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## **The Birchwood Food Desert: a Neighborhood's Fight for Food Justice**

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# The Birchwood Food Desert

A Neighborhood's Fight for Food Justice

Birchwood Neighborhood

Thursday, December 5th  
1:00 pm in Old Main 340

Kate Haworth  
Advisor: Dr. Michael Karlberg

For Disability Accommodations please call (360) 650-3034

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, several problems make easy access to fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate food difficult in the Birchwood Neighborhood of Bellingham, Washington. First, a non-compete clause prevents any grocer from moving into the space left vacant by the previous Albertsons grocery store in the Birchwood Neighborhood for the next 25 years. Second, issues of physical accessibility and transportation come together to severely inhibit residents from consistent access to groceries and fresh food. Third, health continues to be an important factor for the Birchwood neighborhood, as current food options generally only provide processed, packaged food which has been linked to various short- and long-term health consequences. Fourth, the loss of a grocery store left the ability for residents to access culturally appropriate food and food services severely diminished. Many solutions have already been put in place through community organizing such as community gardening and neighborhood food boxes, but the Birchwood neighborhood remains a food desert where residents struggle to access fresh, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

The literature and movements behind food sovereignty, defined as “the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems,” are as vast as they are diverse.<sup>1</sup> This paper will explore one aspect of food sovereignty: a concept known as food justice as it relates to the Birchwood Neighborhood food desert in Bellingham, Washington. According to the Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy, food justice is, “the right of communities everywhere to produce, process, distribute, access, and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion, or community.”<sup>2</sup> By looking at other successful, community-based programs around the country, we can apply the same principles and techniques in the Birchwood Neighborhood to help

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<sup>1</sup> Efe Can Gürcan and Jean Hostetler Diaz, "Cuban Agriculture and Food Sovereignty: Beyond Civil-Society-Centric and Globalist Paradigms," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 4 (2014): 129-46.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Roddy and Maura Paxton, "Food Justice Definitions," Oregon Tilth (Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy), accessed November 25, 2019, <https://tilth.org/stories/food-justice-definitions/>

eliminate food insecurity and inaccessibility in the area. From West Oakland Co-operatives to Detroit's urban farms, Bellingham can learn from such radical acts of food and land justice to liberate its own residents.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Defining Food Deserts

After identifying more than 6,500 food deserts in the U.S. through 2000 Census data, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service set out to understand the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of food desert tracks.<sup>3</sup> They first define a food desert as

A census tract that meets both low-income and low-access criteria including:

1. poverty rate greater than or equal to 20 percent OR median family income does not exceed 80 percent statewide (rural/urban) or metro-area (urban) median family income;
2. at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population located more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store.<sup>4</sup>

However, there is some debate about whether the term ‘food desert’ properly represents the occurrence of food insecurity. Some say the term ‘food desert’ is actually a colonized term. The term desert in a Western and colonial context refers to a place of infertile and sterile land, of desolate emptiness. But Valerie Segrest, a Native nutrition educator and member of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) and Adrienne Kenne (Cherokee Nation) argue that if an indigenous person from the desert is asked, the term desert, “implies a sustaining life force... and a food system and a way of life... [which] is so different than the mainstream conception of what a food desert is.”<sup>5</sup> Segrest continues, saying, “the perspective of the desert came out of colonizers who are pioneering through the west and didn’t make it.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Dutko, Michele Ver Ploeg, Tracey L. Farrigan, and United States, Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, Economic Research Report (United States. Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service), No. 140. Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Dutko, et. al., *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, iii.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Segrest, interview with Matika Wilber and Adrienne Kenne, *Food Sovereignty: A Growing Movement - All My Relations Podcast*, podcast audio, March 02, 2019, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/262196/978045>.

<sup>6</sup> Segrest, *Food Sovereignty: A Growing Movement - All My Relations Podcast*, 2019.

The term food desert also implies that such a phenomenon is a natural occurrence, rather than a man-made and political one. Images of the dust bowl or infertile badlands come to mind when we think of food deserts, places where food cannot grow. That's why some people have argued that the term food apartheid is more representative of the situation. Karen Washington, a physical therapist from the Bronx and co-founder of Black Urban Growers, has focused on the intersections of food, poverty, racism, unemployment and healthcare in her engagement with community organizing. She argues that we should drop the term 'food desert' in favor of 'food apartheid' because, "'food apartheid' looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics."<sup>7</sup> Washington also acknowledges how the term desert erases all the "life and vibrancy and potential," and use of such a word, "runs the risk of preventing us from seeing those things."<sup>8</sup> These arguments highlight an important aspect of food justice, as the terms we use have a direct impact on the issues and their presentation. However, apartheid refers to a specific government policy that has created injustice, and the Birchwood Neighborhood's food desert is the result of a private corporate policy. This paper will therefore use food desert to describe the situation in the Birchwood Neighborhood, as it is the most widely recognized term in the research in this instance, and it is also the title that residents of the Birchwood Neighborhood use.

### **Complicated Concerns**

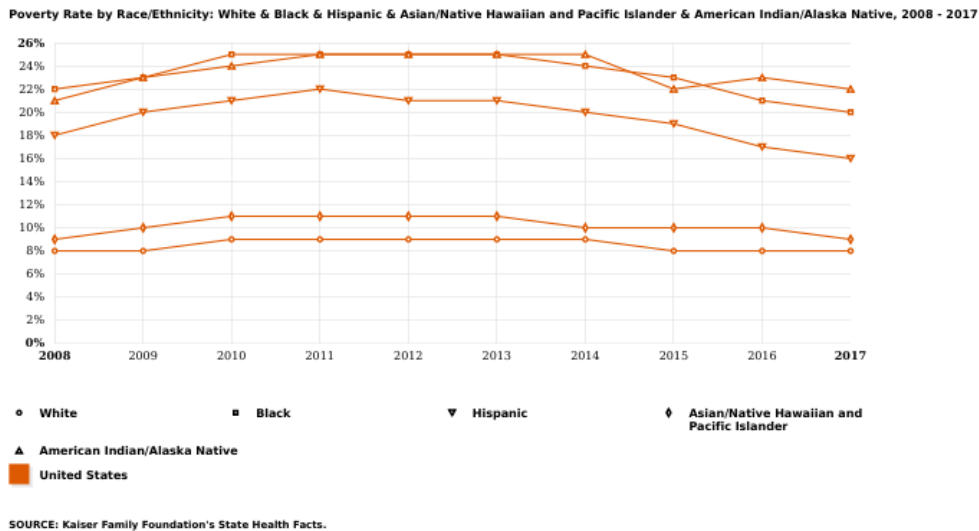
The 2012 study completed by the Economic Research Service and the USDA found several common characteristics in areas identified as food deserts. An area is more likely to be a food desert if it has a high level of poverty, which impacts things like the availability of public

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Brones, "Karen Washington: It's Not a Food Desert, It's Food Apartheid," *Guernica* (Guernica, May 10, 2018), <https://www.guernicamag.com/karen-washington-its-not-a-food-desert-its-food-apartheid/>.

<sup>8</sup> Brones, "Karen Washington: It's Not a Food Desert, It's Food Apartheid," 2018.

transportation and private vehicle availability. This was discovered to impact the area regardless of whether it was a rural or urban tract.<sup>9</sup> On top of this, the study found that, “in all but very dense urban areas, the higher the percentage of minoritized population, the more likely the area is to be a food desert.”<sup>10</sup> In an urban food desert, the percentage of non-Hispanic Black population is twice that than in urban non-food deserts.<sup>11</sup> These findings are critical as they show how racial disparities are historic, cumulative, and persistent in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Food justice and the eradication of food deserts is not only a health and poverty issue, but it is also a racial issue. The ‘non-racial’ characteristics of food deserts, such as poverty and availability of public or private transportation, impact People of Color vastly more than White populations. We see below that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have consistently higher rates of poverty than their White counterparts.



In Washington State, racial disparities in poverty rates are only slightly lower for Black and Hispanic populations, while Indigenous people actually have higher rates of poverty in

<sup>9</sup> Dutko, et. al., *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, iii.

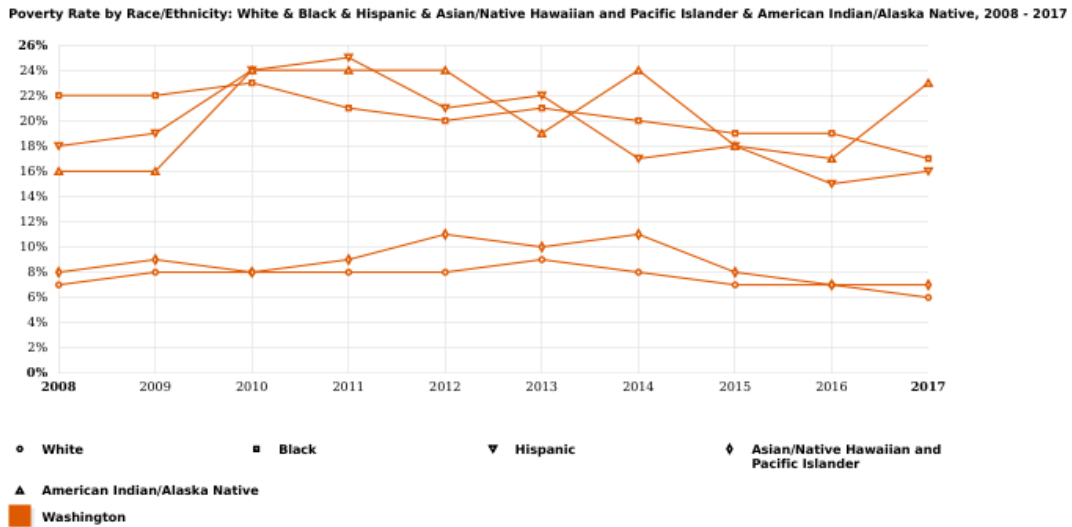
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Dutko, et. al., *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Thomas, “Politics of Racial Inequality,” *Politics of Racial Inequality* (October 15, 2019)



Washington State than in the U.S. as a whole.<sup>13</sup> This means that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are more likely to live in a food desert tract than their White counterparts in Washington State.

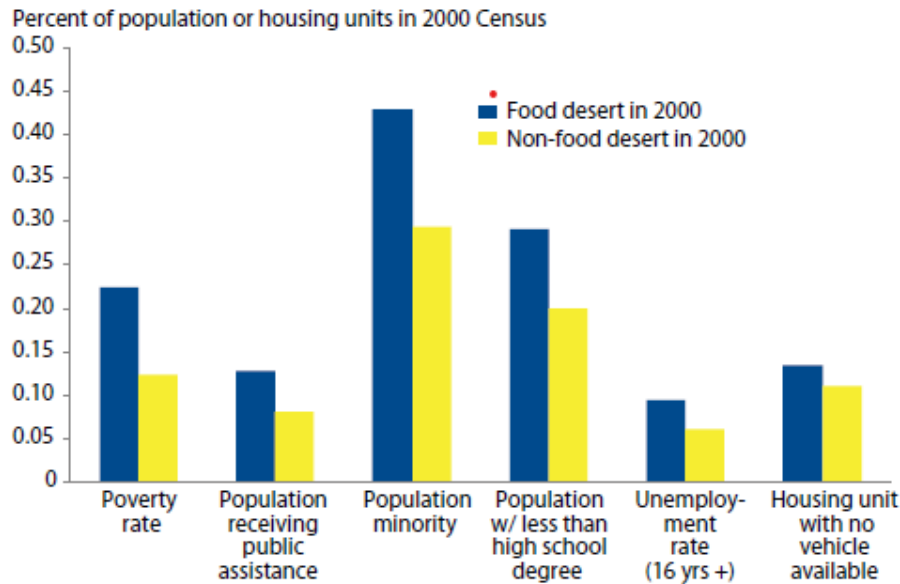


SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation's State Health Facts.

The Economic Research and USDA report also found that the most common characteristic of food desert tracts was the percent of minoritized population in the year 2000 (see graph below). With this in mind, it is important to understand that food deserts are not just an issue of access to healthy, affordable food, but also an issue of a racial and social justice. This should also be remembered when considering the Birchwood food desert, as it is one of the more racially diverse neighborhoods in Bellingham, with many households classified as low-income.

<sup>13</sup> "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, November 29, 2018.

Figure 1  
Mean characteristics of food deserts versus other tracts, Census 2000



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service calculations based on data from U.S. Census 2000.

Though food justice and food deserts are not new issues, the research surrounding the issue is still developing. Within the research and data around food deserts, there is currently no standardized nomenclature that exists to identify grids and other measurements to measure food desert tracts.<sup>14</sup> Measurements that have been used to identify food deserts include county lines, ZIP Codes, census tracts, and grids from the Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (SEDAC). Such a range in how researchers measure geographic areas means that research cannot be linked to other geocoded data, such as mapping or other location data.<sup>15</sup> Other problems with the research of food deserts come from issues of measurement precision in measuring the distances between neighborhoods and food stores. Spatial opportunity measurement, Manhattan Block Distance (MBD), Shortest Network Path (SNP), and Ground-Truthed are all methods of measuring

<sup>14</sup> Dutko, et. al., *Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

travel distances between neighborhoods and food stores.<sup>16</sup> Such measures also only evaluate shopping opportunities rather than actual shopping behavior.<sup>17</sup> Consumers do not take into account only the distance to the store, but also other factors like affordability, cultural representation or availability of culturally appropriate foods, social experiences, etc., which are not accounted for in measures of distance between a neighborhood and a food store.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> For example, one family could be within a mile of a food store, but high prices at the store may exclude them from shopping there.

New policy created with a greater understanding of the connection between food deserts and sociology may have other liberating effects, particularly in terms of health. Such research shows that poor nutritional habits and a lack of exercise have generally been associated with debilitating health problems, but food deserts suggest a more complicated take on health, one that looks to multiple disciplines for explanations of poor health.<sup>20</sup> Arkansas State University – Jonesboro researchers Anthony Troy Adams, Monika J. Ulrich, and Amanda Coleman write that, “Explanations of illness and disease are frequently attributed to hereditary and/or biological predisposition, poor nutritional habits, and lack of exercise. These explanations are overly simplistic. Furthermore, they are the equivalent of ‘blaming the victim.’”<sup>21</sup> Food deserts help analyze health outcomes as a function of the availability of healthy food, dependent on distance, race/ethnicity, income, wealth, poverty, age, ability, and culture, which help explain health outcomes in a more transparent way.<sup>22</sup> All of these factors are implicated in the context of the

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Troy Adams, Monika J. Ulrich and Amanda Coleman, "Food Deserts," *Journal of Applied Social Science* 4, no. 2 (2010): 58-62.

<sup>17</sup> Adams, et al., "Food Deserts," 60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Wolf-Powers, "Food Deserts and Real-Estate-Led Social Policy," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 3 (2017): 414-25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Birchwood food desert as well. We will see how low incomes, poverty, ability, and culture come together to impact how Birchwood Neighborhood residents get their food.

Political and legal considerations are also an important element of food justice. Some researchers argue that food security and food deserts should be framed around the issue of shortage of basic income and a need for higher wage floors.<sup>23</sup> Wolf-Powers explains that because food deserts only occur in low-income areas, income should be the problem which should be identified in issues of food accessibility.<sup>24</sup> However, this approach, too, may be too simplistic, as it doesn't address land sovereignty, cooperate manipulations of power, or the role of capitalism in the US economy in determining the root causes of inequality, poverty, and by extension, access to food.

### **Case Study: Detroit**

As one of the most segregated cities in the US today, Detroit has a history of land racism from suburbanization and redlining to eminent domain and elite land development.<sup>25</sup> 83% of the population is African American, over half of which cannot find jobs.<sup>26</sup> There is a huge opportunity for community owned spaces given the amount of vacant lots in the city – with a capacity of 2 million people that is home to only 730,000.<sup>27</sup> These vacant lots are inaccessible to residents because of pricing and zoning issues, so wealthy real-estate investors snap up properties and take advantage of the economic strife and foreclosures of residents' land. Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) acknowledges that, “we should not consider

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<sup>23</sup> Wolf-Powers, "Food Deserts and Real-Estate-Led Social Policy," PAGE NUMBER.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. PAGE NUMBER.

<sup>25</sup> Justine M. Williams et al., *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States*, (Oakland, CA: Food First Books/Institute for Food and Development Policy, 2017))

<sup>26</sup> Williams et al., *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States*, 203.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Detroit to be 'vacant.' The population continues to live, make communities, and struggle to maintain our city.”<sup>28</sup>

In Detroit, one of the biggest problems for food justice is the mass-sale of land to developers, specifically, a businessman named John Hantz.<sup>29</sup> His view is that economic growth will be brought to Detroit only through the purchasing and privatization of land by entrepreneurs and wealthy real-estate investors. City officials, who agreed with Hantz’s logic, agreed to sell him 1,500 parcels to plant a 140-acre woodlands project.<sup>30</sup> Such properties have continued to be sold to wealthy real-estate investors for far under the market-rate and far above what residents could purchase lots for themselves. The city has exchanged property to wealthy real-estate investors for as little as \$1, in exchange for “major developments” yet to be seen.<sup>31</sup> ‘Beautification’ efforts, as Hantz claimed his tree farm to be, often put wealth, land, and therefore power into the hands of the wealthiest people, increasing inequality in an already impoverished and unequal city. ‘Beautification’ projects also sometimes have the negative effects of pushing residents out of their homes as rents increase when investors buy land and plan beautification projects. One example of the impacts of excessive land prices is when the DBCFSN looked to purchase a piece of land to create the Detroit Food Commons. It was initially listed at \$850,000, but with increased interest and investor activity, the price was raised to \$1.2 million and then to \$1.4 million.<sup>32</sup> While wealthy real estate investors can afford these elevated prices, Detroit residents and community organizations cannot, which make land sovereignty and food justice difficult.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 206-207.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 208.

In response to such devastating land acquisition, grassroots community organizations who have been working towards land justice have brought forth many projects and ideas to combat the segregation and inequality of land and food access. The DBCFSN works to build self-reliance and influence public policy.<sup>33</sup> Yakini writes, “Although we do not think that grassroots communities should wait on the government or the corporate sectors to act, we do believe that we should hold the government accountable for behaving in a responsible manner.”<sup>34</sup> The DBCFSN has created several programs to sustain their food justice movement:

*D-Town Farm.* 7-acre urban farm in a city owned park

*Food Warriors Youth Development Program.* Teaches 7-12-year-olds about food justice and raised-bed gardening

*Food and Flava.* Teaches 14-17-year-olds about gardening skills and entrepreneurship through the sale of produce from the gardens

*“What’s for Dinner?”* A series of classes designed to raise consciousness about the food system and urban agriculture

*Detroit People’s Co-op.* Co-operatively owned, full-service grocery store (in the planning stages)

*Detroit Food Commons.* Incubator kitchen, café, community meeting space, and home of the offices of the DBCFSN (larger project goals)<sup>35</sup>

The DBCFSN argues that food justice should be a two-fold approach: change through policy and change through community, as one without the other will not create a sustainable approach. Such programs should be models for other communities like the Birchwood Neighborhood looking to create greater food security for their area.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 206-207.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 205.

## Case Study: West Oakland

West Oakland is another city with a history of racism and economic marginalization, and one that has left the community underserved and impoverished. Land accumulation by wealthy real-estate investors and developers goes hand in hand with land dispossession and increasingly unaffordable housing. West Oakland, like Detroit, is also a city with deep ties to social activism and community-based approaches to solving problems. One of the most well-known social activist organizations founded in West Oakland is the Black Panther Party.

Much of the issue around land justice in West Oakland has been the historical seizure of properties, many of which were thriving black-owned businesses and homes, through eminent domain.<sup>36</sup> Eminent domain allows the government to take any private property and convert it to public use, such as for interstates and freeways.<sup>37</sup> This, in addition to redlining practices and racist covenants, would push West Oakland residents further into poverty. Today, the region is marked by skyrocketing rents and living costs, as land speculators move in, purchase properties and keep them vacant partly because of low-property taxes, and partly to hold out until they can get the highest sale-price (far above market-price and therefore highly inaccessible for current residents) for their properties.<sup>38</sup>

A lack of any grocery stores, in addition to a lack of community-based or locally-owned grocery stores, is a problem for West Oakland, one that the People's Community Market (PCM) aims to address. West Oakland has an unusually high number of corner stores which sell expensive

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>37</sup> "Eminent Domain," Legal Information Institute (Cornell Law), accessed November 16, 2019, [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/eminent\\_domain](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/eminent_domain).

<sup>38</sup> Williams et al., *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States*, 196.

packaged and processed foods, while it has an astounding lack of grocery stores that provide, fresh, culturally appropriate and staple foods.<sup>39</sup> Not only do these conditions impact the health of West Oakland residents, but they also impact the neighborhood's economy. Of the \$58 million spent on groceries by West Oakland residents, \$45 million, almost 80% of money spent is spent in other neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup> Grocery stores in the West Oakland neighborhood would not only provide better access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, but it would also provide jobs for residents and keep money within the neighborhood.

PCM is a for-profit corporation created to help implement a food market in West Oakland, which created jobs with good benefits and wages as well as create an employee ownership program.<sup>41</sup> Such a solution not only covers access to fresh food, but from an economic standpoint it also creates good jobs for residents and keeps community dollars in the community, rather than them being spent in other cities or for corporate monopoly grocery chains. PCM also provides a meeting space for community members to come together where various events could be held.<sup>42</sup> However, implementing such a place does not come without its challenges. Although many buildings in the business corridor of West Oakland are vacant and unused, it is very difficult to secure funding to purchase after land developers bought land at low prices and then keep them vacant due to incredibly low vacancy property tax rates in California.<sup>43</sup> Such developers then ask for 200-300 percent higher prices than market rate for their properties. PCM was eventually able to purchase land after finding a charitable investor who loaned money to purchase a property and a property owner who was willing to sell at only 50% above market value (which is still more than

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 194.



what the property should have been sold for, but one of the better deals for purchasing property in the area).<sup>44</sup> This was a success for PCM but relying on the charity of wealthy landowners and investors is not a sustainable route for food security and land justice.

Much like Detroit's policy plus community organizing approach, West Oakland has sought to find solutions through policy actions. The Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC) encourages the city to develop 'urban agriculture zones' which allows for legal and tax incentives for people who purchase land for the use of urban agriculture.<sup>45</sup> This again highlights the importance of community efforts and political efforts in any food justice work.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 198.

## THE BIRCHWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD

The Birchwood Neighborhood in Bellingham, Washington is home to largely one-person households, inhabiting both apartments, condominiums, and single-family homes.<sup>46</sup> Homes typically have large lots, which open the possibility of home-grown gardens and food production within the neighborhood itself, and many residents are already doing this. Home to Squalicum Creek system, the Baker Creek system, and a portion of Bellingham Bay's marine shoreline, the Birchwood Neighborhood also fosters a vibrant and important ecosystem.<sup>47</sup>

In May of 2016, Albertsons closed its grocery store in the Birchwood Neighborhood, taking 66 with it.<sup>48 49</sup> Albertsons, now the parent company of Safeway Inc., Haggan, and dozens of other chain food stores, holds a powerful influence, as many of the grocery store chains in Bellingham are Safeway and Haggan.<sup>50</sup> In order to drive business to its other stores, Albertsons closed its “underperforming” branch in the Birchwood Neighborhood which left its population of about 10,000 people without access to fresh food.<sup>51</sup> The Birchwood Neighborhood is also one of the most racially diverse and low-income neighborhoods in Bellingham. Of the over 5,000 residents,

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<sup>46</sup> “Household Types in Birchwood, Bellingham, Washington (Neighborhood),” The Demographic Statistical Atlas of the United States - Statistical Atlas (Cedar Lake Ventures, September 4, 2018), <https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Washington/Bellingham/Birchwood/Household-Types>

<sup>47</sup> Birchwood Neighborhood Plan, City of Bellingham, Washington § (1980).

<sup>48</sup> Christian Conahan, Janae Easlon, and Elizabeth Kayser, “Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert,” Whatcom Watch Online (Whatcom Watch Online, Western Washington University, July 2016), <https://whatcomwatch.org/index.php/article/birchwood-alderwood-neighborhoods-labeled-as-a-food-desert/>

<sup>49</sup> Kie Relyea, “Albertsons Closed Its Birchwood Store in 2016. What's the Latest on the Property?,” Bellingham Herald (Bellingham Herald, March 21, 2018), <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/business/article206108379.html>

<sup>50</sup> Aryonna Willoughby, “Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Rally against Lack of Fresh Food Access,” The Western Front (Western Washington University, May 16, 2019), <http://www.westernfrontonline.com/2019/05/16/birchwood-food-desert-fighters-rally-against-lack-of-fresh-food-access/>

<sup>51</sup> Conahan, et. al., “Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert.”

49% are considered low-income or severely cost-burdened.<sup>52 53</sup> Birchwood Elementary, Shushan Middle School, and Alderwood Elementary have the highest rates of free and reduced lunch in the city at rates of 80% of students, vastly higher than the Bellingham School District average at 37.3%.<sup>54</sup> These characteristics make the Birchwood Neighborhood a food desert and present many challenges for eradicating food insecurity.

### **Issues**

*Non-Compete Clause.* One solution to Birchwood’s food desert would be to simply get a grocery store to move back into the neighborhood. However, this is restricted until the 2040’s due to a non-compete clause put in place by Albertsons Corporation when they moved out. The clause, which prevents any grocery retailer from moving into the vacated Albertsons space for the next 25 years, is typically used by corporations to, “keep future businesses from competing with already existing branches or subsidiaries in the surrounding area.”<sup>55</sup> Such restrictive covenants are common among landowners and corporations, but the Birchwood Albertsons’ non-compete clause is significantly longer than usual.<sup>56</sup> In an email to a Birchwood resident who communicated with Albertsons, Sara Osbourne, who is Albertsons’ Seattle Division media contact, wrote in reference to the closure of the store, “Ultimately, our business analysis indicated that there was no alternative other than to cease operations in Birchwood.”<sup>57</sup> Many residents of Birchwood are asking the City of Bellingham to help change the non-compete clause Albertsons left behind. However, City Attorney Peter

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Colton Redtfeldt, “Bringing Water to the Birchwood Desert,” The Western Front (Western Washington University, May 17, 2018), <http://www.westernfrontonline.com/2018/05/16/bringing-water-to-the-birchwood-desert/>

<sup>54</sup> Conahan, et. al., “Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert.”

<sup>55</sup> Willoughby, “Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Rally against Lack of Fresh Food Access.”

<sup>56</sup> Holt, “How Leaving Stores Closed for Years Helps Grocery Chains and Hurts Communities.”

<sup>57</sup> Conahan, et. al., “Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert.”

Ruffalo says that such clauses are private agreements made between private business owners, and the City cannot repeal agreements made between private businesses. The City Council and Bellingham Planning Department have taken a role in trying to eradicate the issue of non-compete clauses with a proposed ordinance written to address such problems in the future. A public hearing will be held on December 9, 2019 to listen to community members in reference to the ordinance. For now, it seems the only ways to eliminate such restrictive clauses is by pressuring the parties to the agreement itself. However, Ruffalo suspects there will be little success for anyone to go up against a major corporation like Albertsons in court, especially since the courts have consistently backed such covenants.<sup>58</sup>

*Physical Accessibility and Transportation.* The Albertsons in the Birchwood Neighborhood was what is known as an “anchor business,” which means it helped serve and attract a hub of smaller businesses that improved the accessibility of many services in the neighborhood.<sup>59</sup> Some Birchwood residents, such as Jesi Van Leeuwen, moved to the neighborhood specifically because the Albertsons was there.<sup>60</sup> Marchelle Foglesong and her son who lives with special needs also moved to the neighborhood because of how accessible the groceries were.<sup>61</sup> “I either have to leave him alone or bring him out with me and with his mental illness it’s challenging. Before, I could just come over here and get some fresh fruits and vegetables.”<sup>62</sup> Another Birchwood Resident, Sherry Powell, has to be pushed by her husband in a wheelchair, which makes a walk of over a

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<sup>58</sup> Holt, “How Leaving Stores Closed for Years Helps Grocery Chains and Hurts Communities.”

<sup>59</sup> Steve Holt, “How Leaving Stores Closed for Years Helps Grocery Chains and Hurts Communities,” Civil Eats, January 22, 2018, <https://civileats.com/2018/01/22/how-leaving-stores-closed-for-years-helps-grocery-chains-and-hurts-communities/>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Redtfeldt, “Bringing Water to the Birchwood Desert.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

mile to get groceries virtually impossible, at best highly inconvenient.<sup>63</sup> Senior living facilities were built next to the commercial block of the neighborhood that was home to the Albertsons so residents could easily get to the grocery store for food. When groceries move farther away, such as the case with the Birchwood Neighborhood, it places extreme hardship on everyone, but particularly those with mobility issues, including those with disabilities, the elderly, and their caretakers.

Transportation becomes critical when physical accessibility is limited. It was found in 2017 that 9% of residents in the Birchwood Neighborhood do not own or have access to a personal vehicle.<sup>64</sup> Not having a vehicle makes going to any grocery store difficult, but particularly if it is over a mile away. Without personal transportation, residents are forced to rely on Bellingham's public transit system to travel farther for groceries, which is often inaccessible in its own ways. Traveling farther on the bus means paying more in bus fares, and the Whatcom Transit Authority (WTA) is already considering increasing fares on their fixed routes.<sup>65</sup> Because the Birchwood Neighborhood has extremely high rates of low-income people, paying more to ride the bus to get groceries imposes significant hardship. Once dropped off at the closest bus stop to the nearest grocery store, it is a 15-minute walk, about a quarter mile, to get to the grocery store, which again highlights concerns about physical accessibility for elderly or disabled residents.<sup>66</sup> Not only this, but route 232 that runs through the neighborhood to the next nearest grocery store only comes once an hour.<sup>67</sup> This comes with its own considerations, including people who have jobs and families

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Kira Erickson, "WTA Proposes Changes to Bus Fares," The Northern Light, November 13, 2019, [https://www.thenorthernlight.com/stories/wta-proposes-changes-to-bus-fares,8715#:~:targetText=The Whatcom Transportation Authority \(WTA\) could soon be changing its,increasing from \\$70 to \\$90](https://www.thenorthernlight.com/stories/wta-proposes-changes-to-bus-fares,8715#:~:targetText=The%20Whatcom%20Transportation%20Authority%20(WTA)%20could%20soon%20be%20changing%20its,increasing%20from%20$70%20to%20$90)

<sup>66</sup> Conahan, et. al., "Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert."

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

who can't cut out 3 hours of their day to shop for groceries and wait for the bus. The winter time poses another set of safety and health concerns, as it is colder and darker for more of the day. The closing of the Birchwood Albertsons has also impacted the Lummi Nation, as many of its tribal members would ride the bus to get groceries which were at accessible prices.<sup>68</sup> Finally, if someone did have 3 hours to spare and no accessibility issues, the WTA transit authority also only allows a couple of bags of groceries per person on buses.<sup>69</sup> This means that residents have to travel farther for smaller amounts of groceries and have to go to the store more often. WTA offers paratransit service for those who need it, but in practice, this service is also inconvenient for users. Betty Ross, a Birchwood resident, says that the service isn't ideal and can take a long time.<sup>70</sup> "By the time they go back and get you, if you had ice cream or milk, it wouldn't be good," Ross said.<sup>71</sup> Low-incomes and poverty interact with disability and a lack of reliable transportation to worsen the accessibility of fresh food.

*Health.* Ironically, the property was initially sold to an out-of-state real estate company who intended to build a gym on the property.<sup>72</sup> Alex McIntyre, a food justice organizer, said "we knocked on hundreds of doors. Everyone was on board with a grocery store, only one person said a gym is something they'd like to see here." Without access to healthy food, a gym does little for one's health. As some residents wrote on the Birchwood Neighborhood Facebook page, they get enough exercise from walking to the grocery store now.<sup>73</sup> While the company did not end up turning the space into a gym, Big Lots moved into the vacant space instead, where it remains today.

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<sup>68</sup> Redtfeldt, "Bringing Water to the Birchwood Desert."

<sup>69</sup> Willoughby, "Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Rally against Lack of Fresh Food Access."

<sup>70</sup> Redtfeldt, "Bringing Water to the Birchwood Desert."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Stores like Rite Aid, Big Lots, and Little Caesars provide food for residents now, but only provide options of processed and packaged foods, and on occasion canned goods and eggs. Such foods often lead to serious long-term health conditions if one's diet is confined to them. Without a grocery store to provide fresh food for residents, these health conditions are exacerbated.

*Cultural Inaccessibility.* One of the benefits that a full-service grocery store brings to a neighborhood is its ability to provide for a wide range of cultural ingredients that small grocers can't typically provide. Staples such as rice and flour are purchased by families to cook culturally appropriate foods for their families to keep traditions alive. Without access to a range of ingredients, cooking becomes much more difficult, particularly for the underserved. Not only this, but language barriers plague current aide to the community. The Bellingham Food Bank has a mobile unit that it sends to Alderwood Elementary about once a week and provides for about 60-70 families, but many residents were not using the services due to language barriers.<sup>74</sup> The mobile service was used as a remedy to the 6-mile walk to the Food Bank, though the mobile food bank truck faces issues like these in actually administering the food.

### **Current Projects and Solutions**

*Urban Agriculture.* Ellie Duncan and Annah Young are the owners of City Sprouts Farm, both of whom are passionate about urban farming and the utilization of growing spaces. The Kulshan Community Land Trust (KulshanCLT) originally bought about 3 acres of land in the Birchwood

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<sup>74</sup> Conahan, et. al., "Birchwood, Alderwood Neighborhoods Labeled as a Food Desert."

neighborhood for affordable housing or other community needs.<sup>75</sup> Through KulshanCLT, Duncan and Young were able to use the land to start City Sprouts Farm, and today use half an acre to grow food for the Birchwood Farmers Market, the Bellingham Food Bank, local restaurants, and even a small CSA box (Community Supported Agriculture).<sup>76</sup> We have seen in West Oakland and Detroit how one way of eradicating food insecurity was to grow food in the neighborhood, and City Sprouts Farm does just that. Their strong ties to the community and local businesses have created a partnership based on service to the Neighborhood. Of course, one of the biggest barriers of urban farming is land ownership, as open spaces with potential for urban farming are often owned by wealth investors only willing to sell at prices far about the market rate. The KulshanCLT helps keep land for community projects, which was how City Sprouts Farm could operate. However, a reliance on charitable landowners or community trusts for land does not always provide the security and assurance that farms need, which is important for farming due to the time it takes to grow from the earth. Regardless, the City Sprouts Farm has stepped up where Albertsons left, selling fresh food for part of the year at City Sprouts Farm’s single-stand “Birchwood Farmers Market.” In order to make such a service accessible, they also accept EBT and Fresh Bucks, so low-income residents can enjoy fresh healthy food themselves. However, even Duncan and Young admit that Birchwood still needs a grocery store. They simply cannot produce enough fresh food year-round to satisfy the entire neighborhood's needs, and cannot provides staple foods like bread, eggs, milk, cheese, and rice that many residents rely on.

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<sup>75</sup> Lorraine Wilde, “City Sprouts Farm: Bringing Community to the Birchwood Neighborhood,” WhatcomTalk, July 29, 2019, <https://www.whatcomtalk.com/2019/07/31/city-sprouts-farm-bringing-community-to-the-birchwood-neighborhood/>)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



*Neighborhood Food Boxes.* In the aftermath of Albertsons moving out of Birchwood, neighborhood food share boxes were built in the residential parts of the neighborhood. Some residents have personal gardens where they grow kale, tomatoes, apples, and many other kinds of produce, and they now place extra produce in boxes around the neighborhood so others can access it. Some also share canned goods and grains for those who need them.



A Neighborhood Food Box in the Birchwood Neighborhood.

These food boxes address an immediate need though they still do not provide a singular solution for Birchwood's food desert. It is difficult to garden in the winter months, so people's home gardens produce little for the household, let alone enough to share. Still, such food boxes present an opportunity for community connection and a reduction of food waste in the neighborhood.

*Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Advocacy.* The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters (BFDF) formed in 2016 in response to the closure of Albertsons in the Birchwood Neighborhood. This grassroots neighborhood organization is working to, “make healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food accessible to residents of Birchwood.”<sup>77</sup> The group organizes protests, community meals, meetings, garden work parties and canning groups to use the excess produce and preserve it through the winter. They have been able to address some of the community’s immediate food needs through organizing and plan to continue to do so until they have a grocery store. “We’re bringing community [and food] back to this space, and we hope that is a feeling that will grow. We’re hoping that people will enjoy and remember that it’s something every community deserves,” says Tina McKim, a founder and organizer in BFDF.<sup>78</sup> Since Haggan and Safeway are owned by Albertsons, they have also participated in pickets of their Bellingham locations to spread the word about the Birchwood Neighborhood food desert.

*Community Gardens.* One of the biggest community projects the BFDF put together was a community garden. Anyone from the community was able to help grow and tend to plants in the space, which not only produced fresh food for the community, but also heightened the sense of community itself in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, as the garden was on a rental property and the new tenants decided that they did not want the BFDF Community Garden on their property, the garden was closed in November 2019.

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<sup>77</sup> Willoughby, “Birchwood Food Desert Fighters Rally against Lack of Fresh Food Access.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



Volunteers move the dirt from the raised beds at the old Birchwood Community Garden to a new location.

Luckily, 5 new plots were offered to the BFDF for a new community garden, but such a circumstance highlights two issues. First, community gardens are reliant on the permission of the landlord and tenants, which leaves land use unpredictable. Second, gardens are not easily picked up and moved. It takes massive man power to create a garden to begin with, building raised beds and tilling the ground, not to mention such a move often requires a trailer and a truck to pull it, often in short supply in the neighborhood. The BFDF community garden is a great example of how food sovereignty depends on land justice, but access to land, like in Detroit and West Oakland, defines a community's ability to garden.

*Local Business Involvement.* Small businesses have also stepped up in the absence of Albertsons. Small grocers and restaurants like Mi Rancho Meat Market and Netos Market & Bakery have begun to serve more people in the community by providing some produce and fresh meats. Instead of bringing in another corporation like Albertsons, it may be better for community food sovereignty and the community itself to promote small grocer businesses. April Barker, recent

candidate for Mayor, City Council Member, and Birchwood resident said, “A 40,000 square foot grocery store isn’t even financially feasible anymore.”<sup>79</sup> To Barker, such a grocery store won’t be any more feasible for someone else than it was for Albertsons. She instead wants to find ways to encourage small business to increase their capacity, since bringing in a big corporate grocery store would increase competition in the area and possibly hurt the existing small grocers and businesses.<sup>80</sup> “That way, we’re not only helping people get access, but also supporting local business owners and business owners of color in our community,” says Barker.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, placing pressure on the owners of small businesses to provide for an entire community may be an unfair burden. Jesi van Leeuwen, a Birchwood resident and mother of five says, “I don’t think all the pressure should lie on [the owner of Netos Market]... I don’t think that’s fair because she has limitations and she has barriers that aren’t her fault.”<sup>82</sup> The solution for fresh food in the Birchwood Neighborhood must be able to prioritize community members and local business owners without placing the burden of feeding 10,000 people on a few people.

### **Possible Future Solutions**

*Ban Non-Compete Clauses.* One step may be to ban such restrictive covenants in Bellingham to prevent such a circumstance like Birchwood’s food desert from happening again somewhere else. Such restrictions allow for corporations and private companies to dictate who gets what in neighborhoods, which inevitably leaves the poorest, most marginalized people hurting the worst. Currently, a city ordinance is with the city council that the planning department brought forward to ban non-compete clauses in Bellingham. It will be discussed at a public meeting on December

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<sup>79</sup> Redtfeldt, “Bringing Water to the Birchwood Desert.”

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

9<sup>th</sup>. This may help prevent food deserts in the future in Bellingham, but it will not eliminate the non-compete clause that Albertsons has left in place in the Birchwood Neighborhood. A targeted campaign of Bellingham Haggan and Safeway stores by Bellingham residents may help pressure Albertsons to repeal the non-compete clause. The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters have made an effort to do so, but there must be increased awareness and action across Bellingham for a response to take effect.

*Co-operative Grocery Store.* Co-operative grocery stores have also been shown to be better for communities, better for food laborers, and better for employees. Not only this, but they also last longer than corporate grocery stores. In a study done by *The Conversation*, a public journal, it was found that all 22 of the supermarkets opened by community or non-profits are still open today, as opposed to half of commercial stores or two thirds of government developments.<sup>83</sup> Co-ops provide a place for community engagement, which is important for communities and business to thrive. Democratic leadership and shared social values help drive co-ops and keep communities investing in their own health.<sup>84</sup> We have seen the success of such co-operatives in places like West Oakland where the Mandela Co-op not only provides for its community, but supports the local economy and helps local farmers and food workers of color to thrive. With incredible organizing, such a co-operative could be a better long term solution for the Birchwood community. However, to use the space once occupied by Albertsons, which is both geographically convenient for residents and built specifically for a grocery, the non-compete clause would have to be nullified or expire.

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<sup>83</sup> Catherine Brinkley, "Why Community-Owned Grocery Stores like Co-Ops Are the Best Recipe for Revitalizing Food Deserts," *The Conversation*, September 1, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/why-community-owned-grocery-stores-like-co-ops-are-the-best-recipe-for-revitalizing-food-deserts-122997>)

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

## **CONCLUSION**

A healthy community depends on the ability of residents to consistently access healthy foods and habits. The Birchwood Neighborhood food desert highlights a failure of our current food system, where the most marginalized populations are often left to fend for themselves when it comes to basic needs. The Birchwood Neighborhood food desert also represents and highlights the power of community organizing and collective work, from community gardens, to food boxes and local advocacy groups. There have been movements in other communities across the country with similar goals of land and food sovereignty. Detroit and West Oakland, with their past and present issues concerning land ownership, racism, and government policy, have taken matters into their own hands to protect their communities and hold governments and corporations accountable. Co-operatives have proved that community-based food systems are not only possible but are oftentimes better suited to provide for communities than corporate or capitalistic food systems. The community organizing in Birchwood has also witnessed the power of community and has also laid the groundwork for future organizing efforts in the neighborhood and in Bellingham. The future of the Birchwood Neighborhood should not be left up to corporations deciding who gets to eat and who does not. Birchwood residents have shown that they are determining their own future.

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