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Brooklyn's Food Desert



Vegetables at a Bed-Stuy Bravo Supermarket.

by Daniel Bush
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People from Downtown Brooklyn and elsewhere travel to the store to find fresh produce. These days in Downtown Brooklyn, the saying goes, its easier to find a gun than a garden or an apple - or, for that matter, any fresh produce at all.

For many, the controversial demolition of a Myrtle Avenue supermarket that served three major public houses in 2006 helped turn the surrounding neighborhood, which also describes a portion of Fort Greene for longtime residents, into a veritable food desert.

Three years later, fresh, affordable produce is harder to find than ever before, according to a new study released by the community organization Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE).

The study, based on a survey of 150 residents, found that 84 percent of respondents feel they don't have enough food shopping options. Approximately 54 percent said area food stores are too expensive, and lack quality fruits and vegetables.

The survey sample was small, to be sure. But the results, and interviews with city officials, grocery store owners, and residents, indicate food scarcity is a serious problem there. It comes at a bad time, during a recession that has caused a spike in unemployment among public housing residents that far exceeds the citywide rate.

“The availability of shopping choices and the quality of supermarket stores varies greatly across the district,” said Robert Perris, district manager of Community Board 2. In particular, said Perris, people living in and around the Whitman and Ingersoll houses “lack quality choices for food shopping.”

Perris said this has been the case ever since the supermarket magnate John Catsimatidis’ development company Red Apple Group tore down a strip of Myrtle Avenue stores, including an Associated Supermarket, in 2006 to make way for an expensive, multi-building residential complex.

That project, like many others in the area, has stalled, though its first phase is nearing completion.

Catsimatidis, who owns the Gristedes Foods supermarket chain in Manhattan, told the Brooklyn Star the phase one construction of a 98-unit mixed-use building will be finished soon. It will include a supermarket slightly bigger than the one there previously, said Catsimatidis, Red Apple’s CEO.

The supermarket “will be open in February at the latest,” he said.

That should make food shopping easier, but then there’s the question of what kind of supermarket it will be. Will it sell pricey organic products, or cheaper, processed goods? Or some combination of both? Also, importantly, will it accept EBT, WIC and food stamp programs?

In a set of policy recommendations issued with its survey results, FUREE called for affordable alternatives that serve public assistance recipients, among other measures.

Councilwoman Letitia James, for one, said her district would be well served with a Stop and Shop-style store that has inexpensive foods and special sections for organic and other higher-end produce.

“There are models that work and Stop and Shop is one of them,” she said.

Catsimatidis said he hasn’t developed a business model for his new supermarket yet. For other supermarket owners, too, finding a perfect balance of choices for the area’s rapidly gentrifying population - while also turning enough of a profit to afford rent or property costs approaching Manhattan levels - is no small feat.

Alap Vora, who recently opened Concord Market, a smaller grocery store on the corner of

Tillary and Jay streets, said he tries to cater to lower and higher-income residents alike.

His store offers gourmet prepared foods, as well as basic food stuffs such as milk that Vora sells for today's average low price of \$2.99 a gallon. Right now, however, passing discounts on to his customers is difficult to do, he said.

"Our rents kind of reflect what our prices are," Vora said. "There's only so much we can do."

Given this reality - and until Catsimatidis' supermarket opens and the city develops a supermarket at the Brooklyn Navy Yard - residents will be left to fend for themselves for months to come, if not longer.

This will mean more trips to far-off stores in search of good deals and fresh produce. When Beverly Preston visits her mother in Fort Greene, she shops for her at the Pioneer Supermarket on Lafayette Avenue, next to the Lafayette Gardens houses.

Preston said the food quality there isn't bad, but the selection, especially of produce, can be limited. "A lot of fruits I like are not available," Preston said.

Laura, a Clinton Hill resident leaving the same store who only gave her first name, said to find the creme fraiche she loves, she goes to the Trader Joe's on Court Street or into Brooklyn Heights. She said supermarkets in low-income communities oftentimes don't have enough specialty items.

To find healthy, affordable food some Downtown Brooklyn residents travel even further.

Ali Aniella is a manager at a small but lively Bravo Supermarket in Bedford-Stuyvesant with a healthy fresh produce section. He said he gets customers who come all the way from Downtown Brooklyn looking for fruits or vegetables.

"I get people from all over," he said. "They know if they want the quality they have to go look for it."