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Houston Looks At Ways to Bring Fresh Food To Underserved Neighborhoods



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City officials say too many Houstonians don't have access to fresh food in their neighborhoods and they're looking at ways to bring supermarkets into underserved communities. The city says it's an issue of both economic development and public health.

The USDA says over 23 million Americans live in areas known as "food deserts", or neighborhoods that lack places to buy things like fresh fruits and vegetables. And despite the huge food stores you see here in Houston, figures show Texas has fewer supermarkets per capita than any state in the country.

Houston City **Councilman Stephen Costello** remembers talking to an elderly resident in Sunnyside, who said she'd never even seen a grocery store in her neighborhood.

"I've always felt that grocery stores are the cornerstone of redevelopment. If you're able to get a grocery store into the neighborhood, you also have additional jobs that are associated with the grocery store."

Costello is one of the members of the city's grocery access task force. The group includes civic and neighborhood leaders, along with people from the public health field, and representatives from the grocery industry.

Costello says according to their findings, one of the main things the city needs to do is set up economic development programs that encourage grocery companies to build in underserved areas.

"Normally what happens is, in the grocery market, it's market driven, and so if the demographics of a particular area doesn't justify a grocer's profit margin, or what their sales would be, then they probably won't go there."

The task force is focusing on four Houston neighborhoods in particular: Sunnyside, Eastside, Third Ward, and Fifth Ward.

Houston Sustainability Director Laura Spanjian says along with promoting new supermarket development, the city has also launched a program to encourage neighbors to plant their own gardens.

"We are actually giving public land for a dollar a year, a lease, a dollar a year to communities to build allotment gardens. So each family gets a plot of land on a larger parcel where they can grow fruits and vegetables."

Also working on the task force is Brian Greene from the **Houston Food Bank**. Greene says along with providing fresh food you have to change the mindset of people who are used to getting their meals from fast food outlets and convenience stores.

"The community has to be educated on the utilization of fresh fruits and vegetables and there needs to be that dietary change in a community."

The task force is also recommending that the city look into the transportation issues that are keeping people from getting to existing supermarkets.

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