

Food Deserts

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In a place that is considered to be a food desert, there is a lack of access to healthy, fresh, and affordable food. As defined by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a food desert is an area where there is a significant level of poverty, and more than 33% of individuals live more than 1 mile from a grocery store or supermarket. The USDA estimates more than 23 million people live in food deserts in the US, and since over half of those are from low-income households, the issues associated with food deserts are both wide spread and of serious concern.

Imagine for a moment that you are on a limited income, have no car, and live more than a mile from a grocery store. Either you take what free time you have and walk or take the bus to do your shopping (not an easy task with heavy bags of groceries), or you spend your money on the food that is close by. Often, the only food easily available to people living in food deserts is from fast food restaurants or convenience stores, and much of the inexpensive food available in these places is highly processed, packed with preservatives and sugars, and generally unhealthy. This is contributing to high levels of obesity and related health problems such as heart disease and diabetes among the people living in these areas.

The graphic below is from the USDA's food desert mapping program, and it shows that there are many census tracts in and around the City of Greenville that qualify as food deserts. The green areas are census

tracts where over 33% of individuals live over 1 mile from a grocery store or supermarket. For the people living in these areas, issues like hunger, obesity, and associated health problems can be a very real struggle.

So, what can we do about it? Communities across the country are searching for the answers to this question, and though there is no magic wand that can fix the issue of access to healthy foods, there are a lot of possibilities, many of which are starting to take root in Greenville. Community gardens and the urban farm movement bring fresh, healthy food into cities, and when paired with cooking demonstrations, recipe swaps, or classes, these can be a great starting point. Regular farmer's markets or mobile markets can connect farmers with people that need their food, cutting out the middle man and making fresh fruits and vegetables more affordable. "Pay-what-you-can restaurants," food closets, back-pack buddy programs, healthy corner store or healthy vending machine programs, and co-op grocery stores are also possibilities that are being adopted in many different communities. Increasing the access to and affordability of healthy food is just one way that we can address major social and health issues in our country and make our community more sustainable.

