

October 31, 2009

Pushing Fresh Produce Instead of Cookies at the Corner Market

By KEVIN GRANVILLE

Of all the changes coming to Francisco Baez's cramped corner grocery store in Newark's North Ward, he is most excited about the new scanner system at the two checkouts.

But Newark officials, who are paying for the new equipment, are most interested in the new refrigeration units that will be installed near the front of the store. Those new refrigerators, to be filled with fresh fruits and vegetables, are part of a new effort by Newark — with variations in other cities across the country — to improve the diets of low-income residents.

Until recently, small corner grocery stores were seen by public health officials as part of the [obesity](#) problem.

The stores, predominantly family-owned, offered convenience, but the accent was on snack chips, canned goods and sugary drinks. Now, because they are often the sole source of groceries in areas with no full-size supermarket, the stores are becoming linchpins in public health campaigns.

"If you are educating people to make good choices, but those choices aren't available nearby and they don't have a car to drive out to the suburbs to the supermarket, or an hour to ride two buses to get there," said Kai Siedenburg, of the Community Food Security Coalition, a group based in Portland, Ore., that promotes access to healthy food, "then it's really hard for them to make good choices."

Store owners in Cleveland, New York, Louisville and elsewhere are being approached by public health organizations and economic development agencies with offers of new equipment, marketing expertise or neighborhood promotions to encourage them to stock more fresh produce, whole wheat bread and other healthy offerings.

Newark's program combines community health concerns with targeted grants to reinvigorate stores and neighborhoods.

"Bags of chips and cans of soda are the options in too many of our small groceries and bodegas," said Stefan Pryor, a deputy mayor and chairman of the Brick City Development Corporation, Newark's economic development agency. But, he added, "With the thin margins that small groceries operate under, it's unrealistic to expect them to make the investment themselves."

Other initiatives do it differently. The Cleveland Corner Store Project encourages small groceries to sell fruit

near the check-out — prime locations where candy and chips are usually found — and promotes these stores with sidewalk signs and posters and at neighborhood health events. New York’s “Healthy Bodegas” initiative has reached out to 1,000 stores in a variety of ways, including helping owners secure zoning permits to allow fruit and vegetable displays on the sidewalk. In Louisville, two small groceries were awarded \$20,000 this year to expand their offerings of fresh produce.

The idea of using corner stores in campaigns to improve diets has spread from a few cities over the last decade — among them, Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Hartford and Oakland, Calif. — to “probably a hundred or more organizations that are now either starting interventions or that are in the planning stages,” Ms. Siedenburg said.

Rural areas, too, that have lost local supermarkets to distant big-box retailers are looking for ways to encourage convenience stores to offer healthier choices.

“There are all these neat programs popping up,” said James Johnson-Piett, a consultant to Newark’s program who previously worked with the Food Trust, a nonprofit group that developed some groundbreaking initiatives in Philadelphia.

The movement is driven, in part, by a decades-old problem: the paucity of food shopping options in poor neighborhoods. In Newark, with three supermarkets for a population of 279,000, the city says nearly 40 percent of the money spent on food by residents is spent outside the city.

Campaigns to entice supermarkets, with their expansive produce departments, not to mention scores of local jobs, have met with mixed results. In Philadelphia, a ShopRite opened last year in a low-income neighborhood with help from a Pennsylvania program that provided a \$1 million grant and \$7 million in federal tax credits. New York is considering a similar plan that would include tax and zoning incentives, but few other cities have such a program in place.

Joseph F. Ritchie, who until recently was executive director of the Brick City Development Corporation, said big chains were used to building stores of 50,000 to 70,000 square feet in the suburbs, and typically wanted larger lot sizes than were available in city neighborhoods. (Mr. Baez’s Food Plaza store is about 3,000 square feet.) He said that the chains worried that local residents would not buy the high-margin prepared foods and delicacies that buoy a supermarket’s profit. Finally, he said, there were worries about crime.

But lately, concern over urban “food deserts” has become a rallying cry, as a drumbeat of medical studies link obesity and [diet](#)-related illnesses like [diabetes](#) and heart disease to a lack of access to healthy food. Last year, The American Journal of Epidemiology reported that people with no supermarket near their homes were up to 46 percent less likely to have a healthy diet than those with more shopping options.

“In the absence of making gains with supermarkets, we’re trying to take what’s already there and make it better,” said [Jerry Jones](#), executive director of Hartford Food System, a 31-year-old nonprofit group in Connecticut.

The group encourages store owners to replace 5 percent of their junk food and soft drinks each year with regular groceries, including low-salt selections and produce. In return, it provides the stores with market

research on what neighborhood shoppers are looking for and negotiates low prices from a big produce wholesaler.

Forty small groceries have signed up and are entitled to display a sticker that says “Healthy Food Retailer,” Mr. Jones said. In 2008, after the program had been under way for about year, the Hartford Food System took measurements and reported an overall 8 percent switch of food inventories from junk food to regular groceries.

This low-budget approach is echoed in Cleveland’s corner store program, a joint effort of the city’s public health department and Case Western Reserve University.

Earlier this year, Anne Gross, who with her husband, Gary, has run the Convenient Food Mart in the city’s Near West Side for 36 years, agreed to push aside some of the candy at the front of the store and make room for two wicker baskets of fruit. The program provided colorful signs encouraging healthy eating.

It also promoted her store with events like a cooking demonstration in her parking lot with samples of banana bread, free cookbooks, and sign-ups for local cooking classes.

The result: a 20 percent increase in fruit sales this last summer. “Bananas are No. 1,” said Mrs. Gross, 65. “After that, cherries have done very well.”

Matt Russell, a coordinator with Case Western’s Center for Health Promotion Research who asked Mrs. Gross to participate, said a big part of any initiative was choosing the right store owners.

Selling produce also takes more work than bags of cookies or chips. “There’s obviously some risk in taking on new products for these stores. We’ve talked to them about issues like spoilage,” Mr. Russell said. “It’s different than a lot of the products they already sell. You know, a can of soup can sit there for a long time.”

In Newark, the Fresh Food program met with 80 store owners before choosing Mr. Baez to be the first of a handful to qualify for a grant, Mr. Johnson-Piatt said.

“These are folks who are saying, ‘I think I can move fruits and vegetables.’ That’s what you want to hear,” he said. “You can’t spend all your time trying to cajole people to do something they don’t want to do.”

Mr. Baez said he liked the idea of offering customers an expanded selection of produce. “Will I make any more money?” he asked. “I have no idea.”

In Cleveland, Mrs. Gross still sells her customers beer, doughnuts, lottery tickets and other essentials. “As a business person, I have to provide to them what they want,” she said. But she said she is willing to try to improve the community’s health, one banana at a time. “Even if it just changes a couple of people’s habits,” she said, “it would be a huge benefit.”

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