

Food Deserts: Fighting Injustice in the Birchwood
Community

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Executive Summary

The Birchwood neighborhood is currently listed as a food desert determined by the United States Department of Agriculture. The USDA defines food deserts as “*parts of the country vapid of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers*” (“USDA Defines,” 2015). The Birchwood neighborhood has been classified as a food desert since the closing of their only local grocery store, Albertsons, on May 7, 2016. This is a problem, because a large percentage of the population of the Birchwood neighborhood lives below the poverty line; in 2016 21.1% of the Birchwood community was reported to be living below the poverty line (“Birchwood neighborhood,” 2018). Since the Birchwood neighborhood has such a high number of families living below the poverty line, it is difficult for those families to travel farther to other grocery stores and get the healthy food they need. The Birchwood community also experiences social tension between different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups, which is heightened by blame surrounding criminal activity, and the language barrier that results from thirteen different primary languages being spoken within community.

In this report, we will present compiled information gathered from a variety of primary sources, such as community meetings, rallies and surveys and reveal our recommendations for the most effective short term and long term solutions for the Birchwood neighborhood. After our research and community involvement, we propose that the best short-term solution for the Birchwood food desert is to help the community become more resilient through projects such as establishing community gardens, one of which is currently in progress, creating food share boxes for neighbors to share produce with each other, and helping to strengthen personal relationships within the community.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to help establish a means of making produce and grocery staples more easily accessible to people who currently experience food inaccessibility in the Birchwood community due to the closure of the local Albertsons. Albertsons closed down May 7, 2016. The Birchwood community has been in the midst of a food desert for over two years now, thus speaking to the urgency of this ongoing problem. Albertsons established a non-compete clause that prevents other grocery stores from entering the Birchwood area. Even after the closure of Albertsons, the clause was not revoked, creating a plethora of issues for the Birchwood community. The non-compete clause currently stands for the next 44 years. The standstill of the clause and lack of involvement by City of Bellingham creates a tremendous injustice because it prioritizes corporate profit over community need. A big percentage of the Birchwood community is considered low-income and lacks means of transportation. The lack of food availability within the community leaves community members having to travel great distances to reach the nearest grocery store, Fred Meyers. It takes 17 minutes to reach Fred Meyers by transit (not including

the walking distance to the nearest bus stop) and 30 minutes by foot. This makes grocery shopping especially difficult, if not impossible, for people with disabilities who experience great



difficulty moving around (such as those who are wheelchair bound). In addition, talk about plans to fill the Albertsons lot with a gym have surfaced. A gym does not help the Birchwood community access food but in turn takes space away for a potential grocery store as well as creates competition for a locally owned gym less than a block away. The addition of a gym furthers the injustices Birchwood is experiencing. To address this injustice, we are looking into an array of both temporary and long term solutions to bring healthy food directly to Birchwood. Our stakeholders for this project include both the Birchwood Food Desert Fighter's steering committee, as well as the actual residence of the

Birchwood neighborhood. As students, we recognize and strive to collaborate with these groups in efficient and compassionate ways that help to achieve their goals for their own community.

Outcomes

Since the Birchwood food desert is primarily a community project, we initially decided that our project goals would be hands-on service learning. The concept of installing food donation share boxes for the Birchwood community was initially envisioned by the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters (BFDF) group. Since the BFDF were already working on projects within the Birchwood community, we decided to help assist the BFDF with those projects. Alongside working directly with the BFDF, we also conducted individual research, such as arranging interviews and examining case studies, to suggest possible future solutions for the Birchwood community.

Another important aspect of our project goals was community activism. We attended the BFDF meetings to better learn the needs of the community, understand the current vision for the community, and participate in giving advice for solutions. We also attended the rally that marked the two-year anniversary of the closing of the Birchwood Albertsons, to participate in the community protest, help be a voice to the community, and spread awareness.

Through the close involvement with BFDF and the residents of the Birchwood neighborhood, we have gained valuable knowledge towards planning and implementing projects such as this. We have found that when working with communities that are experiencing food deserts, there are components that need to be considered including income, diversity and the



city councils role in resolving this issue. As students working with the Birchwood neighborhood, we hope to deliver within this report a thorough guideline for other communities to follow when trying to resolve a food desert.

Overall, our project resulted in spreading awareness of the Birchwood food desert and contributing to Birchwood projects, such as the prototype share box map, first share box, and beginning weeding in the Birchwood community garden.



Above are pictures from both BFDF meetings, rallies and vigils

Methodology

Through the process of working on this project with the Food Desert Fighters and Birchwood residents, we have come to understand that the issue of the food desert illuminates the culture of discrimination that occurs within Bellingham. Because Birchwood Food Desert Fighters are a grassroots organization, it has been vital that our communities unite in order to be heard. Programs such as Community to Community, as well as various community gardens have helped to give Birchwood Food Desert Fighters a strong voice.

As we became more involved in our communication and research with the Birchwood neighborhood, we have come to a conclusion that, although a great first step, a new grocery store occupying the space of Albertsons will not solve all of the issues that Birchwood residents have to face. At the BFDF meetings residents voiced their concerns towards gentrification and insufficient community space.

Even though the Birchwood community faces other problems alongside their inaccessibility to food, we decided to focus our project on starting to address the food problem given the short time we had to work with Birchwood. We worked closely with Tina McKim, our primary stakeholder and head of the BFDF, to help construct and install share boxes for the Birchwood community. McKim designed the blueprint for the share boxes and purchased the lumber needed for the share box prior to our first meeting, and using those materials we assembled the main part of the share box. We then had to purchase other building materials necessary for the other parts of the box, such as the door screen, base container, roofing, and

After the completion of the prototype share box and our start on the community garden, we recommend that both of these projects be continued. We recommend that the prototype share box be placed for use, so the BFDF can observe if the system works and get feedback from community members to see if they find the share boxes helpful. If the community likes the first share box, then it would be good for the BFDF to expand this project by creating more share boxes to be placed throughout the neighborhood. Although we did not get to work extensively on the Birchwood community garden yet, we think this is a great resource for the Birchwood community and work on the garden should be prioritized this summer.

This is a multi year and multifaceted project that includes a budget of funds allocated through grants. The BFDF steering committee is responsible for these funds and have plans to continue using them towards supporting community gardens and building more share boxes. When analyzing the impact of shareboxes, we considered the implementation of them within the community and found that they fit within the strategies of the BFDF very well. Because share boxes were proposed by BFDF, we have helped to carry on the vision that was established. By doing so, we have already seen a greater amount of enthusiasm from stakeholders and community members. In continuing to implement these shareboxes and community garden support, the results will continue to have a positive impact on the community.

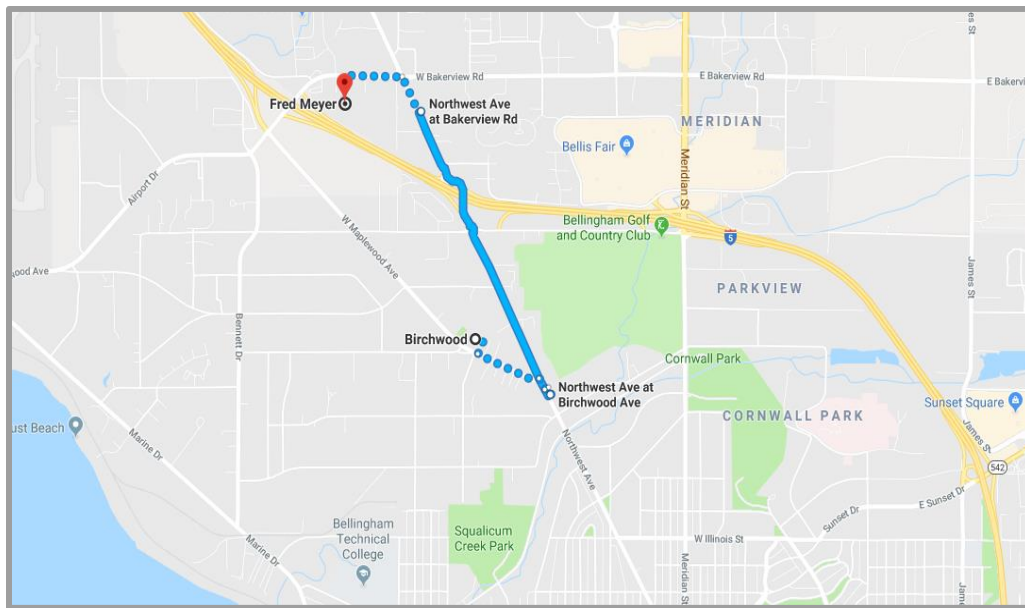
Risks towards implementing these projects include the potential neglect of shareboxes. It is both the BFDF responsibility, as well as the resident whose property the share box is on, to monitor the share box and insure that the food within the boxes do not perish.

In order to fulfill the needs of the Birchwood community it is important for there to be a system of monitoring in place to assess the prosperity of the share boxes and community gardens. The key monitors will include the BFDF and residents within the neighborhood. Through surveying, information towards the success of the shareboxes will be gathered.

Conclusions

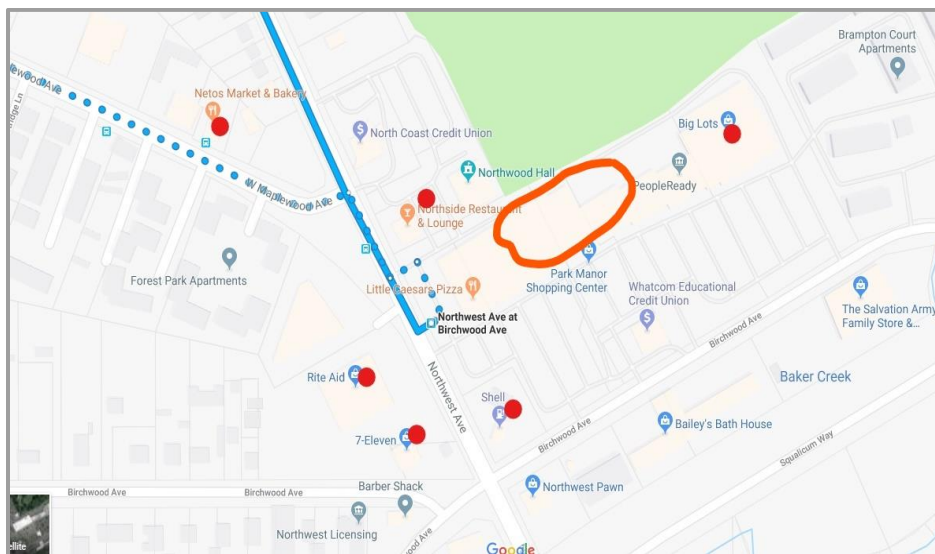
In sum, the Birchwood Food Desert faces the problems of food inaccessibility for low-income and disabled individuals and families since the closure of Albertsons in 2016, institutionalized discrimination against low-income and minority populations (as revealed with the construction of a new gym), social tension within the community amongst different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups, and lack of help from the city council to help address these issues. Our project in particular helped with addressing the issue of food inaccessibility by creating a prototype produce share box and working on the community garden, which we worked on alongside the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters. We highly recommend that the share box and community garden projects be continued and expanded as a temporary, short-term solution to the issue of food inaccessibility within the Birchwood community. We also recommend that a multicultural center or gathering place be considered for the residents of the community in future projects, in order to help address the social tension within the neighborhood and help strengthen the community.

Maps



The nearest grocery store is Fred Meyers.

- It takes 17 minutes by transit to get to this location.
- It takes 30 minutes to walk to this location.



These locations do not provide the necessary grocery staples residents need.

- Netos Market & Bakery
- Rite Aid
- 7-Eleven

- Shell
- Case Studies*
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Research: Birchwood Food Desert

- The Birchwood community in Bellingham is still labeled as a food desert two years after the closure of their only major grocery store, Albertsons. The Food Fighters is a group that is trying to get a store back into the community so people have access to fresh food again. Their major problem is that the last Albertsons has a non-compete clause that prevents other stores from being able to move into the community, and still is valid today even after the building has been bought by someone else. Even despite this obstacle, the Birchwood Food Fighters are continuing to fight for social justice and are trying to get fresh food accessible to the people in the community, any way they can.
- Strategies that the Food Fighters have taken to raise awareness of this injustice include community meetings, rallying and cooperative conversations with residents of the neighborhood. Their main goals include working with the community and fostering relationships to help maintain a resilient voice against corporate power plays.
- Ideas that have been presented for students to work on include ‘share boxes,’ grant funding and video stories.
 - a. Share boxes: A vision created by the food desert fighters where community members that have urban farms and gardens can contribute fresh fruit and vegetables into the community share boxes. These share boxes would give residents access to these vital sources of food without sacrificing a days’ time to get the food via transit. Share boxes will be built spring 2018.
 - b. Video stories: Alex McIntyre suggested the idea of video stories. Video stories would give a voice to residents living in the Birchwood neighborhood. By giving a voice and face to residents who have had to deal with this issue, people watching the video will be compelled to research this issue and hopefully help or donate.
- Links: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/business/article206108379.html>

Research: Alternative Community Methods

When analyzing the issue of a food desert, we were shocked to find that 23.5 million people in the United States are living in a food desert (“USDA Defines,” 2015). This number is overwhelmingly high and having knowledge of this statistic, we found that it was vital to

research ways in which other communities in our nation have been handling the injustice of a food desert. The following bolded titles showcase examples of community solutions towards this issue:

Buy Local, Eat Local, *Invest Local*

When confronting the problem of a food desert in a low income area, it is important to understand all of the needs that must be met when creating a solution. An incredible example of overcoming a food desert can be found in West Oakland where Brahm Ahmadi, founder and former executive director of the nonprofit People's Grocery, using stock in order to make funds for a grocery store.

- They're selling stock in the supermarket on the People's Community Market website
- The method, known as a direct public offering, was used by companies such as Ben & Jerry's ice cream, Annie's Homegrown foods and Costco when they were still fledgling businesses, and it is growing in popularity.
- California Fresh Works program helps to fund and loan projects like West Oakland's food desert.
- With help from both public offerings, investors and shares. People's grocery has almost 83 percent of their funds met to create this store.
- This solution may look different in Birchwood in comparison to West Oakland because California has the California Fresh Funds. California Fresh Funds is a large organization that helps to fund projects like the People Community Market. It is important for Birchwood to look for organizations such as this here in Washington in order to complete their mission and full fill goals of having a grocery store.

Veggie Vans

If there isn't a good permanent source of food in a community, one solution is to implement the use of 'veggie vans'. Veggie vans are a system of designated automobiles that bring fresh produce directly from farms to the community. Although it would be more optimal for a food desert to just have a nearby grocery store, veggie vans are a good temporary solution to a community in need. The YMCA in West Michigan created a veggie van system that runs year-round to bring healthy fruits and veggies from local farms to food deserts throughout the Grand Rapids and Muskegon County areas.

- Veggie vans could be a great solution for the Birchwood community. The community is in need of fresh foods now, and getting funding for the vans could likely happen faster than setting up a new grocery store.
- The Birchwood Food Fighters should still focus on trying to get a permanent grocery store into the community, but veggie vans could be a temporary solution in the meantime. Even after a grocery store is built, a veggie van system could still run for people who need even easier access to food, such as the disabled or elderly. Vans could deliver produce straight to their doorsteps.

- One potential problem is that it is still could be hard to get a veggie van system running in Birchwood, if there isn't any local groups that have enough money to fund such a system. Although the YMCA was able to make a veggie van system in Michigan, the Whatcom Family YMCA might not have enough money to fund the project. The price of vans, gas, and drivers could add up.

Food for Thought

Food deserts are caused due to the lack of available food resources for a specific community. These food deserts leave people of all backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities feeling stranded. A potential solution to food deserts of all kinds is increasing the cities citizens' involvement and awareness up. Birchwood for example is not widely known within the Bellingham community. Implementing local food drives/donations at schools, firehouses, and local businesses will not only provide much needed resources but widen the overall awareness of this issue. By implementing programs such as Food for Thought; a program focused on spreading awareness on limited food resources within communities, Bellingham as a whole can help and support places like Birchwood.

- Increase awareness:
 - Contact local news
 - Flyers
 - Rallies
 - Increase involvement
 - Local food drives
 - Elementary schools
 - High Schools
 - Colleges

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(Above is a link to useful pdfs containing vital information regarding food deserts & solutions)