

 December 2009

FOOD FIGHT:

Expanding Access to Affordable
and Healthy Food in Downtown Brooklyn



**URBAN
JUSTICE**

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



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About the Authors

Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) is a Brooklyn-based multi-racial organization that mobilizes low- and middle-income families to promote equality, improve economic conditions, and build collective power to win systemic changes at the local, state and national level. Primarily led by women of color—with an emphasis on community and family—FUREE uses direct action, leadership development, community organizing, and political education to achieve our vision and goals.

The Community Development Project (CDP) of the Urban Justice Center (UJC) provides legal, technical, research and policy assistance to grassroots community-groups working for positive social change in low-income communities. CDP strives to support such groups in improvement efforts in the following areas: grassroots community organizing; affordable-housing and tenant organizing; sustainable economic development; technical assistance to not-for-profits; worker rights; environmental justice; and immigrant rights and organizing.

Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to the Fort Greene and Downtown Brooklyn Community residents who have long suffered from the negative effects of aggressive development in Downtown Brooklyn. Many families have had to adjust to the rapidly changing environment, including the diminished presence of basic community services many of us take for granted.

We are grateful for the inspiration and leadership of FUREE Members who understand the importance of access to healthy affordable food for low-income and working class families, who often have to choose between eating right or paying other bills in the midst of supermarket deserts. As with many other FUREE projects, we hope to put forth proposals informed and designed by those who are directly affected by negative policies and practices and change the framework by which these issues are debated and solutions are formed.

Thanks to the following FUREE Members for surveying community members on their views on the lack of access to food and entering information on the database to help create this report: Cynthia Ballard, Member; Elijah Bennett, Youth Volunteer; Alexis Buchanan, Youth Member; Joyce Bryant, Member; Tasheen Caroway, Beverly Corbin, Board Member; Youth Member; Della Dorsett, Member; Ruth Gould, Member; Shawnee Lee, Member; Tiana Marie Montazlo, Youth Member; Joamani Moore, Youth Member; Selena Ortiz, Youth Member; Sue Park, Volunteer; Diana Smith, Board Member; Hope Spann, Youth Member; and John Tyus, Member.

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Finally, thanks to the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project for partnering with us in our food justice work in Fort Greene, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500 for their input on this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 Catismidis, 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.



DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN RESIDENTS WANT NEW AND BETTER GROCERY STORE OPTIONS.

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 Castimatidis 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.



1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In May 2004, Mayor Bloomberg won approval for The Brooklyn Downtown Development Plan, a crucial part of his economic development agenda to increase private investment in development. The original justification for the Downtown Brooklyn plan was to transform the area from a mid-density commercial district into a high end, 24-hour business and arts center that would compete with New Jersey for corporate office space. The original plan estimated the creation of 4.5 million square feet of new commercial office space, 18,500 office jobs, 8,000 construction jobs, and 1,000 new housing units.¹ However, as a result of skyrocketing real estate, the new development was almost entirely luxury condo developments, with over 14,000 new units of housing already built or approved.² Reflecting the City's current economic development model, the planning decisions were made with almost no community input; the development instead highlights a partnership exclusively between City government and the private sector. To date, the Downtown Brooklyn Development Plan has resulted in few, if any benefits for current residents, business owners and shoppers, while providing a windfall of benefits, subsidies and cutting of red tape for developers and the real estate industry.

The rezoning also affected services for many low and middle income residents of Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene. Before the rezoning, residents had a readily accessible supermarket; the Associated Supermarket on Myrtle Avenue, close to three public housing developments that are home to nearly 8,000, provided locals with their food necessities at a decent price. The shopping center also included a laundromat, a Duane Reade pharmacy and 99 Cent Housewares Store, providing more convenient basic services to residents.

Soon after the rezoning, John Catsimatidis, the billionaire owner of Gristedes Supermarkets and aviation, oil and real estate tycoon, realized the rezoning would allow him to capitalize on the land he had owned for several decades. In early 2006, he unveiled plans to build two large towers of mostly luxury condos and retail space on Myrtle Avenue, on the site of the Associated Supermarket, directly across from the Whitman and Ingersoll public housing developments. Without any community input or discussion, he ended the leases and closed the stores. The structures that had held the stores were demolished soon after, leaving gaping holes, plywood fences and a makeshift dirt parking lot. Catsimatidis promised to build two towers, one that included some "affordable" housing, a new grocery store, a Duane Reade and some upscale retail.¹

However, the site was empty until late 2008, when Catsimatidis finally began construction, but, due to the economic crisis, only a scaled back version of his original plan (one smaller tower with luxury condos, and a small, 12,000 foot space, Catsimatidis claims will be a mini grocery store).³ Community residents are concerned that if a supermarket is brought in, it will be an upscale store catering to the wealthy rather than the current lower income residents. While Catsimatidis has said he wants to finish the whole project eventually, he hasn't given a timeline for any additional development, and it is unclear if the full size grocery store he once promised will be built. Residents are left with few grocery options in their neighborhood; many are forced to travel long distances for the most basic food.

In 2008, New York City's Department of City Planning released a report discussing the shortage of grocery stores in the city, and recommending various policies to increase the current grocery store to resident ratio. In response to the findings, the City Planning Commission developed the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health or FRESH initiative, a combination of zoning and financial incentives to encourage the building of new supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods.⁴ However, these incentives are only available in some 'high need' areas and residents of excluded neighborhoods, like those in Downtown Brooklyn, have little hope of attracting a new store if incentives exist elsewhere. Furthermore, the plan gives incentives to expensive specialty stores that most local residents cannot afford. Downtown Brooklyn residents, particularly those in public housing, need affordable food in their own neighborhood.

¹ NYC defines 'affordable' housing based on NYC's Area Mean Income (AMI), which for a family of four is \$79,400. However, the 'NYC area', used to calculate the AMI, includes several wealthy suburbs include Westchester County. This throws off the true median income of most residents, making the AMI seem much higher.



CURRENT RATIO

15,000 SQ FT of Grocery Store
to Every 10,000 Residents



FUTURE RATIO

30,000 SQ FT of Grocery Store
to Every 10,000 Residents



Reporting that every borough had a least one neighborhood with a 'high need' for a new grocery store, the city proposed to increase the resident to grocery space ratio from the city wide average of 15,000 SQ FT / 10,000 people in neighborhood to 30,000 SQ FT / 10,000 people in neighborhood.⁵

“Right now, it’s easier to get tobacco in this community than it is to get a tomato.” -FUREE member



The FUREE-ous Bus

After the Associated on Myrtle Ave closed, many residents were left with no place to shop. So in March 2008, FUREE, with the help of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1500, organized a shuttle bus to take residents from the Whitman and Ingersoll public housing projects to the Pathmark on the other side of Fort Greene. The bus, filled to capacity, shuttled 50 residents to the grocery store and back two weekends in a row. For many, especially the seniors, it was the first chance to stock up on groceries in over a year. “We are so happy that FUREE and the UFCW are paying attention to our community’s needs,” said one resident.



2. METHODOLOGY

In response to the grocery store crisis, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), a Brooklyn-based, grassroots organization led by low-income families of color, developed this research project, with the research and writing support of the Urban Justice Center's Community Development Project. This report shows that the current grocery options in Fort Greene and Downtown Brooklyn are insufficient to meet the community's needs and that residents need better access to quality, healthy food at reasonable prices through new and better stores.

During the summer of 2009, FUREE members and staff surveyed local residents outside of several different grocery stores, using a two-page survey instrument. The survey aimed to uncover the state of current grocery stores and find out what local residents want in a new store. Verbally asking questions, FUREE members engaged residents in a conversation about the lack of affordable, quality food in the community. They surveyed a total of 168 people, mostly from zip codes 11201, 11205, and 11206. Many of those surveyed lived in public housing developments; 60 reported they lived in with Walt Whitman, Ingersoll and Farragut. The information for the survey was put into a database and analyzed to identify trends in the needs of the community.

NEIGHBORHOOD SNAPSHOT

Ingersoll Public Housing Development:

- » Population: 4,287
- » Average Income: \$13,131
- » Median Income: \$8,755
- » Households: 1,786

Whitman Public Housing Development:

- » Population: 4,123
- » Average Income: \$12,933
- » Median Income: \$8,844
- » Households: 1,614

Farragut Public Housing Development:

- » Population: 3,558
- » Average Income: \$15,320
- » Median Income: \$11,107
- » Households: 1,614

*All data from Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007.

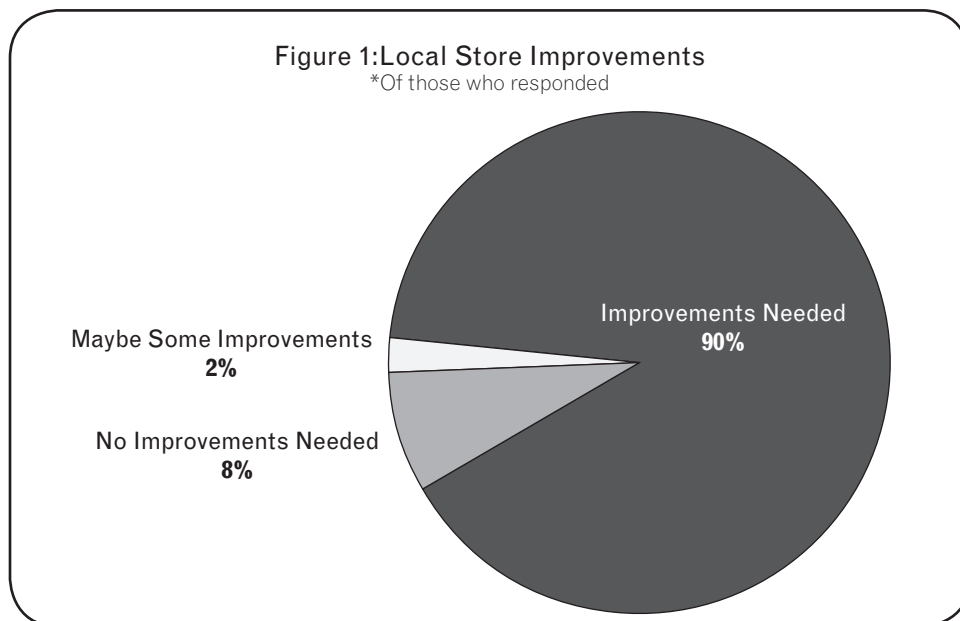


3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

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

Our research overwhelmingly shows that residents are not satisfied with their current grocery store options. Current stores are not accessible, do not sell quality, affordable food and do not provide enough jobs for local residents. Before the demolition of the Associated Store on Myrtle Avenue, residents had an easily accessible grocery store selling reasonably priced food. Now community members are left with a few bodegas and expensive specialty stores that don't provide the goods and services that public housing residents need and want.

» **90% of respondents believe local stores need improvement**

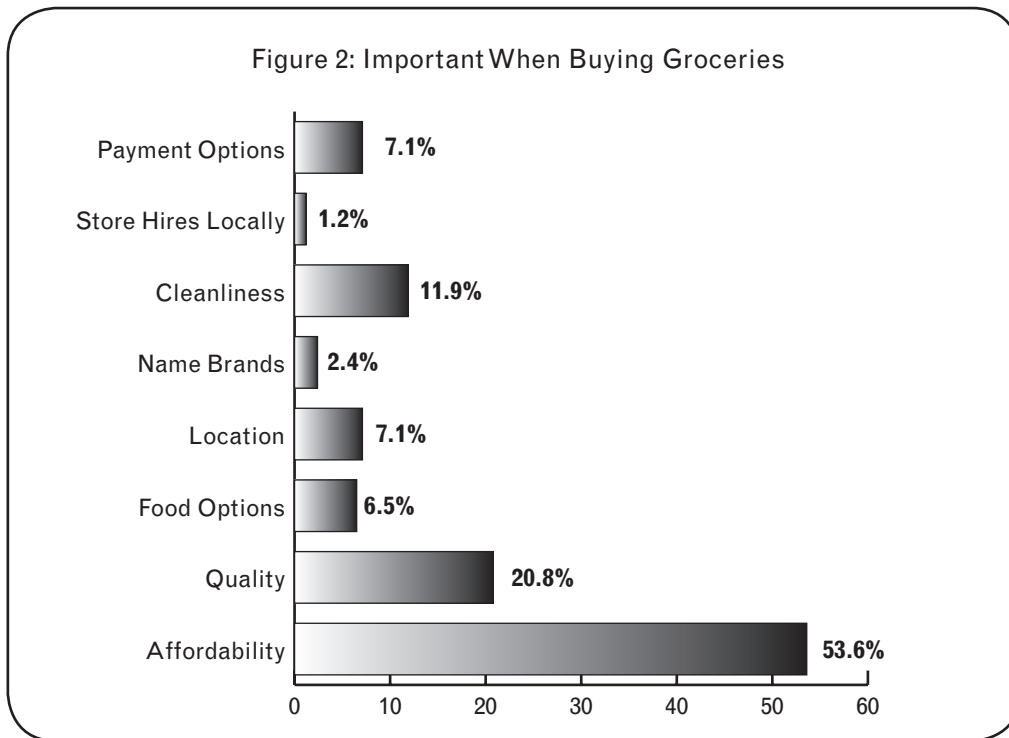


Finding 1: Residents are most concerned about the affordability of food at their current grocery stores.

Food prices at current stores in Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene are too high for the low-income residents in public housing. Since the Myrtle Ave store closed, financially struggling families spend a high percentage of their earnings on food staples, stretching their already thin wallets. 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. In all five boroughs, only the residents of the Bronx reported more difficulty affording food; only 34% of residents in Manhattan reported having difficulty.⁶ Struggling Brooklyn residents need access to truly affordable food.

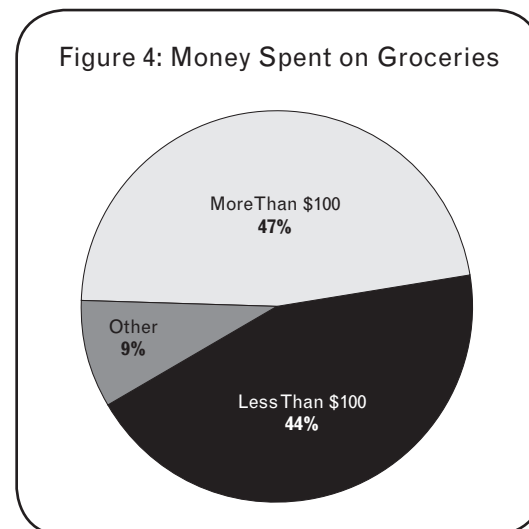


» **53.6% of respondents ranked affordability as the top issue of importance when buying food**



» **79% feel they are being over-charged for their groceries**

» **47% of respondents spend more than \$100 on their groceries per week, 13% spend more than \$200**

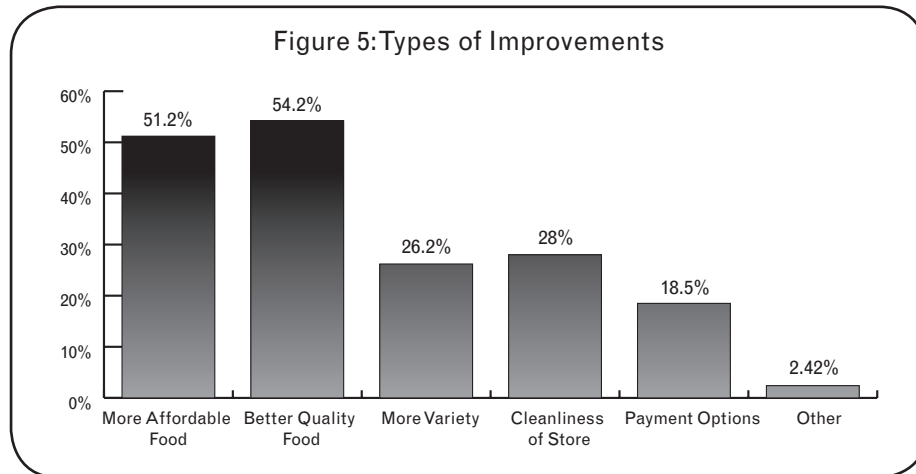


Finding 2: Residents are not satisfied with the quality of food available at current local stores.

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,’ demonstrating there are less establishments selling fresh food in this neighborhood than the average New York area.⁷ Respondents affirmed the lack of quality food, asking for grocery stores selling a “variety of natural and organic products.”



» **54.2% want current stores to improve the quality of food**

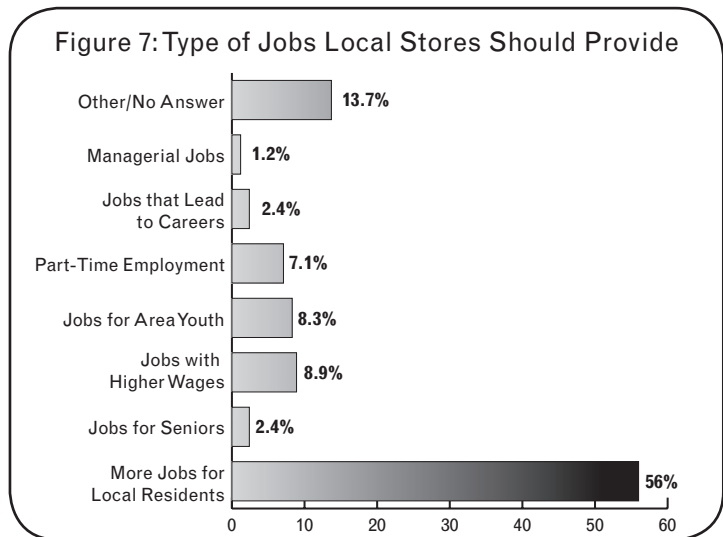
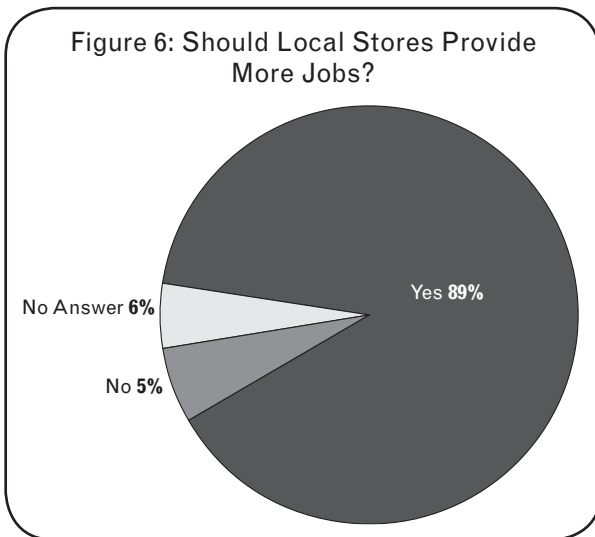


Finding 3: Residents feel that current grocery stores need to provide more jobs, particularly to those from the community.

Usually local grocery stores provide valuable employment, but Brooklyn residents reported that current stores do not provide enough jobs to the local community. According to a 2009 report, there are 10,330 grocery store workers in the Brooklyn area,⁸ but the unemployment in Brooklyn is still strikingly high (11% in September 2009).⁹ 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. Surveyed residents believe strongly that local stores should provide more jobs, and give preference to local residents.

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

» **Of those, 56% said the jobs should go to local residents**

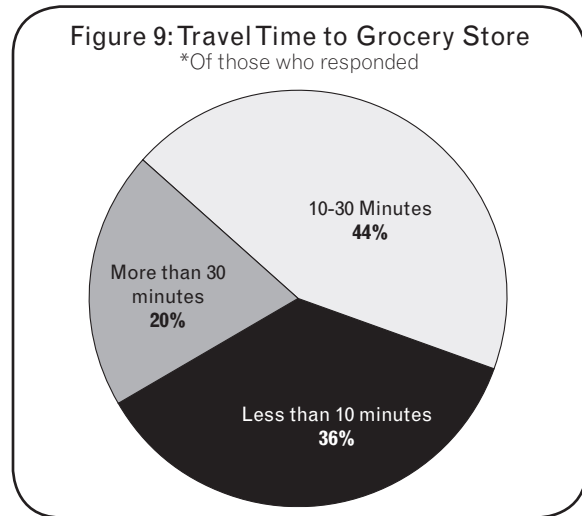
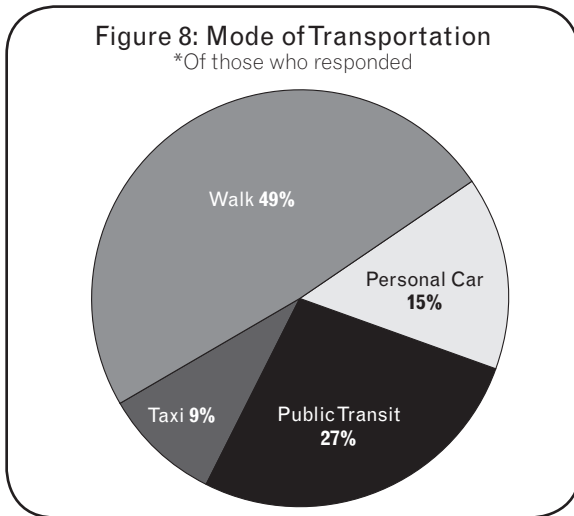


Finding 4: Residents need more accessible supermarkets; many travel long distances to their nearest grocery store.

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). The city's own report, defined a section of downtown Brooklyn as a "Supermarket High Need Area," while declaring the rest to have a 'moderate' need.¹⁰ Residents must travel long distances to get to a grocery store; 64% of those we surveyed reported traveling more than 10 minutes, and a third of those traveled more than 30 minutes. Many simply asked for a "more convenient" store or at least one "closer to senior citizens."



- » **64% travel 10 or more minutes (of those, about a third travel 30 minutes or more)**
- » **Most residents walk to the store (49%) rather than use public transportation (27%), drive (15%) or take a taxi (9%)**

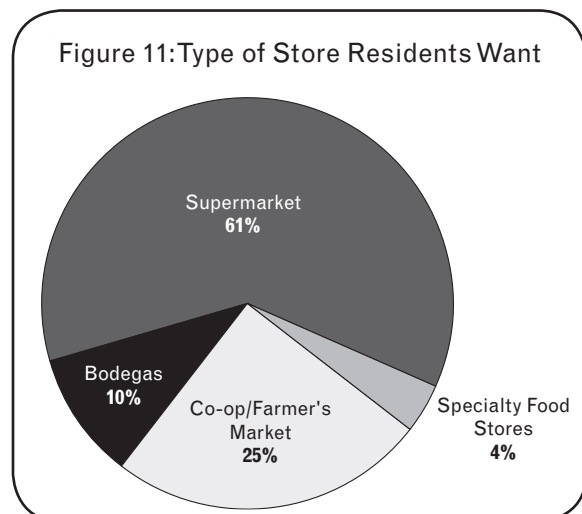
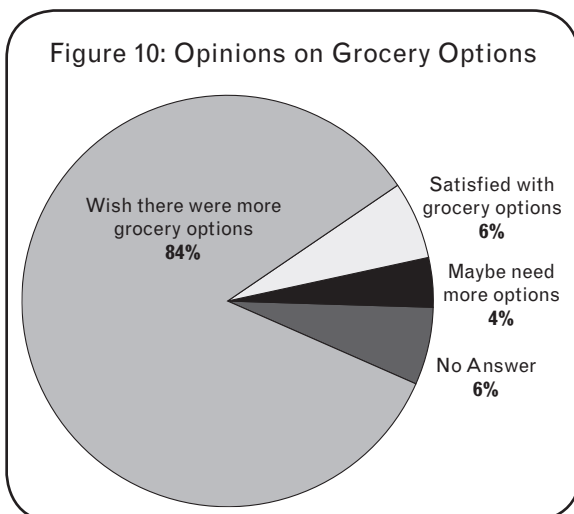


DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN RESIDENTS WANT NEW AND BETTER GROCERY STORE OPTIONS.

Finding 5: Residents want new supermarkets.

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.¹¹ With city and borough encouragement, new stores could be built to satisfy the needs of the community, though new stores need to carry healthy and affordable food. Residents surveyed asked specifically for supermarkets, which tend to have healthier options than bodegas.¹² Low-income residents want, need and deserve better access to healthy, affordable groceries through new stores.

- » **84% of respondents wish they had more options for grocery stores in their communities**
- » **Of those, 61% want a supermarket, rather than co-op/famer's markets (25%), bodegas (10%) or small speciality stores (4%)**



4. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT

The displacement of the Myrtle Avenue store in Downtown Brooklyn is not an isolated incident. Across the city, from Chinatown to Harlem, low-income residents are feeling the negative effects of gentrification. Overwhelmingly, the city's policies favor big corporations and developers rather than average New Yorkers. Along with affecting the affordability of food and small business retention, gentrification and high end development also raises rents and housing prices, forcing out many long-term residents. While affecting all socio-economic backgrounds, this practice has significantly impacted low-income communities, creating a crisis situation in many neighborhoods.

The Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH) initiative is a city program to increase the number of grocery stores in New York City through rezoning and financial incentives. Already approved by the City Planning Commission, the FRESH initiative will most likely be passed by the full city council before the end of 2009. While the initiative encourages the growth of supermarkets, the FRESH program does not cover all high-need areas. Additionally, the program not does include crucial participation requirements, such as requiring stores to meet minimum labor standards. Based on UFCW recommendations, the City Council has made some key reforms to improve the FRESH program, however some changes still need to be made.



5. 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 Castimatidis 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.
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- » **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.



6. ENDNOTES

¹ New York City. The Department of City Planning. Downtown Brooklyn Plan. Aug. 2004. Web. 23 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/dwnbklyn2/dwnbklynintro1.shtml>>.

² New York City Economic Development Corporation. Downtown Brooklyn Overview. Web. 20 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.nycedc.com/BusinessInNYC/CentralBusinessDistricts/DowntownBrooklynCBD/Pages/DowntownBrooklynCBD.aspx>>

³ Sederstrom, Jotham. "Myrtle Ave. condo/supermarket project stalls, leaving just an empty space." *NY Daily News*. 26 July 2008. Web. 23 Sept. 2009. <http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/brooklyn/2008/07/26/2008-07-26_myrtle_ave_condosupermarket_project_stal.html>

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⁴ *Food Retail Expansion to Support Health: Promoting Grocery Stores in Underserved Areas of New York City*. Rep. New York City, Department of City Planning, May 2009. Web. 24 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/fresh/presentation.shtml>>. Also see City Planning Commissioner Amanda M. Burden's statement on the FRESH initiative released September 23rd. 2009 found at <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/about/pr092309.shtml>>

⁵ *Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage*. Rep. New York City, Department of City Planning, Housing, Economic and Infrastructure Planning Division, 29 Oct. 2008. Web. 18 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/supermarket/presentation.shtml>>.

⁶ *NYC Hunger Experience 2008 Update: Food Poverty Soars as Recession Hits Home*. Rep. Food Bank for New York City: Food for Survival, 2008. Web. 18 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.foodbanknyc.org/index.cfm?objectid=CD6F98D5-F3F8-030E-B0A0BB1C1CB8C7A0>>.

⁷ *Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage*.

⁸ *Industry Group Profile: Employment in New York City Grocery Stores*. Rep. Labor Market Information Service, May 2009. Web. 18 Sept. 2009. <http://www.urbanresearch.org/docs/lmis_pubs/NYCLMIS%204451%20Grocery%20Stores_final.pdf>.

⁹ *New York State Department of Labor* -. Web. 25 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workforceindustrydata/Pressreleases/prtbur.txt>>.

¹⁰ *Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Eating In, Eating Out, Eating Well: Access to Healthy Food in North and Central Brooklyn*. Rep. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Resources, Brooklyn District Public Health Office, 2006. Web. 18 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/dpho/dpho-brooklyn-report2006.pdf>>.





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