

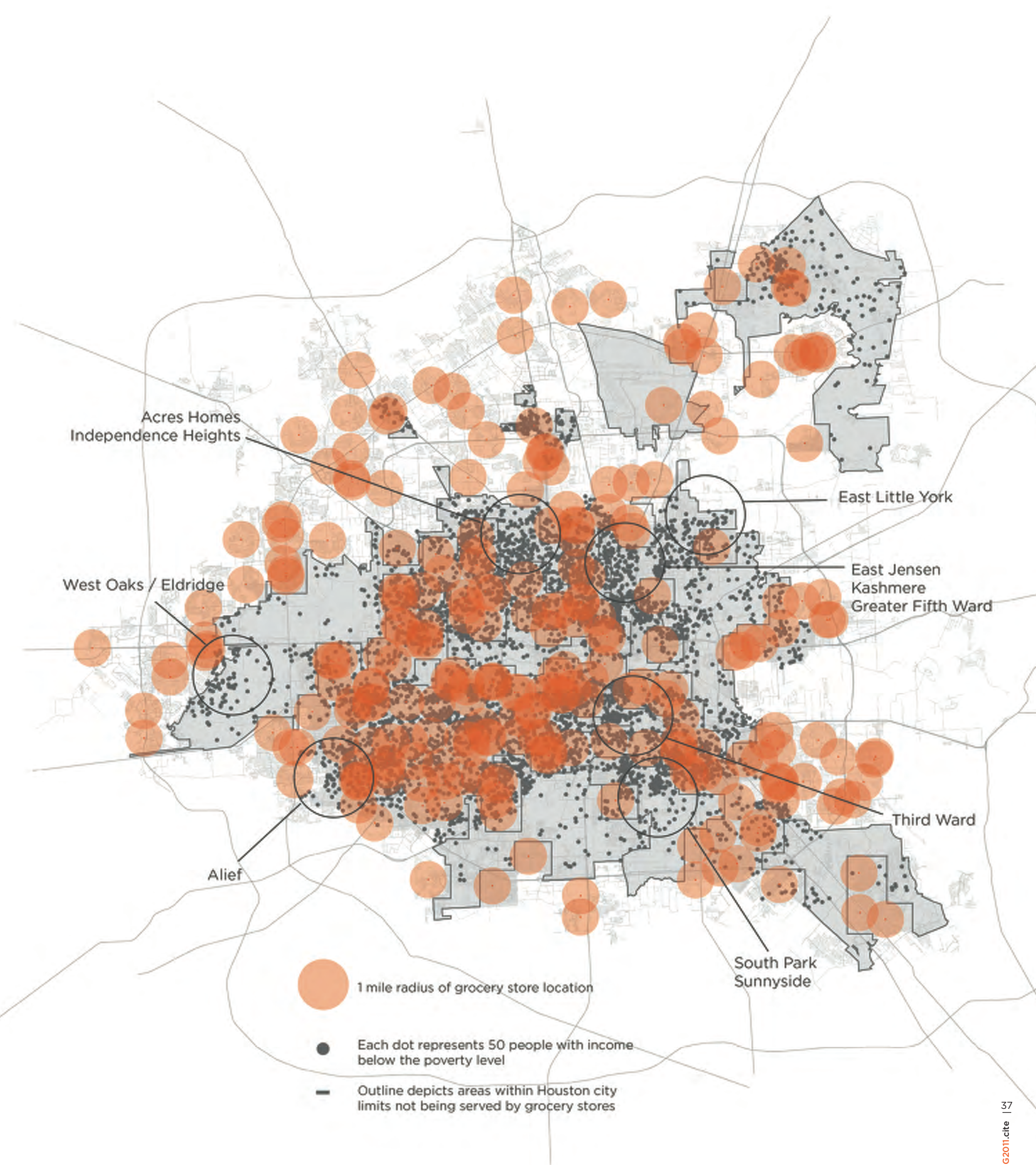


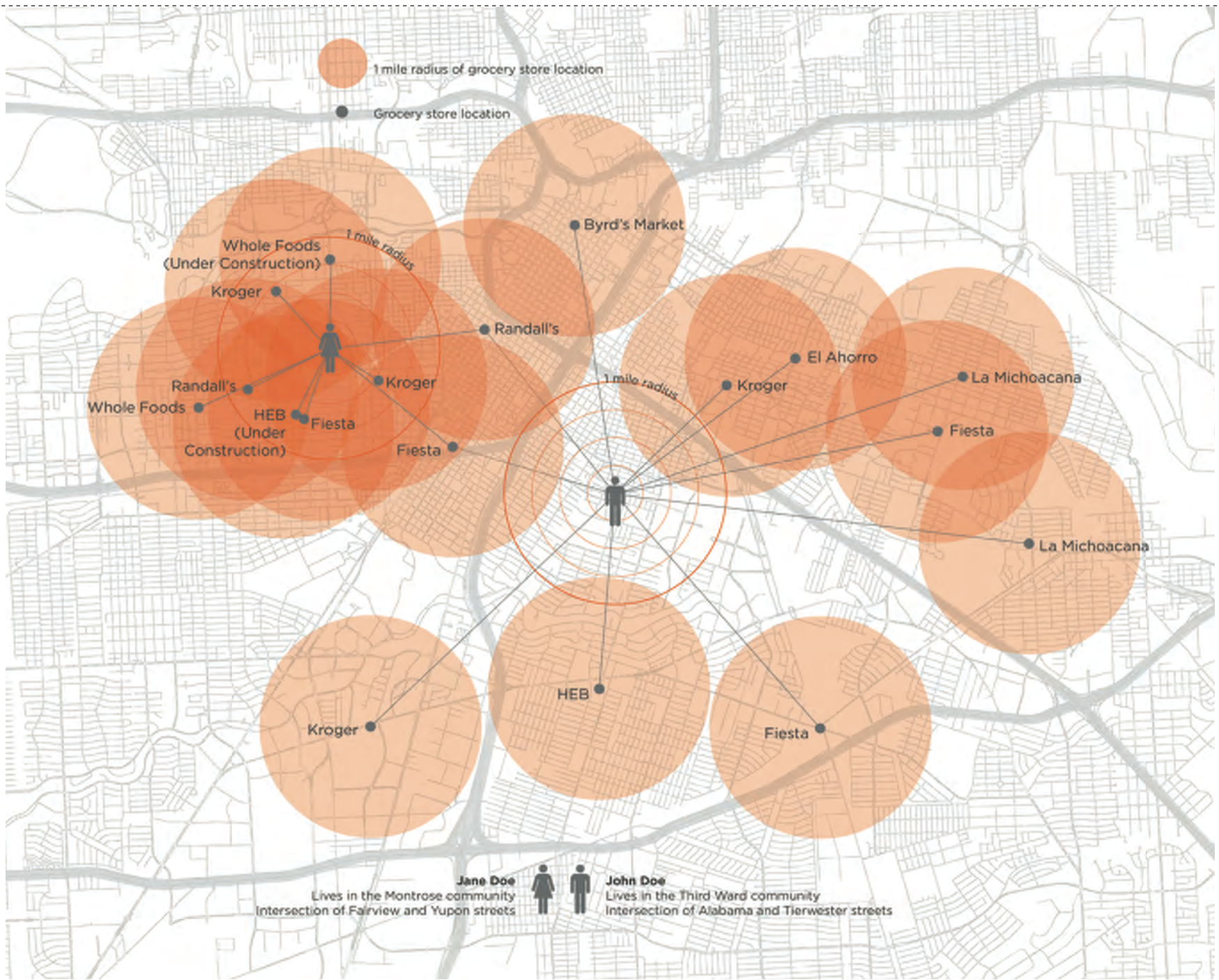
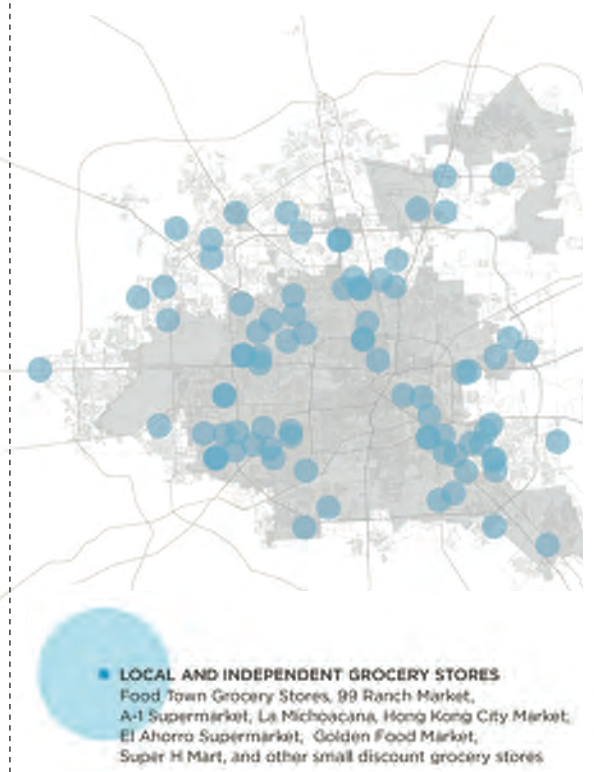
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Mapping Houston neighborhoods
reveals a great divide in access to
grocery stores and suggests
possibilities for bridging the gap.

BY SUSAN ROGERS AND MARIA ORAN

In 2010 neighborhood quality of life and the unzoned “Free Enterprise City” again came to blows. Residents protested, but not against highways, toxic factories, landfills, or highrise towers; instead the targets were a proposed big-box store and grocery store. In the Heights, yard signs screamed, “Super Neighborhoods, Not Super Centers,” in response to the proposed Walmart. And as this article goes to print, another Inner Loop Walmart fight appears to be on the horizon, this time for Idylwood in the East End. Meanwhile in Montrose, a heated debate erupted over the proposed HEB at Dunlavy and Alabama Streets, directly across the street from a Fiesta Mart. HEB placated residents by offering a choice of three designs by famed San Antonio-based architecture firm Lake|Flato.





Food is among the most basic of our needs. In Houston, access to healthy food and a good grocery store is not an unreasonable desire, but it is one that goes unfulfilled for tens of thousands of people, many of them poor. For this reason the recent protests in areas glutted with grocery stores leave a bit of a bad taste in the mouth, even while illustrating the potential of community organizing in the face of corporate power. The irony is that as grocery stores and big-box chain stores converge on neighborhoods with means, often cannibalizing the customer base of other local stores, the neighborhoods ignored in this quest for the highest-end customers continue to yearn for easily accessible, fresh, and healthy food.

In other words, in contrast to the “grocery glut” in places like Montrose, where from the intersection of Fairview and Yupon Streets, you can choose from four grocery stores less than a mile away (and in the future, when the new HEB and Whole Foods stores are complete, you will be able to choose from six), there are neighborhoods across the city of Houston that lack any grocery store, of any design. These neighborhoods can be designated “food deserts.” A food desert, according to the Food Conservation and Energy Act passed by Congress in 2008, is an “area



Dominique Latin, 23, of Houston heads to the Fiesta Mart on Main Street near Wheeler after bussing from Bissonnet and Beechnut with her children.

with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly located in lower income neighborhoods.”

A map of grocers within the city of Houston carrying a wide selection of fresh produce was created from information available on Google and major grocery store websites. Where are these food deserts in Houston? In places those who know the city would expect, including parts of the Third Ward, Alief, Sunnyside, South Park, Acres Homes, Independence Heights, East Jensen, Kashmere, the Fifth Ward, East Little York, Willowbrook, and West Oaks/Eldridge. In these areas and others, more than a quarter of a million low-income residents live more than a mile from a grocery store, and more than 25 percent of these residents do not have access to a car.

Proximity to a grocery store, however, is only one part of the equation. Cost and quality are the others. Dominique Latin, 23, heads to the Fiesta Mart on Main Street near Wheeler Avenue after bussing from Bissonnet and Beechnut Streets with her children. Even though she lives next to a Walmart, she says that canned goods at Fiesta are cheaper. “Walmart, HEB, and Kroger don’t want to build in poor neighborhoods because they don’t want to lower their prices as much as stores like Fiesta. They don’t want to compete,” says Latin. Maps of no-name-brand, mainstream, and high-end grocery stores show that even in areas that do not appear to be food deserts, there is marked stratification. In effect, a low-income resident living next door to a store out of her price range is in a food desert.

On a brisk January morning in the Third Ward, Diana Worthy, 61, buys food from a Family Dollar Store at Griggs Road and Milart Street in the Third Ward and carries her groceries home. She pins her hopes for

a grocery store stocked with nutritious food on the METRO light rail expansion and the demographic change she expects will accompany the investment. “I think they’re not planning it,” she says, “but the neighborhood is changing because of the train. The neighborhood will demand it.”

Food deserts have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable women and children. Single mothers are substantially more likely to live in poverty, and a recent multistate study found that low-income zip codes were half as likely to have a grocery store as higher income areas. Furthermore, convenience stores and fast food are often abundant in low-income neighborhoods, encouraging the consumption of high-fat, high-sugar, processed foods. There is clear evidence that lack of access to fresh and healthy food contributes to diet related health problems such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.

Currently, a new federal program is being proposed to address the inequities in access to healthy food. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative would provide \$400 million in grants and loans to assist retailers in locating in neighborhoods without access to fresh food. The program is modeled after Pennsylvania’s successful Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which offers block grants or low-interest loans to grocers who agree to open stores in low-income or rural areas. The program, according to Policy Link, has generated 83 new or improved grocery stores, provided 400,000 people with access to healthy food, created five thousand jobs, and sparked \$190 million in economic development, all with a public investment of \$30 million.

While the protests against HEB and Walmart attract media attention, the debate needs to be widened to include addressing the more insidious problem—lack of access to healthy food—that undermines the very health of our families and our economy. **c**

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