

Food fight: Detroit's struggle to improve grocery options



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Among caring for her three children and working part-time for several nonprofit organizations, Detroit resident Theresa Mitchell has another responsibility that takes time out of her week: acquiring quality meat and produce from a grocery store not close to her home.

Detroit is the largest city in Michigan by size and population. But it is home to few supermarkets, leaving residents with few options outside of small, independently owned markets. Mitchell, who lives on Detroit's east side, drives extra miles to Kroger locations in Harper Woods and St. Clair Shores to shop.

"There's limited grocery stores in my community, so I actually go outside of my community to go to the grocery store," said Mitchell, 40. "The prices are increased in the city of Detroit, and the produce (offerings) aren't as fresh."

Detroit has attracted a handful of chain grocery stores over the past several years, including Aldi locations at Gratiot and Eight Mile, Plum Market downtown and Meijer markets on Eight Mile at Woodward and Grand River near Telegraph. The Meijer Rivertown Market, a smaller store, [opened a year ago](#) on East Jefferson near the Lafayette Park and Rivertown neighborhood.

The city also has welcomed three new farmers markets since 2020: Jefferson-Chalmers Farmers Market, Palmer Park Farmers Market and East Warren Avenue Farmers Market. But retail analysts say it's an uphill struggle to persuade more chain supermarkets to open in Detroit.

"The population within the (urban) market is economically challenged, oftentimes that means the dollars that they spend aren't as prevalent as the dollars out in the suburban areas," said Louis Scudere, a retail consultant at Riverbend Retail Consulting LLC. "You have to be able to generate \$800,000 to a million dollars a week in sales out of one of these locations in order to economically justify it."

One answer to this challenge is secondary real estate — vacant buildings that can be converted into another business to reduce the cost of development, Scudere said.

"The cost of new construction is so high, which just raises that level of investment to the point that it is just extremely hard for a publicly traded traditional supermarket chain to reach the investment hurdles that they need to justify the investment in the property," he said.

Secondary real estate is the business model Brinda Devine, 59, is using to revive a century-old, 816-square-foot building in northwest Detroit that used to be a grocery store. Devine, who has 25 years of commercial real estate experience, plans to open [Kornr Store](#) at 6224 16th St. in 2023 with healthy food options.

"I'm reading there's a lack of healthy food options. I'm reading there's a lack of retail for personal home goods. Why is this?" Devine said. "The whole experience just turned me to focus on neighborhood development because a lot of commercial real estate development is over on the larger projects. There's always this thought that large projects bring big impacts, but small-scale development, mixed-use developments can make big impacts to a neighborhood, too."

Devine remembers growing up in Detroit with marketplaces in walkable distance from her home. "There are people who shop at liquor stores, convenience stores and dollar stores because there's nothing else around," she said. "It should not be like that. You should be able to walk four to six blocks to a neighborhood marketplace and pick up bread ... milk ... coffee. That should not be insurmountable."

Efforts to add, improve options

The Detroit Food Policy Council, an advisory body established in 2009 by Detroit City Council, is working to increase and improve options for residents.

The food policy council leads the [Detroit Grocery Coalition](#), a collaboration of organizations working to improve and promote the grocery landscape within Detroit. The coalition facilitates the [Great Grocer Project](#) that partnered with Wayne State University to publish ratings of the food options in local grocery stores last year and also runs a program that aims to increase stores' capacity to stock healthy food.

The Detroit Economic Growth Corp. worked with the coalition for the Great Grocer Project and the Green Grocer Project. Lanard Ingram Jr., the DEGC's spokesman, said in an email that the Green Grocer Project gave store operators technical assistance and funding to improve their stores' operations and physical structures.

"Through our existing programs including our portfolio of loan products, and programs such as Motor City Match, we continue to support existing and start-up grocers, other food retailers and food businesses within Detroit's food ecosystem," Ingram said.

The city's number of full-line grocery stores dropped to 64 from 74 between 2017 and 2020, according to the Detroit Food Policy Council. The policy council attributes the decline to grocery markets being converted into dollar stores.

"The issue with that is that dollar stores are not for fresh food typically. People relied on their neighborhood groceries, and that went away, and it turned into a dollar store. ... all of a sudden, their food options are a lot fewer," said Amy Kuras, the food council's research and policy manager. "A lot of what is available at dollar stores is stuff like packaged food and canned foods that can be high in salt, high in sugar and exacerbate health conditions that already fall more disproportionately on people in the city of Detroit."

From 2017 to 2020 — the most recent year for which data are available — the number of dollar stores in Detroit increased to 89 from 73.

"The majority of Detroit is not a geographic food desert as much as it is an 'opportunity desert' where income, time and transportation exacerbate lack of access to good food for health and nutrition," according to the food council's 2020 metrics report. Instead of being a food desert, Kuras likens Detroit more to a "food swamp, where we have too much convenient food and fast food that are available to people in the city."

Seeking a healthy mix

Kate Bauer, an assistant professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Michigan, said attracting supermarkets can help solve food access issues in urban areas, but they're not a cure-all.

"I think it's a good thing, but it needs to be a balance in the community," she said. "You can't have all these outside big box stores come in either because that's also unsustainable for neighborhoods, so it needs to be a mix of businesses so that people who do want to shop at the farmers' market and garden can do that."

In Harper Woods, Kristopher Shina, owner of Vegas Food Center, said small markets like his in and around Detroit often get unfairly compared to chain supermarkets as they do their best to serve their communities. His market, he said, is an "independent retailer in a city that no one wants to come into, corporation-wise."

"I don't accept people saying, 'Oh, we have no other options,'" he said, noting there are two Krogers and a Meijer near his store. "There's options out there; people come here for a reason. If we were not operating with a good conscience, we wouldn't have been here 40 years."

Prices chomp family budgets

Lakeisha Grant, who works as a home visitor and lives in Detroit, said that in her experience, "inner city grocery stores have always been more expensive than big names." Grant, who has daughters aged 15 and 11, said she notices the price difference between city markets and larger chain stores.

"If I wanted to buy a box of oatmeal at the local store, \$10, but it's \$7 at Walmart," she said. "It should be cheaper in the city or the same as the big-name stores."

Grocery prices are a particular concern for Detroit families, as multiple factors drive them up, including supply chain shortages, higher costs for transportation and labor, and the Russia-Ukraine war's impact on grain and oil supplies.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index reports a 13.5% annual increase in local food prices for urban consumers as of August 2022, the largest jump since March 1979.

Cereal, baked goods, sugar, oils and dairy products all rose by more than 16%. Meat, poultry, fish, and eggs climbed 10.6%, and produce gained 9.4%.

David Ortega, a food economist at Michigan State University, calls the inflated grocery prices a "cost-of-living crisis," especially for low-income families, because wages have not increased enough for most households to keep pace.

"Food is a necessity. People have to eat. There isn't really a substitute, you have to go to the grocery store," Ortega said. "What's troubling in particular are the effects of these rising food prices on low-income households and families. These are the individuals that spend more of their income on food."

Ortega says many working-class people will need to make financial adjustments and potentially face "tough decisions in regards to their household budget in order to keep the food on the table."

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