Posted on Thu, Dec. 28, 2006

Urban grocery gap grows

Supermarkets are few and far between in many parts of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Experts call these neighborhoods 'food deserts,' where the dearth of quality groceries is more than an inconvenience.

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Pioneer Press

Leon Davis is out of milk.

The ordeal begins. Grab a coat. Trudge to a bus stop. Catch one bus downtown, then wait for another. Get on, then off at the Aldi store. Carry as much as his bad back will allow — milk, apple juice, bread. Then take two buses home.

Total time: 2½ hours.

'It's a hassle for real,' said Davis, a beefy 54-year-old student at St. Paul College, where he's learning to be a receptionist. 'I'd call it a real headache.'

Much of St. Paul has the same headache. An analysis by the Pioneer Press shows that Davis lives in what health experts have called a 'food desert' — an urban area with few supermarkets and, therefore, limited access to cheap, healthful food.

It may be common knowledge that urban areas don't have the quality or quantity of food stores enjoyed by suburbs. But the grocery gap has become a chasm that is alarming experts and shoppers alike — food deserts now engulf one-third of St. Paul and more than half of Minneapolis neighborhoods.

"It's almost scandalous," said Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak. "I believe there is a direct connection between lack of healthy food and poor health. This is a huge issue for us."

In the Twin Cities, several suburbs have more than 20 times the food stores per capita as in the food deserts.

And the shortage of food stores is made worse by a shortage of cars — nearly one out of five households in Minneapolis and St. Paul food deserts don't own vehicles. (One caveat: In Minneapolis and some of the smaller suburbs, neighborhood boundary lines are drawn smaller than those in the capital city. That means some food-desert residents may in fact live close to a grocery sitting just across a boundary.)

In these urban areas, people rely on convenience stores, with higher prices and a limited selection of fruits and vegetables. Some experts say that could be a factor in why inner-city populations have higher rates of food-related illnesses, including heart disease, obesity and diabetes, than do suburbanites.

"This certainly is a social justice issue," said Dianne Blaydes, a researcher who studied access to healthful food in Hennepin County in 2002.

Trying to link stores with disease rankles people in the food industry. They say food stores — like any other retail outlet — are built to make money.

Anyone determined to eat healthfully can do so, they say, even where it may be less convenient.

"People are responsible for their own actions," said Elliott Olson, president of Dakota Worldwide Corp., a consulting company for supermarket chains.

Urban food stores

The Pioneer Press began its analysis with a list of store locations from the Chain Store Guide, which provides data for the

retail food industry.

A guide spokesman said the list might miss some stores because of incomplete information from corporations or changes in ownership. So the Pioneer Press cross-checked its list with one from the Minnesota Department of Commerce and added 49 stores — most too small to make the original list.

The final list has 230 metro-area supermarkets. The food industry defines these as stores with annual sales of more than $2 million for a chain store or $250,000 in sales for an independent store.

It also includes 729 convenience stores, defined as smaller stores with sales below the supermarket benchmarks. These usually also sell gasoline; many urban stores that call themselves groceries or markets fall into the convenience-store category, by industry standards.

The analysis punctured a myth — that urban convenience stores make up for the lack of supermarkets. There are one-third fewer convenience stores per capita in urban areas than in suburbs, but urban shoppers depend on them because the lack of supermarkets is even more severe.

St. Paul's food desert includes the neighborhoods of Greater East Side, Payne-Phalen, North End, Dayton's Bluff, Hamline-Midway and Thomas-Dale — 130,000 people with 41 convenience stores. The single supermarket is the Rainbow Foods store on Arcade Street, although three stores — Aldi, a Rainbow and a Cub Foods — sit on University Avenue, which forms Hamline-Midway's southern border.

The grocery gap is compounded by a transportation gap. The proportion of households without vehicles in food-desert areas is nearly four times as high as it is in Twin Cities suburbs. People who shop via taxis and buses find it tougher to eat healthfully — because they have to carry bags of food greater distances.

"It isn't fair to me or to senior citizens," said St. Paul shopper Davis, after lugging his groceries home on a bus.

Measuring food quality

Other studies parallel the findings of the Pioneer Press analysis.

Blaydes' 2002 study found that the core region of Hennepin County had one-fifth as many supermarkets or warehouse stores as the county's suburban areas.

She developed a "marketbasket score" to measure quality, variety and price of food — literally comparing apples to apples.

"We wanted to know: Has that orange been around for five days or five months?" she said.

Her conclusion? Bigger is better. And cities are a poor place to be hungry.

On a 40-point scale, convenience stores had an average of 6 points on her marketbasket score; small grocery stores pegged 8; larger grocery stores, 21. Suburban-style supercenter and warehouse stores were given a 29.

Urban food 'gems'

To be sure, no one is starving in the food deserts. St. Paul officials say that while the core cities may not have many supermarkets, there are many other pleasant places to shop.

Nick Shuminsky, spokesman for St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, said industry standards overlook many unique "gems," including farmers' markets and small ethnic shops.

One is the Makola African Market on University Avenue. The tiny store stocks foods unknown to most suburbs, such as whole dried catfish displayed in a basket. But missing are apples, broccoli or spinach.

"Oh, you go to Cub Foods for produce," shrugged clerk Eunice Boteng, watching a Ghanaian movie from a sofa. That would mean going more than a mile east on University.

Several St. Paul shoppers said the "gems" aren't suitable for daily needs, from milk to bread to lettuce. Farmers'

markets, they pointed out, are open only a few days a week in warm weather.

"They don't have good stores around here. It's downtown living," said Tom Van Slyke, a 50-year-old St. Paul house painter, as he carried his two boxes of cookies out of a store near Mears Park.

"They are always out of bread. They are overpriced. It's convenience, and that's all it is."

On Monday, that Mears Park store closed.

Suburban shopping

Compared with urban food deserts, the suburbs are grocery nirvana.

The stores are plentiful. Of the 126 locations of Cub Foods, Rainbow Foods, Wal-Mart, SuperTarget and Costco, nine out of 10 are in the suburbs.

They sell food more cheaply, on average, thanks to membership clubs such as Sam's Club and Costco that offer prices an average of up to 25 percent lower than those in traditional grocery stores — and all 12 metro locations of the membership clubs are in suburbs.

Suburban stores are often newer, with expanded produce sections. They are bigger — about 70 percent larger than the average urban store. The quality and especially quantity of food is better.

"This is a beautiful store," said James Fagrelius, who strolled the aisles of the Kowalski's Market in Stillwater. He picked up a mango, then nibbled a sample of the $25-per-pound Clawson Red Leicester cheese with Red Pepper Terrine.

The lushly decorated store, with 65 kinds of vinegar and 250 types of produce, caters to gourmets, manager Steve Zondy said. "It's a whole different level of upscale shopping," he said.

Land, money, convenience

Why are suburbs magnets for supermarkets?

Land — like food — is cheaper in the 'burbs.

The standard suburban supermarket requires seven to 10 acres, according to Mike Sims, vice president for retail for United Properties, which manages retail property. Such a site can cost as much as $150 million, Sims said.

As high as that is, city lots of that size are almost entirely unavailable at any price. That is especially true for the most desirable sites — on busy streets or freeways with easy access and good visibility.

Retail food stores seek growing neighborhoods with money to spend, according to supermarket-building consultant Olson. Once again, that favors the suburbs. Affluent areas such as Stillwater or Lakeville are the darlings of retail, Olson said.

Add to that the perception of lower crime rates and more business-friendly policies, Sims said, and the suburban advantages are overwhelming.

As a result, grocers avoid the cities and cram store after competing store into the suburbs. For example, in 53,000-population Woodbury, shoppers are swamped with choices including Rainbow Foods, Kowalski's, Target, Cub Foods, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club — and a Trader Joe's on the way. In St. Paul, a single supermarket serves one-third of the city.

Life in the desert

Despite some progress, food-desert shoppers find "shop 'til you drop" to be more than a flip slogan.

One fall afternoon, 26-year-old Hamline University law student Kelli Baxter finished shopping at the Rainbow store on University Avenue in St. Paul. She peered through the pouring rain, waiting for a taxi.

After half an hour, she gave up. With three bags on her right arm, two on her left, she staggered across a parking lot to a bus stop.

She had to rest, and put down one paper bag. Big mistake. The bottom got wet, the bag tore open and food tumbled onto the pavement.

She crammed some items into her backpack, some into other bags. But as she climbed onto the bus, the handle of one overloaded bag ripped.

How would she get her food home? "It's just willpower," she said grimly.

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