

Independent, principled state policy fostering limited and responsible government, free enterprise, and a robust civil society.

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“Food Deserts” – Health Crisis or Mere Inconvenience? - Summary*

There is a very real difference in the quality of nutrition consumed by high and low income households, with high income households consuming significantly more nutritious foods, on average. However, less than 10 percent of this nutritional disparity can be explained by grocery store access. This means that 90 percent of the disparity is due to consumer choice, something government cannot and should not dictate.

Restricting the supply of small box discount stores in “food deserts,” even if it did open the door for more grocery stores to enter the market, would therefore have very little impact on nutritional disparity. Further, such policies are likely to harm the consumers who rely on small box discount stores while failing to increase full-line grocery store access.

Spacing requirements restricting small box discount stores in Tulsa and Oklahoma City are similar to a scheme used by the State of Oklahoma in other spheres such as new car dealers, to explicitly ensure the survival of incumbent businesses against competitive pressures. Rather than eradicating small box discount stores (a bad idea in any event) these policies are sure to make existing stores in the new zoning overlays less subject to competition.

Better Solutions

- Rather than creating more regulation, likely with unintended consequences, policymakers should reduce barriers for entrepreneurs to enter the market.
- Waive some fees and reduce restrictions for both fixed and mobile retail food stores.
- Create a voluntary certification of cleanliness standards, either through privately certified inspections or through the department of health.
- Grant tax credits to reimburse grocery stores for the cost of bringing dilapidated land back to useful condition.
- Establish community Gardens, currently prohibited by some localities, which have the potential to provide locally-sourced food. Bans and other barriers to their entry should be eliminated.
- Grocery delivery services already available may well be the targets of legislation aimed at protecting the old ways. Policymakers must resist the urge to interfere in the market.
- Remove any barriers to community shuttle services, which already operate within Oklahoma City. An enterprising grocer wishing to attract more customers could set up a free or low-cost shuttle to underserved areas in a bid for market share among those with inadequate grocery store access.
- Ride-sharing should be encouraged as a viable option for some to get to a grocer.
- State Policymakers should consider preempting local zoning measures that target one kind of retailer for disfavored status.