



Healthy Food Financing Initiative Opinion Editorial – 3-15-15

Going to the grocery store is something most of us take for granted. In Ohio, too many communities have few places to purchase fresh produce, lean protein and dairy. In fact, over 2 million lower income residents, including more than 500,000 children, are at risk for chronic disease and diet-related death due to a lack of access to healthy foods. A simple trip to the grocery store in these communities is anything but easy.

There are many things that all children need in their community to grow up healthy, and one of them is access to a grocery store that sells fruits and vegetables. Not having a local grocery store can have far-ranging impacts on people's lives. Families who live in communities where they can't find a bag of apples are at greater risk of becoming overweight and obese. Over the past 20 years – with more than 300 studies completed – most researchers have found that people who live in neighborhoods with better access to healthy food also have better nutrition and better health. Without access to healthy food, a nutritious diet is out of reach.

Fortunately, there's a solution to this problem. Healthy food financing programs create public-private partnerships that make a real difference. The critical loan and grant financing they provide helps healthy and affordable food retailers overcome the higher initial barriers to entering low-income and underserved communities—barriers like land acquisition, financing, construction and workforce development.

Once these programs are created, the results are dramatic. In Pennsylvania, an initial state-funded grant of \$10 million a year for 3 years was leveraged with private investment, and the resulting program approved funding for the creation or retention of 88 grocery projects in underserved areas, representing over 5,000 jobs and \$190 million in total investment. What's more, it brought healthy food choices to an estimated 400,000 Pennsylvanians. Stores in formerly underserved neighborhoods in Philadelphia are now thriving, illustrating the pent up demand and market opportunity in many areas that grocers don't usually consider.

In addition, grocery stores serve as economic anchors, supplying local jobs, creating foot traffic and attracting complementary stores and services such as banks, pharmacies and restaurants. Smaller food retailers and farmers' markets can also bolster the local economy and contribute to a healthy neighborhood business environment. Healthy food retail also increases or stabilizes home values in nearby neighborhoods, generates local tax revenues and provides workforce training and development.

It's time for Ohio to consider a program to increase access to healthy foods through support of grocery and other healthy food retail development in underserved areas throughout the state. Join me in urging state support to establish a healthy food financing initiative. To learn more about the effort and how you can support it, read "*Supporting Grocery Development in Ohio*" a new Policy Recommendations Report published by the Ohio Healthy Food Financing Task Force at www.financefund.org.

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