers' markets and produce stands.
 - Innovative education about food and how to prepare it.
 - Shopper shuttles, reduced fares and other transportation solutions to help people get to stores.

These solutions require that we stop thinking of hunger as just a symptom of poverty. Solutions to the food access problems of neighborhoods like East Austin must go beyond increasing the family budget to identifying the structural gaps which exist in neighborhoods and addressing them in ways that make sense for the people who live there.

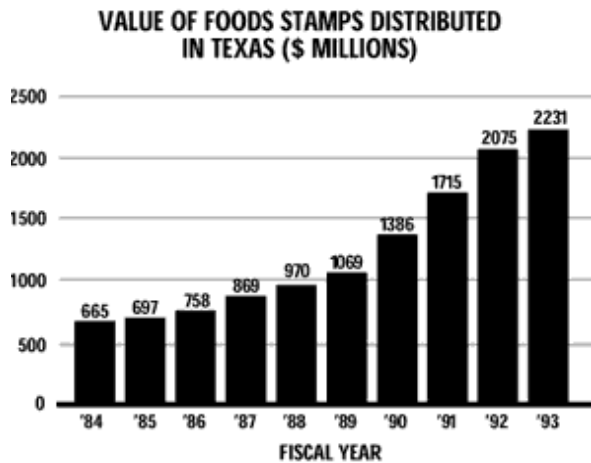
Introduction

In the last decade, the number of hungry Americans has increased dramatically. In 1991 more than 30 million people in the United States, including 12 million children, reported they did not always have enough to eat². These people are hungry despite the proliferation of assistance programs designed to help them. In the last 10 years nearly every metropolitan area in the United States has organized private food banks, each with its own network of participating neighborhood and church food pantries. In March of 1994, the Second Harvest National Research Study found that one in every 10 Americans has needed to use an emergency food pantry³. The U.S. Conference of Mayors reported in December 1994 that food requests rose 12 percent in that year, and four out of five cities expect requests to increase again in 1995⁴.

In Texas, almost one million families rely on government food assistance and emergency

providers to feed their families. The number of households in the state receiving food stamps increased from 645,000 in 1990 to 993,000 in 1993.

Travis County has witnessed similar growth; the number of residents receiving food stamps grew from 43,000 in 1990 to 65,000 in 1993. In 1993 alone, Travis County depended on \$57,000,000 in food stamps to meet basic food needs⁵.



The nation's economic recovery is not reaching all Americans equally, which means that many families will continue to be insecure for food, and children will go hungry. More than 1.5 million Texans fell into poverty in the last decade⁶. This is

more than three times the population of Austin. Increasing food stamp rolls are not a result of "liberalized" eligibility requirements. Although the number of Texans receiving food stamps has increased, the state serves only 63 percent of the eligible food stamp population⁷. The food and hunger crisis in Texas reflects

the effects of economic shifts which have left more people poor. According to the USDA, 20 percent of food stamp families have a member who works.⁸ Texans are increasingly finding themselves in low-wage and part-time jobs which offer little opportunity for advancement and pay a wage that leaves them below the poverty line.

The need for emergency food programs and the appropriation of billions of dollars for government food assistance signals a dysfunctional food system. Transportation deficiencies, wholesaler practices and increasing competition among food retailers have distorted the traditional free-market formula: that supply will follow demand. Although East Austin's 7,820 households use government assistance and their own incomes to buy food, only two supermarkets are located on the Eastside. On average, supermarkets in Travis County serve 3,170 households, but in East Austin each store serves 3,910 households.⁹

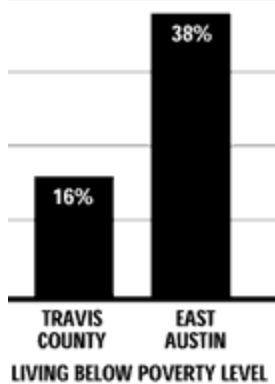
Most Eastside families usually manage to get enough food to eat, but they are never certain that they will. Forced to spend more and travel farther to get food, their food security has been threatened by long-standing food-industry practices and new supermarketing trends.

This study identifies the obstacles some families face in getting food and shows how the food retailing system fails to meet the needs of many neighborhoods. East Austin's food needs and resources emerge through questions such as: Where do low-income families get their food? How do families get to the store? What problems do inner-city merchants face? Why do convenience stores stock what they do? Why do supermarkets locate in some neighborhoods and not in others? In this light, the food access problem becomes more than one of a limited family budget. We see the structural problems that exist between the modern food retailing industry and older patterns of neighborhood living.

East Austin

More than 24,000 people live in the area of East Austin between Manor Road on the north, the Colorado River on the south, Interstate 35 on the west and Airport Boulevard on the east. This is a minority community: 62 percent of residents are Hispanic and 32 percent are African American. The Eastside also has a lot of children: 25 percent of the residents are under age 12.¹⁰ This six- square-mile area, the home of strong neighborhoods and well-established minority-owned businesses, is also the site of industrial warehouses, lumber and city maintenance yards and housing projects. An economic portrait of East Austin reflects this diversity.

POVERTY: TRAVIS COUNTY AND EAST AUSTIN



While the rest of Travis County has experienced economic growth, East Austin remains one of the most impoverished sections of Travis County. Nearly 40 percent of the residents live below the federal poverty level as compared to 16 percent in Travis County as a whole. The average East Austin household income is \$13,676, less than half the median for the rest of Travis County, and the unemployment rate is three times the county's.¹¹ Nearly 2,300 East Austin families ñ almost 30 percent of all East Austin households ñ are enrolled in the Women, Infants and Children Special Supplemental Nutrition Program (WIC).¹² And East Austin families are twice as likely to be headed by a single female than are families in the rest of Travis County.¹³

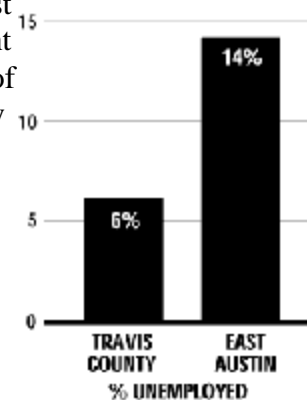
The economic plight of East Austin is not limited to households; East Austin businesses are also marginalized. Since 1988, as gross retail sales have increased by 28 percent across other sections of Travis County, the sales of East Austin retail stores have decreased by 16 percent.¹⁴ Similarly, the number of East Austin retailers has not grown, while other sections of the county have increased the number of retail stores by 25 to 50 percent over the last decade.¹⁵

The decline of East Austin businesses has affected the community's food resources. Both the Foodland supermarket on Oak Springs and Hargrave and the Safeway supermarket on 11th Street and I-35 closed during the last 10 years. In addition, smaller stores such as the 7-11 on Cesar Chavez, the Sac ãn Tote on Pleasant Valley, Sheffers Grocery on Lydia and the Discount Food Store on

Manor Road have also closed, further depleting the food resources of Eastside neighborhoods. [16](#)

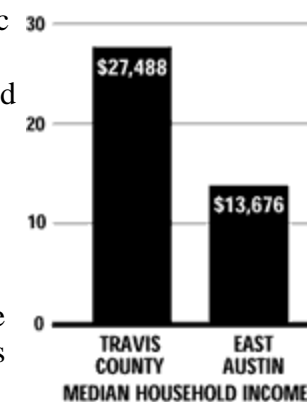
Despite economic hardship, East Austin has maintained itself as a community. On average, 70 percent of all East Austin households consist of families living together, and in some neighborhoods families represent 85 percent of households. In the rest of Travis County, only 52 percent of households represent families. [17](#) East Austin's multi-generational family households are the building blocks of cohesive neighborhoods. As grandparents sit on porches, each block's group of children wanders playfully from one yard to the next, connecting the families living near each other. Despite their reputation for being high crime areas, East Austin neighborhoods have a greater concentration of Neighborhood Watch associations than any other part of Travis County. [18](#) And some East Austin neighborhoods can boast a high rate of owner-occupancy in homes that have not been sold for decades- people who grow up in East Austin tend to stay there as adults. [19](#)

UNEMPLOYMENT: TRAVIS COUNTY AND EAST AUSTIN



But solidarity does not always breed prosperity, and staying put can reflect being content or just being stuck. Many East Austin families do fall short of meeting all their expenses and providing adequate food for their families. For East Austin, poverty and the lack of food resources take their toll on the health of area residents. Within East Austin, chronic high blood pressure and diabetes are the two leading medical diagnoses. When combined with high cholesterol and obesity, these nutrition-related illnesses represent 40 percent of the diagnoses made by Seton East Community Health Center, the area's largest community health clinic. [20](#)

INCOME: TRAVIS COUNTY AND EAST AUSTIN



The prevalence of nutrition-related disease in East Austin mirrors statewide statistics. According to the Texas Department of Health, African Americans and Hispanics in Texas are four times as likely to die of diabetes complications as Anglos. Black men and women are twice as likely to die of heart disease as their white counterparts. [21](#) Libby Bertinot, coordinator of a chronic disease prevention program in the St. John's neighborhood in Austin, says " By teaching a few healthy behaviors ñ by focusing on good nutrition, exercise and stress reduction ñ we can reduce the incidence of chronic disease. [22](#)

Children suffer particularly from poor nutrition. Studies by the Tufts University School of Nutrition and the University of Minnesota Office of Population Research have found that, during critical stages of development, poor nutrition can result in permanent cognitive deficiencies. Children that are not well fed will not learn and will not develop into healthy and productive adults.[23](#)

Government programs like the school meals program exist, but they don't always provide the safety net they should for low-income children. Teachers in Austin observe the effects of poor nutrition daily. Chris Aynesworth, a teacher at Zavala, says that students of his who miss school breakfast are distracted until their 11:15 lunchtime, and only after eating do they concentrate on their lessons.[24](#) Diana Hernandez, a Zavala parent, says that the breakfast menu at school is often not appetizing for her son.[25](#) Karen Miller, the coordinator of the well-child program at the Zavala Health Center, says that many children miss the school breakfast because they arrive too late.[26](#)

And the security of a school meal lasts only nine months. For the summer months children must hope that their school or census tract qualifies for the Summer Food Service Program. Statewide, only 10 percent of children eligible for free or reduced price meals during the school year have access to those meals during the summer.[27](#)

Preliminary findings of the Texas Childhood Hunger Identification Project indicate that when children live in a "hungry family" they suffer twice as many headaches and ear infections as "non-hungry" children. And for each incidence of illness, children miss an average of 1.5 days of school.[28](#)

But perhaps the clearest indication of the food crisis in East Austin is the network of emergency food distribution programs serving the area. More than

20 Eastside churches and neighborhood centers conduct emergency food assistance programs.[29](#) These food pantries receive the food for their programs from the Capital Area Food Bank, from private donations and from the USDA commodity distribution program.

In 1994, the Austin Baptist Community Center served 1,800 families, half of who lived on the Eastside. The Rosewood-Zaragosa neighborhood center provides emergency food to 100 families every month, Metz Recreation Center serves lunch to low-income senior citizens five days a week, and the Central East Austin Community Organization (CEACO) serves commodities to 50 families every other month.³⁰ Many other programs exist in the Eastside, offering various types of assistance: bags of groceries, supermarket vouchers and prepared meals. Managers of emergency assistance food programs report that requests for food assistance have an observable cycle. Requests for food are rare from the 4th of the month through the 19th, when residents get AFDC, WIC and Food Stamp benefits. After the 19th, requests increase and peak around the 27th, tapering off again to almost none by the first of the next month.³¹

Most disturbingly, program managers say that month after month some families consistently need the emergency help. "Most families I see once I'll see again. Everybody's out of food stamps by the 15th," says Vincetta Green, manager of food programs at Rosewood-Zaragosa. Deacon Phil Krotzer of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church sees "single elderly women who receive only 17 dollars a month in food stamps struggle to make ends meet." Emergency food providers have become an institutionalized part of the food system in East Austin.³²

The importance of government assistance programs and of emergency food programs to the food budgets of low-income families highlights the inadequacy of food resources in East Austin. Low-income families respond to the lack of resources by piecing together support from churches, the government, social service organizations and family members. But the question remains: why does this gap between food assistance and food security exist?

Limited Access to Food

In the cities and countrysides of the United States, low-income people often pay more for food than their wealthier neighbors. According to studies in New York City, Los Angeles, Hartford, Knoxville and Minneapolis, low-income residents pay 10 to 40 percent more for food than higher income residents of the same cities.³³ Low-income residents pay more because large, efficient, well-stocked supermarkets rarely locate in their neighborhoods. The very people who need to make every dollar count do not have an essential piece of the neighborhood infrastructure to do so.

Supermarket Consolidation

In the last 20 years, the supermarket industry has become increasingly centralized. Fewer stores, each one increasingly larger, sell a greater proportion of the nation's groceries. Over 75 percent of America's groceries are purchased in supermarkets, more than half of which now measure 50,000 square feet and stock over 18,000 items.³⁴ Centralization of the supermarket industry cost Texas communities more than 500 grocery stores from 1982 to 1987.³⁵

In Austin, three supermarkets have closed within the last year. The AppleTree store on Oltorf and South Lamar, the Fiesta on William Cannon and the Randall's on William Cannon all served communities which include low-income neighborhoods.³⁶ While these smaller and less profitable stores have closed, newer, more modern stores have opened, though usually in different neighborhoods. HEB has opened its new Central Market store on North Lamar Boulevard and reconstructed its store on Anderson Mill Road. Randall's will open a new store on William Cannon and MoPac, farther west than the store it closed. And Albertson's hopes to begin construction soon on a new store in West Lake Hills.³⁷



Each of these supermarket relocations show how affluent neighborhoods gain food resources at the expense of lower-income areas.

The modern superstores that serve as flagships of the supermarket industry do not serve East Austin shoppers. Of the chains that do business in Austin (HEB, Foodland, Randall's, Fiesta and Albertson's), only HEB and Foodland even have a store in East Austin - just two supermarkets to serve the 24,000 residents living within the six-square-mile area. In contrast, the rest of Travis County has one supermarket for every 8,876 people.³⁸ At both Eastside stores, residents find that the parking lots are dimmer and without raised plots or walkways to separate rows of parking. Inside, shoppers feel that the aisles are narrower and the floors dirtier than the stores they see in other parts of town.

How Eastside Residents See Their Stores

Residents of East Austin know their food resources are limited. The concerns of Eastside shoppers emerged through more than 100 discussions with them about the ways they shop. In these individual and group meetings, most Eastside shoppers expressed that they do not shop at their preferred store because they lack transportation. Many shoppers rely on carpooling, buses, taxicabs or walking to get to a food store. When residents can't get to one of the supermarkets, they shop at one of the 38 small convenience stores scattered throughout the neighborhood, or at a drug store. In a 1991 survey of residents who lived along East 11th Street, 78 percent of respondents expressed the need for a grocery store in their neighborhood.³⁹ When they do get to a supermarket, most residents see poor security, dangerous parking lots, narrow aisles, poor food quality and crowded checkout lines as the main disadvantages of shopping on the Eastside.

Discussions with shoppers highlight a variety of real concerns about access to supermarkets on the Eastside. Resident Gloria Jackson deplors the lack of shopping carts at one store. When asked, the store manager acknowledged that customers had to wait 20 or 30 minutes for a shopping cart and blamed the neighborhood for the theft of carts.⁴⁰ Indeed, shopping carts cost \$100 each, so replenishing them is a substantial expense for supermarkets.⁴¹ But the missing carts, which can be found abandoned near people's driveways and by the road,

highlight the neighborhood's transportation deficit. For residents without a car and on a limited budget, swiping a shopping cart from the supermarket's parking lot to carry an extra heavy load of food home may make more sense than paying for a cab or the bus.

At the HEB on 7th Street, most residents complain that the checkout lines and parking lot are always overcrowded. "The parking lot scares me," says Elidia Vazquez, who drives by the HEB to shop at stores farther from her home. One reason for checkout crowding is confusion over food stamps and WIC items. Although the store accepts WIC, signs indicating which items are redeemable often fall off or are obscured, leaving WIC participants uninformed about what they may buy until they arrive at the register. WIC items are displayed amidst all other items for sale, forcing a WIC client, children in tow, to read through cereal or cheese labels carefully to get the certified product and package size. Some WIC participants say that repeated confusion and embarrassment at the checkout counter intimidates them, and they choose not to use their benefits.⁴²

More importantly, Eastside residents cite high prices and poor selection as the reasons they dislike shopping on the Eastside. The HEB on East 7th Street does a good job of keeping its prices equal with those of HEB stores in other parts of Austin. A price comparison of 40 basic food items at five different HEB stores showed that the prices for all of the items were identical at each of the stores. But the East 7th Street store, the only HEB store in an entirely low-income area, is inferior to other HEB stores in important ways. One day in September, 1994 stores in other parts of town stocked five different varieties of apples, bags of pre-cut spinach and four kinds of lettuce. The East 7th Street store had only two kinds of apples, spinach that needed to be cut and cleaned and only two kinds of lettuce. Selections of whole wheat bread, wine and health foods are also more limited at the East 7th Street store than at other stores.

The Foodland on Airport Boulevard is substantially more expensive than any of the HEB stores. A price comparison of 40 basic food items showed that 29 items were at least 10 percent more expensive, eight items were one to nine percent more expensive, and only three items were less expensive at Foodland than at



HEB.⁴³ Overall, the shopping basket of 40 food items at Foodland cost 18 percent more than the same items bought at HEB. For residents without transportation living near this store, there are few other food options. Moreover, quality suffers. At this Foodland, produce is delivered three times each week, not six times per week as at HEB, and selection of all items except canned vegetables is limited. The high prices and poor selection at the Eastside Foodland store are also found at the Foodland in South Austin on Ben White Boulevard, which also serves a moderate to low-income neighborhood.

Many low-income shoppers depend on taxi-cabs to transport themselves and their groceries to and from the supermarket. Dispatchers at Yellow Cab and American Cab report that one-half to one-third of their calls city-wide involve travel to or from a food store. During the first week of the month, just after food stamps are distributed, these dispatchers estimate that calls to or from a supermarket can reach 150 per day.⁴⁴ Low-income shoppers need taxis because they often do not own their own cars, or if they do own one, someone in their family uses it for work. In addition to taxicabs, East Austin residents rely on public transportation, but the buses serve a limited function within the community. Bus routes follow several main corridors into downtown Austin, making transportation from one section of the Eastside to another difficult.⁴⁵ If residents want to shop at a store on the Eastside, they often must travel to downtown, wait to change buses, and take another back to an Eastside store. This results in lengthy trips and disconnected neighborhoods. These additional transportation costs act like a shopping tax on immobile low-income consumers, reducing their already limited food dollars. High food prices and transportation costs cut dramatically into a family's food budget. A study by the Community Food Resource Center in New York shows that inner-city shoppers must pay as much as \$400 a year for taxis or buses, or they must settle for the poor selection and higher prices available to them from the lower quality stores in their neighborhoods.⁴⁶

The Role of Convenience Stores

Faced with more time-consuming and expensive trips to the supermarket, East Austin shoppers sometimes choose, instead, to shop at local convenience stores.

The 38 convenience stores scattered across East Austin form an important part of the low-income food economy but often fail to serve the actual food needs of their neighborhoods. Among all 38 convenience stores in East Austin, only five offer a selection of food choices from which it would be possible to cook a nutritious balanced meal.⁴⁷ Even the five real food stores stock a produce section consisting only of a few apples, bananas, onions and lemons.

The other 33 stores lack all or most of the basic food items such as rice, noodles, meat, milk and bread. Instead, these stores get much of their sales from alcohol, gas or candy. A brief comparison of items stocked in each



of the 38 stores indicates that while all of them stock alcohol, only 18 of them carry milk, and 15 carry bread. After alcohol, cigarettes, candy and soda, the most commonly stocked items are canned foods. The manager of the Hillside Minimart says that cans represent a safe investment since they do not spoil like meat or milk. "I can sell cans in three months, but meat I need to throw out every three days." But for consumers, canned foods are often low in nutrients and high in sodium and preservatives. When asked if he stocked any meat, one store owner pulled a dusty can of Vienna wieners from a shelf.

This is the food situation facing East Austin families. And though food insecurity appears as simply another symptom of poverty, increasing food access depends in large part on addressing the gaps in the food retailing industry as well as on increasing family income. By understanding the precise reasons why large and small stores have trouble doing business in low-income neighborhoods, it is possible to form workable solutions that will improve the food distribution network, end families' dependence on emergency food assistance and make each family food secure.

Challenges Stores Face on the Eastside

There are reasons for the gaps in service Eastside residents experience when they go to supermarkets and convenience stores in their neighborhood. Both supermarket corporations and convenience store owners face real economic constraints doing business on the Eastside.

Supermarkets represent a major investment in land, buildings, equipment and inventory. According to the Community Food Resource Center, the average supermarket in an urban area represents \$10 million in start up costs.⁴⁸ Further more, although a lot of money can be made in supermarkets, the industry is competitive. Even the largest stores operate on just a one or two percent profit margin.⁴⁹ Supermarket owners think carefully before opening new stores. According to representatives from two regional Texas supermarket companies, there is a standard set of criteria for expanding into a new neighborhood. These executives will not consider an area that does not have 25,000 people within a one-mile radius with an average household annual income of \$30,000.⁵⁰

These basic criteria have a fundamental importance for medium size, low-density neighborhoods like East Austin. Unlike the dense inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago, Detroit or New York, East Austin's 24,000 residents live spread out over six square miles. Many East Austinites live in houses with yards separated by empty lots, garages, parks, warehouses or factories. This pattern of living, and the median income of \$13,676, means that a new supermarket would not have a large enough concentrated group of potential shoppers on which to depend.

Beyond these basic income and population density criteria, supermarket executives assess the profitability of the inventory the store will carry and weigh it against the cost of doing business in a particular area. Costs can be high in inner cities. Because low-income families are poor, they buy basic foods. This is a negative for the supermarket industry because profit comes from meat, seafood, prepared foods and non-food items such as flowers. In addition, some executives claim that shoplifting and theft of shopping carts are real obstacles to locating in certain areas. So, although real estate can be cheap, other costs of doing business can be high in low-income neighborhoods. Together, these factors combine

to make the construction of additional supermarkets unlikely for low-income neighborhoods like East Austin.

Small convenience store owners face as many obstacles as large supermarkets, but they are problems of a different nature. Interviews with grocery owners and operators in East Austin show that the largest problem they face is that they are undercapitalized. According to the Austin Wholesale Grocery Company, to fully stock a small store can cost from \$5,000 to \$25,000.⁵¹ Without the capital to buy their initial shipment of goods, these owners sometimes have more shelf space than product, leaving their stores with an empty and unattractive appearance. At the Discount Food Store on Manor Road, daily sales averaged \$400-\$500 - hardly enough to meet expenses that included rent, inventory labor, electricity and insurance, let alone produce a profit.⁵² "I want to buy meat and fruit to put in the refrigerators, but I can't afford it," says the owner. Indeed, after 18 months, Taj Surjatha could not afford to renew his lease, closed the store, sold his equipment, and the location will soon become an entertainment center.

Small stores also face problems dealing with their wholesalers. The grocers who supply these small stores usually require payment in cash on delivery. These are rarely the terms which supermarkets arrange to pay for their inventories. This financial burden further limits the flexibility of small operators. The Austin Wholesale Grocery Company supplies many of the small stores on the Eastside, but they offer a limited selection. Indeed, some small operators are so small that no wholesaler will service them. This situation has caused at least one grocery owner to drive his van to Sam's Club, purchase groceries there and resell them in his store at much higher prices. Finally, many small groceries lack technical skills in displaying the inventory, marketing their products, keeping records of their sales and other important business skills.⁵³

Community Resources and Solutions

A variety of practical and simple solutions exist to respond to the food crisis of East Austin. These solutions require the cooperation of local government, businesses, community groups and neighborhood associations. Though small in scale, several solutions together can make food buying easier and cheaper in low-income communities. New strategies toward community food security and empowerment could combine initiatives in several different areas: increasing community access to stores, improving store quality, experimenting with alternative retail formats, stimulating local food production, improving food education and coordinating programs.

These efforts, and others like them, could be initiated under the auspices of an Austin-Travis County Food Policy Council. Food policy councils have been developed in cities across the country to provide comprehensive responses to reduce hunger and increase food security in a region. They are public/private partnerships which include representatives of all the stakeholders in a region's food system working together on long-term solutions to the crisis of inadequate food resources. Food policy councils are generally provided staff and support resources by local government. Their achievements are a testament to the dedication and cooperation of their members and the efficacy of working together.

The Sustainable Food Center's principal recommendation is that the Austin-Travis County region form a food policy council to address the problems outlined in this report. It could begin work by pursuing some of the following initiatives.

Access to Supermarkets

Supermarkets remain the cornerstone of food shopping on the Eastside. The community cannot afford to lose these stores and must undertake to improve the services they offer and to make them more accessible. Transportation planners can lower obstacles to shopping by improving transportation between stores and the neighborhoods they serve. Options include evaluating bus routes in terms of their relation to food stores, validating bus tickets at food stores to subsidize a return trip home, and establishing partnerships between supermarkets and taxi

companies to discount rates for bringing a group of shoppers to a supermarket. Regular shuttle service from schools, libraries, senior centers and the neighborhood supermarket could make shopping easier for community residents.

Store Quality

Supermarkets can improve the quality of service they offer by listening more closely to community needs. Community advisory groups for each store would allow residents to participate actively in the food economy and to get the particular items they want. A dialogue between store managers and the community would make residents aware of the business constraints supermarkets face and perhaps lead, through collaboration, to workable solutions. Also, providing incentives to food businesses to locate in East Austin neighborhoods would help to retain existing stores and promote the food industry as a foundation for neighborhood revitalization.

Small stores that serve so many residents of low-income communities also need to improve their quality of service. For most small stores the main obstacle is a lack of capital which limits the amount of inventory they can purchase and encourages them to invest in high-margin items such as soda, candy and alcohol instead of bread or produce. These stores need help to decrease the cost of their inventory and increase its variety. Here again, the solutions are relatively simple. A grocer cooperative could enable several small grocers to purchase their inventory as a group from a single wholesaler. Fleming Wholesale Foods, one of Texas' largest wholesale companies, has a 50-case minimum for orders. Even without a volume discount, buying cooperatively would gain small stores access to the competitive prices and wider variety of products offered by wholesalers [.54](#)

Access to financing will allow owners to buy inventory and to stimulate sales. City of Austin programs such as Businesses in Growth, that provide training, technical assistance and financing to micro-businesses, could be adapted to the special needs of the food industry. Rey Ocanas, Director of economic development for the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce says, "Small businesses suffer most from lack of access to expertise and training. Just learning how to use a computer to manage inventory can be a big help." Technical assistance with

bookkeeping, managing inventory and displaying merchandise will also help make small businesses more attractive to banks and lending institutions for small business loans. Finally, linking stores with local producers ñ gardeners and farmers ñ will create a market for local produce and allow the stores to buy fresh produce in small quantities at affordable prices. This is one of the most exciting options because it benefits store owners, local producers and consumers, encouraging a model of sustainable community food security.[55](#)

Alternative Retail Formats

Farmers markets, a place where local farmers sell their own produce directly to local consumers, can provide bountiful produce and fun for community families. The Eastside Community Farmers Market has operated the past two summers in the heart of East Austin. Certified to accept food stamps and WIC coupons, the Eastside Farmers Market provides fresh, nutritious, affordable food to community families. The produce at farmers' markets is usually produced with far fewer pesticides and chemical fertilizers than that sold in stores. Such an informal shopping setting has increased the income of local farmers, offered high quality produce to low-income shoppers, and transformed an empty urban lot into a bustling center of colorful, safe and fun community activity. Many East Austin families come each Wednesday and Saturday to the Farmers Market to buy a few vegetables but also to gain personal contact with farmers, to learn new recipes and to ask questions about unfamiliar foods.

Food buying clubs are another option that has proven successful in some low-income communities. In a food buying club, a group of households purchases basic, non-perishable food together in bulk from a wholesaler. Fifteen neighbors formed a food buying club in 1973 in Howardsville, Missouri, and by 1983 the club had expanded to include 150 families.[56](#) Eventually the club transformed into a cooperative grocery store serving a wide area. Food clubs have also succeeded in Houston neighborhoods, where the Shape Community Center administers a federation of local buying clubs. Although a food club might initially only provide rice, flour, canned goods or paper towels, as it grows in size it can provide a complete menu for participating families. By buying in bulk, families

can realize significant savings. Also, food clubs encourage families to plan their food needs weeks in advance, pre-empting impulse purchases at the checkout aisle that destroy tight food budgets.

Local Food Production

An essential step in improving Austinites' access to good food is to increase support for local food production. The first task is to stimulate regional agricultural production and to find ways to connect farms with the city. By including farmers markets in downtown revitalization plans, increasing the purchase of local produce for government food programs and highlighting local fruits and vegetables in our stores with bright signs, planners can buttress a vibrant local farm economy which could then serve as the foundation for Austin's community food security.

Urban gardening is an important form of local food production. Gardening in the city is cheap and rewarding. Vacant land is plentiful in East Austin, and owners who donate use of their lands in return will see empty lots well maintained. Water could be subsidized by the city at little cost compared to the amount spent on emergency feeding programs. Leaves for compost are abundant; the Eastside Community Garden receives leaves from the Texas General Services Administration. Local farmers are happy to share their knowledge of plants with gardeners. Finally, the Travis County Agricultural Extension Service has a horticulturist on staff to assist local gardeners.

Urban gardening can take many forms. First, families should be encouraged to garden at their homes. Second, community gardens on empty lots have worked in low-income neighborhoods throughout the country. Just a few neighbors could transform urban eyesores into vibrant sources of food production. One 4x16-foot garden plot could provide a fresh vegetable for a family of four every day of the year. The Eastside Community Garden has constructed 10 such raised beds completely out of donated wood, leaves and soil. Third, most community centers and social service buildings in Austin have grounds around them with water connections. The Salvation Army has sponsored a community garden in South Austin with little investment except work from the gardeners themselves. Finally, when urban gardens become large they can produce a surplus of food for

sale within a community, becoming real urban farms. In Los Angeles, a group of teenagers from Crenshaw High school have created “Food from the Hood.” They grow vegetables, make salad dressings and have contracted with national supermarkets to distribute their product to 2,000 stores. The same type of project could be done in Austin. Such projects create jobs, beautify neighborhoods and increase food security.

Community farming is another way to increase the amount of food in a low-income community and increase food security. In Hartford, Connecticut the Holcomb Farm project raised 32,000 pounds of fresh produce on five acres. Although it would require help from local farmers and skilled management, a similar project in Austin could work on land near Bergstrom Airport or in the new Colorado River Park.[57](#)

Food Education

Poverty and poor access to good food are the two crucial reasons low-income families go hungry. But other problems, most importantly a lack of knowledge about food and nutrition, exacerbate the problem. A plan to increase food security must address food education.

Low-income families are often very busy. Without a car, routine chores take more time. Surviving the maze of government assistance can be a full-time job, and increasingly both members of low-income families work.

In addition to their busy lives, some low-income families have lost their cooking traditions. In place of that tradition, the attitudes of these families toward food are shaped in large part by the food marketing industry. Just as tobacco and alcohol advertisers target low-income consumers, so too do the purveyors of fast or processed food. Indeed, according to the Wall Street Journal, 25 percent of fast food hamburger sales are in stores that service low-income neighborhoods.[58](#)

Although some food education programs exist, they can be improved by being integrated with an overall plan. Food education must be fun and informal. Recipes must be quick and use foods people are used to eating. Special attention should be paid to making cooking classes safe for kids, who often cook their

own dinners because their parents are working. The Sustainable Food Center experimented successfully with nutrition education at the Eastside Farmers Market. The classes there worked because they were informal, culturally appropriate and interactive. The California Food Policy Advocates devised a successful program to get high school students to eat breakfast with a non-traditional, faddish campaign emphasizing, “Feed Your Head.” Whatever the approach, educators should listen to their audience, mothers, fathers or kids to devise an effective campaign.

Conclusion

Food insecurity is such a pervasive problem that neighborhood planners need to include food projects in their community development strategies. City and county governments already understand their roles in encouraging private initiatives in low-income neighborhoods. Let us systematically start to include food businesses in future programs. Financing to small business groups, the provision of vacant warehouses for storing food shipments or empty lots for community gardens, and flexibility of zoning regulations to allow responsible construction for farmers markets and produce stands are all concrete ways for governments to apply their role as catalyst for economic initiatives in the food economy.

Our review of food access in East Austin is disturbing because it sheds light on the realities of food insecurity in East Austin. But our report also identifies real resources that are available in the community to turn the situation around. Together, farmers, processors, wholesalers, retailers, consumers and government determine the ways that food is produced, marketed and consumed. A neighborhood in which farmers sell their produce directly to consumers through farmers markets, small retailers start a cooperative to expand their inventory, supermarkets start community shuttles, transport planners adjust bus routes, residents grow food in thriving gardens and community groups conduct cooking classes will still be low-income, but it will be stronger. And its residents will have a more secure source of good food.

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