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## Food deserts exist in supermarket-resplendent Fort Collins

By Bobby **Magill**

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For Pat Jekel, a former checker at King Soopers, only since she stopped driving in 2008 has getting to the grocery store been a challenge.

Jekel, 75, can only get to Walmart on Magnolia Street maybe once a month, when her family visits from Greeley and takes her shopping. Sometimes it's longer.

When she is able to get to the store, Jekel, who uses a walker and lives on Social Security, feels rushed.

"The other day, I had to shop for 15 minutes," she said. "I didn't have anything for a month."

Sometimes, she said, those who take her to Walmart are in such a hurry that she doesn't get what she wants at the store.



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She said there are a lot of other people like her living in the Collins Aire Park trailer park on North Timberline Road, where resources are sparse.

Among the neighborhood's residents, 31 households have received groceries from the Food Bank for Larimer County in the past two years, according to data provided by the food bank.

Sitting just outside Fort Collins city limits, the Collins Aire Park is a low-income neighborhood about a half-mile from the nearest TransFort bus stop and exactly 2.3 miles from Walmart, the nearest grocery store.

"I can't ride the bus because I can't get up to the bus station," said Jekel, who said local farmers will sometimes hand out fresh produce to Collins Aire Park residents.

But that doesn't happen often this time of year.

Jekel is the kind of person the U.S. Department of Agriculture is talking about when it says many low-income people living around the Collins Aire Park live in a "food desert."

Food deserts are about food insecurity, places where people who are just scraping by may have an extraordinarily difficult time scraping a healthy meal together.

They're places where it may be more convenient and less expensive for people who don't have access to transportation to visit McDonald's or Loaf n' Jug for dinner than to get to a grocery store farther away, where they can buy fresh food.

There also might be grocery stores in food deserts, but most low income people live more than a mile away from them.

"Many chronic diseases have been associated with low consumption of fruits and vegetables, along with high consumption of sugary and high-fat foods," the Colorado Health Foundation report says. "These factors, in tandem with the lack of education on healthy eating and a dearth of exercise opportunities common in food deserts, are taking a documented toll on the health of those who do not have convenient access to a grocery store."

With five King Soopers stores, three Safeways, three Albertsons stores, two Walmarts, a Whole Foods Market, a SuperTarget, a Sprouts, a Vitamin Cottage Natural Grocers, a Sunflower Market and a variety of farmers' markets and other smaller grocery stores, the Fort Collins area is brimming with places to buy fresh food.

But if you live on North Timberline Road or on Pleasant Acres Drive behind the U Stuff It mini storage, all those supermarkets are several miles and a world away.

A 2009 Colorado Health Foundation report shows that in these food deserts, lack of access to healthy food at a supermarket means a higher obesity rate among residents who have greater challenges maintaining good health.

There are three such food deserts in Fort Collins and in adjacent unincorporated Larimer County, where supermarkets may be inaccessible to lower-income residents - 2010 Census tracts where supermarkets are more than a mile from where low-income residents live, USDA data show.

More than 8,800 people in Larimer County live in food deserts, and all of them live in the city of Fort Collins or just beyond the city limit between Overland Trail and Interstate 25, according to USDA data.

Nearly 660 of those people are low-income residents whom the government considers to have low access to supermarkets. Most of them live in a large food desert between City Park and Vine Drive, east of Overland Trail and west of Shields Street.

The Collins Aire Park sits at the heart of two adjoining food deserts bordered by Prospect Road on the south, Vine Drive on the North, Interstate 25 on the East, Old Town on the west, and on the southwest by Jefferson Street and Riverside Avenue.

Food deserts in Northern Colorado aren't limited to Fort Collins, however. Nearly all of northern Weld County is considered a rural food desert, including Nunn, Grover, Hereford and Briggsdale, where residents have to drive more than 10 miles to reach a supermarket.

### **Spiking gasoline prices and food insecurity**

Most research on food deserts has been done in Denver and southern Colorado, where grocery stores are sparse for residents living near East Colfax Avenue or in small towns in the San Luis Valley. But little is known about how living in a food desert in Fort Collins affects low-income people here.

"Basically, in urban areas, food deserts have been framed as there being food in neighborhoods, but it's fast-food restaurants or corner stores with heavily processed foods," said Dawn Thilmany, professor of agriculture economics at Colorado State University, who participated in a study of suburban food deserts in Longmont.

That's a major contributor to higher levels of disease among low-income Coloradans.

In 2008, the Colorado Health Foundation found that low-income Coloradans have higher rates of chronic disease than their more affluent counterparts, and the foundation concluded in its 2009 report that providing convenient and inexpensive fresh foods to poor communities is the best way to slow down the increasing rate of obesity, diabetes and hypertension.

Produce is often expensive, so poor families turn to cheap, calorie-packed processed foods instead, the report says. Ensuring easy access supermarkets stocking those fresh foods is a major part of reducing that trend.

For some people, obtaining fresh food in an urban food desert is less about the specific location of a grocery store than it is about simply getting there regardless of distance, said Lisa Walvoord, vice-president of policy for Live Well Colorado, a nonprofit dedicated to reducing obesity and promoting good nutrition throughout the state.

"They don't even have the means to travel a mile," she said.

That's a major hurdle facing people getting their food from the Food Bank for Larimer County, whether they live in a food desert or not, said Pezzani, the food bank's executive director. "Many of our clients cite that transportation is an issue for them," she said. "Even though both of our food share locations are located on a major bus line, their actual residents may not be near a bus line. It's a challenge for them to get to the bus to get there."

That's especially true for residents of the Collins Aire Park, she said.

"I don't know how far the Walmart is from there; even if someone wanted to bike or walk to that store, it wouldn't be very safe," she said. "In other areas of town, at least you have a bike lane on a major road. There are definitely issues with access that those folks face. In those areas, too, there's probably not much in the way of gas stations in that area."

The Longmont study, conducted by a team led by Live Well Longmont, found that transportation to grocery stores isn't much of an issue for the suburban poor, Thilmany said.

The problem was that the stores didn't provide culturally-appropriate food for those low-income residents who may not be accustomed to preparing food available at large grocery stores, she said.

What's unique about food deserts in Colorado is Coloradans' overall high access to transportation, affinity for eating out and their overall good health, issues that expose holes in the USDA's food desert data for Colorado, she said.

"USDA did their best to come up with data that would start painting a picture of what the food environment is," she said. "What all of us in each of the 50 states have tried to do is put a unique spin on what our state looks like. With the exception of Denver and Colorado Springs, we do not have transportation issues (in Colorado). Most people have access to transportation."

"The missing data we have is, if you have a car, is there still a transportation problem because gas has gotten expensive?" she said. "If gas gets expensive enough, it doesn't matter if you have a car."

#### **WHAT IS A FOOD DESERT?**

A food desert must be both a "low income" community and a "low access" community as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**Low Income:** The USDA defines a low income community as any census tract where the poverty rate is 20 percent or higher, or any census tract where the median family income is at or below 80 percent of the area's median family income.

**Low Access:** At least 500 people in the census tract or 33 percent of its population must live more than a mile from a supermarket in an urban area, or 10 miles from a supermarket in a rural area.

**No Supermarket:** The USDA defines a supermarket as a store that sells items in all standard grocery departments and rings up at least \$2 million in annual grocery sales. That may exclude many smaller stores that sell fresh food in smaller towns and communities. A food desert may include a major supermarket if most low-income, low-access residents live more than a mile away.

#### **Food deserts by the numbers**

3: The number of food deserts in Larimer County. All are between Overland Trail and Interstate 25.

299,630: Population of Larimer County

8,815: Number of residents living in Larimer County's food deserts, all in and around Fort Collins.

5,168: Number of food desert residents with low access to supermarkets

658: Total low-income food desert residents with low access to supermarkets.

Source: USDA, based on 2010 Census data

#### **Between old town and waffle house: A profile of a food desert**

Fort Collins' largest food desert – an entire census tract – sprawls between Old Town and Interstate 25, north of Mulberry Street and south of Vine Drive. 2010 Census data show this area is a picture of need. Here's a breakdown:

**Major Businesses:** New Belgium Brewing, Odell Brewing, Walmart, Home Depot, Sears-Trostel Lumber

**Major Restaurants:** Charco-Broiler, KFC, Taco Bell, Waffle House, Qdoba, Silver Mine Subs, Denny's, Hacienda Real

**Grocery Stores:** Walmart

**Population:** 2,155

**Residents with low access to supermarkets:** 38 percent

**Low-income residents with low access to a**

**supermarket:** 5.2 percent

**Low-access homes without a vehicle:** 2.8 percent

Source: USDA

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