



MAIN OFFICE: 39 Broadway, 10<sup>th</sup> fl, New York, NY 10006, T: 212.566.7855 F: 212.566.1463  
WAREHOUSE: Hunts Point Co-op Market, 355 Food Ctr Dr, Bronx, NY 10474, T: 718.991.4300, F: 718.893.3442

Testimony prepared by

**Áine Duggan and Triada Stampas**

for the

**City Council Subcommittee on Zoning and Franchises**

on

**FRESH Food Stores**  
(Land Use Application #1244-2009)

**October 26, 2009**

on behalf of

**Food Bank For New York City**

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the City Council Subcommittee on Zoning and Franchises regarding increasing access to fresh food in New York City.

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. We warehouse and distribute food to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food sites citywide; provide food safety, networking and capacity-building workshops; manage nutrition education programs for schools and community-based organizations; operate food stamp outreach and education programs; coordinate the largest civilian Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) volunteer tax preparation program in the country; and conduct research and develop policy to inform community and government efforts to end hunger throughout the five boroughs.

Food Bank was also a co-convener 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. Today's testimony briefly describes the need for increased access to fresh food in a retail environment that allows low-income New Yorkers to redeem Electronic Benefits

Transfer (EBT), food stamps and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits, and its importance to combating food poverty in New York City.

### **IN ORDER TO BE ACCESSIBLE, FRESH FOOD MUST BE AVAILABLE**

Accessibility comprises two key considerations: availability and affordability. In order to be accessible, fresh, healthy food must be available locally, as easy to obtain as other local food options. As a number of recent studies have shown, however, consumer access to fresh food is not distributed uniformly across New York City; neighborhoods with lower concentrations of supermarkets and other fresh food retailers tend also to be areas of both low income and high incidence of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases.<sup>1</sup> This is no accident or coincidence; one's food environment profoundly impacts one's ability to maintain healthful dietary practices, particularly for people whose low incomes and tight budgets additionally limit their options.

The New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) recognized this link, and the Supermarket Need Index (SNI) it created to identify areas of limited opportunity to purchase fresh food includes low household income as a factor.<sup>2</sup> DCP found approximately three million New Yorkers live in high-need neighborhoods. Given the geographic concentration of poverty in certain areas of New York City, there is no doubt significant overlap between these three million New Yorkers, the four million New Yorkers who have difficulty affording food, and the over 1.5 million currently enrolled in the Food Stamp Program.<sup>3</sup> To access fresh, healthy food if it is not available within their neighborhoods, the New Yorkers least able to afford it are forced to bear the additional costs of time and travel.

### **IN ORDER TO BE ACCESSIBLE, FRESH FOOD MUST BE AFFORDABLE**

Local availability is indeed crucial. But without measures to ensure low-income New Yorkers can afford it, local availability alone is no guarantee of access to fresh, healthy food. Affordability is equally important.

Food, like other basic needs in New York City, is not cheap. 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.<sup>4</sup> In that time, increases in the costs of housing, fuel and utilities, transportation and medical care in our area also outpaced the national average.<sup>5</sup> It should come as little surprise, then, that the number of New York City residents having difficulty affording food over those years nearly doubled, from approximately 2 million in 2003 to approximately 4 million in 2008 – nearly half of New York City residents.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> "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

<sup>3</sup> *NYC Hunger Experience 2008 Update: Food Poverty Soars as Recession Hits Home*. (2008). Food Bank For New York City; "HRA Facts: August 2009." ([http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/hrafacts\\_2009\\_08.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/downloads/pdf/hrafacts_2009_08.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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

Government nutrition assistance programs like food stamps and WIC significantly increase the ability of millions of New Yorkers to purchase food. With recent changes to the food stamp program at the State and federal level to increase benefit amounts, food stamp recipients in New York City now receive approximately \$160 per month for food purchases.<sup>7</sup> In short, food stamps and WIC make food more affordable.

## **CONCLUSION**

The FRESH initiative's targeted zoning incentives for supermarkets and other fresh food retailers in high-need neighborhoods give it the potential to address half of the accessibility equation: it can make fresh, healthy food available in areas where it is currently scarce.

In order to have a truly meaningful impact on the food choices low-income New Yorkers are able to make for themselves and their families, however, affordability cannot be ignored. While acceptance of EBT, Food Stamps and WIC might be, strictly speaking, outside the realm of a zoning text amendment, Food Bank urges the New York City Council to take appropriate measures to ensure that recipients of zoning and financial incentives under FRESH accept EBT and WIC.

Doing so will not only help ensure low-income New Yorkers are actually able to avail themselves of the fresh, healthy foods the new supermarkets created by this initiative will no doubt carry, it is an example of responsible fiscal stewardship that serves both to protect the public's investment in these businesses and to generate the greatest economic benefit for the city.

The Food Stamp Program's impact on the food purchasing power of low-income New Yorkers is significant; in July 2009 alone, the food stamp program boosted the ability of New York City residents to purchase food by approximately \$245 million.<sup>8</sup> By requiring supermarkets that accept incentives to site in high-need neighborhoods to also accept EBT/food stamps and WIC, the City will ensure both that these businesses are operating smartly by capturing the full purchasing power of the residents in their communities and that it is creating conditions for these businesses to succeed.

In addition, acceptance of EBT/food stamps and WIC will provide a much-needed economic boost in a flagging economy. Food stamps are a potent economic stimulant – every dollar of food stamp benefits is estimated to generate \$1.73 of economic growth.<sup>9</sup> Many of the more than 1.5 million New Yorkers who receive food stamps, however, are forced to shop outside their neighborhoods; some shop outside New York City completely. Requiring acceptance of these benefits will mean that the City's local businesses – and the workers who rely on them for employment – will be supported with federal dollars, and that the City will capture their full economic development potential.

---

<sup>7</sup> Temporary and Disability Assistance Statistics, July 2009. New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> 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.