



Safe Routes  
to School  
National  
Partnership

# Mind the Gap: Using Public Transportation to Connect Neighborhoods and Grocery Stores



Photo: R. Moreno/Flint MTA

## Traveling Outside the Neighborhood for Food Access Can Be Complicated Without a Car

When grocery stores aren't close to home, people have to travel outside of their neighborhoods to access nutritious foods. Without a vehicle, people must walk, bike, rely on family or friends, or hire a cab to take them to the grocery store. In communities with public transportation, transit agencies can play a critical role in helping people overcome the transportation barriers to healthy food access.

## Why Public Transportation Matters for Food Access

Many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, lack healthy food retail options close to home, requiring them to travel outside their neighborhoods to access nutritious choices.

- Several studies have found that low-income neighborhoods, rural neighborhoods, predominantly Black neighborhoods, and predominantly Latino neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and more convenience stores than higher income, urban, and white neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

- Low-income residents, Black residents, and Latino residents are less likely than other residents to shop for food close to home – probably because limited options mean they have to travel further to find adequate or appealing food options.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these communities rely on active transportation modes like walking, bicycling, and public transportation due to lack of vehicle access.

- Low-income residents rely heavily on transit and walking to reach basic needs, including food; 27 percent of people living below the poverty line in the U.S. do not have cars.<sup>3</sup>
- Black residents are six times more likely to use public transit than whites; Latinos are three times more likely.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, strengthening the transit link between neighborhoods and grocery stores improves opportunities for physical activity, which creates the potential to improve health.

- A study of two African American neighborhoods in Philadelphia found that residents who use public transit to get to their primary food store have lower BMI than those who use cars, perhaps because they walk more in order to reach public transit stops.<sup>5</sup>

## Strategies for Transit Agencies to Improve Healthy Food Access

Transit agencies have a unique opportunity to create vital linkages between where people live and where they get healthy food. Transit agencies can improve access to healthy food if they:

- **Include improving food access as a goal in long range plans.** The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania prioritized making healthy food accessible within ten minutes of public transportation as a goal in its Sustainability Plan, which allowed the agency to pursue strategies that make it easier for Philadelphians to access nutritious foods via public transportation.<sup>6</sup> Transit agencies can incorporate food access as a goal in long range plans to set a vision for how their agency meets the needs of its riders and then works toward those goals.
- **Engage community members and community based organizations when changing routes and service schedules.** In Phoenix, Arizona, Valley Metro participated as a stakeholder in a Health Impact Assessment conducted by the Maricopa County Department of Public Health, which recommended “strengthening community engagement plans and protocols for bus level of service modifications in the study area.” Transit agencies can hold focus groups and meetings with food advocacy organizations, such as food policy councils and neighborhood associations, that can provide feedback on how a changed bus route will affect their ability to access groceries and other essential services.<sup>7</sup>

- Assess impact on communities when changing bus routes.** In Austin, Texas, recipients of an American Planning Association Plan4Health grant prepared a report entitled *Food for All: Inclusive Neighborhood Food Planning in North Austin*, which calls for the requirement of “a food impact analysis for all new transportation expansion projects.” This requirement would compel transportation planners for Capital Metro to consider access to and location of food venues when planning new transportation infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> Transit agencies can conduct internal assessments of how changing transit routes will affect riders’ ability to access essential services, like grocery stores, by incorporating this as a priority in service planning or when conducting an equity impact review of proposed changes.
- Educate the public about how to take public transportation to food access.** In Los Angeles, California, Metro publishes a map on its website to show riders where farmers markets are accessible along transit routes. Transit agencies can develop similar maps for their systems displaying both transit routes and places where people buy healthy food, like farmers markets and grocery stores.<sup>9</sup>
- For additional examples and specific ideas about how to promote healthy food access through service planning, co-location, and real estate, check out our fact sheet [The Wheels on the Bus Go to the Grocery Store](#).**

Thank you to the [Safe Routes to Healthy Food Task Force](#) for their contributions to the development of these recommendations.



Photo: Flint MTA



Photo: Lisa Kelly/The Food Trust

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