

FOOD DESERTS – THE NEW OPPORTUNITY

A food desert is defined as an area with little or no access to the foods necessary to maintain a healthy diet. These areas more often than not contain several Quick Serve Restaurants.

In the United States over eleven million live more than a mile from a supermarket. Of those, two million plus do not have access to a vehicle. Over three million live between a half mile and a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle.

Limited or no access to nutritional food is a factor in poor health and lower life expectancy. Problems related to obesity, along with diabetes, cancer, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases are more prevalent in food deserts than they are where access to supermarkets, and their abundance of fresh produce and meat, is easier.

Access is not exclusively one of distance. In reality most suburbanites live further than a mile from a supermarket. But access is also one of how that distance must be traversed. If households do not have a car, access is limited. If the walking commute to the supermarket is impeded by a barrier such as a freeway or unsafe walking conditions, the straight line distance of a half mile can easily double or triple.

Who lives in these food deserts? Predominantly residents have incomes of less than twice the government established poverty level. Most are of non-white ethnicity and/or elderly. A minority live in urban pockets recently re-gentrified where the residents do not own automobiles.

The USDA, federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly more active in placing oases in these deserts. Three of the most active metropolitan areas committed to reducing the number of food deserts are New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Tax incentives and reduced real estate costs are but two of the enticements to open a supermarket in a food deserts.

The question becomes, what kind of supermarket is needed? More often than not, the answer lies in thinking outside the big box. Big box operators in Minneapolis and Chicago have opened a few successful big boxes but 60,000 square foot or larger locations in food deserts are rare, rare indeed.

What is needed depends on the demographics, mobility, ethnicity, income, language spoken at home and lifestyles of the desert dwellers. The prototype that provides water to the thirsty may be as simple as a farmer's market, a grocery cooperative, or a 20,000 square foot limited assortment store. Perhaps it is a 30,000 square foot conventional supermarket that is accurately assorted to the community's preferences.

Dakota Worldwide has been instrumental in placing successful big box supermarkets, neighborhood stores, food cooperatives, and limited assortment stores in food deserts.

We welcome every opportunity to counsel so that deserts have oases while still providing store operators a profitable venture.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan area has fewer food deserts than many metropolitan areas. These deserts have been watered by a variety of different supermarket formats. The associates at Dakota Worldwide welcome you to begin your search for the right format here in our metro. Please call to arrange a guided tour that will aid you in thinking outside the big box.