

CHAPTER ONE

Shopping Around: Chicago's City-Owned Grocery Store Proposal

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Introduction: Chicago's City-Owned Grocery Store

Throughout 2022 and 2023, a series of high-profile grocery stores closures occurred across Chicago, leaving many neighborhoods without a local store. The closures came after national chain grocery stores pulled out of the city due to a lack of profitability; Walmart alone closed four stores in 2023¹ with most closures in neighborhoods with a predominantly minority population. With the closing of stores, many neighborhood residents are now left without convenient access to groceries. Take, for instance, the former Walmart at 4720 S Cottage Grove Avenue in the Kenwood neighborhood. After Walmart closed, the next closest grocery store is more than 15 minutes away by bus according to the City of Chicago's grocery store database.² This store is "One Stop Food & Liquors" a small grocery store that primarily sells boxed goods with a limited fresh grocery section. Residents around 4720 S Cottage Grove who want a wide selection of food and goods are then closest to a Whole Foods in Hyde Park. Whole Foods is not a viable option to meet grocery needs for low-income residents, as the store charges a premium for groceries and the route to the store often requires multiple public transit transfers. The Kenwood saga is not an isolated example. Looking at a map of Chicago's grocery stores³ (appendix) there are glaring gaps in store accessibility on the south and west sides of the city. The Walmart and other similar closures have left a hole in the Kenwood neighborhood, as well as other neighborhoods across the city.

The void created by closed grocery stores has not gone unnoticed, and many neighborhood groups have assembled protests in favor of opening new stores. The most vocal of these groups is the Residential Association of Greater Englewood or R.A.G.E., which has been protesting what it calls a "Food Apartheid" (as opposed to "food deserts"). R.A.G.E. traces Food Apartheid to historical systems of neglect from the city government, leaving a lack of consistent food options for residents primarily on the south and west sides of Chicago.⁴ The adoption of the term Food Apartheid

focuses the problem as one created by policy, as opposed to “food desert,” which suggests a naturally occurring condition. For neighborhood community groups, the only solution to the Food Apartheid is investment into local, reliable, and quality grocery stores.⁵

In September 2023, Mayor Brandon Johnson announced that Chicago would be “exploring city-owned grocery stores.”⁶ This exploration, undertaken by partnering with various research groups, will seek to determine if a public grocery store can improve economic choice and empower communities. The ultimate goal of the mayor’s exploration is to appropriately invest in communities and address the longstanding exclusion from resources and food access in historically underserved communities.

The prospect of a non-profit grocery store with the full power of the local government behind it may help address historical disinvestment in communities. Though Chicago is the first major US city to explore such a policy, city-owned grocery stores could soon become widespread, especially if early efforts are promising. This chapter will address the main debates surrounding municipally-run grocery stores, as well as consider alternative methods of responding to food deserts and community disinvestment.

Furthermore, this chapter will draw out the attributes that have contributed to the failure of private stores in Chicago as well as the strong success of a city-run store in Baldwin, Florida. Even if not dispositive, the Baldwin example of a city-run grocery store can guide the study of similar stores in Chicago. Finally, this chapter will conclude with arguments that address potential shortcomings of city-owned grocery stores.

On Grocery Stores

Grocery stores come in varying sizes, but all stores sell a variety of fresh goods, such as fruit and produce. By providing this access, stores create benefits in two direct ways: offering a place to buy fresh food and providing that food for an affordable price. These benefits can mean that grocery stores are critical resources for a neighborhood.

Grocery stores should not be confused with convenience stores. Under-resourced areas may have many local convenience stores but frequently lack nearby grocery stores.⁷ The fresh goods that are features of grocery stores – but generally are not important elements of convenience stores – bring with them an expansive range

of documented health benefits. For example, healthy grocery access can support brain development, physical growth, and disease immunity in children;⁸ for adults, access to healthy groceries lowers risk of disease and supports healthy pregnancies.⁹

Furthermore, grocery stores are more able to accommodate dietary restrictions such as food allergies and gluten-free diets. Alternatively, convenience stores are smaller than grocery stores and primarily offer items with low-nutritional value, such as boxed foods high in sodium and/or sugar.

Further, spending on food is a necessity, one that is more burdensome for low-income residents; therefore, it is vital that low-income residents have access to grocery stores, which make cheaper groceries available. The convenience stores in food deserts often sell their products at inflated prices, straining the budget of low-income residents who depend on them as their primary source of food.¹⁰ In Chicago, roughly 17% of residents live in poverty¹¹ and these residents often spend more than 31% of their income on food (compared to 8% for those with the highest income levels).¹² Food access is a basic need, and a dependence on convenience stores puts unnecessary economic pressure on low-income residents.

Grocery stores offer further indirect benefits such as providing economic stimulus to a neighborhood by creating jobs and promoting other community development. Chicago neighborhoods like Englewood and Washington Park are not only food deserts but suffer from the highest unemployment rates in the city: 30% or more.¹³ Grocery store operations create stable jobs for those with all levels of education, giving community members long-term employment and building transferable skills. Grocery stores may also serve as a signal for further investment by acting as a gauge for business conditions in an area.¹⁴ By bringing in additional businesses, grocery stores can be a catalyst for community development, where new jobs and housing spring up.

Finally, grocery stores have the potential to act as spaces for social community development.¹⁵ Grocery stores are a space to connect with others, whether through informal run-ins or organized community events. These events are not insignificant: as a McKinsey study found, the main reason shoppers chose grocery stores over online pick-up or delivery shopping is due to the desire for personal contact.¹⁶ Shoppers value the chance to connect with others in their neighborhood. In the grocery store, community members have a chance to meet outside of their homes and workplaces and build a sense of community.

Why Private Stores Fail in Cities

Grocery stores' razor-thin profit margins require effective business models to remain sustainable, but these models may not adapt to cities and especially to underserved communities. Chain grocery stores typically operate at profit margins of only around 2%.¹⁷ This small margin requires strict operational efficiency to gain a return on investment. Grocery stores struggle to adapt to urban areas because of the costs associated with operating in a city vs. a suburban or rural area. The specific reasons for urban operational struggles break down into three categories: store size, shrinkage protection, and population changes. All three areas adversely affect the already thin margins of grocery stores and keep them out of underserved communities.

The massive size of grocery stores swells operating costs, which can prevent stores from opening in and serving dense urban areas. For many US residents, the stereotypical grocery store is that of the "Walmart Superstore," which averages a size of 182,000 square feet¹⁸ – equivalent to more than three American football fields. Walmart has leveraged this size to its advantage in the rural and suburban areas it typically operates in by becoming a one-stop shop, often housing auto-centers, electronics, and clothing departments in addition to groceries.¹⁹

While size has been an asset for Walmart's operations traditionally, in urban areas this large footprint becomes a liability. There is no space for a superstore in local neighborhoods and additional building and tax costs associated with mega-structures cuts into the thin profit margins. Walmart has explored operating smaller-scale stores, but with little success in Chicago. The "Walmart Neighborhood Market" is a Walmart designed for urban areas, with a significantly reduced footprint of 38,000 square feet that almost exclusively sells groceries;²⁰ however, these stores may still be too big with three such Chicago stores closing in 2023 due to operational losses.²¹ The Markets are more than twice the size of the average Aldi's²² – a chain whose reduced footprint and operational efficiency have led to the obtainability of fresh groceries at prices less than Walmart.²³ In many Chicago neighborhoods, Aldi's is the only grocery store available;²⁴ however, the store has also faced operating difficulties with a recent closure in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood²⁵ (though for reasons unrelated to store size).

Aldi's and other stores have claimed an increase in shrinkage has made continued operation in some neighborhoods unsustainable.²⁶ Shrinkage is a metric for inventory loss composed of many factors, but stores across the country have cited

increases in shrinkage due to crime, primarily theft.²⁷ The actual rate of shrinkage – or if it is even increasing at all – is unclear, but some stores are responding to the perceived threat.²⁸ Many stores have added high-paid security guards,²⁹ raising their operating costs; other stores have closed instead of increasing security. Overall, while the amount of shrinkage is not fully understood, the perception (and perhaps reality) that it has increased has contributed to the closure of many stores across the country.

Neighborhood grocery stores also close because of population changes. Neighborhoods in the South and West sides have seen a steady decrease in their population since 2010, reflecting an on-going exodus of Black residents out of Chicago.³⁰ Smaller populations intersect with the typically large size of grocery stores; a neighborhood may have once supported a grocery store, but now the store is too big for its local population. Further, a neighborhood that is losing residents can struggle to attract a new grocery store that can help stabilize the area: the potential for a negative feedback loop is palpable. There is space and money to be made in areas of reduced population, as people always need food and places to acquire that food; however, as with other businesses, grocery store operators are likely to find other neighborhoods more appealing for investment.³¹

A city-owned grocery store may better understand the communities it serves and can address some of the drawbacks associated with private grocery stores. Chain grocery stores can operate thousands of locations across the world, so narrowing in on the needs of a specific neighborhood can be difficult. The city, in contrast, can more easily work with constituents to find out how to maximize the impact of a store. For instance, the city could operate stores of the appropriate size for the community and can take locally beneficial measures that would not be worthwhile for a store dedicated to making profits. Non-profit, city-run grocery stores can fill the gaps of areas in decline and help bring residents to the neighborhood, as well as possibly attracting back former residents by making an area more appealing. City-owned stores can do this as they can be less worried about the return on investment and more concerned about the social benefit offered by stores. Moreover, without a need for profit the city can afford to decrease the “profit margin” and could decide to subsidize security with less impact on overall sustainability. A city-owned store comes with the freedom and flexibility for a city to do as it wants; however, lessons must be learned from the private sector to avoid repeating past failures.

Baldwin, Florida: A Possible Model?

Only a handful of city-run grocery stores operate across the US; all these stores opened in the last 10 years and are in small, rural communities.³² This is the case in Baldwin, Florida which is the most publicized example of a city-run grocery store in the US. While the policy experience in a rural town is not immediately transferable to Chicago, the lessons learned from Baldwin can be valuable.

The municipal-owned grocery store in Baldwin, Florida shows that the city-run business model can succeed. Baldwin, a small town of about 1,400 residents, manages its own grocery store.³³ Since 2019, the Baldwin City Market (BCM) has been the only grocery store in town. BCM serves a primarily low-income population, which has limited access to transportation due to age and income.³⁴ The town's small and low-income population made it unable to raise taxes to subsidize a grocery store to move into Baldwin, but at the same time, access by Baldwin residents to grocery stores in other towns was limited: a local store seemed imperative. The town's mayor, Sean Lynch, found that the most cost-effective option was for Baldwin to purchase a defunct, in-town store and run it similarly to a public utility: Baldwin covered the initial start-up costs, but the residents pay for the store's continued service. As Lynch told the Washington Post "We take the water out of the ground, and we pump it to your house and charge you, what's the difference with a grocery store?"³⁵ The store has largely been a success in Baldwin, creating jobs for locals, garnering strong local reviews, and regularly exceeding sales expectations – and thereby ensuring sustainability.³⁶ The one drawback for residents is the price of groceries. The store serves such a small population that economies of scale are not possible, meaning that prices are regularly higher than at Walmart and other similar stores. Considering the Baldwin public store operates with a minimal mark-up, the relatively higher prices are concerning, though perhaps unavoidable outside of large national chains.

While the BCM has been successful, the sustainability of city-owned grocery stores elsewhere remains unresolved. The main issue with the BCM is that the store has higher prices due to the unavoidably higher per unit-costs that characterize single, low-volume retailers. Whether Chicago-owned grocery stores would be better able to capture economies of scale is debatable, but the answer could be critical for judging the viability of such stores.

Consider the Chicago neighborhood of Austin. Austin is considered a food desert, and residents have an extremely low average income per capita of around \$16,000³⁷ – about a third of the median income of Baldwin. The relatively high food

prices at the BCM are bearable even for low-income Baldwin residents, but in Austin, high prices could be expected to be more deterring to low-income shoppers. On the other hand, Austin's population of almost 97,000 people is 60 times larger than Baldwin's. In Baldwin, almost every resident visited the store in its first week of being open;³⁸ if the customer attraction was similar in Austin the store would operate at a much larger scale, paving the way for lower per-unit costs and retail prices. If the larger customer base could drive down costs and prices to near Walmart levels, then the city-owned store would be more accessible to residents and therefore more likely to succeed.

Another key difference between a Chicago-owned and a Baldwin-owned grocery store is the urban versus rural dimension. Baldwin's fresh groceries are offered at a discount due to its partnerships with local farms. The proximity to farms gives Baldwin cheap access to high-quality produce and helps bring down prices. Chicago also has access to nearby farmland, but these farms primarily grow feed crops (for animals) such as corn and soybeans;³⁹ Chicago's local access to human food crops is minimal. A Chicago-owned grocery store cannot depend on favorable access to producers to keep prices low.

A city-run grocery store in Chicago is most feasible by leveraging city resources to reduce costs and prices. Neighborhoods like Austin⁴⁰ and Englewood⁴¹ are both densely populated and have cheap lots zoned for grocery store use – some of these lots are already owned by Chicago's Department of Development.⁴² With relatively low start-up costs and a larger customer base than Baldwin, it is possible that the city could utilize its large population to reduce food costs to be near those of corporate chain stores. If a Chicago public store can attract enough customers to buy and sell large quantities of goods, then it could possibly replicate the success seen at the BCM.

Subsidized Grocery Stores

Subsidies have been provided to grocery stores in Chicago with varying degrees of success. City governments that value community well-being may choose to subsidize grocery stores that otherwise could not survive in the marketplace. This strategy is more desirable the greater the non-monetary neighborhood benefits of local grocery stores. Subsidies to private enterprises are a considerably lighter intervention than operating city-owned stores. In this section, the failures and

successes of the subsidy model will be explored through two Chicago examples, the closed Whole Foods in Englewood, and the Jewel-Osco in Woodlawn.

The November 2022 closing of the Whole Foods in Englewood brought this city-subsidized store to an all-but-destined end. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel championed the opening of the Whole Foods in 2016, with the city pledging almost \$25 million in tax incentives.⁴³ Local community groups had been campaigning for a quality grocery store like Whole Foods since at least 2010,⁴⁴ so the store opened to widespread neighborhood excitement. Community members were happy with the new availability of healthy options; however, the premium prices of Whole Foods limited the accessibility of groceries.⁴⁵ Englewood is one of the poorest communities in Chicago, with a per capita income of only \$11,888⁴⁶ – not the sort of resources that allow for frequent shopping at Whole Foods. The Englewood store was able to create jobs and provide access to a large variety of groceries, but without making those groceries affordable to residents the store struggled to make a profit. As a result, the store closed only six years after it had opened, leaving Englewood to become a food desert yet again. The Whole Foods example shows the importance of bringing in a store that matches the wants and means of residents, and reinforces the insight that availability is not the same as accessibility.

The 2019 opening of a Jewel-Osco in Woodlawn, along with its continued operation, shows that subsidized grocery stores can have positive community impact and be profitable. Jewel-Osco is a chain of affordable grocery stores located primarily in the Chicagoland area; the Woodlawn store was opened after receiving \$11.5 million in subsidies.⁴⁷ Before the Jewel-Osco came to Woodlawn, the neighborhood spent more than 40 years as a food desert with the nearest grocery store more than 2 miles away.⁴⁸

Much like the Whole Foods in Englewood, Jewel-Osco's opening was welcomed by neighborhood residents; however, several factors have contributed to the store's continued success. The store offers groceries at prices residents can afford, with sales and coupons being widely publicized. I live in the Woodlawn neighborhood, and my block as well as surrounding blocks receives free, weekly fliers from Jewel-Osco, which not only attract customers, but offer discounted groceries. Further, the store increases access for those in the surrounding area by accepting Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT)/Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for local grocery delivery.⁴⁹ These government programs promote food affordability for disadvantaged people, so by accepting these benefits Jewel-

Osco provides another form of access for low-income residents unable to visit the store directly. Moreover, Jewel-Osco has successfully embedded itself in the community, with a presence at many local happenings, as well as hosting the store's own events. This community goodwill has helped translate into profit with the store returning "a good return for its investors" according to a Crain's Chicago Business article.⁵⁰ The store further benefits from its location, which is next to two residential buildings that cater to senior citizens.⁵¹ These (often mobility-impaired) neighbors receive vital access to groceries and provide Jewel-Osco with a significant base of regular customers. Finally, the store has created more than 200 full-time jobs, 95% of which are union affiliated.⁵² By almost every metric, the Woodlawn Jewel-Osco has been a success: ingraining itself into the community, turning a financial profit, addressing local food insecurity, and creating quality jobs.

Jewel-Osco has helped spur a wave of economic development in Woodlawn. After the store opened, local business owners reported a ripple effect with increased and continued patronage.⁵³ Jake Sapstein, owner of the local Robust Coffee Shop, claims in a Chicago Sun-Times interview that the opening of the store has "absolutely" had a positive effect on his business and the surrounding neighborhood.⁵⁴ Researchers at Case Western University and University of Illinois-Chicago support the claim that Jewel-Osco boosted the community's visibility and viability for businesses and has promoted Woodlawn's development.⁵⁵ The researchers state that Jewel-Osco and nearby apartment developments have together drawn in more than \$400 million in community investment dollars. The Woodlawn Jewel-Osco was further recognized for its community impact by the non-profit organization, Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), which gave the Jewel-Osco the For-Profit Real Estate Project award for the year, calling the store "a model for what equitable, people-powered economic development [is]."⁵⁶

While neighborhood residents support the Jewel-Osco, there was a fear that the community redevelopment could have led to gentrification, pushing out long-term residents. This reality almost came to pass; however, in the face of rapid community development, Woodlawn community groups successfully advocated for the Woodlawn Housing Preservation Ordinance to protect housing access.⁵⁷ This ordinance set aside 30% of new housing developments for "very low-income" residents to make sure that long-time residents were not pushed out. (The more general question of how to balance community revitalization against gentrification remains a common predicament, in Chicago and elsewhere.) With the continued

investment into Woodlawn the store has helped to spur, the Jewel-Osco has validated its public subsidy and illustrated the developmental effect of grocery stores in a community.

A city-owned grocery store may similarly be able to produce these benefits and offer more financial incentive than a subsidized store. In the subsidy model, public funds go to private owners, and they might bring social benefits that justify the expense; however, the city does not have a chance to directly recoup the funds spent on subsidies. Instead, the city's subsidies increase resources by creating employment opportunities, promoting community development, and spurring other economic improvements. City-owned stores could have the same favorable impact on community development, while also directly recouping public funds through profitable operations, as in the Baldwin, Florida case study.

Together, the two examples of subsidized grocery stores in Englewood and Woodlawn illustrate the importance of proper implementation in deriving benefits from grocery stores. Theoretical demand for groceries is not enough for a private store to remain open: neighborhood ability to pay is vital as well. Grocery stores should reflect the wants and means of a community to maximize private and public benefit. Furthermore, the examples illustrate the social benefits, beyond the provision of healthy food, that a grocery store can offer. If a city-run grocery store can maintain the benefits offered by a corporate store, while capitalizing on the ability to directly gain revenue, then city-owned grocery stores could be as (or more) impactful than successful subsidized grocery stores.

Arguments Against City-run Grocery Stores

Arguments arrayed against city-run grocery stores generally point to the potential for such stores to have limited or even negative net benefits for communities. Care in implementation, however, can reduce the potency of these concerns. Here, two arguments against city-owned grocery stores will be surveyed. One of the arguments has been made by respected community leader Asiaha Butler, and the other by prominent academic Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. Both arguments can help guide the implementation of a city-owned store to sidestep some of the potential problems.

Community buy-in is critical, but one leading community member possesses healthy skepticism of the city's ability to address historical disinvestment. Asiaha Butler is the leader of R.A.G.E, or the Residential Association of Greater Englewood,

which was earlier introduced along with its approach to Food Apartheid. Asiaha Butler has rightly pointed out that food insecurity exists in large part due to historical actions by the city government; as a result, she only trusts locally-owned businesses to protect the community.⁵⁸ Further, it is not enough to recognize that residents want a grocery store: they want a grocery store that meets their needs. Without involving community members at every step of the process, a city-owned grocery – or any other type of grocery store – could set itself up for failure.

A recent case in point with respect to bad outcomes connected to a lack of community input is the Englewood neighborhood's Save-a-Lot grocery store. After the closing of the Whole Foods in Englewood, a "Yellow Banana" grocery store, which operates under the Save-a-Lot name, was slotted to go into the neighborhood. R.A.G.E organized large community protests and boycotts against the hasty opening of what many viewed as a sub-standard store. The protests delayed the opening of the store for a few weeks, and Yellow Banana has been working to better connect with the community.⁵⁹ Chicago's residents will let the city know if a store is not up to their standard, and without community approval, stores are doomed to fail. To prevent this failure, the city should continue to acknowledge the historically racist disinvestment from communities and include neighborhood residents in the decision-making process.

If proposed city-run grocery stores do not include additional policy protections, then the law of unintended consequences may negate or reverse any policy gains: so argues Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, the dean of the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. Bueno de Mesquita is concerned that a city-owned store will promote gentrification and an overall increase in the cost of living due to higher neighborhood housing prices.⁶⁰ It is true that a new grocery store makes an area more appealing; however, the new store can be accompanied by an increase in local housing units, as seen in the Woodlawn Jewel-Osco case. While this increase in apartment supply may itself offset some of the potential housing price increase, housing protections in gentrifying neighborhoods can be put in place – again, as Woodlawn has done. One of the ironies of the gentrification/housing price concern is that it only possesses traction if the policy works, if the city-owned grocery store does revitalize a neighborhood. At any rate, a city-run grocery store will not operate in a policy vacuum. If Chicago truly intends to reinvest in communities, then city-owned grocery stores will be but one step in protecting and promoting underserved residents.

Conclusion

Chicago's south and west sides have been relatively starved for resources, and the scars of previous city actions against minority communities remain. The city owns over 10,000 vacant lots, concentrated primarily in the south and west sides.⁶¹ With the start of Mayor Lightfoot's Invest South/West initiative in 2019, the city began addressing Chicago's historical neglect of residents.⁶² City-owned grocery stores represent a natural progression of this policy and a promise to residents that the city is trying to take care of them.

Grocery stores have shown they can be a catalyst of development by attracting additional private investment and giving residents stable employment. The city should continue to explore city-owned grocery stores but be cautious in their implementation. Community input is paramount: the city must understand its target demographic and work in accord with neighborhood wants and means. Excessively high prices for groceries will be a recipe for failure. A grocery store is a long-term investment into a community, and city-owned stores would be a "new normal" that could eventually be viewed in the same vein as public utilities.

If a trial run is successful, city-owned grocery stores could be a key intervention targeting food insecurity. A successful city-owned store would have all the benefits offered by subsidized grocery stores but do not need to entail the continued subsidies given by the city to private grocery chains. If implemented, a Chicago-owned grocery store will become a case study that all cities can look to in addressing their own food insecurity issues. Whether the case is taught as a success or a failure is uncertain, but a willingness to learn from the experiences of other non-standard grocery stores will raise the odds that the success version prevails.

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Appendix

“[Grocery Store Status Map](#)” from Chicago Data Portal

