



Live where ‘basics’ are missing? How about access to fresh, affordable food? If so, you may live in a food desert (even downtown!)

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When you're looking to buy a home, what factors do you consider? Would access to fresh, local food be top of mind?

Unfortunately, it wasn't for Judi Varga-Toth, who moved from Ottawa to West Carleton five years ago. She knew about the local farmers' market there, and she had plans for a garden. It was only after she bought her house that reality set in: there aren't any grocery stores.

The farmers' market was open only in the warmer months, and even when it was operating, it lacked variety. Surely as a farming community, she thought, the local fields would be teeming with edible crops.

But when she and her husband drove around, “we only saw fields growing non-human crops.”

Eventually she realized that Canadians eat mostly food that is grown elsewhere, in warmer climates; many farmers in the area have either stopped farming or grow only foods not intended for human consumption. The handful of convenience stores peppered around the community did not sell much in the way of fruits and veggies — and what they did sell was expensive.

Though Varga-Toth could look out from her property onto lush fields, without access to food, she might as well have been standing in sand, looking out across a sea of dunes. It wasn't long before she realized she had bought in a food desert.

Back to Basics

Deserts exist everywhere in Canada. Often they are areas where people live without access to something essential — and I use that term loosely since often what's essential to one may not be as essential to someone else. We can all probably agree that access to paramedics, fire, and police services is essential. What about cell service? Cycling lanes? Transit? Libraries? Postal service? In 2016, the CRTC ruled that high-speed Internet is a “basic” service, generating new discussions over the definition of essential.

The City of Ottawa's long-term vision (dubbed Ottawa 20/20) states that residents need “access to basics.” But what does that mean? How should access be interpreted when it comes to urban areas? Is it different for those who live in rural areas?

I live in Wakefield and work in Ottawa. When I moved to Wakefield, there was at least one gas station near town. Within a year, however, it closed. Now, if I forget to fuel up before leaving Ottawa, it's roughly 25 kilometres until the next gas station. Locals adapt — they keep gas containers on hand, borrow gas, or pray they have enough fumes to get them to Masham — the area's last remaining gas station. But you could say I live in a gas desert.

In rural areas, food deserts are locations that force residents to drive more than about 10 kilometres to buy nutritional, affordable food. In West Carleton, Varga-Toth says, locals have to drive upwards of 20 kilometres, to either Arnprior or Kanata North, to find a grocery store.

Within cities, food deserts are defined as “low-income neighbourhoods with only limited access to fresh, healthy food.” (Neighbourhood Study, a project by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, defines low income as “income levels at which families or persons ... spend 20 percentage points more than average of their after-tax income on food, shelter, and clothing.”) This study identified 14 low-income neighbourhoods.

The idea of a food desert in the middle of the city might seem strange, especially in neighbourhoods lauded for their condos and boutiques. But consider the bustling area of Little Italy and Chinatown, known to city officials as West Centretown.

Remember when Loeb on Booth Street closed in 2006?

Since then, this neighbourhood, which the city estimates is home to 6,000 people, has been without a grocery store. Local convenience stores and specialty shops exist, but those tend to sell expensive, non-perishable foods and are spread out over many blocks; they also often cater to particular ethnicities, which can limit the range of products sold. This situation affects

the quality of life for everyone, but especially those whose average income is below \$50,000 (that's more than 50 per cent of West Centretown residents). And even if people can afford the food, the distance and lack of variety are problematic for people with dietary restrictions, the elderly, and anyone who simply cannot afford the time to visit several stores.

In short, whether they are in urban, suburban, or rural areas, food deserts affect quality of life.

Home Economics

With housing prices on the rise and affordable rental options on the decline in downtown Ottawa, lower-income people are moving to suburban or rural areas, such as West Carleton — which necessitates the use of a car to buy groceries, likely negating what was saved on rent.

Moreover, food deserts in suburban and rural areas tend to lower property values. According to a report by the Detroit Fresh Food Access Initiative: “Food deserts ... also decrease the value of neighbourhoods, making it difficult to attract new residents and developers and lowering the resale value of homes. Market research has shown that food deserts hinder the marketability of residential projects.”

Back in West Carleton, councillor Eli El-Chantiry disputes the food desert label. He points out that there isn't an obvious centre to the area. So, he asks, if you had a larger grocery store, “where would you put it? The problem is geography,” he says.

As El-Chantiry explains, the size of the ward (763 square kilometres) means that if you live on the ward's extremities, it's more convenient to drive to Arnprior or Kanata North to shop than to head into the ward's centre. In other words, if a grocery store were to open in Kinburn or Carp, West Carleton residents might still choose to shop elsewhere.

El-Chantiry says people have adapted to the lack of a central grocery store by picking up groceries on their way back from work. It's not unlike the same adaptation that Wakefielders have made regarding gas.

West Carleton is an interesting case study, but some of the issues this ward contends with also apply to Ottawa's urban areas. Does the ward — and the city — have ways to incentivize a grocery store to open?

El-Chantiry flatly says: “No. Nor should they. I don't want the city to be in the business of opening businesses.”

(I mused that the city didn't have an issue with trying to attract Amazon to build a new office here, but El-Chantiry rebuffed the comparison.)

In the end, the more the locals are forced to adapt to their situation by driving distances to buy groceries, the less incentive there is for someone to open a grocery store. And El-Chantiry says that most residents are satisfied with driving outside the ward to get groceries. Even if a grocery store were to open, there's no guarantee that locals would change their shopping behaviours to support a local supermarket. In fact, El-Chantiry says that food chains were approached by BIAs in his ward, requesting that they open small satellite stores; he says the chains responded by saying that there was not enough business to pursue such an endeavour.

El-Chantiry also suggests that shopping habits are changing, especially now that everything can be purchased online and shipped to one's door. Of course, this means that reliable, affordable Internet needs to be available in the ward. (Over in Wakefield, that's not the case.)

It seems locals do play a role in perpetuating food deserts.

It's not unlike the gas situation in Wakefield, where, some might say, it was the locals' habit of chasing cheaper Ontario gas that put local gas stations out of business. (Quebec's taxes at the pumps are generally higher than in Ontario, though some compensation is given to pumps closer to Ottawa.)

Deep Roots

To improve her situation, Varga-Toth founded [Deep Roots Food Hub](#) in 2016. Their goal? To build a central root cellar in the community that will encourage local food production and supply convenience stores in the area with fresh fruits and veggies. Interestingly, the biggest challenge was finding land within the ward. Instead, Deep Roots settled on NCC's greenbelt property nearby.

The reason? "People didn't understand what it was or how it would work," says El-Chantiry.

The city contributed funds to the project, but Varga-Toth argues that perhaps their rural needs were not as "well understood" as in other areas of the city. She characterizes the city's mindset in this regard as "poverty of the imagination."

"A paradigm shift needs to happen with our city planners," says Varga-Toth.

Perhaps, but it's up to residents as well. Learn from Wakefield's mistake: buy local.

Until the root cellar is built, Varga-Toth and others in her community remain marooned in a food desert. Asked whether she would prioritize a store that sells a variety of produce and fresh food year-round as part of any future move, she replied, "Yes, it's something I would consider much more."