

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

As Dollar Stores Proliferate Food Deserts, Some Communities Push Back

Dollar stores often fill the gap when grocery stores exit communities. Critics say they make food inequity even worse.

Source: Wesley Brown, CivilEats.com, April 20, 2022

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson, a county commissioner in DeKalb County, Georgia, knows precisely how many “small box” discount stores there are in her 360-mile, suburban county outside Atlanta.

“There are 70 dollar stores, and more than half — 41 — are in my district,” says Cochran-Johnson, who took her oath in 2019. During the 2018 election campaign that swept her into office, a constituent quizzed her about the spread of dollar stores and the lack of healthy food choices in her district, where the residents are more than 80 percent Black.

That conversation stuck with the commissioner, who introduced a resolution to establish a yearlong moratorium on so-called small box discount retailers (SBDRs) in DeKalb County’s seven districts and unincorporated areas in her first week of work. “In part, this moratorium was put in place because of concerns about how SBDRs may be negatively influencing public safety, food availability, and property values in unincorporated DeKalb County,” reads the resolution.

“I am not against the existence of dollar stores — I am a dollar store shopper,” says Cochran-Johnson. “I am against the proliferation of dollar stores in our communities because there is a direct correlation between their presence and food deserts.”

The commissioner points to the fact that Black people in the U.S. face increased rates of several diet-related health disparities, including hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. DeKalb County, where the population of 758,000 is nearly 55 percent African American, is no different.

If you were to map the dollars store in DeKalb County, Cochran-Johnson says, the areas where they are most prevalent would overlap with maps that show the neighborhoods with the lowest median incomes and the most residents of color. For example, the two mostly white districts in north DeKalb County with the highest median income earners are only home to three such dollar stores.

After the DeKalb County Commission easily approved Johnson-Cochran’s resolution to put a moratorium on new dollar stores in early 2019, it defined a SBDR store as less than 16,000 square feet in size. The county’s ban, which also affects some convenience store operators, has since been extended four times, blocking any new applications or permits for the smaller-than-Walmart discount stores.

Those extensions are tied to another part of the resolution that called for a comprehensive evaluation of the effects of small box retailers on the health, safety, and welfare of county residents and businesses, says Cochran-Johnson. Now, the seven-person Commission will consider “next steps,” to address the potential influence SBDRs have on obesity, food availability, food quality, crime, and land value.

“[Dollar store owners] are very clear on their target audience. So, we have to be very clear on what we will and won’t accept,” says the county commissioner.

DeKalb county is just one of a number of municipalities responding to the rapid spread of dollar stores in this way. Kansas City, Kansas was the first to create such an ordinance in early 2016 and in the years since similar bans and moratoriums have taken root in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Mesquite, Texas, as well as larger cities, such as Cleveland, Fort Worth, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans.

The DeKalb evaluation identified 25 cities that instituted these kinds of policies in 2019 and 2020. And while many are drawing a connection between the stores and neighborhood economics, food access is also at the center of the conversation. Yet, despite this backlash, the companies behind the nation’s small box discounters have aggressive plans to continue expanding despite an array of recent, documented health and safety violations.

Fighting ‘Food Deserts’ or Helping Create Them?

Three months after DeKalb County’s moratorium went into effect, Cleveland, Ohio adopted a ban on new construction permits for stores that meet the same small-box store criteria as those in DeKalb. After extending the six-month moratorium several times, Cleveland’s city council unanimously passed a more permanent ban on new stores within two miles of an existing discount store in early 2022.

Former City Council President Kevin Kelley says the small box retailers' proliferation caught Cleveland officials off-guard. The city planning division did a "heat map" to locate the dollar stores, and the results were the same as they were in DeKalb county — "low-income, mostly Black neighborhoods."

Kelley adds that the impetus for the ban must be viewed against the backdrop of the larger grocery stores exiting low-income communities in recent years, thus leaving large areas without access to groceries. "When [grocery stores] started closing, it really left a big gap and dollar stores were very aggressive about filling this void," he says.

Cities enacting new policies are tying local regulations to broader public goals such as formula business restrictions that limit chain retailers as well as specifically targeting dollar stores, says a report released in January by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR). In addition to the dollar store density requirements, these policies can also include incentives to foster better alternatives.

For example, the Tulsa city council outlined its desire for "greater diversity in retail options and convenient access to fresh meats, fruits and vegetables." Meanwhile, Kansas City officials said the purpose of that city's ordinance is to "better regulate the total number and proximity of small box retail stores to assure the best possible opportunity to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the community."

Dollar stores stock very few fresh foods if they stock any. And, as the ILSR put it, "this has exacerbated the problem of food deserts and further eroded the economic prospects of vulnerable communities."

Sriya Shrestha, the researcher behind the DeKalb County study and a professor at California State University Monterey Bay, also points out that dollar stores are specifically targeting those who earn under \$40,000 annually or live below the poverty line.

"Women with families who earn under \$40,000 per year dominate the dollar store model. They purchase only what they can afford to buy now, in smaller packages that often cost more per unit than they would at big box retailer," Dr. Shrestha told Talk Poverty recently.

Nadine Gracia, president of Trust for American's Health (TAH) and the former director of the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), also draws a direct line between dollar stores and food insecurity in poor communities. She said TAH's annual report on obesity ties the proliferation of dollars stores to "unhealthy foods that lead to unhealthy communities."

"We found it was important to talk about that connection between having access to healthy and affordable foods and the risk of being overweight and obesity," Gracia says.

In addition to keeping new dollar stores from being built in close proximity to existing stores, some of the new rules cropping up on cities also outline guidelines for dollar store developers, including requiring them to disclose shelving and floor plans and the types of goods and products the stores will sell.

To encourage the development of stores that sell fresh meat and produce, Tulsa's policy reduces parking requirements for grocery stores by 50 percent in the district covered by the ordinance. Meanwhile, Kansas City's policy exempts stores that dedicate at least 15 percent of shelf space to fresh and frozen food or those that contain a prescription pharmacy from the required special use permit process. Similar research on food access and food insecurity by the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) at Kansas State University have reached those same conclusions in smaller communities where Family Dollar or Dollar General are often the only food retailer in town.

Erica Blair, program manager at the Manhattan, Kansas-based initiative that aims to sustain locally owned rural grocery stores and improve access to healthy foods, told Civil Eats smaller communities have even more complex issues to overcome when they lose access to fresh food. From its research, RGI considers independent grocery stores "anchor institutions" because of the multiple benefits they offer rural communities. Local businesses owners also have a stake in helping small towns prosper.

"They have so many economic benefits and provide access to healthy foods are their community's hubs," says Blair. "So, it really is an existential issue when those communities lose a grocery store."

Possible Response Questions

- Do dollar stores contribute to a food desert in your community?
- Do you support legislation to limit the number of dollar stores? Explain.
- What are your thoughts about "food inequity"?
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.