FOOD FIGHT:
Expanding Access to Affordable and Healthy Food in Downtown Brooklyn

A report of Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE)
and the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center

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In May 2004, the City rezoned Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene to increase private investment in development. Before the rezoning, residents had a readily accessible supermarket on Myrtle Avenue directly across from three public housing developments. However, in early 2006, John Catsimatidis, a developer and owner of the upscale grocery store Gristedes, unveiled plans to replace the supermarket with two large towers of mostly luxury condos and retail space, demolishing the community's only grocery store. This particularly marginalized the low-income residents of the Ingersoll and Whitman public housing developments who are now forced to either buy expensive food sold at local specialty stores or to travel long distances to find healthy, affordable food. Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), with support from the Urban Justice Center's Community Development Project developed this research project to document this grocery store crisis and advocate for a new grocery store on Myrtle Avenue that sells healthy, affordable food. FUREE members surveyed a total of 150 residents, and the results were analyzed to identify the following trends.

FINDINGS
CURRENT GROCERY STORE OPTIONS ARE NOT MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE IN THE DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN COMMUNITY.

Finding 1: Residents are most concerned about the affordability of food at their current grocery stores.

» 53.6% of respondents ranked affordability as the top issue of importance when buying food

Food prices at current stores in Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene are too high for the low-income residents in public housing. In 2008, 51% of all Brooklyn residents reported having difficulty affording food and 46% said they were concerned about needing food assistance in the next year.

Finding 2: Residents are not satisfied with the quality of food available at current local stores.

» 54% of survey respondents want current stores to improve the quality of food

Unlike many grocery stores in the city (like those in Manhattan), most stores in Downtown Brooklyn do not sell quality fruits and vegetables. The City's “Going to Market” report described Downtown Brooklyn as having below the city's average 'share of fresh food retailers.' Respondents affirmed the lack of quality food, asking for grocery stores selling a “variety of natural and organic products.”

Finding 3: Residents feel that current grocery stores need to provide more jobs, particularly to those from the community.

» 89% of people surveyed said local stores should provide more jobs

Usually local grocery stores provide valuable employment, but survey respondents reported that current stores do not provide enough jobs to the local community. The old Associated Store on Myrtle Avenue used to provide many local residents with jobs, but now that lot has sat empty for over three years.

Finding 4: Residents need more accessible supermarkets; many travel long distances to their nearest grocery store.

» 64% of survey respondents travel 10 or more minutes to the store

Across New York there is a major supermarket shortage, but nowhere more than Downtown Brooklyn. Brooklyn has less than 15,000 SQ FT of grocery store for every 10,000 residents (the current city-wide average ratio). Residents must travel long distances to get to a grocery store.
Finding 5: Residents want new supermarkets.

84% of respondents wish they had more grocery options

It is clear that current stores do not meet the needs of residents, particularly those from low-income communities of color. Interestingly, the Department of City Planning recently reported Downtown Brooklyn has the capacity for two additional grocery stores. Residents surveyed asked specifically for supermarkets, which tend to have healthier options than bodegas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report, we recommend NYC Council Members, Borough Presidents, the City Planning Commission, NYC Economic Development Corporation, private developers and Mayor Bloomberg work to implement several policy changes.

The City should require the new store on Myrtle Avenue and any future stores built in Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene to include:

- **Community Involvement:** Mr. Catsimatidis and the City must work with the community to restore a full size supermarket to Myrtle Avenue across from Whitman and Ingersoll that sells affordable, healthy and community appropriate food. The community should have input into what type of supermarket Catsimatidis leases to and about decisions involving hiring, pricing, etc.

- **Buses:** Until a full size supermarket is restored on Myrtle Avenue, the City should expand the current ‘Market Ride Initiative’ (a Department of Aging program that provides free rides to supermarkets for seniors) to include the low-income residents of Fort Greene.

- **Affordability:** New stores should sell food that is truly affordable for all residents, including those in public housing developments like Ingersoll and Whitman.

- **Good Food:** Food quality, including the ripeness of fruits and vegetables and the freshness of meat, should be carefully monitored at all grocery stores.

- **Good Jobs:** All jobs should meet minimum good job standards, including paying a living wage and providing industry standard benefits, as determined by City Comptroller.

- **Local Hiring:** Stores should participate in a “First Source” hiring system, to ensure hiring of local residents.

- **EBT/WIC:** Supermarkets should be required to participate in EBT, WIC, and food stamp programs. This would ensure all residents can afford to shop at the new store.

- **Transparency:** Stores should report relevant information back to the community on food quality and employment practices.

The City should change the city-wide FRESH program to include:

- **Labor Standards:** Stores participating in the FRESH program should be required to meet minimum good job standards to provide a safe working environment, a living wage and decent benefits.

- **More Neighborhoods:** To ensure all New Yorkers have access to fresh, healthy food, the FRESH program should be expanded to include all communities without a grocery store.
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