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Testimony submitted by

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for the

City Planning Commission of the City of New York
Public Hearing

on

Special Regulations Applying to FRESH Food Stores
(proposed Zoning Text Amendment N 090412 ZRY)

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on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon. I am Triada Stampas, Director of Government Relations & Public Education with the Food Bank For New York City. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony this afternoon to the City Planning Commission regarding increasing access to fresh food in New York City.

The Food Bank For New York City works to end food poverty through a range of programs and services that increase access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. The organization warehouses and distributes food to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food sites citywide; provides food safety, networking and capacity-building workshops; manages nutrition education programs for schools, community-based organizations and emergency food programs; operates food stamp outreach and education programs; coordinates the largest civilian Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) volunteer tax preparation program in the country; and conducts research and develops policy to inform community and government efforts to end hunger throughout the five boroughs.

The Food Bank was also a convening member of the New York Supermarket Commission, whose work was the catalyst for the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH)

initiative, and joins in the effort to secure permanent, local access to fresh, affordable nutritious food for low-income New Yorkers. In my testimony today, I will briefly describe some of the impacts that lack of access to fresh, affordable food has, and the need to increase access to fresh food in a retail environment that allows low-income New Yorkers to redeem their food stamp and WIC benefits.

THE NEED FOR FRESH, AFFORDABLE NUTRITIOUS FOOD IN LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS

As a number of recent studies have shown, access to food is not uniformly distributed across New York City neighborhoods; areas with lower concentrations of supermarkets and other fresh food retailers tend also to be areas both of low income and of high incidence of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases.¹ This is no accident or coincidence; food environment profoundly impacts a person's ability to maintain healthful dietary practices, particularly for people of low incomes, whose tight budgets severely constrain their options.

The New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) has recognized this link, and the Supermarket Need Index (SNI) it created to determine the areas of limited opportunity to purchase fresh food includes low household income as a factor.² DCP found approximately three million New Yorkers live in high-need neighborhoods. There are few areas in New York City where it can be said that poverty does not exist, but it is particularly concentrated in certain communities; there is no doubt significant overlap between these three million New Yorkers, the four million New Yorkers having difficulty affording food and the over 1.5 million currently enrolled in the Food Stamp Program.³

PERMANENT, LOCAL ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, NUTRITIOUS FOOD IS A CRITICAL SUPPORT FOR LOW-INCOME NEW YORKERS, AND NECESSARY TO THE SUCCESS OF FOOD STAMP OUTREACH AND NUTRITION EDUCATION EFFORTS

Between 2003 and 2008, the cost of groceries in the New York metropolitan area increased 22 percent, more than the national average of 19 percent.⁴ In that time, increases in the costs of housing, fuel and utilities, transportation and medical care in our area also outpaced the national average.⁵ It should come as little surprise, then, that the number of New York City residents having difficulty affording food in that time nearly doubled, from approximately 2 million in 2003 to approximately 4 million in 2008 – nearly half of New York City residents.⁶

Spurred by a flagging economy, rising unemployment and the concerted efforts of City government and its non-profit partners to maximize participation, food stamp enrollment in New York City is currently over 1.5 million, a high not seen in more than a decade.⁷ A potent economic stimulant – every dollar of food stamp benefits is estimated to generate \$1.73 of

¹ See, for example, "Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage." (2008). New York City Department of City Planning, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and New York City Economic Development Corporation; or *The Need for More Supermarkets in New York*. (2008). The Food Trust (Philadelphia, PA).

² "Going to Market: New York City's Neighborhood Grocery Store and Supermarket Shortage." (2008). New York City Department of City Planning, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and New York City Economic Development Corporation

³ *NYC Hunger Experience 2008 Update: Food Poverty Soars as Recession Hits Home*. (2008). Food Bank For New York City.

⁴ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *NYC Hunger Experience 2008 Update: Food Poverty Soars as Recession Hits Home*. (2008). Food Bank For New York City.

⁷ HRA Facts, June 2009.

economic growth – recent changes to the food stamp program at the State and federal level have increased the value of food stamp benefits; in March 2009 alone, the food stamp program put nearly \$200 million in the hands of low-income New York City residents for food purchases.⁸ When food stamp benefits are spent, they support local businesses – and the workers who rely on them for employment – with federal dollars.

Food Bank For New York City runs one of the largest food stamp outreach, prescreening and facilitated enrollment programs in the country. With a dearth in low-income neighborhoods of retail outlets that provide fresh, affordable, nutritious food, many of the over 1.5 million New Yorkers currently enrolled in the Food Stamp Program have limited opportunity to purchase these foods in their neighborhoods, and as a result, New York City fails to realize the full potential of this work, and of the food stamp program's public health and economic benefits.

The full benefits of nutrition education remain similarly unrealized when opportunities to exercise healthy food choices are limited, or simply do not exist. Food Bank For New York City reaches approximately 13,000 low-income New Yorkers across the five boroughs through its CookShop[®] nutrition education programs. Based on the knowledge that people need multiple exposures to a new food before they adopt it into their diet, the CookShop curricula strive to expose low-income, food stamp-eligible New Yorkers to common, seasonal food they might not otherwise seek out, prepare or eat on their own. Without fresh, affordable produce available to them in their neighborhoods, they are denied a critical opportunity to practice the healthy food choices that reinforce their learning and help them maintain their good health.

FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY SUPPORTS INITIATIVES TO INCREASE ACCESS TO FRESH, AFFORDABLE FOOD WHERE PEOPLE CAN USE FOOD STAMPS & WIC

The Food Bank For New York City is committed to increasing access to fresh, affordable food for low-income New Yorkers. As the city's main provider of emergency food, Food Bank has distributed over 10 million pounds of fresh food to date this year to nearly 1,000 emergency and community food organizations throughout the city – many of them located in areas with little access to quality, fresh, nutritious food from retail vendors. Food Bank's nutrition education programs make over \$100,000 in regular purchases of fresh food from local supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods, providing a market and an incentive for those supermarkets to carry fresh food year-round.

With the FRESH initiative, government has a real opportunity to secure local, permanent access to affordable, nutritious food for low-income New Yorkers who are going without – and to have a meaningful impact on the food choices they are able to make for themselves and their families. Moreover, creating a healthier food environment not only secures better health outcomes for the people who live in it, it creates conditions for success for all the valuable work of government and nonprofit bodies to provide low-income New Yorkers income supports and education to better feed themselves and their families.

Food Bank For New York City supports the City's efforts to create permanent, local access to affordable, nutritious food in high need areas of New York City. These efforts should, of course, always be informed by the needs of low-income New Yorkers and their families, and should also include a commitment that no one's access to fresh, nutritious food ever be limited or restricted because they receive Food Stamps or WIC.

⁸ Mark Zandi, Chief Economist and Co-Founder, Moody's Economy.com, in written testimony before the House Committee on Small Business Hearing on "Economic Stimulus For Small Business: A Look Back and Assessing Need For Additional Relief," July 24, 2008; Temporary and Disability Assistance Statistics, March 2009. New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.