

# COMMENTARY

## HARTFORD RESIDENTS HUNGRY FOR A SUPERMARKET DOWNTOWN

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It came as no surprise when a recent national study ranked Hartford as the country's eighth worst city — among cities with 100,000 to 250,000 residents — for providing access to healthy foods for its low-income residents. New Haven was fifth in the same category. Connecticut fared no better among states, ranking fourth from the bottom.

Approximately 30,000 residents of Connecticut's capital city — or nearly 1 out of every 4 residents — live in a designated "food desert," which describes an area where access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables is especially challenging. Sadly, most of these 30,000 live within a mile of the state Capitol in Hartford's downtown.

Not including the downtown population of about 2,000 residents, the rest of Hartford's food desert dwellers live in low-wealth neighborhoods of predominantly black and Latino households in the city's Clay Arsenal, Upper Albany, Northeast, Asylum Hill, Frog Hollow, South Green and Sheldon-Charter Oak neighborhoods.

In Hartford, nonprofit organizations such as the Knox Parks Foundation and Hartford Food System have done yeomen's work in building a network of community gardens and farmers markets operating throughout the city during the summer and fall months. Hartford Food System has also worked to persuade corner store operators to offer healthy options such as bananas and broccoli next to the multiple aisles of chips, soda and candy bars.

Nevertheless, with a large percentage of residents relying on public transportation to get to a grocery store and only one full-service supermarket of more than 35,000 square feet in the city — compared to neighboring West Hartford with seven such markets and approximately half the population — access to healthy food is severely limited.

Political leanings aside, one of the widely applauded programs from the Obama administration that has received solid support from Democrats, Republicans and independents alike has been the 2010 Healthy Food Financing Initiative. This collaborative effort that joined the forces of the U.S. Treasury Department, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, acknowledged the increasingly expensive epidemic of obesity in the U.S. — an epidemic that has hit low-wealth communities of color like those in the city of Hartford especially hard. The program's goal is to help establish grocery stores and other healthy food retailers in the nation's underserved urban and rural communities.

In some studies, obesity rates were nearly 50 percent higher among residents of poor neighborhoods, in part because healthy food options are frequently few and far between in such communities.

The Healthy Food Financing Initiative provides creative financing and technical support for efforts to increase access to healthier foods for low-wealth communities. As a community development financial institution, or CDFI, the Hartford Community Loan Fund receives technical support for our work in this field from the CDFI Fund within the Department of the Treasury. This assistance enabled us to commission a market study that revealed that the grocery-buying power of residents currently living in Hartford's food desert is sizable enough to support a full-service supermarket were one to be established near the city's downtown.

The continuing success of such a supermarket, however, would depend on it having ample and easily accessible parking, being on public transit lines, offering competitively priced groceries and providing a large enough selection of foods to appeal to the wide diversity of residents living in Hartford's center city neighborhoods. The former Market at Hartford 21, a small upscale market located downtown that opened and closed in 2011, met none of these criteria.

With a strong commitment from Gov. Dannel P. Malloy to help build a vibrant downtown Hartford, now is the time for the state and city to work together to bring a new full-service supermarket to Hartford — one that will offer healthy, fresh foods to residents of the city's downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

Let's end the drought in Hartford's food desert.

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*Rex Fowler is executive director of the Hartford Community Loan Fund. A resident of the city's Northeast neighborhood, he travels to Bloomfield to buy most of his groceries.*