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NOWHERE TO SHOP

IN NEIGHBORHOODS OF FEW SUPERMARKETS, LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS
ENDURE DIFFICULTY GETTING GROCERIES
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If you live in Charlotte's Southside Park and you have a car, here's how you could get to the supermarket:

Cross South Tryon Street on Remount Road and go 1.2 miles to the Bi-Lo at Park Road. Easy drive. It takes five minutes.

If you don't have a car and you live in Southside or neighboring Brookhill Village, two low-income neighborhoods with more than 900 families, it gets harder.

You could walk, a trek through two major intersections, hauling heavy bags of food up and down hills past industrial buildings and small houses, a solution that is practical for only a few items at a time.

You could take a bus, which requires going uptown to change buses. Even without shopping time, it takes 90 minutes.

Or you could go to a small neighborhood store, where there is no fresh produce or skim milk and many prices are higher than in supermarkets.

In the retail business, stores go where it's easiest to make the biggest profits.

But as Charlotte's population has shifted into the suburbs, people left on the west have fewer stores. In Southside and Brookhill, 47 percent of the households don't have cars, according to the 2000 Census. In the 14 neighborhoods along Beatties Ford Road, 25 percent of homes have no cars. That means thousands struggle to reach affordable, nutritious food, a struggle that can lead to poor diets and earlier arrival of diet-related diseases.

When The Observer mapped the addresses of 97 chain and independent supermarkets in Mecklenburg County, only 25 were west of Interstate 77. In south-central Charlotte, 2.5 miles from uptown, there are no supermarkets near West Boulevard, an area that includes Wilmore, Dalton Village, Southside and Brookhill.

Along the Northwest Corridor, the section of the city bordered by I-85, I-77 and Freedom Drive, an area with about 21,000 residents that includes Johnson C. Smith University, there is one full-service supermarket, the University Park Food Lion at Beatties Ford Road and LaSalle Street. Beyond that, the closest stores are on Freedom Drive near I-85, a 4.5-mile drive.

Smaller stores in the area, like Wayne's Super Market at 2050 N. Graham St., stock no skim milk, fewer fresh fruits and vegetables and less lean meat.

In Southside and Brookhill, the neighborhood store is Tyson Groceries on Remount Road. Visits by Observer reporters in August and December found fresh meat with no expiration date on the labels, some of it visibly gray. (The Mecklenburg County Health Department gives the store a passing grade and says dates aren't required on fresh meat, although most stores include them voluntarily.)

Tyson carries no fresh vegetables, and a gallon of milk - full fat, no skim - was about 40 cents higher than the typical supermarket price. Owner Saylor Tyson would say only that he sells what people in the area buy.

In west and southwest Charlotte, not all of the people are poor and not all of them are black. But with 153,933 people on the west side of I-77, versus 541,521 on the east, the area holds the city's higher concentration of low-income, predominantly black neighborhoods.

Nationwide, studies show that predominantly black neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets. A recent study by the UNC Chapel Hill department of epidemiology found that predominantly black neighborhoods average one supermarket for every 23,582 people. Predominantly white neighborhoods typically have one store for every 3,816 residents.

"This is an endemic problem that's been going on for 30 years," says Dr. Roland **Anglin**, director of the New Jersey Public Policy Research Institute at Rutgers University. He dates the situation to the 1960s, when large businesses began to abandon urban areas, leaving behind smaller stores that charge higher prices and often have unsanitary conditions.

"This is a problem in a lot of communities, so the nutrition and health in these communities is compromised.

"The only way to solve this is to reintroduce competition. And that is slowly happening. Chains are starting to realize there is a huge market there."

Costly rides

"Transportation is the single biggest problem our clients face," says Beverly Howard, executive director of Charlotte's Loaves & Fishes, a nonprofit emergency pantry that provides groceries to families in economic crisis.

Even though Loaves & Fishes has pantries in 16 locations, getting to the food is a big problem. Howard has heard of people paying for a ride with a bag of their emergency food.

"Our clients have a limited pool of money. Their lack of access means it takes a disproportionate amount to meet their daily needs."

For many, when they run short on food, the only option is a convenience store, where much of the food is not only more expensive, but also lower in nutrition.

"People have to have access to food that will not only satisfy them, but keep them healthy," says Howard.

Exposure to healthful food also is important, she says. While stores in low-income neighborhoods sell the food that people are most likely to buy, she points out that making positive changes in anyone's diet, like switching to skim milk, requires repeated exposure, "and that's if I've been offered the choice and been given the opportunity to make the choice."

'The sheer energy it takes'

Two studies by UNC last year looked at the effect of fewer supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods nationwide. The first found there were four times more supermarkets in white neighborhoods, a lack of access that means poor and minority communities have a harder time choosing healthy food.

The second showed that for every additional supermarket in a black neighborhood, people's intake of fruits and vegetables increased 32 percent. In white neighborhoods, consumption of fruits and vegetables was 11 percent higher with the presence of one or more supermarkets.

People in food charities in Charlotte can recite problems that stem from a lack of access to affordable, healthy food: Children who don't get fresh vegetables and skim milk have less energy to stay alert in school. Parents who are worn out from getting to jobs and stores by bus don't have the energy to read to their children at night. Health problems like diabetes and stroke show up earlier, when people are in their 50s.

Lucy Bush of Friendship Trays describes the daily struggle of a typical client:

"I'm a single parent. My job isn't close to home. I get on public transportation at 6 a.m. to get my child to day care and get to my job on time. I get to work and I get a call that my child is sick. I have to leave my job, lose a day's pay, get back on the bus, go and get my child, get her to a doctor, then take a bus to a store to get medicine or something for dinner.

"The average person doesn't analyze the scope of that, the sheer energy it takes."

Business reality

You can't blame the stores. After all, retail goes where the profits are.

Marilyn Marks of the Gleaning Network, which distributes fresh produce in low-income neighborhoods, used to be a commercial lending officer with a bank. So she understands business reality.

"You cannot put in a (supermarket), pay for extra security, pay more for personnel to drive there," she says. "Grocery stores, when I was in lending, were the lowest-margin businesses. Why should they do that out of the goodness of their hearts?"

"Food retailing is a competitive industry, where the return is less than 1 penny on the dollar," says Todd Holdquist of the Food Marketing Institute, a national organization that represents food retailers and wholesalers.

In the supermarket industry, there are generally three kinds of stores: Chain supermarkets, which offer the most selection, usually have lower prices because they handle high volume. Independent stores are usually older, often located in small buildings left behind by the chains.

Because they don't have the buying power of multiple stores, their prices are usually higher and selection is smaller. Then there are small stores such as convenience stores, which base their price and selection on what will sell quickly.

Traffic and land

Spokesmen for three of the four largest supermarket chains that operate in Charlotte - Food Lion, S.C.-based Bi-Lo, and Winn-Dixie - all say placing stores in any neighborhood is complicated, involving decisions as simple as high-traffic corners and as tricky as finding large amounts of affordable property.

"We get a lot of cities that want us to go to downtown areas," says Bart Coleman, Bi-Lo's vice president for real estate. "But then they don't want us to build the facility we feel we need to build." Urban sites, he says, are often small and have limited parking.

"We have stores in every type of neighborhood. The key is to find a sufficient amount of ground with easy access," says Mickey Clerc, spokesman for Winn-Dixie's regional office in Jacksonville, Fla.

"Every site is different," says Glenn Dixon, vice president of real estate at Food Lion's Salisbury headquarters.

Shopping centers in low-income areas often have a harder time getting the mix of stores that bring traffic for a supermarket, Dixon says. Smaller businesses often can't afford the rent near a successful anchor. And without small businesses like dry cleaners and manicurists, it's difficult to attract larger tenants like supermarkets.

"That's often why developers aren't attracted," he says.

Harris Teeter, which operates 29 supermarkets in Mecklenburg County, refused to be interviewed for this series, saying all information about store locations is proprietary.

Security and profit

Experts raise two issues when the subject is supermarket locations: security costs and the expected lack of profits in lower-income neighborhoods. But those aren't always borne out.

Security, for instance. Every store, whatever the neighborhood, has to have security.

"We address that in every location," agrees Food Lion's Dixon.

Bi-Lo's Coleman says that even stores in high-income areas can have trouble with theft, particularly if the store is near a high-traffic highway with quick access.

Tom Worshauer, director of business services for Charlotte Neighborhood Development, says security is something stores cite when they just aren't interested in an area.

"It's an easy thing to say, like if you don't want to go to a party, you might say your hair's wet. I don't think that's the underlying reason."

Lower profits may not be the reason, either. A 2001 report by the Washington-based Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, "Exposing Urban Legends: The Real

Purchasing Power of Central City Neighborhoods," found that while inner-city neighborhoods have lower per-capita incomes, they also have high rates of spending because they are more densely populated.

Buzz Roberts, vice president for policy with the Local Initiative Support Corp., a national nonprofit group that focuses on housing and retail in distressed areas, says some supermarket chains are starting to find benefits in challenged neighborhoods.

"They're typically very successful markets, from the operator's perspective. They don't face a lot of competition. What you give up in per-capita income, you make up in population density."

However, selling in low-income neighborhoods is more difficult. People who shop with food stamps usually buy fewer nonperishable items like toiletries and impulse items, the things that bring stores their highest profits.

"It can be a different kind of business in some ways, and it takes a savvy operator to serve an urban market," says Roberts.

In putting together more than 20 supermarket projects around the country, he has learned there is more than just nutrition and affordable food at stake.

"When you put together a major retail center in a tough neighborhood, the tax base for the city goes up," he says. "It helps to stabilize and revitalize distressed areas."

The community taxi

In Southside Park, you can't look into community efforts to improve lives without crossing paths with Velma Jones. A neighborhood resident, she has worked in several community programs, including feeding children in an after-school program.

In her small townhouse, she keeps a room off the kitchen packed with packaged food, cans of pasta and salmon and bags of rice, ready for neighbors who need help.

"I was a child that went to bed hungry," she says. "I remember waking up to no breakfast, going to school and getting a headache because you didn't get anything to eat until lunch. I've been hungry."

She calls her small green Dodge "the community taxi" because she gives so many free rides to stores.

How does she pay for gas? "I pray," she says. "Sometimes my dollars come short."

Jones helped to get a federal grant to build a shopping center at Dalton Plaza on West Boulevard. The shopping center fell through when no store would commit to the space, even though a private study in July 2000 found that the area could generate annual grocery sales of \$8.2 million by 2005, enough to support a medium-size store.

The grant was used to tear down an old Wayne's Super Market on West Boulevard, and a small retail center with a police substation is being built. Plans for a small IGA grocery store slated for the space fell through, and the city is no longer pursuing a grocery client, says Worshauer, of the city's neighborhood development office.

But the need is still there, says Jones. While working on the grant, she surveyed her neighbors in

Southside, Brookhill and Wilmore. The No. 1 complaint: the lack of a place to buy groceries.

If people had a store, she says, "they will wear it out. Even people that have cars complain."

'We're going to pay'

The reasons for fewer supermarkets on the westside are complicated and the solutions aren't simple.

Getting a supermarket into the area would take a tremendous effort, says Joanne Stratton Tate, a former community activist with United Family Services, a community-building organization. Instead, she'd like to see people in the neighborhoods organize a co-op that would offer retail and prepared food.

Co-ops, or nonprofit food-buying clubs, would allow people to pool their money to buy food that is distributed among members. Food clubs can have low overhead, and their community involvement can ease security issues.

"I'd rather see people give to develop a food co-op than make a single food donation," says Tate. "It would put food access in the community."

So why should people in areas of Charlotte where the landscape is densely dotted with stores care about the lack of stores on the westside?

"There's a justice issue," says the Gleaning Network's Marilyn Marks. "There's a difference between charity and justice. Justice is when everything is available on the same level. If we think this city is going to be OK and thrive, we have to look at making that divide more narrow, rather than turning our backs and letting it get wider.

"We need to convince people that, bottom line, nutrition matters. If a child grows up on fish sticks and macaroni and cheese, we're going to pay."