Corner Store Program Possibilities in Louisville by Benjamin Bowman

Emerson National Hunger Fellowship Hunger Free Community Report for Community Farm Alliance

I. Why are we talking about corner stores?

An Introduction to CFA's Louisville Corner Store Work

a. Origins of the discussion: The Louisville Community Food Assessment

In 2007, four years after opening an office in Louisville and with twenty-two years of statewide, rural organizing under its belt, Community Farm Alliance (CFA) published Bridging the Divide: Growing Self-Sufficiency in our Food Supply. Partly a critical analysis of Louisville's food economy and partly a positive vision for the future, this document has been a bulwark in the struggle to create a Locally Integrated Food Economy, or L.I.F.E., in Louisville. Bridging the Divide documented gaping holes in the availability of healthy food to residents of twelve West Louisville and East Downtown neighborhoods – Louisville's food apartheid zones.¹

These are holes in terms of the simple scarcity of healthy food for sale as well as in terms of how unaffordable that meager amount of food is: Not only is there "an average of only 1 full service grocer per 25,000 residents" in these neighborhoods, "compared to a Jefferson County wide ratio of 1 per every 12,500 residents," but "residents are [furthermore] forced to do a great deal of their shopping at convenience stores, where the market basket costs roughly 50% more than at the supermarket".² This unavailability of food is exacerbated by the relative immobility of affected residents: from 17% to as much as 70% of households in the apartheid zones do not have access to a vehicle, compared with rates often lower than 5% in other areas of Jefferson County.³

Beyond these quantitative discrepancies, the simple experience of shopping for food in an apartheid zone is markedly worse than in wealthier, more developed neighborhoods: 60% of survey respondents strongly agreed with the statement "When I visit a store on the other side of town I am struck by how clean the store is and how attractive the fruits and vegetables are". This is a more subtle but no less damaging difference, and, as we will see, it is one that continues to present itself as a matter to be reckoned with in the struggle for L.I.F.E.

¹ Although such areas have often been referred to as "food desserts," language of virtual townships of food apartheid has been working its way to the surface as a more accurate, more honest metaphor. The emphasis here, vis-à-vis the term food desserts, is that whereas a dessert is a naturally occurring terrain that sustains life and is actually quite beautiful, urban and rural communities across the country and around the world are being structurally, actively oppressed – this is neither life giving nor beautiful.

² Bridging the Divide 6, 9. [supermarket = \$16.09, Convenience w/out gas = \$23.89]

³ Ibid 13. Also: "residents of traditionally underserved populations* are likely to have even less vehicle access than others" (Bridging the Divide, 14). [*this includes "low-income mothers, non-English speakers, disabled people, the elderly and people of color"]

⁴ Ibid 11.

b. A Local Ordinance Subsidizing Healthy Food in Corner Stores

Concluding that "The real injustice lies in the fact that people are forced to make choices that destroy their health and the health of their children and future generations because of structural problems within our food system," The West Louisville Food Working Group, which Community Farm Alliance brought together to research and produce the Bridging the Divide, set forth eight policy recommendations. The fourth was titled Incentives for Low-Income Retailers and proposed the following:

Kentucky currently provides incentives to retailers who agree to provide consistent and prominent shelf space to promote Kentucky grown food products. The City of Louisville should consider a similar program for retailers located in empowerment or enterprise zones, which also correspond to the food desert communities. We specifically recommend a pilot program that would work directly with 25 grocers in those areas providing financial incentives to increase the availability of local fresh fruits and vegetables.⁵

Corner stores make a logical partner in the effort to build L.I.F.E. for a number of reasons. One is that they are far more likely to be locally owned – a major tenet of L.I.F.E. and of CFA more broadly. Another is that, although there are fewer corner stores today than in decades past, they do already exist throughout the food apartheid zones: by partnering with them, CFA saves itself the time and expense that would be required in the creation of new store or of any other new infrastructure, and CFA can benefit from the fact that these stores already have a steady stream of customers – a captive audience, if you will, cutting down on the need for marketing.

CFA's Policy Committee in Jefferson County has been prioritizing and pursuing these policy recommendations since *Bridging the Divide* was published, and, as should be expected, they have evolved over time. The current proposal, which calls for corner stores to receive kickback on local produce, up to 20% depending on participation, is attached in Appendix 1.

c. The Need for a More Complex Approach to Corner Stores

The corner store subsidy, in its original incarnation, would offer money to any corner store simply for carrying Kentucky Proud produce. That kickback money would then have to be spent in an approved way, such as on further purchases of Kentucky produce. In the process of developing and pursuing this ordinance, CFA sought and received a lot of feedback – from members and stakeholders, from city and nonprofit allies locally, and from our counterparts in the food justice movement nationally. Much of this feedback demonstrated a need to expand the qualifications for receiving subsidy money and to broaden the scope of CFA's corner store work generally.

⁵ Ibid 33.

Some of the first feedback came from CFA members at a fall 2008 Jefferson County chapter meeting. This was a valuable learning experience and warrants a brief retelling. We realized, in the course of the chapter meeting, that few, if any, of the CFA members on the policy committee lived in the target, food apartheid neighborhoods. An unintended and unforeseen dynamic, this segregation seems, on a personal level, simply to reflect the different interests of different members – CFA's active members from the target neighborhoods weren't as interested in the policy work. It is also worth questioning, however, whether, on a structural level, these members, who have statistically lower incomes, ultimately failed to attend the policy meetings because they had less disposable time and energy, rather than because they had less interest. If this is the case, than it is worth exploring how to consolidate the meetings or otherwise make them more accessible. Thankfully, the chapter meetings have provided a common forum in the meantime.

An important preface to the criticisms presented at this meeting is that the relationship between some of the food apartheid neighborhoods and the corner stores is still tainted with the residue of a bitter fight over liquor licenses. A number of communities in West Louisville organized an effort to ban the sale of liquor in four different precincts. A majority of store owners happen to be Middle Eastern while a majority of residents are African American, and, unfortunately, the struggle devolved into accusations of racism by both sides.

That said, what the policy committee and CFA staff learned from the members who live and shop in the food apartheid neighborhoods was that corner stores are generally disrespectful to their customers and communities. Some particular complaints were that the stores are not maintained well, quickly becoming eyesores, and that the food itself was of a low quality and overpriced. One store, for example, had earned itself the nickname of Dirty Joe's. We should not, they argued, expend organizational energy pursuing a strategy that indiscriminately benefits these institutions. Such an approach is too narrow, making it both morally insufficient and logistically impractical. It was morally insufficient because it did not consider the entire scope of the relationship between the stores and the target neighborhoods; we would be turning a blind eye to the store owners' general attitude of disrespect. It was logistically impractical because people don't like shopping at the corner stores, and so they would be unlikely to support, let alone rally behind or get excited for, a program to bring healthy produce into those stores; it would be hard for the program to gain traction.

When three of the Louisville staff were able to attend the 2008 Community Food Security Coalition conference in Philadelphia, we gained parallel insights from the testimonies of similar nonprofit organizations nationwide. One of the most reiterated points was that, to successfully change the structures of a food system in food apartheid neighborhoods, using corner stores as your vehicle of change, it was important to start small and be thorough. For the Healthy Bodegas Initiative in New York City, this meant a campaign that was initially limited to increasing both the supply and

demand of 1% milk. In most cities, though, organizations limited their scope by scaling down the number of targeted stores rather than the pace of the envisioned changes. One organization that really drove home this approach was Literacy for Environmental Justice out of San Francisco. By being very selective about which stores they accepted into their Good Neighbor program, and by being very thorough about building a personal relationship with each store, they ensured themselves a quality reputation and a sustainable program. This meant, for example, devoting three whole months to bring a single store on board, but, they argued, they were now reaping the benefits of this investment.

One final difference between our incentive vision and the examples of successful corner store programs that we were hearing about was that these programs got off the ground with relatively little capital investment. They accomplished this by offering various, relatively inexpensive rewards or services to corner stores that instituted relatively inexpensive changes. The organizations found that it was easier to muster staff time, which could be put towards surveying residents about what they would like to buy, for example, than it was to muster up money – be it from governments, foundations, or small donors. The counterpart to this, though, is that the programs are heavily dependent on human relationships, i.e. between organizers, community members, and store owners, and that, therefore, those organizations had to invest a lot of staff time in their programs. Some expressed hope that, once they had demonstrated the viability of their program, they would be able to acquire money from one or more of these sources for a subsidy like the one we were pursuing. Examples of the rewards offered and improvements sought by these groups are compiled Corner Store Program Features, which is attached as appendix 2.

As we processed these parallel streams of feedback, our vision for the corner store work grew into a two pronged approach. The first prong would entail a program, administered by CFA, along the lines of those we had learned about in Philadelphia. The precise criteria of the program would be fleshed out by CFA members and as many other stakeholders as could be involved, the hope being that such a process would empower the communities to take ownership of the program. By being selective and thorough in finding stores that meet this community-defined criteria, these efforts would strengthen our grassroots structures in the target communities and provide us with a means of identifying the most respectful corner stores. It would also begin the slow process of relocalizing Louisville's food system.

The second prong was to continue pursuing the subsidy. The qualifications to participate in the subsidy program, however, would now include meeting the criteria of CFA's corner store program, ensuring that the policy not be too narrow. This would address the concern that our policy work was ultimately going to have us throwing money at undeserving corner stores, and it would dramatically increase the effect of the corner store program. A map of how the program and subsidy would interact is attached in appendix 3.

II. Corner Store Directory

To aid in finding and processing the corner stores, I have created four interactive, online maps. The first one delineates CFA's target neighborhoods. As multiple maps can be displayed at the same time, this one is useful as a backdrop to one or more of the other maps. As such, it is shows which neighborhood a store is located in or whether a store even falls within the broad target areas of West Louisville and East Downtown.

1. Map of Neighborhoods:

http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=116749830472958417982.00045ace2d 385d6bdc5de

The second map is of the corner stores themselves, and they are categorized hierarchically based on their potential value as a partner in a corner store program. Green thumb tacks are the highest value, meaning that the store owner seemed genuinely interested in the vision of the program, and not merely in his or her personal gain through the subsidy. Turquoise tacks mean that they are cautiously interested. That is, they weren't prepared to sign onto anything right away, but would be worth arranging follow up meetings with and seem like likely candidates for a corner store program. Yellow tacks indicate greater skepticism than turquoise, but still a willingness to listen. Almost all of the stores in this category are interested in hearing the business argument for the program, and willing to at least give things a shot. These differ from the green and turquoise stores in that they lack appreciation for the holistic change we are aiming for and engaged primarily around how they might benefit financially. Finally, the pink tacks are for stores that are wholly uninterested in the program, have an irresolvable, physical limitation, or are too controlled by corporate regulations to offer local produce.

2. Potential Corner Stores:

http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=101896436502440886438.00045b5ad3 694fcac4899

The third map shows the two stores that are participating in the YMCA and Metro Health Department's Center for Health Equity's (CHE) pilot grant program to increase produce in stores by providing refrigeration equipment.

3. Healthy in a Hurry Corner Stores (CHE and YMCA program):

http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=101896436502440886438.00045acfb88 e773962110

The fourth map is of medium and large grocery stores. Naturally, it would not be strategic to partner with a corner store adjacent to a large grocery store because the competition would be too fierce.

4. Medium & Large Grocery Stores:

http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=101896436502440886438.00045c99a8 5deb0a768fa

The last map is not one that I or anyone at CFA made, but one which is nevertheless useful. It delineates census tracts and shows the population density of each. This would be confusing to overlay on top of the Neighborhoods map. It would function, rather, as an alternative backdrop to the Neighborhoods map and would be useful in indicating which corner stores serve more densely residential communities.

5. Population Density based on 2000 Census:

http://maps.google.com/gadgets/directory?synd=mpl&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmaps.webfoot.com%2Fmapplets%2FcensusDemographics.xml

III. Grappling with Where to Go from Here:

My goal in this part is to explore some of the bigger questions that I think will need to be resolved for a corner store program to flourish. There are not many obvious easy "answers", but hopefully my thoughts will contribute to a constructive conversation about reasonable ways forward.

Residual Animosity:

One of the big questions that seems to continue presenting itself lies in the tension between the African American communities in West Louisville and the Middle Eastern corner store owners. However these groups felt about each other before the fight over wet and dry zoning devolved into racist name-calling, many from each have harbored animosity for the other ever since. The most recent time that this came to the surface was when some CFA members went on a popular West Louisville radio show to talk about the CFA's vision for a corner store partnership. After the experience, one of them reflected that there was "a nearly across-the-board resentment among many African Americans who called in of how corner stores operate in their neighborhoods, promoting liquor, charging high prices, being unsafe and often dirty. Some particular stores became the butt of some of the call-in comments, with harsh criticisms." Similarly, many times while I was interviewing corner store owners, I heard this alienation and disdain returned in the form of comments about what "these people" buy or don't buy. Certainly, corner store owners of all ethnicities seemed confident that they understood their clientele in and out. It was predominantly and markedly between these two groups in West Louisville, however, that those judgments were couched in racist logic and language. Of course, these feelings are not universal, and CFA could, without very much trouble, find a perfectly respectful corner store owner and focus group of residents with whom to plan a corner store program. The question remains, unfortunately, of how successful any such program can be before this tension is more generally resolved.

Staff Time:

As I mentioned before, one of the insights that we gleaned from the Community Food Security Coalition conference was that a corner store program is heavily, heavily relationship dependant. That means that staff need to be able to devote significant hours to building foundational relationships. It also means that, once established, a corner store program depends on the continued maintenance and tinkering of the particular staff person or people who built it, in order to keep things running smoothly and to respond to bumps in the road. I think that for CFA to successfully get a corner store program off the ground, the Louisville office would need to hire at least a part time organizer devoted to the program, allowing the current staff to devote themselves to their work plans.⁶ It would be important to find somebody who is willing to commit him/herself to the program for a number of years and to then commit the organization to retaining him/her.⁷

The Landscape:

The title of CFA's Community Food Assessment, Bridging the Divide, references the chasm between, on the one hand, family farmers struggling to make a living in rural Kentucky and, on the other hand, low-income families struggling to live and eat healthily in Louisville's food apartheid areas. It is obvious that to build a bridge one must have an intimate knowledge of the river banks from which it will rise. CFA's long history of rural organizing lends the organization particular advantage in understanding the rural bank, and Bridging the Divide went a long way to discovering the urban bank. It seems, though, that within CFA and the Louisville food justice movement generally, there remain disorienting gaps in knowledge. In our conversations with allies nationwide, it has become apparent that the populations of different cities seem to fall on a spectrum of food knowledge. That is, in some cities, nonprofits have had the experience that little more is needed than to physically improve access to food. People there know how to cook from scratch and are generally conscious of what constitutes

⁶ In fact, with so many projects taking off out of the Louisville office, and with so much foundational and philanthropic interest in urban food systems work, I think that it would be reasonable to hire either a third full time staff person or two part time staff, in order to manage not only the corner store program but also initiatives like the Fresh Stops, the Urban Gardening Guild and Stone Soup Community Kitchen. In a very short time and with few resources, these initiatives have already proven their ability to pull in new membership and to sustain their engagement. They have the potential to become profound vehicles of change in Louisville and to bring in sustaining foundational and philanthropic support.

⁷ Although one of CFA's historical difficulties in Louisville seems to have been retaining staff (which is a particularly damaging pattern in community organizing because of the importance of relationships) it was very encouraging to hear staff retention spoken of with such priority at the January 2009 annual meeting.

a nutritious meal. In other cities, however, the opposite is true: immense amounts of nutritional and culinary education are necessary to build demand before any corner store program focusing on supply can have success. Most cities, I imagine, including Louisville, fall somewhere in between. It is unclear, though, where on this spectrum Louisville falls, and even whether all of Louisville's food apartheid zones can be said to fall at the same point on the spectrum. Amongst corner store owners, at least, there is little agreement about where their customers fall on this spectrum: some view their customers as strikingly ignorant whereas others have responded with comments like, "This isn't a fast food neighborhood. People here know how to cook." Some research is currently being done into this by Public Health students at the University of Louisville. When they produce their findings, it will be worth examining whether what they discover satisfies this gap in knowledge or whether it fills only a part of the gap and should be only the initial component of a more comprehensive investigation.

Approach:

Despite serious efforts, corner store programs do not seem to have gained traction in Louisville: neither the CFA project in its visioning and planning stages nor the CHE/YMCA project in its pilot program infancy. While there are a multitude of possible reasons for this and certainly no clear answer, one sticking point seems to be the systematic approach taken thus far. The notion of a corner store program, crafted in the contexts and nuances of other cities around the country, and so often the product of painstakinaly slow grassroots organizing, has been brought to Louisville somewhat quickly and inorganically: In lieu of grassroots ownership of the programs, I have seen well intentioned but nevertheless isolated and unengaging focus groups. It has taken time for me to perceive this dynamic, and I have undoubtedly perpetuated it myself, and so my point is not to cast blame for or even question how this dynamic developed, but simply to call attention to it, now that it exists. I think that without redress, it is ultimately a recipe for failure. What I mean, practically, is that rather than starting with a generic vision of a program that can be instituted in different neighborhoods across the city with little variation, a more valuable starting point may be a certain neighborhood or community, or even a certain store. Hopefully the corner store directory will be useful in the process of selecting a starting point. Starting this way will also allow CFA to gather information about the targeted population (such as how much nutritional or culinary education is needed, in lieu, for the moment, of a more comprehensive report on this). Such a process, embedded in the particularities of a community, will hopefully result in a more appropriate program and a more engaged community.

ORDINANCE NO. _____, SERIES 2009

C-L.I.F.E.

Corner stores supporting a Locally Integrated Food Economy

<u>Vision:</u> *C-L.I.F.E.* envisions a food and fiber system for Kentucky that provides safe, adequate, and nutritious food for human consumption in a manner that is socially, economically and ecologically sustainable and is a vital component of the state's economy.

Background and Purpose

Community food security (CFS) is defined as a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice. The basic principles of CFS are to address a broad range of problems affecting the food system, to address low-income food needs, to build a community's food resources to meet its needs, to support local agriculture and to emphasize the need to build individuals' ability to provide for their food needs.

Many residents of West Louisville and East Downtown do not have access to vehicles; therefore they become marooned within a food desert, where they cannot purchase the nutritious foods necessary for healthy living. As a result, the standard of living is lower, and residents are at risk for food-related health problems. For people living in this situation, the main food buying options are either to shop at food retailers with inferior goods or to buy fast food. These are two unacceptable options. Low-income people cannot and should not have to pay more for lower quality groceries than higher income people on the other side of town.

To address these problems, funding for *C-L.I.F.E.* is used to reward participating corner stores that purchase approved KY Proud produce twenty-percent (20%) back on purchases for the award year.

Store Eligibility

Stores eligible to participate in *C-L.I.F.E*.:

- Must be a participant in the EBT program in good standing
- Must be a participant in the WIC program in good standing
- Must be in good standing with state and county food safety, licensing, and registration services
- Must be a participant in the "KY Good Neighbor" Program
- Must dedicate 5% of their current shelf space to KY Proud produce
- Must attend a program orientation workshop

Reward Redemption

- 1. Participating stores will qualify for at least \$1500 in rewards per year on approved purchases of KY Proud produce.
- 2. Purchases will be approved by (fiscal agent).
- 3. To gain approval, each purchase requires the completion of the *C-L.I.F.E.* purchase approval form to be submitted to the (fiscal agent) quarterly.

4. If the purchasing form is approved, rewards will be dispersed within 5 business days after approval.

Reward Expenditure

Rewards may be used to purchase the following:

- Ky Proud Produce (a list of vendors can be found at http://www.kyagr.com/kyProud/index.htm)
- Ky Proud marketing materials (including but not limited to brochures, displays, signs, etc...)
- Customer healthy eating education materials (including, but not limited to brochures, pamphlets, info cards, etc...)

PRODUCE STORAGE EQUIPMENT (refridgeration and/or shelving) NOTICE:

We propose a forgivable loan for purchasing storage equipment. Storeowners would be forgiven dollar for dollar for additional KY Proud produce purchases.

Rewards may **not** be used for non-program realted facility renovations.

The C-L.I.F.E. Rewards Expenditure Report must be submitted to the (fiscal agent) quarterly.

If reward funds are used for ineligible purchases, the store will lose eligibility for *C-L,I,F,E*. participation indefinitely.

C-L.I.F.E Funding Budget

Y	# 00 000
Incentive disbursment	\$80,000
Produce storage equipment	\$20,000
Program administration	In-kind
Program orientation training	In-kind
Supporting business workshops	In-kind
-Women, Infants, and Children	
- Food Stamp Program	
KY Good Neighbor storewide Marketing	In-kind
TOTAL funding	\$100,000

C-LIFE Purchase Approval Form

Approved Denied (To be submitted quarterly) Date_____ Store Name _____ SID # _____ Store Address _____ Store Phone Number _____ Owner Name_____Owner Phone Number _____ Owner E-mail Qty. (#bushels, lbs., etc...) Price **Total Price Reward Amount** Items **Vendor Name** 0.00 0.00 0.00 0.00 0.00 0.00 0.00 0.00

TOTAL	0.00	
C-LIFE Use Only		
NOTES		
C-LIFE reserves the right to refuse any purchase request.		

Purchases made without an approval form may not be rewarded.
Please submit this form to C-LIFE quarterly.
Storeowners will not reimburse for taxes paid on approved purchases.

Signature of C-LIFE Technical Co	ordinator	
Signature of C-LIFE Coordinator		

TC Initials

C-LIFE Rewards Expenditure Report (To be submitted quarterly)

TC Inititals	s
Approved	Denied

Date	Store Name		SID#		
Store Address		Store Phor	ne Number		
Owner Name		Owner Pho	one Number		
Owner E-mail					
Vendor Name	Item	Qty. (#bushels, lbs., ite	em) Price	Total Price	
				0.00	
				0.00	
***************************************				0.00	
		,			
TOTAL				0.00	
C-LIFE Use On	ly		·		
					N.
Please submit this Storeowners will no	form to C-LIFE quar ot be reimbursed for	mination from C-LIFE. terly. items purchased <u>over</u> the rev s paid on approved purchase			
Signature of C-LIF	E Technical Coordin	ator			

Corner Store Program Features

Location	Easy Improvements	Easy Rewards		
Hartford, CT (Hartford Food System)	-Commit to shifting 5% of shelf space from junk food and soft drinks to healthier items within a year	-Direct owners to wholesalers that can provide better food		
	(requires inspection to create a baseline measurement of shelf space usage – they used UCONN students)	-Survey Residents to ask what kinds of products they want local stores to stock (supplement with market data?)		
	-Agree to stock a short list of healthy items such as whole wheat bread and reduced fat milk within a year	-Door stickers (dated annually) and other grassroots publicity		
	Toddood fat Hillik Widini a your	-Kick off event with (6) original participants, Hartford's Mayor, the Director of Health and Human Services, various health professionals, and 130 residents		
Philadelphia, PA (Romano's)	-Pre-priced \$1-2 "Grab-bags" of fresh produce			
San Francisco, CA (Literacy for	-A 10% minimum of fresh produce	-The youth educate the community about the importance of healthy eating.		
Environmental Justice) *awaiting further deails from Best	-An additional 10% minimum of healthy foods and culturally appropriate products	-Participating stores are entitled to (annual?) cooking demonstrations		
Practices Guide	-Participation in Food Stamps and WIC	-Free advertising in the community newspaper		
	-Adherence to environmental standards	-Prominent display of the Good		
	-Limited tobacco and alcohol sales and ads, and a store policy of refusing alcohol and tobacco sales to minors.	Neighbor store brand.		
New York City, NY (Health Department Healthy Bodegas Initiative)	-Stock 1% Milk	-Information! -Financial advice (mircoloans, etc), -Permits (For outdoor display or food processing? Bring paperwork with you, help them fill it out) -Education		

