



City of Las Vegas Food Access Policy and Planning Guide

INTRODUCTION/EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 2008 report from Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity outlines why food access is relevant for policy makers:

- The U.S. Surgeon General, in his Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity, recommends that governments create policies that promote environments in which healthy dietary options are easily accessible.
- Effective obesity prevention policy addresses changes to the environment, which help individuals take responsibility for improving their own nutrition. Increasing access to healthy foods by facilitating grocery store location for those who lack access is an example of such a policy.
- Prevention of obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease can significantly decrease health-related costs that burden both government and the individual.
- Bringing supermarkets to low-income areas, and helping smaller groceries expand their stock of healthy and affordable items, is a win-win situation for communities and residents who gain:
 - Access to healthy foods
 - Increased potential to reduce obesity through healthy eating
 - New jobs
 - Increased revenue
 - Increased potential for commercial revitalization
 - Capacity-building of community organizations and coalitions
- Local businesses will also benefit from:
 - Market expansion and increased revenue
 - More foot traffic to neighborhoods
 - Contributing to the community's public health and economic well-being

LOCAL IMPLICATIONS

The term "food desert" is increasingly being used by to describe areas that lack adequate access to healthy food, typically in the form of a supermarket. In 2012, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) created a food desert definition that is tied to a robust methodology. The Department of Planning evaluated this methodology and determined that 42,708 City residents (7.2 % of the population) lived within areas which can be considered "food deserts". For discussion purposes, staff depicts these areas on five maps within this Guide.

THE ROLE OF PLANNERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Improving food access involves changing the built environment in which our neighborhoods develop and operate. Because planning and policy shape this landscape, improved food access relies on policy makers to understand the importance of the issues and the tools available to work toward solutions. While it may seem that healthy eating and active living policy is the exclusive work of public health departments, it is planners and developers who shape the neighborhoods and layouts of cities. These policies have health consequences even if planners are not used to thinking in these terms. Increasing food access also creates positive benefits beyond the public's health, such as offering economic development opportunities for small business owners and creating more walkable and livable neighborhoods.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Guide is to address one of the City's key health challenges. The following key concepts have informed policy in the study, and are intended to address this issue.

PROMOTE LAND USE AND TRANSPORTATION DECISIONS THAT SUPPORT HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

The development patterns of the City – how the land uses are arranged, the urban form is constructed, and the streets designed – should allow people to bike more, walk more, and have greater access to healthy food. This can be achieved by focusing development in mixed use districts and along major transit corridors, constructing a diverse mix of uses throughout the City and providing neighborhood retail and services within the majority of residences. It can also be achieved by creating attractive and safe pedestrian and bicycle facilities and by promoting high-quality transit service.

PROVIDE EASY AND AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOODS

The City should encourage increased access to affordable nutritious food for all residents, particularly children. The City should also work to retain and expand access to existing healthy food retailers, such as grocery stores and farmers' markets. It should use economic development, land use, and other incentives to attract new retailers and encourage the selection of healthy food options at restaurants, stores, and other food vendors that already exist in the City. The City should also support the creation of community gardens and farmers markets throughout the City.

SCOPE

The primary scope of this report is to provide policies related to municipal land use and the built environment that can remove barriers to community members' physical access to healthy food. The following types of policies are not included within the scope of this report:

- Restaurant menu labeling and regulation
- Tax policy (e.g., candy and soda)
- Institutional purchasing guidelines
- School district level nutrition, procurement, and vending policies
- Farmland and natural resource preservation
- State level policy

While we acknowledge that policy change across these categories impacts the healthy food access issue, they are beyond the scope of this Guide, which is intended to focus on land use and other policies that can be implemented at the municipal level. However, it should be noted that in addition to policies intended to increase access to supermarkets, this Guide also includes policies intended to reduce barriers to community gardens and promote farmers markets. Such gardens and markets can bring locally-produced food to consumers to improve their diets, as well as link consumers more closely to their neighbors, to the land, and to the people who produce their food.

Most residents of the city of Las Vegas enjoy a variety of options for purchasing food to eat at home. Yet in some areas, residents have limited access to fresh, healthy foods at a reasonable cost. This limitation can affect both their well-being and their budgets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reports that people without access to full-service grocery stores tend to depend on fast food outlets or convenience stores that may not carry the variety of foods needed for a healthy diet. It also reports that convenience stores often charge more than grocery stores for the fresh, healthy foods, which can deter people from eating a balanced diet. Clearly, identifying areas in which residents have inadequate food access has the potential to improve public health and quality of life.

The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 recognized this situation when it defined a "Food desert" as an area "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities." About 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in low-income areas that are deemed food deserts, according to the White House website.

While food deserts and swamps (geographic areas marked by high densities of unhealthy food options) are prominent aspects of a failure in food access, they do not tell the complete story. Public health strategies are lost without an awareness of the food system—or the interlinked network of processes, resources, and policy and regulatory tools required to produce, process, distribute, access, and consume food—and its connection to other urban systems (such as land, housing, transportation, parks and recreation, etc.). Recent research has begun to examine food access more comprehensively, taking into account the nuances of place, people, and policy that interact and reinforce each other. As a result, food access is not simply a health issue but also a community development and equity issue. For this reason, access to healthy and affordable food is a key component in a healthy, sustainable community.

Increases in rates of obesity and related chronic diseases that may be linked with poor diets, such as diabetes and heart disease, are major public health concerns. Some advocates and community leaders are concerned that these problems, and poor diets in general, may be more severe in certain portions of the City of Las Vegas because these areas have limited access to affordable and nutritious foods. A primary concern is that some areas do not have access to supermarkets, grocery stores, or other food retailers that offer the large variety of foods needed for a healthy diet (for example, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fresh dairy and meat products). Instead, individuals in these areas may be more reliant on food retailers or fast food restaurants that only offer more limited varieties of foods. This relative lack of access to full-service grocery stores and the easier access to fast and convenience foods may be linked to poor diets and, ultimately, to obesity and other diet-related diseases.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

QUALITY OF LIFE AND HEALTH BENEFITS

Residents in some areas have limited opportunity to buy fresh, nutritious food, which may reduce their chances of preparing healthy meals. Large amounts of the household food budget may be spent in establishments not carrying fresh foods, such as discount stores and convenience stores.

Improved access to neighborhood grocery stores and supermarkets would reduce food costs. Additional stores could also increase convenience and the availability of fresh foods, empowering consumers to make healthier decisions about what to buy and what to eat.

In 2006, a study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found the presence of a supermarket within a Census tract was associated with lower prevalence ratios of obesity and overweight residents. The article defines supermarkets as any of the following: ‘large corporate owned “chain” food stores, distinguished grocery stores, or smaller non–corporate-owned food stores’.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BENEFITS

Policy Link is a national research and action institute which strives to advance economic and social equity. In their 2010 report, “The Grocery Gap, Who Has Access to Healthy Foods and Why It Matters”, they indicate that the following economic benefits are associated with the introduction of new neighborhood grocery stores:

- Increases in property values, which expands the city’s tax base and creates jobs;
- Full-line food stores are high-value magnets that attract complementary stores and services, creating opportunities for additional private sector investment.
- New stores also contribute to the physical revitalization of communities.

BARRIERS

The Food Marketing Institute has identified the following barriers to grocery store development in low access areas:

INADEQUATE DEMOGRAPHIC BASE

Most grocery retail chains have well-defined store formats that they have developed to successfully serve a certain number of customers and achieve profitable sales volumes. Depending on competition from other types of grocery outlets in the area, attracting a sufficient customer base to successfully sustain a grocery store can be challenging. Typically, grocery chains look for areas capable of supporting their format rather than redeveloping their store

concepts to fit a particular geographic or demographic area. For example, if a chain typically builds 48,000 square foot supermarkets designed to serve 20,000 people, it makes little sense to offer that format in a county of 2,000 residents. Similarly, a store located in a low income urban area will have a greater chance of success if they are able to attract customers from surrounding neighborhoods possessing other economic demographics.

HIGH INVESTMENT COSTS

It is time consuming and expensive for grocery retailers to redesign their core store formats. To do so means higher investment costs and requires modification of business models, hiring practices and inventory requirements. While some chains do have flexibility in their store formats and approach, from a business standpoint, retailers need a fairly high confidence level that the store will succeed since most tend to avoid financial risk. There are many initial costs involved with building a new supermarket, including but not limited to the initial purchase of real estate, site preparation, construction, acquisition of permits for operating, equipment and shelving as well as workforce training needs. These costs are magnified and investments are jeopardized if there are delays in any of these areas. The typical supermarket takes between five and seven years before its initial investment costs (\$8 to \$25 million dollars) are recovered.

HIGHER OPERATING COSTS

Insurance and Security Costs: In high crime areas, insurance for damage and loss and providing extra security are necessary for store operation. Whether the security issues are real or perceived, the additional costs are necessary to address customers' need to feel safe while shopping.

FINDINGS

METHODOLOGY

The term "food desert" is increasingly being used by researchers and policymakers to describe areas that are not within walking distance to healthy food, typically in the form of a supermarket. In 2012, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) created a food desert definition that is tied to a robust methodology that considers the following factors:

1) Distance to Supermarket: Based on empirical studies, it can be assumed that households using public transit to get groceries, as many low income residents do, would not walk farther than ¼ mile with groceries. Bearing this in mind, a ¼ mile distance measure was included within the CLF definition.

2) Poverty Measure: Low income areas are identified by median household income at the block group level. The CLF definition considered 185% of the Federal Poverty Level or below to be "low income," as this amount is used to qualify for federal nutrition assistance programs. Low income households may be adversely affected without competitively-priced fresh food available at the neighborhood level. The consequences include more time and money being budgeted for grocery shopping.

3) Vehicular Availability: A comprehensive literature review was completed to determine an appropriate percentage or threshold of the population negatively impacted by the lack of access

to a vehicle. The Hopkins Food Desert Definition cited 10-35% or more of the population as a significant percent. However, based on the climate and transit accessibility, Department of Planning staff finds that areas where over 20% of households have no vehicle available should be included within the designated Food Desert Areas of the City of Las Vegas.

Based on these factors, for purposes of this study, the City of Las Vegas Department of Planning has defined a food desert as:

“An area where the distance to a supermarket is more than ¼ mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, and over 20% of households have no vehicle available.

Included within this Guide are five maps that depict those areas which, based on the preceding definition, are considered to be Food Deserts. These maps were developed using Geographic Information System (GIS) software. Each of these factors were mapped individually and then layered based on geographic locations. Supermarkets were defined as stores with all food departments present, including produce, meats, seafood, canned goods, and packaged foods. When combined with the methodology created by the Johns Hopkins Food Desert definition, the map indicates that 42,708 residents (7.2 % of the population) live with high need for grocery stores and supermarkets.

AREA POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT A SUPERMARKET

The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) is a national leader in the financing of neighborhood revitalization, and has invested \$1 billion in communities since 1985. TRF finances projects related to housing, community facilities, supermarkets, commercial real estate and energy efficiency. It also provides public policy expertise by sharing data and analysis via www.policymap.com.

TRF recently conducted a national study in which they identified areas with Limited Supermarket Access (LSA) (<http://www.trfund.com/TRF-LSA-widget.html>). This study also identifies LSA areas which have an unmet demand for food (also known as leakage). After determining LSA areas, TRF assesses the area's market potential to support a new store by calculating area leakage. Leakage is determined using data on existing store locations and annual sales reported for each store as compared with estimated resident expenditures on food. Knowing where these stores are and how much demand is captured by existing stores is important when considering if attracting a new supermarket is a viable strategy.

TRF determined that \$12 million is the average annual sales volume for full-service supermarkets. This number is a good benchmark to consider when evaluating whether an LSA area has the required unmet demand to sustain a store. For areas that do not meet the \$12 million leakage threshold, the LSA-area population may be small (with a limited amount of unmet demand), or the area may contain numerous alternative stores (including conventional pharmacies) that capture the existing demand for food. Areas with leakage below \$12 million may still provide an investment opportunity for interested parties to finance the expansion of existing stores, allowing stores to offer a greater diversity of types of foods. Low leakage areas may also represent places where communities can consider programs that increase access

through alternative means, such as farmers markets, transportation programs to stores or efforts to support existing stores in expanding their selection of food items.

While it is important to improve access, not all areas with inadequate access have the market potential to support a new full-service supermarket. Further, the opening of a new store is likely to affect the revenue of existing stores within a given area. The supermarket industry is highly competitive, with relatively low profit margins compared to other industries. According to the Food Marketing Institute, “the typical grocery store’s profit after taxes is approximately 1.3%, with the average store taking in approximately \$6,000 per week in profits based upon median [weekly] sales of \$466,000.”

The estimated level of leakage provides both decision-makers and staff with a way to distinguish between low-access areas that could support a new full-service supermarket and those in which providing other forms of food retail might be a more viable, sustainable strategy. For areas that can support a new full service supermarket, the potential economic benefits that grocery stores can bring to their communities serve as a strong incentive for intervention.

UNDERSERVED AREAS

The primary challenge while preparing this Guide was in identifying where the problem is most pronounced and determining the appropriate response. First, staff sought to create a valid and reliable measure of access to healthy food and to subsequently identify underserved areas (Food Deserts) within the City of Las Vegas. These underserved areas are shown in greater detail on maps designated as Areas 1 through 5. Once the areas were identified, the next step was to review the characteristics of those areas and determine the opportunities for, and barriers to, healthy food access. From that review, staff prepared a series of policies and implementation actions that staff intends to add to the various elements as part of the scheduled updating of those elements.

AREA 1: Decatur Boulevard between Smoke Ranch Road and Lake Mead Boulevard;

This underserved area consists of single-family and multi-family residential areas which are more than ¼ mile from a supermarket at the southwest corner of Lake Mead Boulevard and Decatur Boulevard. Staff’s evaluation of data obtained from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) website indicates there is not a sufficient amount of unmet retail food demand in this area to support a new full-size supermarket. However, staff notes that the majority of residences in this area are at most a half-mile walk (10 minutes) to an existing shopping center on Decatur Boulevard, which includes a supermarket and other commercial uses. Therefore, staff has included a recommendation for the creation of a Walkable Community Plan for this area as part of Policy/Action FDS 1.1.3, described within the Goals suggested by this Guide.

AREA 2: Martin L. King Boulevard between Bonanza Road and Lake Mead Boulevard;

This underserved area consists primarily of single-family and multi-family residential areas which are more than ¼ mile from a supermarket at the southeast corner of Owens Avenue and J Street. Evaluation of data obtained from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) website indicates there

is not a sufficient amount of unmet retail food demand in this area to support a new full-size supermarket. However, staff notes that the majority of residences in this area are at most a half-mile walk (10 minutes) to an existing shopping center which includes the previously described supermarket and other commercial uses. Additionally, the majority of this area lies within the Historic West Las Vegas Walkable Community Plan. This plan includes recommendations which will enhance pedestrian connectivity to the nearby commercial areas.

AREA 3: Vicinity of Eastern Avenue and U.S. 95;

This underserved area consists of single-family and multi-family residential areas which are more than ¼ mile from supermarkets located along Charleston Boulevard and Eastern Avenue. In regard to the area south of U.S. 95, staff notes that a Walkable Community Plan that focuses generally on the intersection of Charleston Boulevard and Eastern Avenue is currently being prepared. This plan will include recommendations which will enhance pedestrian connectivity to the nearby commercial areas which include grocery stores.

The area north of U.S. 95 would also benefit from improvements designed to enhance pedestrian access to the existing commercial shopping areas (including three supermarkets) located at the intersection of Bonanza Road and Eastern Avenue. A recommendation for a Walkable Community Plan which focuses on this area is part of this Guide.

AREA 4: Las Vegas Boulevard between Owens Avenue and Sahara Avenue

Staff's evaluation of data obtained from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) website indicates there is possibly a sufficient amount of unmet retail food demand in this area to support a small grocery store. Grocery store developers must conduct additional research to determine the feasibility of such a store.

Staff notes the majority of this area is within the Downtown Centennial Plan. Should a grocery store be constructed in the area, there are existing goals and policies which encourage pedestrian access to all future commercial development.

AREA 5: The south side of Sahara Avenue between Interstate 15 and Arville Street.

This underserved area consists of single-family and multi-family residential areas which are more than ¼ mile from supermarkets located at the intersection of Sahara Avenue and Valley View Boulevard. Evaluation of data obtained from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) website indicates there is not a sufficient amount of unmet retail food demand in this area to support a new full-size supermarket. However, staff notes that the majority of residences in this area are at most a half-mile walk (10 minutes) to existing shopping centers which include the previously described supermarkets and other commercial uses. Therefore, staff has included a recommendation for the creation of a Walkable Community Plan for this area within the Goals suggested by this Guide.

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the Food Access Policy and Planning Guide should occur through the development and completion of a number of subsequent initiatives. This Guide is intended to act as a broad set of overarching policies. It is intended to have direct linkages with, and provide direction to future updates of the General Plan, the Unified Development Code, and other plans, codes, and regulations. It is intended that those updates would include proposed revisions that could increase access to healthy foods and decrease access to unhealthy food retail outlets where appropriate.

GOAL 1: Safe, convenient access to healthy foods for all residents

OBJECTIVE FP 1.1: Encourage safe, convenient opportunities to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy, affordable foods in all neighborhoods.

POLICY FP 1.1.1: Within developed areas of the City, the attraction and retention of high quality grocery stores and other healthy food purveyors should be pursued as an economic development strategy. Healthy food outlets include full-service grocery stores, farmer's markets, fruit and vegetable markets, and convenience stores or corner stores that sell a significant proportion of healthy food.

POLICY FP 1.1.2: As development occurs in previously undeveloped areas, the City will encourage design choices which result in residential neighborhoods being within a ¼ -mile walking distance of a healthy food outlet.

POLICY FP 1.1.3: The City should remove barriers to farmers markets. This includes pursuing new farmers markets in transit-accessible locations, supporting expanded transit service to bring residents to and from the farmer's markets, and allowing farmers markets on public property at minimal cost to the vendors.

POLICY FP 1.1.4: The Department of Planning will review the General Plan, the Unified Development Code, and other plans, codes and regulations in an effort to remove barriers to the operation of Community Gardens.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.1.5: The City should investigate the creation of a Virtual Supermarket Program (VSP), similar to the innovative, award-winning "Baltimarket" program operated by the Baltimore City Health Department. This program uses an online grocery ordering/delivery system to bring food to areas designated as "Food Deserts". The VSP enables neighborhood residents to place grocery orders at their local library branch, school or senior/disabled housing site or from any Internet enabled computer or device. Residents pick up their order weekly at their community site. This type of program would likely be undertaken in cooperation with the Southern Nevada Health District and would seek funding from outside grants.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.1.6: The Department of Planning will create Walkable Community Plans focused generally on the following intersections:

Lake Mead Boulevard and Decatur Boulevard;

Bonanza Avenue and Eastern Avenue;

Sahara Avenue and Valley View Boulevard.

OBJECTIVE FP 1.2: Avoid concentrations of unhealthy food retailers and liquor stores within the City.

POLICY FP 1.2.1: New drive-through restaurants should be discouraged from locating near schools.

POLICY FP 1.2.2: The City will avoid concentrations of liquor stores in all areas of the City.

OBJECTIVE FP 1.3: Provide opportunities for community gardens and support farmers markets to increase access to healthy, local, and affordable foods encourage community-building, and support local agriculture and economic development.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.3.1: The City will support the use of public and private vacant lots, including school yards, for community gardens, as feasible or appropriate.

POLICY FP 1.3.2: The Department of Planning will create a list of suggested fruit and vegetable crops intended to minimize water usage.

POLICY FP 1.3.3: The City will ensure that community gardens can be located in all areas of the City.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.3.4: Support farmers markets and community gardens by reviewing and updating the Public Facilities Element to include an inventory of properties owned by the City and determine where there is unused land that the City could provide to the public for these purposes.

POLICY FP 1.3.5: Encourage the operation of at least one farmers' market[s] in the designated Food Desert areas.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.3.5: The dedication of land for neighborhood centers, public parks, squares, or plazas or comparable uses that can be used for farmers' markets in new developments shall be encouraged.

OBJECTIVE FP 1.4: In partnership with the Southern Nevada Health District, the City shall encourage operators of existing convenience stores to offer healthy food and fresh produce alternatives.

POLICY/ACTION FP 1.4.1: The City should investigate the creation of a Healthy Convenience Store Program (similar to one found in Minneapolis, Minnesota) intended to support owners and operators of existing convenience stores in making healthy food and fresh produce more visible and affordable to neighborhood residents. This type of program would likely be undertaken in cooperation with the Southern Nevada Health District and would seek funding from outside grants.

Discussion: For existing small stores like corner markets and convenience stores, the challenges lie not only in developing the capacity to carry fresh foods (refrigeration, food handling knowledge, finding appropriate distribution source), but also in marketing this new product selection (via exterior and point of sale signage, as well as standard store advertising in newspapers, blogs, and radio). Incentives and grants could target either or both of these purposes.