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## A struggle to eat in Toronto's food deserts

June 14, 2010

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Tamara Sanchez plops lemons, blackberries, asparagus, avocados and cucumbers on the folding table in the courtyard of her Toronto Community Housing complex.

Cashier Aasma Badoodi carefully weighs produce and tallies the bill on a calculator for Sanchez, who is doing part of her weekly shopping a stone's throw from home.

"It's been amazing. These prices you can't beat, except maybe in Chinatown," said Sanchez. "The corner store is extremely overpriced, and it's not the quality of food we like."

Because Sanchez doesn't drive, she needs to hop the streetcar or get a lift to a supermarket. But thanks to this weekly Good Food Market, run by volunteers affiliated with the non-profit FoodShare, she has access to healthy food at reasonable prices.

Not all Toronto residents are so lucky.

A new policy paper from the Martin Prosperity Institute analyzes the growing number of "food deserts" — areas where residents do not have easy access to good quality, affordable food. It estimates that only 51 per cent of Toronto's population lives within 1 kilometre of a grocery store.

Food deserts are most pronounced in the inner suburbs and the city's 13 priority neighbourhoods, such as Lawrence Heights, Flemingdon Park and Steeles-L'Amoureaux.

The inner suburbs, once home to middle-class families with cars, are now filled with low-income families, often new immigrants, dependent on transit or walking. Picking up food is daunting, especially for seniors and disabled residents.

Mark Denstedt, a research associate at the Martin Prosperity Institute, said that even when there are grocery stores in a priority area, they are often on the edge, making it expensive and time-consuming to get there. That leaves residents dependent on convenience stores or fast-food outlets.

A quick survey by the *Star* found a dozen extra-large eggs priced at \$2.59 at No Frills, \$2.69 at Loblaws and \$3.99 at the Kitchen Table. Similarly, a 750g tub of yogurt cost \$2.95 at No Frills, \$3.99 at Loblaws, and \$4.29 at the Kitchen Table.

"You won't be getting a wide selection, if any, of fruits and vegetables. The milk will be more expensive" in these areas, Denstedt said. He notes that bulk buying or shared meal preparation in a church basement are ways to ensure healthier food.

"But often it gets down to time. If you're working two jobs, if the grocery store isn't on the way home and a convenience store or McDonald's is, you're more likely to go there."

Improving life in the "priority" neighbourhoods was once a top political issue, yet there's been barely a peep about them in the mayoral race.

Dr. David McKeown, the city's medical officer of health, believes the time is right for food-oriented initiatives, from farmers' markets to



Tamara Sanchez and daughter Milla, 9, show off their healthy purchases at the Good Food Market at a Toronto Community Housing building on Queens Quay. Their basket includes blueberries, blackberries, cucumbers, tomatoes and bananas.

VANESSA LU/TORONTO STAR

community bake ovens to local production.

A food strategy report earlier this year outlined ideas the city is studying to boost access to healthy food, from reconsidering the ban on backyard chickens, to using city-owned land for urban agriculture, and allowing mobile trucks to sell fresh produce.

"Not all of these ideas will work; some won't," said McKeown, but the key is exploring the possibilities.

For Debbie Field, executive director of FoodShare, the solutions lie in better planning: "Nothing in the Planning Act demands a developer to build a grocery store," she points out, though there are requirements for things like schools.

"As a right of living in a great city like ours, people should be able to walk two blocks from their home and get a full range of foods — fresh meat, vegetables, bakeries — that are not outrageously priced," said Field.

"I would think that the planners need to work with the private sector to make that happen."

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#### **On the menu**

Metcalf Foundation will release five reports Tuesday examining ways to improve access to good food in Ontario, with recommendations for various sectors. Ten ideas:

Set up a school food program and include food literacy in the curriculum

Support community food centres, where meals and supplies are offered, and teach healthy eating habits

Boost urban agriculture by making space available for growing and processing on city-owned or institutional land

Help local producers through means such as tax reforms or setting a floor price

Expand purchasing by schools, hospitals and other public institutions of local, sustainably produced food

Create regional food clusters, linking producers with small- and medium-sized food processors

Build the case for linking good food with good health.

Develop ways to help farmers who grow organic produce or do on-farm processing sell their goods

Implement a province-wide program to link farming with ecological efforts

Plan for the future of farming and food, by dealing with zoning and taxation issues

*Source: Metcalf Food Solutions*