

Life in a food desert, where fresh produce is 2 bus rides from home

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Willie Brown carefully guided his cart of groceries off the Trinity Metro Bus. The cart thumped on the ground, and he slowly pushed it across an empty parking lot toward home.

Thirty years ago, that empty parking lot would have been filled with shopping carts and families buying groceries. It would have been where Brown shopped. Now, the Stricks Food Store is empty. Its parking lot at East Jefferson and Evans avenues is used as a gathering place for people who use bus stop No. 5.

The building is a reminder of what the Hillside neighborhood used to be.

"This area is dying," Brown said as he looked around.

Brown has lived in the Hillside neighborhood—within Fort Worth's 76104 ZIP code—since 1964. The USDA identified the area as a [food desert](#)—meaning the community lacks [grocery stores](#) and farmers markets within a convenient distance. Food deserts are heavy on convenience stores that sell mostly processed foods high in calories and low in nutrients.

A study by UT Southwestern found that residents of the 76104 ZIP code have the lowest life expectancy in Texas at 66.7 years. Doctors and residents say the lack of affordable healthy food contributes to the area's poor health.

Most of the deaths in the 76104 ZIP code that the Fort Worth Star-Telegram examined from Tarrant County Medical Examiner's reports occurred in three neighborhoods east of Interstate 35W: Historic Southside, Hillside and Morningside, which are home to just over 13,500 people. The medical examiner's data does not include those who died in a doctor's care, so it provides a glimpse, but not the full picture, of causes of death in the ZIP code.

The No. 1 killer was heart disease, which is caused by a number of risk factors, including smoking, pollution, lack of exercise, high blood pressure, diet and stress.

The neighborhoods, up until the late 1990s, had at least five grocery stores by Brown's count. Now, there are none.

The lack of grocery stores means Brown has to travel up to an hour for food. He refuses to shop in the neighborhood's 11 corner stores. They don't have the healthy foods he and his family want.

Living in a food desert

El Rio Grande Latin Market and Walmart Neighborhood Market are the only grocery stores near Historic Southside, Hillside and Morningside. They're a mile from each other and on the edge of Morningside, at least two and half miles from many residents.

For the 1,118 households in the ZIP code without cars, this can mean an hour-long walk (across a highway to Walmart) or an hour-long round trip on the bus.

Despite his long trip by bus for food, Brown said he's a bargain shopper, so he doesn't stick to just one [store](#). He has at least five mouths to feed (between his children and grandchildren) and needs to save money while providing his family with healthy meals.

Brown, who is retired, has the bus system down.

"If I catch the 5 I have to transfer and catch the 2 downtown if I want to go to Tom Thumb," Brown said. "If I want to go to Walmart, I gotta catch the number 24. The bus system here is a jungle and you gotta know how to swing those buses."

Coming back from Walmart on a Friday, Brown's cart of plastic grocery bags was full of meat, vegetables and canned foods.

Without the bus system, even with its flaws, residents in the three neighborhoods without cars would be left with a Jack in the Box, Mama E's BBQ & Home Cooking, Food For Yo Soul Family Diner, Lloyd's Cafe, Smoke-A-Holics BBQ, Golden Chick, and a 7-Eleven.

Crystal Perry and her son spend their evenings in the kitchen, cooking and eating together while they talk about their day.

Perry, who lives with her aunt, Casandra Wren, usually shops at a corner store.

Wren said she'd like to see a co-op type grocery store, though she calls herself a lucky one for having a car that can take her to the Walmart two miles away.

"I think having a store here would bring people together because we'd all be going to the same place," she said. "It will create jobs and bring in healthy choices."

Health experts say a lack of grocery stores and affordable food in neighborhoods can lead to obesity, heart disease and cancer.

People are more likely to make healthier choices when healthy foods are available, according to a study on food by the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. And the proximity of someone's home to a supermarket correlates with his or her health, the study said.

Supermarkets are less likely to be in lower income neighborhoods and areas with a high proportion of Black residents, like Historic Southside, Hillside and Morningside, the study found.

Even though a CDC study found that only 9% of Americans eat enough

vegetables, a lack of health care (more than 6,000 people in 76104 don't have health insurance) and a lack of early intervention means unhealthy diets hit the poor harder than the middle class.

"The real crux of this is primary care, that's the greatest need, but then you also look at things like food deserts and available healthy foods and obesity, and all of a sudden you realize (life expectancy) is a public health problem as much as a medical problem," said Dr. David Capper, a John Peter Smith Hospital board member. JPS is the only public hospital in Tarrant County.

Eleven Fort Worth ZIP codes have been identified as food deserts.

City officials have discussed bringing in a grocery store as part of their efforts to redevelop the once thriving Evans and Rosedale area in Hillside, said Robert Sturns, the economic development director for the city.

"That's the key component to that area. But we have to ask, what are these food options? What exactly do they look like? Is it a local store? Is it a national chain? I think all these things will be on the table specifically in that project," he said.

The city enlisted developer Hoque Global to redevelop the area.

For years the city has owned a piece of property north of the Evans Avenue Plaza and south of East Terrell Avenue, as well as two strips of land on the east side of Evans. The area has been designated the Evans and Rosedale Urban Village, one of 16 urban villages in the city. These small, densely-populated areas, like Magnolia or the West Seventh district, are designed for foot traffic.

In the latest renderings of the project, which were released last year, the

project includes a hotel and apartment complex and two sets of townhomes. Other buildings include an incubator for small businesses, a maker space and several commercial spaces along Evans Avenue.

The developer wanted to pause and re-evaluate the market with the COVID-19 outbreak in mind, but city economic development officials are hopeful a community meeting will be scheduled this fall.

Thinking outside of the box

Some residents of Historic Southside, Hillside and Morningside want to address the area's food problems in more creative ways.

Brian Dixon, the president of the Historic Southside Neighborhood Association, imagines a food delivery system that involves grocers and the association, which would reduce the need for overhead and additional buildings, like a co-op.

Historic Southside, the smallest of the three neighborhoods, is also the farthest one from the Walmart. The neighborhood's boundaries are south of East Vickery Boulevard and north of East Rosedale Street. A survey found the majority of Historic Southside residents shop at Walmart, Dixon said.

"They're going to continue to shop there," he said. "No other grocery store is going to be able to beat those prices. One way to get groceries into the neighborhood is using us as a neighborhood association. We can play the middleman between our members and an established chain."

Sturns said grocery stores still have to decide if opening a new location will be the most cost-effective move—and with the rise of online shopping and grocery delivery, sometimes the answer is no.

But 66-year-old Louis Sadler said depending on online shopping isn't an option for many of his family members who live in 76104 because they're older and don't use smart phones or computers. Sadler moved to Fairmount about 10 years ago, but still understands the struggles of those living back in his home neighborhood.

"It's hard on the elderly if you don't have family who can help you out," he said. "There's all these food ordering apps but you want to go to the grocery store and do your shopping yourself. These are proud people."

Sturns agreed with Dixon that a nontraditional solution might fix the problem.

"There's talk about looking at alternative models like a food co-op or a more locally based grocery store where an entrepreneur sees that as an opportunity to open," he said. "I think you have to consider all the options to combat the problem. There are opportunities here to think outside of the box."

Others are creating their own solutions in their backyards.

In the back of New Mount Rose Missionary Baptist, seven raised garden beds grow vegetables such as okra, jalapenos, collard greens, zucchini, lettuce, cucumber and an assortment of herbs.

There's no gate to the garden and sometimes someone living nearby will walk into the church yard and pluck the ripe veggies.

The Rev. Kyev Tatum started the garden with the goal of supplying fresh food to people nearby who are in need.

In Stop Six, which is just to the east of 76104 and in a ZIP code with a similarly low average age of death, the Lady Butterfly Urban Farm

distributes foods to students at Marten Logan Elementary. Ashley Hickson, community impact director for the American Heart Association, which partners with the garden, hopes to expand to other areas like 76104.

Reinventing corner stores

The Blue Zones Project—a national health initiative in which Fort Worth is a participant—also wants to look at the food problem a different way.

Because of the group's work, the Cowtown Market, at 3821 Southwest Blvd. near the Ridglea Hills neighborhood, now accepts SNAP benefits, the City Council removed some barriers that prevented [farmers markets](#) from opening in other parts of the city, and the city's first healthy food pantry opened at Daggett Middle School in the Fairmount neighborhood.

Matt Dufrene, vice president of Blue Zones Fort Worth, said the healthy eating pantry is a pilot and that the Blue Zones Project is interested in doing something similar in 76104 schools.

"But it does take partnership, volunteers and funding," he said in an email. "Blue Zones Project continues to explore new opportunities."

What could also work in 76104 is changing the foods and products that corner stores offer to residents.

In 2017, the Blue Zones Project helped revitalize the Ramey Market in Stop Six.

On a warm Monday last fall, owner Sam Moulegiet walked in Ramey Market with a bag of newly purchased fruits and vegetables.

He pulled a head of iceberg lettuce to the front row of the open refrigerator, then reached into his grocery bag and put a new head in the back. He ripped open a mesh bag of avocados and dropped them into an empty basket. He overturned tomatoes to make sure they were still fresh and put them back in place.

Meanwhile, two customers walked by to tell him how much they love his store.

"Healthy people are happy people," he said, looking over his produce to make sure it was perfect.

The store is across from Jacquet Middle School. Students used to purchase chips, muffins or candy before class.

Now they go for fruit—apples and bananas are the most popular choice. Their parents often go for the green veggies after work.

Ramey Market is seen by leaders at the Blue Zones Project as a blueprint for what could be done at the 11 corner stores in Historic Southside, Hillside and Morningside—and Moulegiet thinks those owners should consider partnering with Blue Zones, even though he was hesitant when the project first approached him.

Moulegiet was worried whether people would buy healthy foods and whether he could keep a good stock of affordable selections.

But he found ways to keep the costs low. He shops at restaurant supply stores and only buys produce that is in season.

Sometimes, he said, he might lose a little bit of money if prices on certain produce go up, but he would rather take the occasional loss than not stock his shelves.

"The customers are buying," he said.

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