

The Shelf Is Empty If You're Looking for a Supermarket Here

By [ADRIAN FLORIDO](#)

Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2009 | Once a month, Carmen Rendón unfolds her rusted and rickety wire pushcart and walks the 30 or so blocks to the Northgate Gonzalez supermarket three miles southeast of her Sherman Heights home.

She pushes her cart slowly past the gritty convenience marts and fast food restaurants that provide the backdrop along National Avenue, stopping at each intersection to stabilize the cart with her free hand to prevent it from collapsing as she lowers it from the sidewalk into the street. She descends a long slope that leads her to the Chollas Creek bridge, passes beneath Interstate 15 and emerges to climb the upward slope on the other side, with more than a mile left to go.

"We're humble people," Rendón said one recent blistering afternoon, as she and her friend Berta Juarez towed their carts up Sampson Street in Barrio Logan. "I usually don't have money for the bus. It takes me more than an hour to walk."

Rendón's monthly ritual is not uncommon in this part of the city, an area where physical and geographic barriers often contribute as much as market forces and personal finances to limiting low-income residents' access to nutritious food.

Liquor stores punctuate most blocks along the main thoroughfares and even residential street corners. Only a few small and medium-sized grocery options serve the Logan Heights area. It has no major grocery store.

The community -- which includes Barrio Logan, Logan Heights, Sherman Heights, Memorial, Grant Hill and Stockton -- is roughly bound by State Route 94 on the north, Interstate 15 on the east, Harbor Drive on the south and Interstate 5 on the west. It is predominantly Latino, immigrant, and low income.

Surrounding neighborhoods like downtown to the west and Southcrest east of Interstate 15 enjoy well-stocked supermarkets, but the pickings have remained slim here. In other parts of the

country like Detroit and Chicago's South Side, sociologists have termed the phenomenon of urban settings with few to no grocery options "food deserts," and have linked limited fresh food access to higher rates of obesity among residents who rely on processed foods to feed their families.

In the Logan Heights area, families without access to transportation shop at corner markets, where liquor shelves are prominently featured, withering produce is relegated to back corners, and a jar of peanut butter can cost more than five dollars.

"In terms of direct access for the population of families with stay-at-home moms or elderly, there are no relatively close options," said David Alvarez, a local representative for state Sen. Denise Ducheny. "They're lettuce and tomato type of shops, so if you're doing your weekly grocery shopping, you have to go somewhere else."

Seeking Out on Foot

Some residents traverse the neighborhood on foot seeking out the best deals on produce, milk and bread at small and medium-sized stores like Eduardo's or Arrow Mart. One store offers door-to-door shuttle service to customers who spend a minimum amount.

A drive along Imperial or National avenues might not give the immediate impression that access to food in the Logan Heights area is scarce.

But the word "market" plastered on the side of many of the smaller shops is deceptive, said Ben Rivera, a Logan Heights resident who serves on the Southeastern Planning Group. The group makes recommendations on whether the city should approve new or amended liquor license applications in the area.

In response to requests from members of the planning group, he said, some liquor store owners have added the word "market" to the names of stores even though they primarily advertise "liquor."

"I don't necessarily agree with that," Rivera said. "They're not really markets."

Still, applicants seeking new or upgraded licenses promise storefront improvements and the ability to offer wider selections with the profit made from alcohol sales, Rivera said, making it less likely their requests will be denied. But those promises rarely materialize and prices remain high.

Rivera, who moved to Logan Heights from Lemon Grove to save money on housing, said he ended up spending just as much because of food costs. He drives and sometimes shops outside the neighborhood.

But many of his neighbors don't. So the No. 11 buses that run up and down National Avenue continue to empty passengers carrying bags of groceries from the Foodland and Northgate grocery stores located too far east to be within reasonable walking distance.

But even that has gotten more difficult. The latest round of Metropolitan Transit System cuts reduced bus frequency along the route to once every half hour on Sundays, the day many families

do their grocery shopping.

"The cuts, the increasing cost of the bus and people choosing not to take it because it's too expensive -- all those things play a role," Alvarez said.

The area hasn't always been bereft of fresh grocery options. Though it has not had a supermarket in recent memory, Alvarez said, he and his family used to ride bicycles to the ground floor of the Western Metal Supply building that is now part of Petco Park's left field wall.

It was a farmers' market that offered fresh selections used in Mexican cooking. When it closed, their next closest option was the National Avenue Food Palace that today is the IGA Foodland, more than two miles from the neighborhood's western boundaries.

They occasionally shopped at the Farmer's Market building on Imperial Avenue. Today, most of its stalls are vacant and those that remain serve restaurant-style food. Two weeks ago a makeshift produce mart opened in the building's main parcel.

Mark Rillos, who was tending the register and looking over the small selection of fruit and vegetables, said the owner was waiting to determine whether there was enough of a market to expand. Though business was good, he said, he reduced the quantity of produce from the first week's stock because they hadn't sold it fast enough to keep it from rotting.

"People are still hearing about us," he said.

An Example of Viability

The perception that it lacks the market or income base to sustain a supermarket-sized grocer has long dogged the Logan Heights area, as it does poorer communities nationwide.

"There's this excuse," Alvarez said, "that no supermarket wants to move in because there is no market share."

But he points to the Northgate Gonzalez supermarket on 43rd and Alpha streets in Southcrest as an example of a large grocery store's viability in a place like the Logan area. The two neighborhoods share similar demographics.

The Northgate opened in June of 2006, just months after an Albertson's shuttered there for lack of business. Its 50,000 square feet of retail space feature wide aisles, sprawling meat counters, farmers' market-like produce displays, Mexican bakeries and women running handmade tortillas through a conveyor belt oven.

"In terms of business, it's one of our better stores in all of California," said Allen Bagley, the Northgate's director of human relations. "We thought it was going to be good, but not really as

Supermarket Options Near Greater Logan Heights Area

Click on the map to see where supermarkets are in relation to the Greater Logan Heights Area

View [Food Access in Greater Logan Heights Area](#) in a larger map

good as it is. There really isn't any competition there."

The company, which is based in Orange County, follows large chain grocery branches that have shut down, usually in lower income Latino neighborhoods.

"With their pricing structure, they don't always have the kind of products that the demographics that we serve are looking for," Bagley said. "We'll bring in specialty and Hispanic products, and we tend to do better in those situations."

At 3 p.m. on a recent Thursday, spaces were scarce in the grocery store's vast parking lot.

"We see people come from all over San Diego to go there because they have the products that they want," Alvarez said.

A 2005 study by San Diego State University professor Guadalupe Ayala suggested that many immigrant Latinas in San Diego "may feel less comfortable shopping in large supermarkets for reasons such as language barriers or unavailability of certain ethnic food products."

That cultural misunderstanding on the part of grocery chains has contributed to the perception that there is little market for the Logan Heights area, Alvarez said. "There needs to be more of a concerted effort to bring in someone that will attract people," he said.

Mercado's Long Struggle

In the past, there has been discussion that a Northgate could open in Barrio Logan, at the site of the long-promised Mercado Project on the corner of Logan Avenue and Cesar Chavez Parkway.

For almost 20 years, the city and developers have struggled to move forward with plans to build a retail development with a large grocery store as its anchor. The project, which received initial financing from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has been plagued by disputes over land ownership, financing, and developers' visions for the site.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Carmen Rendón said of the Mercado Project as she struggled to lift her push cart onto the sidewalk after crossing a street. "But they just keep talking about it." The designated site is less than a half mile from her home.

Those who still want to see the Mercado built hope it will serve as a community centerpiece similar to Market Creek Plaza in southeastern San Diego's Diamond Neighborhoods, which until 2001 also lacked a major grocery store.

Through a partnership between local stakeholders and the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, the center developed several acres of blighted land into a retail plaza with a Food 4 Less.

Its supporters have held it up as a success story in providing a local source of pride as well as making nutritious food more accessible in a community where the proliferation of convenience stores and processed foods have had negatively affected public health.

In the meantime, while residents of the Logan area await their own grocery store, at least one small-time effort to improve area's food landscape has cropped up in recent months.

In April, the Sherman Heights Community Center inaugurated the Barrio Marketplace, the neighborhood's first certified open-air farmer's market.

Still in its infancy, it features about 10 booths and one to three certified farmers each week. Its organizers are unsure whether it will catch on or whether farmers will be attracted to sell there, especially amid current economic conditions. Some have promised to set up there, but backed out, said Jerry Guzman-Vergara, assistant director of the center.

Organizers are working to make it accessible to low-income residents by setting up a system to accept food stamps.

"We have a lot of pride in it, and a lot of community support," Guzman-Vergara said. "We won't know until a couple more months whether it's appropriate this second. But it's definitely a step in the right direction."

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