

# Increasing healthy food options makes economic sense

February 10 2012, by Karl Brisseaux

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If there is an obvious truth one can learn from perusing the various dining options on Lehigh's sprawling Asa Packer campus—from the University Center and Rathbone Hall to the sorority and fraternity houses on “the Hill”—it is this: students have access to a broad spectrum of foods within a reasonable distance.

The same, however, is not necessarily true for South Bethlehem's residents. People living blocks away, among the many students who choose to live off campus, may be faced with walking upward of a mile to and from the nearest source of fresh [food](#). And even then, healthy eating options are often expensive or unavailable.

This dilemma, among others, is the focus of Breena Holland's research and was the topic of her lecture Tuesday night as part of the Town Hall Lecture Series at Bethlehem City Hall. An associate professor of political science and a faculty member in the Environmental Initiative, Holland spoke on “Environmental Justice, Food Security, and Public Health: A Future for Bethlehem,” inspiring discussion among the community members, students and faculty in attendance.

The lecture was the first of its kind this year, and is part of a collaboration between the City of Bethlehem and Lehigh's South Side Initiative (SSI), a project co-directed by Seth Moglen, associate professor of English, and John Pettegrew, associate professor of history.

“This initiative is about bringing folks together to tackle the problems

and challenges facing our community,” said Moglen, who delivered the opening remarks. “This is the lifeblood of democracy.”

## **A culture of growing and consuming healthy food**

Holland said that economic status bears heavily on one’s ability to access food, as more money makes people more mobile and secure. However, people earning high incomes are not eating much healthier than poorer people.

“Consumption of convenience food—frozen dinners, box meals and the like—increases with income,” she said. “As income rises, people spend more on food outside of home.”

According to Holland, there are sound economic reasons to support locally grown food and teach residents to make use of the area’s rich land. At more than 800,000 people, the Lehigh Valley is the third-most populated region in Pennsylvania, and residents spend \$1.6 billion on food annually. Of this, only \$5 million—just 0.3 percent—is spent on food grown locally.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of healthy eating, Holland spoke at length about the adverse effect air pollution has on local residents, especially children and seniors. According to a 2005 study on childhood asthma in the U.S., 8 percent of children nationally have asthma, but the Bethlehem Area School District reports a rate of 25 percent. And at Donegan Elementary in South Bethlehem, the rate is 39 percent.

But there are signs that quality of life is improving. Projects such as the South Bethlehem Greenway can help curb pollution. The farmers’ markets at University Square and Steel Stacks offer healthy and affordable foods, community gardens are becoming more common, and

programs are in the works to teach local residents about [healthy eating](#), as well as gardening and cooking techniques.

Said Holland: “What I’m advocating is we need to create a culture of growing and consuming healthy food, and take advantage of the economic opportunity in this area.”

Provided by Lehigh University

Citation: Increasing healthy food options makes economic sense (2012, February 10) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-healthy-food-options-economic.html>

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