



SAGINAW FOOD ACCESS STUDY

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Residents of the City of Saginaw have limited access to healthy and affordable foods. There are only two grocery stores in the City and many convenience stores and dollar stores that sell low-quality and highly processed food items. Many residents of Saginaw experience food insecurity – which is not having consistent access to enough food to live a full, healthy life. The barriers to accessing food are more pronounced for households with low incomes and those who do not have a vehicle.

Additionally, systemic racism and bias have caused residents of color to experience disparities in poverty, asset accumulation, unemployment, and lack of food access – all factors that drive food insecurity.

The purpose of the Food Access Study was to gather information that will help the City of Saginaw plan and take action to improve food access for residents. The study focused on the food retail environment and where and how people get their groceries. The study gathered input from residents and other community members through one-on-one and small group conversations, a public survey, and a community meeting.

This study was commissioned by the Saginaw City Council and conducted by [Public Policy Associates](#) with support from Guidehouse.

The recommendations are targeted to the City Council, staff, and other representatives, but the report is intended to be a source of information for anyone interested in increasing food access in Saginaw.

You can read the full report here:
publicpolicy.com/featured-work/saginawfoodaccess





Findings

The following are the major takeaways from the Food Access Study.

FOOD LANDSCAPE

Most of the City is a low-income and low-grocery-store-access area. There are two grocery stores in the City, but satisfaction is mixed regarding the quality, freshness, and selection of food. There is a Food Club under development, a nonprofit membership grocery store that would serve some low-income households.¹

There are many stores in Saginaw that accept SNAP and have a selection of staple food items. However, variety, quality, and freshness are lacking. Around 85% of SNAP retailers in Saginaw are convenience stores or dollar stores.²

There are two food banks and many food pantries and soup kitchens that play an invaluable role in providing food for residents. However, many food pantries are clustered, resulting in overlap in some areas and limited access in others.

The City has many assets and strengths to address food access issues. The City has many active residents and neighborhood associations. There are numerous committed food-access organizations, including the food pantries, food banks, and at least two networks of local organizations (the Food Access Coalition Teams of Saginaw and Saginaw Just Transition Indaba).

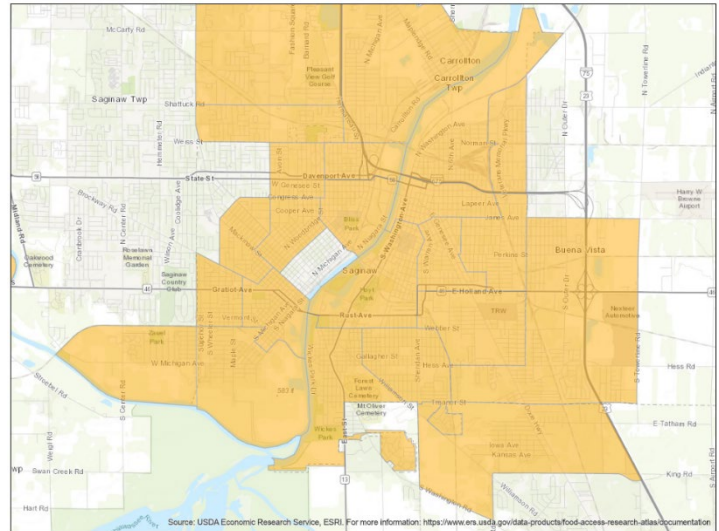


Figure 1: Low-Income and Low-Grocery-Store-Access Areas of Saginaw. (USDA Economic Research Service, 2019)

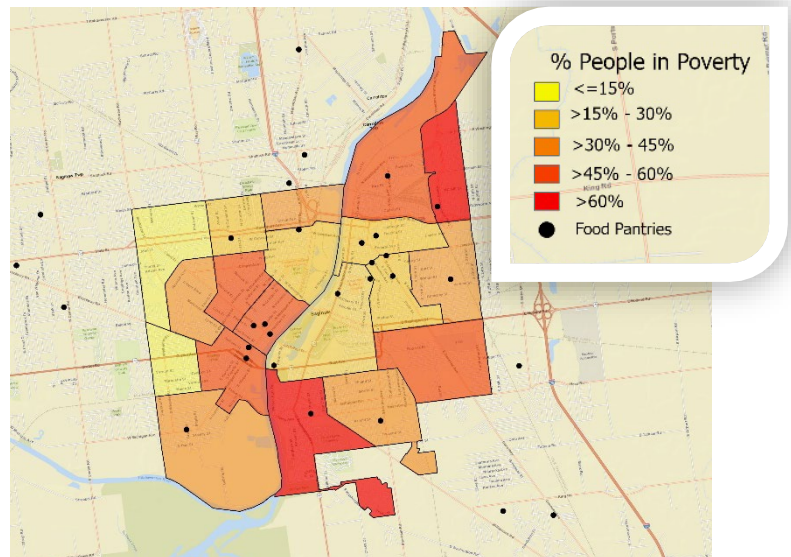


Figure 2: Food Pantry Locations in the City of Saginaw. (Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; Food pantry data provided by the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan and 2-1-1).

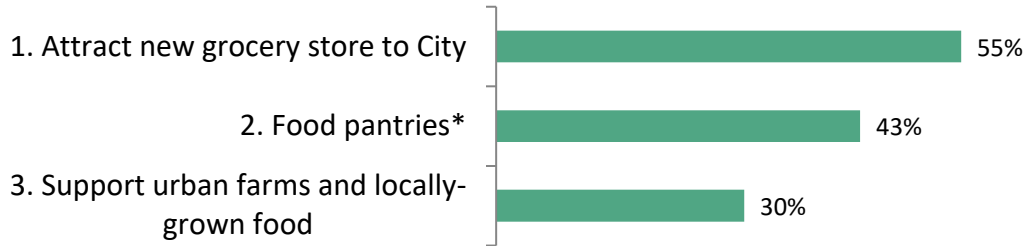
¹ As of late 2023, there was interest from a developer in putting in another grocery store, but few details are publicly known (Thompson, 2023).

² Calculation of SNAP retailer type includes SNAP retailers in zip codes 48601, 48602, 48607, and 48609. There are small areas of other zip codes, e.g., 48603, that are in Saginaw but mostly fall outside of the City.



FOOD ACCESS PRIORITIES

Top priorities for residents that responded to the survey:



Top priorities change based on income level. **Food pantries³ are the top priority for respondents that live below the poverty line**, followed by attract a new grocery store.

FOOD CLUB PRIORITIES

At the Saginaw Community Food Club (under development), people with lower incomes would shop in a grocery store but not need cash. Instead, they would pay a low monthly cost (\$12-\$16) and receive points to buy food.

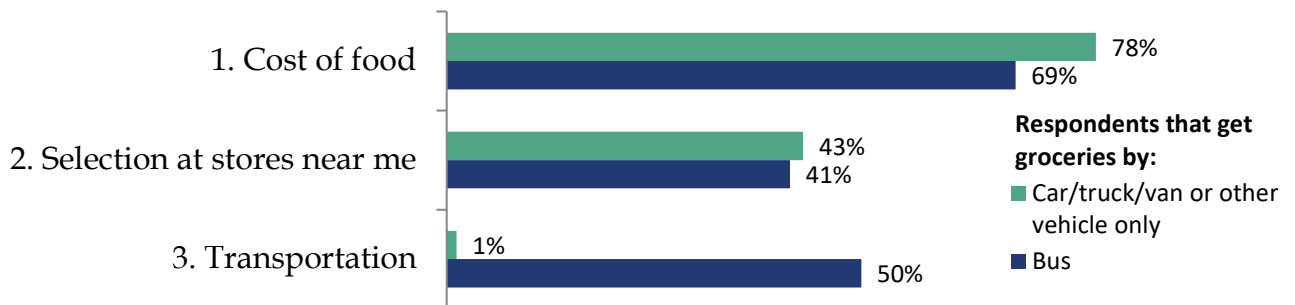
Survey respondents who may be eligible thought it was most important that the Food Club:

- Keep membership information private.
- Offer non-food items, including paper products (e.g., toilet paper), hygiene products (e.g., soap), and household cleaning products and detergents.

91%
are interested in shopping at the Food Club.

FOOD ACCESS CHALLENGES

Top challenge reported by survey respondents in getting the food they want and need:



“A lot of access to food is corner stores and they don’t carry anything fresh and they mark everything up so high. It’s really not sustainable.” – Local organization representative

³ *Food pantries is a combined category that includes the percentage of respondents that selected “more food pantry locations,” “let people choose food at food pantries,” or “expand the days or hours that food pantries are open.”



The food items that were rated most difficult for survey respondents to get, especially those who have low incomes, take the bus to get groceries, or live on the east side, are:



seafood or fish



meats



fresh produce

The challenges may be due to a combination of less selection at stores within the City and the cost.

GROCERY STORE DEVELOPMENT

Anticipated challenges attracting a grocery store to Saginaw:

- National trends in grocery toward consolidation
- Local trends in retail. Grocery stores in the City have closed. Other stores have moved to a drive-thru model
- Perception of theft. Even if not pervasive, national trends or perception may affect ability to attract a grocer
- Population has declined in the City
- Cost to rehabilitate a building
- Limited experience attracting retail to the City
- City capacity and funding constraints

“As grocery stores consolidate to mega stores... I would be pragmatic about the ability to land one of those mega stores.” – Local organization representative

City supports and incentives potentially available to attract a grocery store:

- Available land at a low/reduced cost
- APRA funds
- Tax exemptions
- Committed and experienced City and economic development staff
- Flexible zoning (in process)
- Re-development underway downtown (synergy).
- Current interest from Akkadian, a Bridgeport-based development company (Thompson, 2023)
- Existing buildings with freezers and coolers (e.g., vacant Walgreens and Rite Aids)

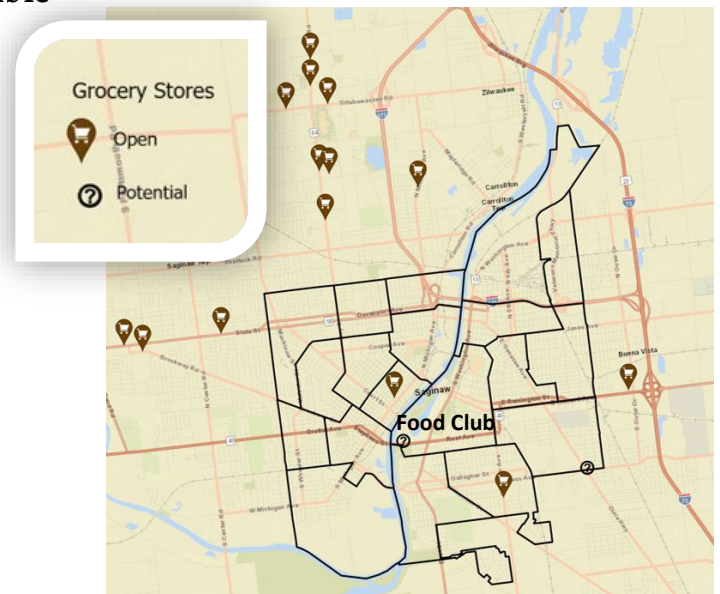


Figure 3: Existing and Potential Grocery Stores in the Saginaw Area, 2023



OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing food access and food security in Saginaw is going to take a multi-faceted approach to find solutions that work for different people and communities. There is not one solution that is going to be “right” for all.

ATTRACT NEW GROCERY RETAIL ESTABLISHMENT(S)

There is a lot of support for attracting a new grocery store to the City of Saginaw.

Recommended characteristics of a grocery store, whether the Food Club, a for-profit chain, an independent grocer, or a community-owned co-op:

- Carries quality, fresh produce, meats, and seafood or fish
- Affordable and accepts SNAP
- Local business or community-driven
- Carries locally-grown food
- Offers non-food items including paper and hygiene products, and household cleaning products and detergents
- Prioritize the east side, including the downtown, because residents that live on the east side have less access to existing grocery stores and more challenges with food access. Additionally, development already occurring downtown may help attract a grocery store.

Requests for Proposals

The City of Saginaw could take action to attract a new grocery retail by releasing a Request for Proposals (RFP). The following are recommended elements to include in an RFP:

- Who is eligible to apply
- Background information and marketing profile
- Priorities and requirements for the store, including location (see above)
- Purchase price if proposing to build on publicly owned property
- Financial and other support available
- Selection process and criteria

RFP process recommendations:

- Prior to releasing the RFP, have discussions with local grocers and developers to gauge interest and needed incentives before proceeding with the full RFP.
- Engage community members in the RFP development and selection process. Incorporate community feedback from this study into the RFP. (See recommended grocery store characteristics above.)
- Distribute the RFP widely, including to local grocers and Michigan-based independent grocers.



INCREASE ACCESS TO EXISTING GROCERY LOCATIONS

Saginaw residents that do not have or cannot operate personal transportation (i.e., a car) face increased barriers to getting to and from the grocery store.

The City could work in close collaboration with Saginaw Transit Authority Regional Services (STARS) to identify resources to make it easier to get groceries by bus through:

- A specially equipped grocery bus that could take people home from the store with large grocery orders (there is a bag limit for safety reasons on regular buses).
- A direct-to-the-grocery-store bus route.

The City could work with the charitable food network to increase access to free food for residents. Funding aside, good roles for the City would be:

- Bring together local food pantry partners and facilitate discussion and coordination.
- Work with 2-1-1 or the Food Bank Council of Eastern Michigan (FBEM) to ensure their existing food pantry directory is complete and up to date.
- Disseminate information about food pantry availability on City website and at events.
- Develop City protocol or policy on supplying food and water in emergency/crisis response (in partnership with FBEM).

SUPPORT COMMUNITY COALITIONS AND WORKING GROUPS

We encourage the City to consider how best to support local organizations in food-access planning initiatives. Readiness to be funded for a one-time or capital expenditure (such as those funded by the City through American Rescue Plan funds) takes considerable upfront planning. It can be exceedingly difficult for people or organizations to do that planning without funding or other supports. Nor should people, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) led organizations, be expected to provide their time for free to develop or manage food-access initiatives.

SUPPORT URBAN AGRICULTURE

Residents who responded to the survey would like the City to directly or indirectly support urban agriculture and access to locally grown food. There are opportunities to:

- Create new markets for urban agriculture through new or existing food retail outlets and food pantries. For example, connecting neighborhood corner stores or pantries with local produce vendors; or in an RFP for a new grocery store prioritizing carrying local foods.
- Partner with existing organizations focused on urban agriculture such as the Saginaw Just Transition Indaba (network of local organizations) and MSU-Extension (operates urban agriculture projects across Michigan).



References

USDA Economic Research Service (2019). *Go to the Atlas*. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved January 24, 2024 from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>

Thompson, M. (2023, March 31). New life for vacant Walgreens. *Saginaw Daily*. Retrieved January 23, 2024 from <https://saginawdaily.com/2023/03/31/local-news/new-life-for-vacant-walgreens/>