

Brown bag blues

By: Christian Moises, News Editor June 4, 2007 0



More than half of the grocery stores in Orleans Parish, such as Robert's Fresh Market on Carrollton Avenue and Canal Street, have yet to reopen since Hurricane Katrina, choking off healthy food choices for residents. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

Many Orleans Parish residents, already struggling with a battered health care network, can't even count on an apple a day to keep the doctor away.

With a shortage of supermarkets — there were 36 before Hurricane Katrina cut it to 15 — the city's Food Policy Advisory Committee hopes to provide residents with fresh produce absent from many neighborhoods.

"The current situation is a large majority of people in New Orleans have to drive (to a supermarket), but a good percentage don't have a car," said Dr. Tom Farley with the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. "Stocking up on fresh fruits and vegetables once a week or less isn't frequent enough, so they stock up on long-shelf-life items or they go to the corner store."

That's a problem, said Farley.

A Tulane survey of 219 predominantly low-income Orleans Parish residents found they shop at local convenience stores an average of 11 times per month and 57 percent have to drive more than 3 miles to reach a full-service supermarket.

Only 22 percent of New Orleans adults eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day, according to the survey, which showed 35 percent of neighborhood stores sell fresh apples, 33 percent sell fresh tomatoes, 10 percent sell fresh strawberries and 8 percent sell fresh broccoli. "People assume the New Orleans population wants junk food, that they won't buy fruits and vegetables. But people like fruits and vegetables more than they like burgers and fries," Farley said,

citing the 70 percent of respondents who "would buy" or "might buy" fresh produce if it is available.

In 2006, the Chicago Food Desert study showed higher rates of obesity in neighborhoods farther from a grocery store.

The Tulane survey also showed fewer than 35 percent of neighborhood corner stores sell some kind of fruit or vegetable. Most convenience stores do not carry fresh produce.

Erin Baker, assistant director of the prevention research center at Tulane University's School of Public Health, said a more sophisticated population analysis needs to be done.

"We're looking to create a graphic that will show mortality stats in relation to residents' proximity to supermarkets, which will make a much better argument," she said.

Farley said residents need to eat less caloric snack food and less food with saturated fats, and they need access to more healthy food.

"When everyone lives like that, it becomes part of the culture to eat unhealthy foods, and that's not a healthy way or even natural way (of living)."

Farley said access to fresh produce is extremely important since the leading causes of death such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity are food-related.

Access to fresh produce was limited even before Katrina, and availability has worsened, Baker said. None of the 15 open stores are located east of the Industrial Canal.

The Food Policy Advisory Committee, which received the New Orleans City Council's backing May 3, will issue a list of recommendations to the Council in January, including financial incentives for new and existing businesses, potential funding sources and other innovative solutions.

City Councilman Amie Fielkow said there's been an ongoing discussion in every district about grocers coming into the city.

"More access to supermarkets and healthy foods is good for growth and the economy," Fielkow said. "(Supermarkets) were made a large part of the 17 target zones the city created in the recovery. The more grocery stores that exist, the more residents will be willing to move in."

Farley said people want to live in an area with access to healthy foods.

"If people have to drive across the parish line, then we're losing jobs and sales tax," he said.

Grocery stores must deal with the assumption inner-city stores cannot be as profitable as suburban stores. Many New Orleans residents shop for groceries in the suburbs but others don't have the transportation.

According to the Tulane survey, only 6 percent live within walking distance to a supermarket and only about half own a car.

"What we're really interested in is finding out why these urban supermarkets are reluctant to come in and find out why that stigma exists," Baker said.

Jay Breaux, perishable foods director for Breaux Mart, said the chain is always looking for new locations.

"We are in a position to add several more stores, especially in the Garden District or Uptown," he said.

The committee is trying to follow a similar program successful in Philadelphia.

The statewide Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative has helped open about 25 locations since 2004 to give low-income communities better access to fresh produce.

"Everybody has to eat," said John Weidman, deputy executive director of The Food Trust in Philadelphia. "Our program is a public/private venture that helps to create a financing pool to provide grants and loans to any food retailer, big or small, to set up a new shop or renovate an existing store to provide fresh fruits and vegetables."

Weidman said it's key to work with the supermarket industry to help them better understand the opportunities available.

"You really need to show the operators sites they wouldn't normally look at, and then they realize there are areas that are really underserved."